

Atlanta Student Movement
June Wilson Davis Interview
Conducted by Jeanne Law Bohannon
May 19, 2017
Transcribed by Ella Greer

Interviewer: We are here today talking with Norma June Wilson Davis of the Atlanta Student Movement and we are here to collect her stories and her experiences for the Democracy Doesn't Run on Cruise Control oral history project.

We will start off at the beginning, when you were born and where you were born.

Davis: First, let's say just call me June, it's much less formal. When I met my husband in 1961 he thought Norma was much too formal for me, so he started calling me June. I'm named after both grandmothers, one was Norma and the other June, so I've been June Davis ever since then.

I was born in 1940 in Jacksonville Florida and it was an interesting time. I don't remember a great deal of oppression, a lot of segregation. My mother and other relatives tell stories of taking me to downtown Jacksonville and I refusing drink at water fountains that they told me were the ones they told me to drink at and I refused to sit at the back of the bus, I did not understand why I had to pass open seats and sit in the back so let's just say I was a rebel or anti-segregation or anti-evilness or whatever you want to call it from a very young age.

Interviewer: Where did you go to college, you came to Atlanta to come to school?

Davis: I came to Atlanta to come to school, I went to Spellman College. My godmother taught in the French department here and she encouraged me to come to Spellman. My mother had gone to a girl's school as well, but it was in Greensboro North Carolina. I thought Atlanta was exciting, I had no idea how much excitement I was going to get myself into, but it was good.

I was in Spellman from 57 till 61. And we got started in February of 1960. This was after Jesse Jackson and the Greensboro group, and Lonnie King and Julian Bon had already sort of been talking about what students could do in Atlanta. I was not privy to those conversations I did not know about that. What I knew first was that the presidents of the Atlanta university system called in the student body leaders of the HBCU's in Atlanta and I was a part of that group and that got us started. We talked about Greensboro, that was the first thing we did was talk about Greensboro what had happened there. And we decided as a group that what we wanted to do was say why, why we were going to do anything if we were going to do something let's say why. Let's don't just act without letting everyone know ahead of time what it is we are upset about and why we're doing what we're doing so that's how we got started so in a way the presidents of the AU system really organized the student movement of Atlanta Ga. and they were supportive for the most part I think.

Interviewer: So how did you first hear of the Atlanta Student Movement?

Davis: That was it. There was no Atlanta Student Movement. I was there, we didn't even know what to call ourselves back in those days.

Interviewer: How did you decide that name?

Davis: I don't really remember. You may want to talk to Lonnie King about that, I'm sure he remembers why. I don't know how we decided on a name, it just sort of evolved that I can remember. I got all involved in the what's and why and once we decided what we were going to do then it was how we were going to do it and that sort of maintained my focus until I graduated in May of 61, it was how.

Interviewer: As a leader of the ASM what were the roles that you played?

Davis: Well we all played whatever role was necessary at the time to be played; there weren't that many of us. Some of us stuck with it the whole time I don't think all of us did and we realized quickly that if we were going to do the activities that we had in mind to do such as picketing or anything else we were going to do we needed volunteers. We were recruiters, we were trainers because you couldn't just bring students in and ask them to participate in what we had decided was going to be a nonviolent movement that was, that's a state of mind and that requires some training and some thinking and talking about so we had lots meetings, lots of training sessions so I served as a trainer as well. We all did, we all did what we had to get it done.

Our activities were planned and there were different kinds of activities over the time frame from 60 to May of 61 and we needed differing numbers of people to be involved so there never was any one set group of people that was always there and if there was that group that was always there, it was a small group. And when we decided we were going to picket or integrate the restaurant at Rich's we had to go out and recruit again, so we were always, constantly recruiting people to come and participate with us.

Interviewer: So, were you at Rich's in October of 60?

Davis: Yeah, I helped plan what happened at Rich's in 1961. I sort of served as co-chair of the action committee during this time and yeah, I was there.

Interviewer: Was the sit in at Rich's like other sit-ins that you planned, how was it different?

Davis: This was totally different. This was a much larger sit in, well in a way I guess our very first ones were probably bigger in numbers. That was when we did state and municipal, I think we did municipal, but we did state buildings because we were part of the public and our rationale was that the lunch rooms in those buildings belonged to us as much as they belonged to anyone else. So that's where we started, we started in what we thought was our home base where we had rights. But Rich's was sort of a pivotal time for us in a lot of ways. It was different, it was more complicated. We wanted Martin to participate, we had not asked him to participate before in any of our activities in fact we have sort of told him at different times

Interviewer: I have to tell you I'm in awe that you are just calling him Martin.

Davis: That's what I called him then.

Interviewer: It was a student driven movement and you invited him to be a part of it, but you were leading it.

Davis: There are probably more than one reason for that but one of the reasons for me personally was that the students probably had the least amount to lose. We did not have jobs or families, and no one was economically dependent on us, so we could go out and do things that our parents, adults couldn't do because they may lose their job. So, it kept us away from, in my mind, away from the adult community. Now it's not that we did not seek advice because we did seek advice, we just kept that advice, I wouldn't say at a minimum, but it was advice it was not leadership, it was advice.

So back to Rich's, we had to talk him into doing this because he hadn't been active with us before. So, Lonnie King and Herschel Sullivan who were our co-chairs at the time got the dubious honor of trying to convince Martin to come and participate with us. I don't know who asked the question but whoever did got the answer that we wanted and so he came.

Rich's was a symbol. It was a symbol in the white community and a symbol in the black community and a symbol in the southeast. We felt that if we could make our point at Richs then we felt that was going to be critical in our success later. And so, we worked hard to get that down. We got some different results from that than we thought. We became more influential than we could have possibly imagined with the fact of having Martin with us. I don't know that then but that was the first time he had been arrested.

Interviewer: The first time that Martin Luther King Jr was at Richs in the sit ins. Wow.

Davis: Yeah so that was huge, I hadn't thought about the impact of that at the time. With him being there he also became a target and he became the target. So, when people were arrested, those people who were around him were arrested and sent to one place and the rest of us were sent to another place. Some of us went to the city jail and some of us to the county jail.

Interviewer: Did they separate out the women and men?

Davis: No, it was not by gender. It was really about who was around King, and they made him a focus, put the focal point around him. And he became a focal point in a negative kind of way because I said they wanted to target him, so I think he was arrested first.

Martin got arrested first in Montgomery. I got to tell you that was what I thought but when you read the history books that's what they tell you. They're wrong. He was arrested in Montgomery but the first time he was arrested and went to jail voluntarily was in Atlanta.

Interviewer: So, he showed up at the sit in that morning knowing he was going to go to jail.

Davis: Yeah, he knew that if he was going to be there he was going to be arrested. We didn't do sit ins not to be arrested, we expected to be arrested. So, they transferred him from the county jail to the state prison here in Reedsville. They took him in the back of the car if I remember correctly with a dog sitting next to him and in chains. That was I'm sure frightening for him and it scared all of us when we heard about it. And they wanted to make an example out of him, but they went back and found an old parking ticket or something like that he had, some traffic violation some very minor thing and the governor wanted to make an example of him in a very violent way.

Interviewer: At the Rich's sit-in, did the students could bail out or were you all still in jail when all this was happening with MLK?

Davis: Our students always had the chance to ask for bail, we always had money to bail students out. So, whenever students went to jail if they were uncomfortable for whatever reason they could always ask to be bailed out. Some of us never got arrested at Rich's, I did not get arrested at Rich's. So, everyone was not arrested. As I said they arrested those students who were physically the closest to Martin in the restaurant. We were in two different places, the Magnolia Room and the bridge so that already made a separation for us right there. So all of us did not go to jail in fact I was reminding Lonnie today that two days after that since I was chair of the committee and King was in jail I said we had to have another activity we go to go out and do something immediately and so we did, we planned a brand new set of sit ins that no one expected to happen because we were supposedly still going to be licking our wounds because some people were still in jail, students were still in jail, I don't remember how long that group of students stayed in jail and martin was still in Reedsville. So, they were very surprised that two days later we were back on the street in full force and numbers and ready to go again with an entirely different thing we were doing. I think we did dime stores, I think we did like Woolworths and places like that at that point, but we hit several places at one time we clocked it and hit at the same time in four five different places.

Interviewer: Were they all in the Little 5 Points downtown area?

Davis: Yes, they were all in downtown area.

We go back to Martin a little bit and I'm sure you know because you talked to Lonnie about this.

That when they put him in jail everyone got frantic about how we were going to get him out of jail. Martin shouldn't have been there, we were afraid for his safety to be there and certain people then called Bobby Kennedy, he was the campaign manager for John F Kennedy at the time this is 1960 this is October, we were getting ready to vote in November and in a lot of maneuverings the Kennedy family got involved in getting King out. Just before the Sunday before that Tuesday they published what they called the blue book and they gave it out to churches, I don't think Atlanta churches got them. Detroit, Chicago, places like that and I think Philadelphia and put them in black churches to have blacks support Kennedy's Presidency. During that period blacks in the south were

Republicans, they were not Democrats. In fact, Martin's father himself made a comment to the fact that he would not vote for a Democrat and I think he said something about not a Catholic too. And so there was a big deal for us, if he got King out of jail then they used that as leverage in order to promote Kennedy's presidency and historically they give a lot of credit for them doing that and those blue books for the small margin of error because it was a small margin of error in which he won, particularly in Chicago. All of that happened because we asked Martin to join us down at Rich's, so we played a much bigger role than we anticipated playing.

I'm not sure we realized it at that time. I think so many of us, I know I was, trying to go to school and go to jail as often as I did I didn't have time to think about it. I know the newspapers, I didn't even read the newspapers, I had a friend at Spellman collect all the news articles on the sit ins for me and she would just put them in my room, I wasn't there very often, I was not on campus most of the time.

Interviewer: Would you say that Rich's was your most memorable moment?

Davis: No.

Interviewer: What was the thing that hit you the most by being a leader in the movement?

Davis: You mean experiences?

There were three. If I had to pick one, it would be hard, but I can tell you about all three of them.

The first one would be that two days after Rich's and we planned this activity, well I guess it was one day after because I took a group with me on a sit in there was a young man in the group my group who was white. I do not know who he was or where he came from or whatever, but he volunteered to go and let's say there are twenty of us something in that number and we get to jail and there were other groups that happened, but this is my group. Oh I should tell you this, we organized our activities so that there was a spokesperson for every group so no one had to try to remember what had been said except that one person so if anyone was going to lie that one person was going to be the one to lie or to tell the truth and everyone else just had to follow along and give them your name and your serial number so to speak and that was it. In fact, I told the girls at Spellman to not even give them your home address, so most of them gave the address at Spellman. No need to get your parents involved before they had to get involved as far as people trying to take their jobs away from them or harass them in some way in the communities in which you live.

So, we'll go back to this. So, I was with my group in court and our lawyers are there - we always had lawyers who came. The lawyer was there and I'm standing there in front of the judge and the judge, I'm talking because I'm the spokesperson for the group and the judge tried to get this white man to disavow himself of being involved with us and he wouldn't do it. So, the judge looked at me and said, 'Ms. Wilson if I see you again after this fiasco today, I'm going to throw you in jail.' I said yes sir. Well he saw me again the next day and that was

the two days afterwards we planned these other activities. So, he said 'Ms. Wilson what did I tell you yesterday?' I didn't say anything, so he repeated what he said yesterday, he said 'So because of Ms. Wilson's yesterday activities you are all going to work camp.' No, we've never been to work camp before we had always been in county or city jails, mostly city jails, we didn't even know what that was.

Interviewer: I have no idea what that is, can you explain that to me?

Davis: Well it was physically set up like a farm. The men worked out in the fields all day sort of like a chain gang situation and the women worked in the field and kitchen. It was a self-sustaining farm.

Interviewer: Where was this, was it somewhere in the metro area?

Davis: Well, it didn't take us more than an hour to get there. So, we were all in a state of panic about this and I'm the leader of the group and I got six or seven females with me and maybe 20 males. AD King, Martin's brother was with us, was one of the ones that was with us. And we got to this farm and we found out we could not see lawyers, we could not see ministers, nor could we see family members. We were sentenced to 15 days and the farm is not a place for hardened criminals. It was a place for petty thieves, prostitutes, alcoholics, small drugs, they weren't giving big sentences for marijuana those days. And so, people never stayed more than 30 days on the farm, so it wasn't like it was hardened criminals which I ran into later but anyway.

So we got there, walked in the place and they separated us by gender and they took the young men off some place I don't know where and we walked in and when you walked in the front door down the hallway you made a left and there was a kitchen and you walked through the kitchen and there was a eating area and behind that were the black women's quarters. So, when the women came in, there was a group of white women peeling potatoes and the potato peels just fell on the floor so when we walked through we had to walk through these potato peels to get to the room in the back this sort of dormitory rooms a big room with bunk beds. I walked in and I knew we were in trouble. There were fly strings hanging from the wall, and this is in the fall, its chilly, it did not feel like there was much heat and it did not look very clean. And I said to myself what am I going to do about this and how am I going to take care of these girls. There were no bars on the windows or the door it was just a regular door that opened. So, I looked around and decided that the best thing for me to do was to put us all in top bunks. The bunk beds were close enough together that if you were on the top you really could walk it if you took a wide step to the next one, that's how crowded it was.

Interviewer: So, all this has happened in your early twenties and your first thought of being in this incredibly obscene foreign place was taking care of the people with you?

Davis: I was 19. I was in charge so that's what you do when you're in charge, you take care of everyone. None of the girls who were with me had been in charge before and had I realized what was going to happen to us I never would have let that group of girls go, I would rather of a group of girls with me who had been to jail

before and therefore would be a little more hardened about the idea of doing this. This was going to get ugly. I didn't know it was going to get ugly, but this was not like going to sit in city or county jail where it was clean, and someone was going to come and bring you meals. This was going to be a different matter.

So, we were in bed and I took the top bunk on the end with the door on my right and behind me and the girls were lined up this way. In the middle of the night the door opened, and the white male guard came in and put his, it looked like a rifle I don't know one gun from the other, put it down on the floor and proceeded to rape the inmate under me. I did not move, I could hardly breathe. He left and when he left, my mind said he didn't really want to rape her he was sending us young girls a message that we were next on his list. I knew that, that was evil. So, I asked for an audience with the person in charge, what would that be called, the warden. They said prisoners don't get to talk to the warden and I said I want to talk to him. Somehow, he let me talk to him and by the time I talked to him I made up some conditions. One of them was that that white man had to go. I explained to him first that I was the editor of the student newspaper at Spellman college and that I had a telephone acquaintanceship with Ralph Gill the editor at the AJC and that this would be in the paper, just a matter of whether it was in the paper tomorrow or fifteen days whenever I get out, this will be in the paper. He needs to go. It's cold in here, we need sweatshirts or something to keep us warm and I said I understand the men are working, going to be working outside, everybody works. They had already told us 6-6 and I said I wanted the women to work 6-6 I don't care what shift but we all work at the same time and sleep at the same time. Well they gave us sweatshirts, they changed the guard to a female, there were no guns anymore and we worked from 6 in the morning to 6 in the afternoon in the kitchen. The women in the kitchen were all black they were so wonderful. The fresh milk came in from the farm in the morning and they would shake up those huge big canisters and what they did was skim the cream off the top of the canister and put them in the refrigerator, so we could have cream with our breakfast or cream with our coffee if we wanted it. They made sure that we were fed and taken care of, they wouldn't let us go hungry. So, we cooked and washed dishes in the kitchen.

The woman who was the nurse for the entire facility was a black female who had graduated from Spellman and she was staying outside of our quarters basically on the same floor with us and so when I saw this woman I went over and talked with her and found out she gone to Spellman and I said are you here all the time and she said no she goes home for Sundays and I said do you think you could make a phone call for me and she said she'd have to think about that because if she got in trouble and if anyone found out she could lose her job. So, I gave her the phone number and said if you get home and feel that you can make a phone call to this number tell them who you are and that you met me and let them know that we are doing ok. and she did that.

Then my other job I had these men, I had all these boys over here from Morehouse and Clark and wherever they were from there were more than 20 of them, how was I going to know what was happening with them, I had no way of knowing. So I realized the men were coming in and out of the same front door we had come in that night and had to pass the kitchen so asked one of the trustees who happened to be an old inmate I had come across in my previous jail times in

previous places in Fulton County and asked her if she could get a message to the boys for me. She asked if I could write something down and I said no because if she got caught with a written note she would be in trouble, we had to do this verbally. We worked out a signal system and tell them that if I'm standing at the door when they come in from the fields then everything ok, if I'm not there then something is wrong. Ask A.D King to nod his head if everything is ok with the men and that was the system that we used when we were there. And we didn't have any more trouble, nobody bothered us, we couldn't see anyone, but no-one bothered us after that. I don't know what day of the week that would have been but on Sunday I guess someone said we were going to have visitors. Anyway, my godmother had packed up a picnic lunch French style, she was chair of the French department, cold chicken white wine, I don't know where she thought she was going, pate and French crackers, she was bringing them to the work camp. which would have been hilarious if that had happened, we got out of there I think that Friday, we weren't there longer than 3 days. We got out and she told me what she had done and that was a real funny thing.

When I got out I did call Ralph McGill and had a talk with him and there was an investigation of the state county farm system after that. It hit all the newspapers. I don't know what they found, I was too busy. See every time I'm in jail, I'm gone, I got to go back to school and catch up. I'm still determined I'm going to graduate in May of 61 so I have to catch up, so I didn't pay attention to what it said but they exposed him, there were all bad things, I'm sure with the work farm.

Okay so that was one of kind of a different experience. The other thing was with the Supreme Court passed the law that opened the restaurants for interstate traveling and bus stations. We said, let's go test this out, let's go see what's going to happen. So, we were from all over everywhere, so we put together 4 or 5 groups and had at least one who was going home from Chattanooga, Birmingham, Jacksonville Florida and probably two more, Lonnie probably remembers, I don't. I was taking a group to Jacksonville so we get on a bus and we head out and the first stop was in Macon, GA and we get off it was time for lunch so we went to the lunch room and I'm walking in front and I had two students with me and I get my tray and I'm filling it up with food and I get to the cashier and I said I'm paying for myself and for these other two. Her mouth dropped open. I said ok to myself. So, we sat down, we were there about ten minutes and a white man sat with me. They were sitting in a booth for two and I was next to them across the aisle by myself. He came and sat and talked to me, I don't know where he came from or whatever, but he knew who I was, he knew my name. He said what can I do. I gave out a phone number, so you could call them and tell them. But we had someone trailing us, each group had a car with a minister in it from the theological seminary who was trailing us to go wherever we were going because we weren't going back on the bus we would come back in an automobile. We didn't want to fight the battle two ways, we just wanted to do it one way.

So, he sat there with me and he left, and the cops came in and arrested us. Well they tried to arrest the two, they weren't going to arrest me. I had to tap the cop on the shoulder and tell them I'm with them and he said okay you want to go to and I said oh yeah, I'm in charge.

So, we went to the police station and the police chief and I talked, and I said you know we haven't broken any laws. And he said we don't serve you, and I said the Supreme Court just said you will. So, he left the office and went out conversed with some people and found out I was right. So, we were not really arrested but they kept us there. So, what are they going to do with these black college students until the next bus to Jacksonville which was going to be around 5 or 6 o'clock in the afternoon and here it was around noon. Luckily, I knew someone in town who just graduated from Spellman and I gave him her married name and that was a very prominent black family she married into in Macon, GA, so we spent the day in her in-law's home where she was living as well at the time and blacks from all over the city of Macon just came. They came to touch us and to see us, they didn't say much, just a hug they'd come in, parade in, and walk give us hugs, and parade out. The parade went on all day long. I'd never experienced anything like that before, it was both scary and very rewarding that we were doing something that the black community in Macon, GA thought it was positive to them. And we hadn't intended to impact Macon at all. So, when the bus came the blacks arranged for a car from the funeral home to come and get us because it was the only car I guess the black community had that had tinted windows and the police were afraid of what was going to happen to us. So, they put us in this car and took us to the bus station along with several men. They didn't have guns, but they were clearly there to protect us. We got to the bus station and there were newspaper people all there everywhere, New York Times was there. Time Magazine, everyone in the world you would have thought would only be in New York were there in Macon GA. But they had all day to get there because I'm sure the word had spread around that we were there. So, I have some newspaper clippings of us on the front page from the two pages in Macon GA. We got on the bus and the GBI put two agents on the bus with us to ride and protect us to get us to Jacksonville. It was a local bus, so it would stop and let everyone get off the bus we had to stay on and then we could get off in some places. In other places we would get off first and they escorted us, stood outside the bathrooms or wherever we were and we all went to Jacksonville FL together, no incidents. We got to Jacksonville and the Ku Klux Klan was there. The Jacksonville bus station at that time had windows, huge windows on at least two sides of it and one was a long wall. So, when we got to the bus station you could just see the Klan walking up and down. That was not my first opportunity to see the Klan, I was not particularly afraid of that. The Klan picketed beside us in Atlanta many times. At most they were a bunch of bullies that really weren't going to do anything, and we were supposed to be afraid of them when they put their costumes on. My father sent someone to pick us up and we went back through Macon the next day.

But when we got back Lonnie King said that he of course had all the national newspapers that he had got a call from James Farmer at Core and you may want to check with him to be sure this is accurate because he and I have not talked about this, in years we have not talked.

He said I like the idea of the rides that you took, and he said I think I'm going to call them Freedom Rides and that's how the Freedom Rides were born. Now we didn't have any trouble in Macon but the group in Birmingham had problems, there was a very mean Commissioner of Public Safety their Bull Connor who was

notorious at the time, so they had problems there I don't know if anyone else had problems, but no one's was physically hurt at the time.

The interesting thing about Atlanta with all this and Lonnie and I were talking about this earlier, but Atlanta didn't receive any publicity about this and I contend it was because both the black community and the white community who say now that they were too busy to hate, and I really don't think that was it. They had an economic machine going on here and they were developing into a major force in the southeast and economically everyone was doing well on both sides of the color line and no one was interested in rocking the boat. So, they did not want to see publicity about guns being pulled on students in Atlanta, GA or fire hoses being turned on students in Atlanta, GA. That was bad for business and they were determined to keep the business going so that kept us fairly safe physically. Besides that, the GBI was on the case constantly. They knew me, they knew my name. When I left Spellman's campus in the morning, if you know Spellman's campus they're gates, when I walked out of the gates in the morning they were there in the car they followed me everywhere I went, they found out. The newspaper did as well they found out that where I was going was where the action was for that day. And so, it was of some peace of mind that there were outside eyes and ears on our activities all the time and that made me feel a little bit safer. Other people didn't know, I didn't even tell anyone. I knew they were GBI and from the newspaper because they would say hi Norma June how are you doing this morning and we knew each other by names but I didn't tell anyone else that.

Interviewer: So, the GBI were there to protect you. Did you feel protected or did you feel afraid of them, I'm assuming they were all white men?

Davis: I wasn't afraid of them. I didn't think they were going to do anything to us. Not physically, that's not their job, that's not sort of their demeanor, not the way they do business. They have other ways of hurting us, so it would not be physical confrontation but if someone confronted us even if they did not want to step in because they didn't feel like it was FBI business, they could call a cop easily. They were always there. They told me don't every apply for a job in the state of GA. You would never get hired in this state, your record is too long.

So out of the Macon situation, the Interstate Commerce Commission got in touch with us to see if our civil rights had been violated in any way. I have some letters back and forth between me and them, all of us got letters. They came to the campus and interviewed us and decided our civil rights had not been violated in Macon.

So that was 2. The third one was probably in February of 61 and I got arrested, well we decided that we were going to pack the jails with as many people as we could get in and hopefully strain the financial resources of the county. And we did. So, we did a jail without bail program and it was deliberate. We sent swarms of people in, they went to jail, they could stay if they wanted to or as I said earlier they could always get bail. I went in with the first group and I stayed for two weeks. That was a different experience, it was a county jail, a big jail. We slept in bunk beds in big open rooms there was no privacy for bathroom facilities at all. The whites were with us as well and we were physically attacked by black

women inmates a couple of times and we had to physically fight back. In those types of situations, you don't bother to tell the warden. Nobody had a knife, and nobody could kill you, it wasn't worth it. We felt we had to protect ourselves and we had to show that we could protect ourselves and there were more of us than there were of them and we didn't gang up on them in numbers. If I was attacked which I was, then I was the one who fought back, physically fought back to look out for myself so that they know there's a code of survival in those situations and I had learned by then what that code was. And someone said Norma June let me help you and I said no I had to do this because she must understand that she can't do this to me again or attempt to do this to me again. And it worked.

Interviewer: So daily life in county lockup without bail, physical fights, I'm assuming verbal attacks as well?

Davis: No, not really. In fact, we probably only had two physical fights, and both involved me. They were lesbian attacks is basically what that came down to so that made it easier to manage and I was the only target, nobody else was. So, we didn't have, it was not chaos and soon they moved the white women out. They realized they put them in with us and they were totally outnumbered. We had like 30 or more women and they had 2,3,4 sometimes 5 women. And the county jail the women were in for, they were in for murder, these were not petty criminals, these were serious women who had done serious crimes. And I had been sentenced, I guess we all had, but I had been sentenced for a year. So, I was expecting to be there for that period. I was expecting to be transferred to somewhere, but I didn't know. But we were able to have lawyers and I didn't have any family in town to see me, but ministers could come and newspaper people. They took all our books from us when we got in. Because we never went to jail without carrying our books. First, it was a symbol of who we were, we always wanted to remind people of who we were, we were students. So, it was a symbol, but we were all trying to study to go to school as well. I wrote my parents and said don't pay the second semester tuition because I'm not going to be in school. There was nowhere to sit during the day, so we sat on the concrete floor, all of us. There were some benches and things in there, but I was the leader of the group, so I don't sit on a bench I sit on the floor I make an example that it's possible to do and leave the benches for other people because girls were rotating in and out. Girls would come in, they would get frightened and they would want to leave.

Interviewer: What was your parents' reaction to that letter you wrote them?

Davis: I don't know. I don't think they ever told me. When I went to that work camp I talked about earlier they had to put my mother in a hospital. She just freaked out.

Interviewer: She was scared for your safety and afraid you were going to be killed.

Davis: Plus no one knew what the work camp was. No one had ever seen one or ever been there and they wouldn't let anyone come to see us. We were totally held without communication so that frightened her. I think she did well with everything else. They were not surprised that I was doing this. I told you I sat on the bus in the wrong place and drank from the wrong fountain when I wasn't even school age, so they really weren't surprised by that.

Interviewer: When you got older, did you talk to your parents about the stuff that you did?

Davis: Some of the things I told you today, no. They would have freaked out if they had known the kind of danger I was in some of those times, they would have been very unhappy. I managed to graduate on time and just let bygones be bygones so to speak. Like when you were a teenager and you do something wrong and you really don't give all the details well I didn't really give all the details all the time. I didn't start talking about any of this except to my husband until recently and still I haven't done it but maybe 3 or 4 times.

Interviewer: Is there a reason you haven't talked about it?

Davis: I just thought it was difficult. It was difficult. Plus I had this probably naive, during the late 50s early 60s there were a lot of hanger-on people who wanted to get involved because it was sort of, in a way, the cool thing to do and later on they wanted to brag about the fact that they have done things and I did not want to be seen as that kind of person so I just didn't want to talk about it.

Interviewer: But you were one of the leaders.

Davis: That didn't matter. People who weren't there don't know that. They don't know that. It's not written anywhere. My name doesn't appear anywhere. When people tried to do newspaper articles and stuff they would come in and Lonnie would say and other people in the group- Norma do you want to, and I would say no pictures. I told you before it was a matter of pride with me I think that I did not need that kind of attention and that was not why I was doing it but there were very legitimate reasons, very soul felt reasons as to why I was doing it and if my name never appeared anywhere then that was fine.

Interviewer: So, all these monumental things and I feel safe in saying that what you did was monumental, you changed the face of our entire culture.

Davis: And now they're trying to change it back again.

Interviewer: Yes, how do you. I'm not sure if I'm phrasing this right. How do you carry yourself day to day knowing the impact that you had? Not just on the civil rights movement but on American culture and American progress.

Davis: I don't have a problem with that because no one knows I did that so it's sort of my secret that walks around with me so its fine. I don't have problems with that. And I well, I thought it was. I did get to give a long talk about this at the University of Iowa when we were there on a MLK birthday and everyone in the University of Iowa heard the story. I married this very brilliant scientist, college professor type. I stayed at home, promised him I would not have any children in jail and I met him in the December after I just graduated from college and he was teaching in Nashville, TN at the time and I promised I wouldn't have any children, I didn't, and I did not do it any longer after that. Because for me you don't do things like that half way, it's something you're either in for all the way or you don't go in at all. And then we were in, we lived in Washington, DC for years and in '68 we moved to Iowa and so I was in a whole other kind of world and when I got to Iowa City I found myself getting bored. because it was a small town, I had never lived

in a small college town before. So, I started volunteering and doing things like sitting on an advisory committee for the school system to study racism in the public-school system. I did that very early on. And then I got involved in after school childcare. That wasn't my problem, but the women were just beginning to go to work. And leaving home they did not have care for children after school and my friends got involved and through that I became a member of the City Parks and Recreation Commission in fact I was vice chair. And that was a job, I was there all the time. We had our meetings, but we were always lobbying the city council to mostly buy park land. They were beginning to have a big building spree in Iowa city and land was disappearing and they were putting up all these houses and there was no big space, no green space. So, what we wanted to do was buy what is now green space, years later you can develop, but if you don't have land you have nothing to develop. So I did that for a long time and the next thing I know I was working at the University of Iowa and I did several jobs there and then I became University, Vice President of University, of Iowa for Finance and University Services which is very interesting because I only have a bachelor's degree from Spellman and I was in a sort of hierarchy of those who had advanced degrees but I worked hard and I think I did a good job and I earned what I got. So, I took my energies and put them into other sources, including raising children.

Interviewer: Did your children know?

Davis: Yes, my children knew basically. They don't know all the stories. It's funny how you tell your grandchildren more than your children at an earlier age. So, when we retired we moved to Kansas City 20 years ago, we have 2 grandsons in Kansas City who were then about 6 and 4 and we started telling them all our stories about anything and everything. The oldest one is now 25 and he probably knows more about my civil rights activities than I remembered to tell you today because he has that kind of memory. So, the grandchildren were never frightened by it and I don't think my children were ever frightened by it. But it was important for me to be involved in the community because it was a totally white community in Iowa City and my children were an oddity in that community. There may have been 12, 15 black families in town. There were more black people in town there but most of them were students but families living in the city there weren't very many. And it was my major job during those years, the early years to help them navigate that kind of world and I felt that I needed to be a mom who was at home and present and was alert to what was going on at the school and on the playground and every place else my children were. So, when I became 35 was when I went to work for the first time. My daughter was going into junior high school, 7th grade and my son was going into 5th grade so I was sort of a late bloomer going into work.

Interviewer: Well it sounds like your superwoman, it just sounds like your leadership is innate in who you are. Wherever you found yourself in your personal history you became a leader.

Davis: I think that's true.

Interviewer: Isn't it much more fun to be able to tell people what to do and show them which way to go?

Davis: Showing them which way to go is better than telling them what to do so I try to show it, it is much more fun. The last 2 or 3 years at university I got involved in a Total Quality Management Program and our division which was finance and university services had about 1500 employees in it and we were the structure of the university meaning we were the city. The city runs the school and the city council is sort of the thinkers and whatever. My husband was faculty but that's another matter, but we ran the physical plant, took care of all the personnel matters and paying the bills and all that kind of stuff. So, we decided to go to Total Quality Management and they asked me to lead the program and I knew nothing about that, but I said what else is new I never know. So, let me go, give me some money, let me go around the country and talk to people and figure out what's going on with this and how this operates. So I got to show those last two years and train our department heads and our unit how for them to be good leaders for their people and how to let their people skills rise to the top and not always telling them what to do but to include everyone in the decision making process so I did get to show a lot rather than tell what to do.

Interviewer: You are an amazing woman, I'm in awe of you and I thank you for taking the time to come and talk with us. Where do you live now?

Davis: Kansas City, MO. So, we retired, and I had to recreate myself again in Kansas City, so I picked out the organizations I wanted to associate with and started being the community volunteer. And now I'm not doing much of that anymore, I'm tired.

Interviewer: You should take a break.

Davis: I decided when I was 70 I was going to take a break, so I have taken a lot of breaks since Turing 70. It's June's time.

Check with Lonnie about some of the dates and stuff because he's the one that kept up really with the timelines and major details. I've moved on.

You may be interested in this. Dr. LaFevers, he was a professor at Spellman not when I was there but after I left. He decided to write a book about the women of Spellman involved in the civil rights movement in the 60's and it's called "Undaunted by the Fight" which are words from the Spellman song. He sent me this and I forgot I had this until the other day. This is a copy, he wrote this book and was gathering information. About this book, I think the Mercer University Press printed it. He found not at the time he was doing this book but later, someone had found this hand-written note by Martin to the young women who had been arrested at Richs with him. Lafia sent me a copy of this and the hand written one, he sent me the transcript of this. It gives the names of the women who were arrested in here. I don't think, I think these names are only female names in here because he wrote this to the girls. I don't know what happened because it stops mid-sentence. So, you might be interested in that. The original was found in Loretta Scott King's papers. So that's kind of a big piece of history. Dr. Lafia never had the original and he would have used it in his book if he would have found it. The other thing is this is the Macon GA when all the press was popping for our pictures when we were getting ready to leave town so that was in

Macon. And I kept sort of a diary during the Fulton County jail notes. I know I was there Feb 9, 1961, that's interesting its almost exactly year after we started. Until, I think I wrote every day, the last was Feb 21, 1961. Almost two weeks.

Interviewer: It's interesting that they called you college seniors so the idea that you were really wanting to build on the ethos of college students doing this.

Davis: Right, these were not adults. I was 20 at the time, I didn't make 21 until two weeks before I graduated from college, so I was never a real adult when I was doing any of that.

The young man on the right-hand side was the president of the Clark Student Body Ben Brown and the woman Betty Williamson, she's from Atlanta, her father owned a real estate company at the time. Having her presence sort of represented the Atlanta structure in a way her family had given her permission to go and do this with us. A lot of the black community was against us when we started. In fact, the black newspaper was totally against us and we started our own business and shut that newspaper down. And the newspaper that we started the Atlanta Inquirer is still going on. We started that as students. Julian used to write, Carl Holcomb was a professor at Clark and he sort of helped us as a faculty member to do this and the summer after my junior year in college Julian and I would go out at night and troll in town looking for stories for the Atlanta Inquirer. So, the black newspaper was shut down, we didn't shut it down, but we did by taking the money from them basically they could not survive anymore because the black elders in town finally came around to supporting us. They weren't supportive at first, but they finally came around.

Interviewer: So, you said you thought some of it was economic? Do you think they were afraid?

Davis: Of course, I think it was all a machine. The black community probably was, I must give them that. I think there was some fear. Of course, there was some fear. There's always some fear when you get police and guns and blacks and whites and blacks trying to take things what they think they have a right to and other people are keeping them from having, of course there was some fear. But they finally came around, came around to our way of thinking. They just didn't want us to rock the boat at first. But people, and I don't know who they were, but people in this town put up their property for us that's how we had bond money for everyone. You must have real property for the bondsman to loan the money or whatever however they do that, but I know that's property behind it and there was a lot of people in this town who put up property. they may have done it anonymously, I don't know but it was always there. We always had money and our money was coming from in town and I was telling you earlier we got money from Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte and Shelly Winters would call on Sundays to my office at Spellman and give me an amount of money. They'd say this is Shelly and I said this is Norma June and she would say how much money there were sending you this week. They didn't send it to me, I don't know who they were sending it to, they know who they sent it to. I didn't ask, that was not part of my job description to know that and I am glad I did not know, didn't want to know who was handling the money and who was getting it. I know they were very supportive of everything Martin wanted to do. Morally and financially they

were always there backing him and when we started here they backed us with their dollars. They raised money for us in New York and California and everywhere, they raised money for us. They just went around asking people to write checks. And people did so whenever we needed something, you heard Lonnie say it earlier, we always, there was never a day when we thought we couldn't do something we wanted to do because we didn't have money.

The Pascal brothers fed us, the Pascals restaurant that is still here, it used to be closer over to the colleges the HBCU's and when we would meet like we would do for one time maybe a week I ran this picket line downtown Atlanta and celebrities and stuff would come and ask to serve on the picket lines and I went down to see how we were going to run this down here. How was Norma June going to do it, I told you I was always interested in the how's of everything, so I picked the post office and I don't know if it's still there or not but I'm a US citizen and I can use a US post office and it had this big huge terrace outside. The bad thing was that it was up off the ground. Is it still like that? The big post office, whatever it was. But anyway, it sat up, you had to walk up a lot of steps to get to the top of it and there was a huge big plaza around it.

Interviewer: Yes! That's on the GA State building now. It's a Walgreens drugstore now,

Davis: I decided to set up my position there because it was elevated, and I could sort of see around and I thought I had a right to be on the property without anyone kicking me off. So, we did, and we put one of the short radio waves with me and the football players at Morehouse gave me one of those capes they wear when they sit on the benches when it was cold outside cause it was cold. I'd go down there in the morning at 7 o'clock and I'd be there until we got the last person out which was around 6 o'clock. Somebody would come spell me occasionally, so I could go inside and get warm, got to the bathroom but I was there. And everybody who was there, we had at least 6-8 places we were picketing all at once, so I kept records, everyone checked in and everyone checked out with me, so I would know who was there and I would be sure the last person was out before I left downtown. And then we would go to Pascals and meet until probably sometimes maybe midnight, Spellman students had to be on campus at 6 o'clock. Pascals fed us, we would go in there, whoever the leaders were that we were meeting that night, they would let us eat anything off the menu we wanted to eat, steaks, frog legs, whatever you wanted to eat. That was their contribution and they made a big financial contribution because they fed us for a long period of time.

If everyone had to be on campus at 6 o'clock how did you get on and off, they have a fence around the campus?

Davis: It depended on what time of day I was leaving. I did know the president's schedule for walking his dog. And when he would walk his dog he would come back to campus by a certain time so I would arrange if it was that time of day when I need to leave around 5 or so that I would be going on as he would go in and we would stop and I would say good evening Dr. Man lee and we would pass the time of day, how was your day or however, pat the dogs head, and he'd keep walking in on to campus and I would keep walking off. Never dawned on him that I was not supposed to be walking off that campus. I don't think it dawned

on him. But I had a rule and that rule I had was, that there was an 11th commandment and the 11th commandment for me was thou should not get caught. So therefore, you don't tell your right hand what your left hand was doing. So, I never confided in anyone, no one ever knew when I was leaving the campus, when I was coming back, no one knew when to expect me. My friends and classmates became accustomed to that fact. My senior year the dorm mother gave me a key to the building. And she said to me because I was having those midnight meetings and we didn't have cell phones in those days and I had to arrange early in the day to have someone check the phone at a certain time at night at a pay phone in the building and I would call from a pay phone from somewhere and I would say open the door I'll be there at 10:30 or whatever and I had to make sure I was there, someone had to get me there and somebody got out of bed and opened the door. She caught wind of this and so she gave me this key and she said if someone catches you with this key I'm going to say you stole it, fair enough, I said fair enough. Thou should not get caught, I gave her the key at graduation I said thank you very much and gave her key back.

Now we had a guard on campus who patrolled the campus at night. Whether he saw me and ignored it, I don't know. I was the only Spellmanite who was out doing this kind of stuff at these hours, so it was like there was 2 or 3 of us and talking I was always by myself. I don't know if he saw me and decided I was doing the right thing and it was ok somehow, I don't know. He and I never discussed it, I knew him, we would wave and talk but we never talked about it. There was no need to talk about things that were not necessary to be talked about. Because he probably did see me and if I had talked to him about it I probably would have put him in an awkward position of how he was going to handle it the next time he saw me come on campus late at night like that. Because I couldn't let anyone drive me on campus, they had to drive me to the gate and I would have to walk so he had plenty of time, it was a much smaller campus than it was now, he had plenty of time to see me before I got to the building and I never got caught.

Interviewer: You weren't supposed to.

Davis: No, and I do believe that things work out the way they are supposed to work out and that was my job to do what I was doing so I did my job then when I got done it was somebody else's turn to do the job.

This is a bad picture, but this is a picture of Clyde McPhatter, he was a famous Do Wop singer, he started during that time and he asked to be on the picket line. So, somebody came and got me and said Norma June Clyde is going to be on the picket line come on the newspaper going to take a picture of this. So, this is Clyde McFadden on the picket line. He was in town appearing at something and wanted to show his support and come and participate.

They were interesting times, they were important times. I think we all felt good that we could make some contributions.

Interviewer: You have such a unique perspective on it. Which I think is going to be an important part of this project, the main audience are students K-12 students and they have no frame of reference for the struggle of civil rights. And I think that

you have such a unique perspective because you lived it and it didn't seem at the time that it was some sort of monumental, which for people who didn't live it seems monumental, it seems like the top of the mountain, it seems gigantic.

Davis: It felt like the natural thing to do. Why hadn't we done it before is what I was thinking because something needed to be done. When I was a little girl playing out in my yard, white police would drive out in front and I lived in a suburban kind of neighborhood. There were no sidewalks, septic tanks, I don't think the streets were paved when we moved in, so I was out in the country at that time, that location is not in the country anymore. And they would drive by and make racial epitaphs at me on Saturdays or when I was younger and just home playing and not going to school.

When the boys dated me they always knew they were going to get pulled over, the cops would pull them over. They were very careful not to drink anything, this happened to my husband and I when I was in Iowa several times.

It's interesting because I just had my DNA down, I'm 56% European. I was kind of surprised of the percentage there. But I was very surprised because I don't look like anyone in my family, not by color. I was not expecting that. So, I guess I understand why the woman in Macon thought I was not part of the group or why the cop didn't want to arrest me at the time I never thought about that, I thought that when everyone saw me they knew I was black because I knew I was black. No matter what color my skin was they knew I was black. I had blonde hair for years as a child. So that gave me another set of problems to deal with.

Interviewer: Were you ever able to use passing as an advantage in the civil rights movement?

Davis: It never crossed my mind to do that. Why would I want to do that, I was who I was, so I never thought about that? I knew other people would do that. So, this is all new information for me like in the last 2 or 3 months.

Interviewer: What were the other percentages?

Davis: The rest of the percentage is African. The largest percentage is Irish, then British, and then a couple of Norwegian and believe it or not Afghanistan. One of my DNA's that I had done was National Geographic, so they get very much into the geography. So, I have a little Asian, around Russia, from the Caucasian.

Interviewer: How far back have you gone to trace your genealogy?

Davis: I think 7.

Interviewer: Have you found any of these people who brought this to you?

Davis: My great grandmother was Irish on my mother's side. She was never married to my great grandpa. No name was passed down, so I don't know who she is, I did not know she was Irish I only knew she was white. But I did not know she was Irish until I got the DNA. He thought she was Italian because she told him that in Philadelphia. No one wanted to be Irish in Philadelphia. So, at one point in the census my grandmother happened to be visiting her father and she said her

mother was born in Philadelphia and there's a hash mark on that and it says Rome so the only person who would have known anything about this woman was my grandfather. That's one side of the family.

On the other side of the family, my mother's family were all out of slavery very early. I don't know much about that. You can't find us until after slavery basically. But my mother's family was from the eastern shore East of Maryland and we found them in the 1820's and they were all free. So, I don't know what was going on there.

But on my father's side, my father's great grandmother was a slave and his grandmother were fathered by the owner of the plantation and there were several children, 5 at least who carried his surname Elliott. And where the name is from I'm not sure, I've been working on that in the last 6 months. I think they were from somewhere I think in Ireland or the British Isles, but I haven't been able to put a connector on that yet so I'm not sure where my 56% came from yet.

Interviewer: Did that surprise you?

Davis: It did. but it is what it is. All of us are mixed.