

Atlanta Student Movement Project
Sarah Stephens Interview
Conducted by Jeanne Law Bohannon
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Transcribed by Tessa Bost

Interviewer: I'll start by just asking a little bit about yourself, where you grew up, went to school and how you met Lonnie and how Atlanta Life and the professional movement intersected with the student movement. Is that good?

SS: Yeah.

Interviewer: And then you can just talk and

SS: Well, I'll let you...

Interviewer: Okay! That's great! Do you want to hold this?

SS: Okay.

Interviewer: So how did you get the original? Is that like a press photographer that took that? Or who took that?

SS: Maurice Pennington, he was a photographer that led Life.

Interviewer: Oh, and he took that! Oh wow. I just saw his amazing editorial cartoons up on the wall at AU center and so many of them are still applicable today. So, I'm talking today with Sarah Stephens who was involved not just in the Atlanta Student Movement but was involved on the professional side of folks who were involved in the business community, who were helping to overcome the laws of Jim Crow in 1960 and 61. So I guess we'll start. Mrs. Stephens, tell me just a little bit about yourself, like where you grew up and where you went to school and how you met Lonnie?

SS: Okay, I grew up in Atlanta. I was what was called a Grady baby, and I grew up in Grady homes. So, we moved there in 41, I attended David T Howard High School and of course, this was where I met Lonnie because we were classmates.

Interviewer: That's nice. He was ahead of you right?

SS: No, we were in the same class.

Interviewer: Really?

SS: Mhmm.

Interviewer: Okay,

SS: Yeah, same class.

Interviewer: So, you were there for the whole student government debacle where he ran against Vernon Jones. Was it Vernon Jones?

SS: Vernon Jordan.

Interviewer: Vernon Jordan?

SS: Yeah, right.

Interviewer: Vernon Jordan.

SS: Exactly, exactly, yes.

Interviewer: That's interesting. So, after high school?

SS: After high school I attended Savannah State College and, of course, money became an issue. I did not get a chance to finish, but that is where I went. I went to Savannah State College and then eventually I had enough time at Savannah State where I did enroll at Woodrow Wilson Law School. Did not complete that either because of some family problems but, and education wise, this was just Savannah State and Woodrow Wilson.

Interviewer: You went to work at Atlanta Life?

SS: I went to work at Atlanta Life and at Atlanta Life is where I experienced the Civil Rights Movement. We were asked at Atlanta Life to support the students and so there were some of us that said yeah, we could be but non-violent. Because they made sure that we could withstand what we were going to experience, so with that, I considered to be a part of the movement and we were asked to picket the businesses downtown, preferably Rich's. That is where I was picketing, and that was quite an experience. We were told that we could only walk so many feet from each other, so many feet from the curb, otherwise we would be arrested. And it did happen, it happened to one of my coworkers. She was in front of me and she was a little off and not only that, they were concerned because she was so fair she looked like she was white, and they thought she was white. This detective car drove up beside us and grabbed her and said, "What are you doing in line here?" Of course, they put her in the car. I didn't say anything because we were told not to break the picket line, wait until we got to the federal property which was the US post office and once we arrived at the post office they could not arrest us because we were on federal property. I was picked up there and we went back and reported what had happened during that time and the rest is whenever they needed us and whatever capacity they needed us to work in, we were available. I was available along with some of the other employees of Atlanta Life and of course during that period of time they decided well, in addition to desegregated lunch counters, buses, and what have you, we need to do something about these jobs. So, we were asked to apply for positions with the US Civil Service at that time, Lockheed, and General Motors. I went and took the Civil Service examination and I was blessed. I did pass, and I

was hired by GSA. Others applied for positions with Lockheed and they were hired as well as General Motors. All this was part of that, of the student movement to desegregate businesses as well as restaurants, stores, or what have you. So, all of that was part of my experience.

Interviewer: Talk a little bit about how you are a trailblazer at the GSA.

SS: When I passed the Civil Service examination and I was hired at GSA, I was informed that I was the first black female that they'd hired in region four in the city of Atlanta. And, of course, I started my career at Peachtree and Seventh Street and in the Peachtree Seventh Street building there was a restaurant called Sprayberry's. Sprayberry's had not integrated. It was still very much segregated, so I could not eat at Sprayberry's. I could order my food, but I had to go to the back door to pick up my food. Here I am in a federal building, could not eat in the Sprayberry's cafeteria. So, I took my lunch and I had found out that there was another black female that had been hired by Housing and Urban Development at the time and she was the first black to be hired by HUD. We would eat together, our cold lunches. She had a hot plate in her office and occasionally we would bring a can of soup. warm it on her hot plate, and that's how we got our hot food. I would break down and must admit and would order food from Sprayberry's because they have very good fresh vegetables and what have you and I would go to the back door and pick up my lunch and go back upstairs and eat. When I was called in after 90 days, after my 90-day probation, they asked me, you know, they were pleased with my work and they assured me that I would be a permanent employee, so they asked if I was concerned about anything. I said yes. I asked if they could extend my lunch hour at least once or twice a month where I could actually go someplace and get a hot lunch. They apologized for the fact that I was not able to eat at Sprayberry's, so they did give me permission to travel from Peachtree and Seven to Auburn Avenue to have lunch at BB Beamers restaurant. So, Elizabeth Stamps and myself did that for quite a while. And then eventually before we left Peachtree Seven, he was ordered to integrate the business and he did. When I went in for the first time to have my dinner at Sprayberry's, Mr. Sprayberry apologized to me. He said, "I'm so sorry." I said, "No, no problem." So, that's what happened. So, that was another part that um.

Interviewer: So, Mr. Sprayberry was the man who owned Sprayberry's right? So, he could have decided to integrate or what do you think?

SS: I don't think that he could because whether the state had a lot to do with it, but I just could not eat there. Because once it became a federal law, then I could eat there. But like I said, he apologized because often times I would actually want it, a hot meal, and I would go to the back door to get the meal. But he did. When I went in the front door and sat down, he apologized.

Interviewer: When you went in the backdoor to get your food, those times, what did it make you feel like?

SS: You know, I just felt like I knew what the mission was all about, and I guess I was more determined, you got to stick with this. Don't let this get to you. Because, eventually if you stop then what is going to happen? So I don't know. I just felt like really fighting in

and just say well I can do it. This is not going to last forever, but I need to do something to make a difference. I don't know, I never felt like I was less than anybody else. I just knew that time, understanding, and love would be the thing to change what we were experiencing, what I was experiencing anyways.

Interviewer: And that would have been, Sprayberry's would have been integrated in 64? Or earlier?

SS: I'm trying to remember. It must have been 64 because I started, yeah, 63 or 64.

Interviewer: Because I think that was when the federal law.

SS: Yeah. Yes, 64, right, exactly.

Interviewer: So, in your career at GSA did you, a lot of the folks who participated in the movement felt like after the federal buildings were integrated and after the lunch counters were integrated and especially after the schools were integrated, that it was OK and things are going to be OK and you were able to move on. Was that your experience too or?

SS: Yes, I did, uh, I had . . . well, let me put it this way. Some of the co-workers were not, let me see, naturally I was the only black and I knew I could feel the tension with some of the white co-workers. Some weren't very nice and there were others that just, very uncomfortable with me sitting beside them, working with them, and I knew that, I could feel that. But just like everything else, there's always an opportunity for you to help this person that it's been a little difficult. So, what invariably happens, you have to do something to show them, hey, we are in this together, you know, everything is fine, I'm okay. I had some bosses that were awesome, and I said this because they recognized my contribution that I made to the agency. They were very pleased with my work. I was pleased with my work, and everything else, and they were very, very fair. I never had to ask for a raise or anything because they just saw what I produced and therefore I was rewarded for that. The females, I think there was only two that had a problem with me and it's simply because of, what happened is, our supervisor was out for a couple of days and the boss asked that I just sort of supervise and one of the young ladies said that her husband forbid her to take orders from me. So, the boss said, okay, then you can just stay home with your husband. After that, I really didn't have any problems, but I had a problem initially because it just, while you're already here, everybody else isn't.

Interviewer: Did you have any defenders among your coworkers who were white, who said we're not going to put up with this either or was it . . .

SS: Well, my boss, he was the one, he just told them the way he felt. If they could not work with me, you know, then this is the way it was going to be. And if they had a problem with that, then perhaps they need to leave. And I didn't have any more problems. None whatsoever.

Interviewer: Did you finish out your career at GSA?

SS: Yes, I did, I did. Actually, I was with GSA for 22 years and in 1967, President Johnson decided he wanted to be more open and more accessible to the public and he decided that they needed to do something so that the government could be more, uh, but like I said, accessible to the public. So, what he wanted, he decided that he wanted an information outlet, someplace the public could call or go to get information about the federal government, and not get, what they call the federal run around. So, what they did, they decided that they were going to establish a United States Federal Information Center and GSA was tapped to do the prototype. In order to staff this new center, there were seven agencies that were to tap someone to represent the agency to help staff the Federal Information Center. They posted the job on the bulletin board and the job description was just unbelievable. And the requirements. And I looked at that said, oh I would love to have this job, but I did not meet the requirements. I did not have a master's degree. A master's degree in sociology or something else you had to have a degree in, a master's in, and so I just thought no, I might as well forget about it, but I knew that I loved the public and I could do the work, but I didn't think anymore about it. One day I walked into work and the secretary said to me, your boss, Nunzio, who was my boss at the time, he would like to see you. So, I said okay. I went into his office and we talked. He said, "Well we need to go to Fred Hopkins Office," that was his boss. And I thought, "What have I done?" You know, you always think these things when you're the only black. So, I said "What have I done?" So anyways, we went to Fred Hopkins office and when we got to Fred Hopkins office, Fred Hopkins says, "Well, I guess you're wondering why you're here." I said, "Yes I am." He said, "Well, the President has tapped GSA to staff this new federal agency called the Federal Information Center and we are to each, they were called delivery agencies at the time, we are to staff one from each one of the delivery agencies. So, the original administrator, whom I had never really met, just had spoken to, you know, said, "So you have been selected to represent GSA, you will be on the staff representing GSA." So, I went down, and I was interviewed by the Federal Executive Board along with the other latest from the various agents. We had representatives from the Internal Revenue Service, Department of Labor, Federal Aviation Administration, the Veterans Administration. So, we were all interviewed by the Federal Executive Board and I, the same day, the same morning they called me, and I had to go and talk with my boss and his boss. Then at 11:00 o'clock I had to go down to Peachtree and Baker building, Peachtree and Baker, to be interviewed by the Federal Executive Board for this position with the Federal Information Center. So, I went down for the interview and I was hired, and that's where I retired from the Federal Information Center. And I wound up becoming the manager of the FIC.

Interviewer: Wow! That's amazing. Absolutely amazing. So, did you keep up with Lonnie all these years?

SS: Well, Lonnie was working at Atlanta because, he has admitted to me, he said, "Sarah, I used to call your office all the time." He said, "We tried to trap you," because you never knew what they were going to ask you. The only thing you knew about your job, you knew you were located at 275 Peachtree Street, but once you answered the phone and you said, "Good morning, Federal Information Center," it was wide open because you never knew what they were going to ask you, but it was our responsibility to have the answer. We were required to read the Federal Register, the Congressional Record, the Presidential Compilation. I think I read about eight or ten different newspapers to stay

abreast as to what was going on. We had to know everything that was going on in the Federal Government. So, when you call, and you said I have this problem, can you help me? We had to know where to refer you. Not only did we answer calls, there were walk-ins and also correspondence. But Lonnie, like I said, he admitted to me, he said, "We tried our best to stop you," but I didn't know it was Lonnie calling because he never identified himself. He told me later on. So, Vernon, we were all classmates. He went one way, I mean Lonnie went another direction. So, I've been in Atlanta all my life and I haven't been outside of Atlanta.

Interviewer: Wow. So, before we end, I wanted you to hold up the photo and talk to me a little if you could because your face, well, first of all, it is so beautiful, but so determined. I mean, the look in your eyes is just like, I'm doing this. Raise it up just a little.

SS: I was marching around Rich's at this time when this was taken, and this is when I think my girlfriend, my coworker had just been arrested prior to, as I was going around Rich's and I couldn't say anything. I couldn't say anything to her, could not say anything to anybody else. I just had to continue to walk and not only that, there were two black professionals that also crossed my line and went into Rich's to make a purchase and I knew who they were. So, I told them when I got back, today as I share this experience with you, that whole scene is just,

Interviewer: Coming right back

SS: Coming right, coming back, coming back.

Interviewer: So, you were angry as well, but you saw them walk in.

SS: Mhmm, mhmm, directly, yeah.

Interviewer: So that's determination and anger and not going to let anybody deter you.

SS: Right.

Interviewer: Wow. That's an amazing, amazing photo. And that's when you were at Atlanta Life.

SS: Atlanta Life.

Interviewer: And Maurice Pennington who was the...

SS: Maurice Pennington, he did this, he was the photographer. And there was another group picture. I don't know where it is, of the other ladies that also participated, and of courses, they are deceased, but it was a beautiful group of us.

Interviewer: Is that located in an archive?

SS: Some of his work, but I don't know. I have not seen it.

Interviewer: So that photo you're not sure, because I would love to have a copy of that photo.

SS: Okay, okay, well I have a small one I can leave with you.

Interviewer: Oh, okay, because I'd also like to try to find the group photo. Would Atlanta Life have any archives?

SS: I don't know, I think his wife is still living,

Interviewer: Yes, she is.

SS: And I would see if Lucy has any, if I could get a copy of it. I'm one of the latest but the ones that were on the picture with me, they are deceased, and I know some of the siblings I can see if they have copies.

Interviewer: Because that would be really important to acknowledge their contribution because they're not here to talk about it.

SS: Exactly.

Interviewer: Thank you so much, Sarah, for sitting with me

SS: You're welcome, you're welcome, and I hope you're going to edit that to take out the little things or whatever.

Interviewer: And, also, I would love to come and sit and talk with you over coffee, anywhere you want to go, and you tell us anything else that you want us to know that maybe I didn't ask the right questions or things that you think are important for students who watch this and who are learning from your story to remember and to know. Because this is going to eventually end up, you know, as part of history lessons that we're pushing to students all over the country so that they can learn what really happened because this is not in any of the history books.

SS: It is not.

Interviewer: It is not.

SS: And that was another organization that was very much involved. You probably picked it up from some of the other ladies they probably told you about. In addition to Atlanta Life they had, in Atlanta at that time, it was the Atlanta Negro Voters League and they were very much involved in all of that.

Interviewer: No, I haven't. No one has talked about that yet.

SS: That particularly league, the membership was comprised of ministers, lawyers, doctors. And I heard you talk about how pastor, Dr. Borders. It was just a lot of information flowing from that. But anyways, I will see if I can find the group picture, but in the

meantime, I don't know whether Lucy has any of them or what Maurice did with all of his pictures, Lonnie might know.

Interviewer: I will call him because, he wants me to call him when I'm done to do a debrief with him, let him know how it went. I'll ask him because I know he's in touch with Mrs. Pennington a lot because they're trying to figure out what to do with some of Maurice's editorial cartoons that Clark Atlanta doesn't have out. They want to make sure they're viewed. And so, I'll ask him, we'll talk for sure.

SS: Okay.

Interviewer: It was so wonderful and I'm so sorry it took so long.

SS: No problem. No problem. No problem.