

Atlanta Student Movement Project
Dr. Herschelle Sullivan Challenor Interview
Conducted by Jeanne Law Bohannon
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Transcribed by Ella Greer

Interviewer: So I am here today speaking with Dr. Herschelle Sullivan Challenor, one of the co-chairs of the Atlanta Student Movement and one of this core group of folks who were in a brain trust as Lonnie King and I call it, who've changed the world, certainly. So we are just honored that you took the time to sit and talk with us.

Challenor: The pleasure is mine.

Interviewer: It's so important. I wanted to start just with the beginning. If you would tell us a little bit about you. Where you were born, where you went to school as a young woman, and then how it was you came to Spelman.

Challenor: Actually, I'm a Grady baby. I was born in Atlanta as were both of my parents. And went to Spelman Nursery School for a while. And then my parents moved north, my father first, obviously, as part of the exodus of African-Americans from the south looking for better opportunities. He wanted to be an engineer and of course Georgia Tech would not allow him to enter their institution. And so, I never got it straight. Once I heard that they gave him money to do Carnegie Tech, I'm not sure that part is true but anyway he did finish Carnegie Tech.

So, born in Atlanta, moved to, I guess when I was about 4 years old, we moved to Pittsburgh where Carnegie Tech was located. But obviously I was so influenced by my parents. They said they were both Atlantans, she finished Spelman, he finished Morehouse undergrad and then got a Master's in Math and then had his Engineering degree. My mother subsequently when we were in Pittsburgh got her Master's in Social Work. So my sister, there's two of us, one older sister, we were quite fortunate in that our parents valued education and there was never a question about us going to college, I mean that was just something that was understood.

So I didn't really know much about Atlanta until I came back here to go to Spelman College. I wanted to go to Spelman not only because my mother was a graduate, but also in Pittsburgh, and we went to, my sister and I both went to public schools and in most instances there were one, two, or three African Americans in our class and so I wanted to have the black experience and I think that's why many children of parents who had gone to a historically black college or university want to have at least some part of that experience themselves. So I did go to Spelman as an undergraduate, hated the first year. And I don't know if

you have an understanding of what it's like to be raised in the north and come to the south. It's true that the only person who called me a nigger was someone in the north, it never happened in the south. Well, I was a baby, we didn't stay here that long. And then of course during the Civil Rights Movement, we had all kinds of unkind things said to us.

But both of us came. Both my sister and I. And I don't regret it. I remember going to my first football game at Spelman. I had never seen so many African American people in one place in my life and it was really quite different.

But back to my parents. I had a very happy childhood as far as that was concerned. Except that my sister was very, very smart. She has a doctorate too in Cytogenetics. And so it's interesting that we're in such different fields. I'm in the social sciences and she's in the natural sciences. Growing up we, in Pittsburgh, both of us were usually, not usually, we were always in the top tier of our class, we took our studies seriously. My childhood was much like others, I mean, well I wanted to study ballet and my parents didn't think that was such a good idea. But, normal childhood. We had black kids who, whose parents had different orientations. And I don't mean in terms of gender or sexuality but I mean they were, they came from less well-educated parentage and these kids didn't particularly want to be in school and they would chase us home from school and argue and fight with us, but other than that, a normal childhood.

Perhaps the most important thing to me was the chance to study abroad, that was made possible by Spelman College. And I don't know if you know that Morris Dillard also was a Meryl Scholar. But that was transforming as was the ability to be part of the Civil Rights Movement.

I don't know what else you want to know.

Interviewer: Well like when you went abroad and the equality was just the norm right, more so than the American south? And then you came back to the American south. So what year was that when you came back?

Challenor: It would have been 1960, September 1960.

Interviewer: And you came back to a place where equality wasn't only available or valued it was shunned and legally so. I mean there were institutions in place in the American South right where you were not equal and how, how did that impact you?

Challenor: Well one of the things that struck me as an African American, I was very interested in African students. The time I was there it was really the eve of Francophone Africa. I studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and was just fascinated by

the French language. I know my father was interested in French when he was in college. And one of the things that struck me so much in talking to African students was the realization that, the realization that we as African Americans could never go back and have the opportunity to run for president of a country that was ours. And I cannot tell you how much the election of Barack Obama meant to me and so many other African Americans. But there were other things that I, I just enjoyed French culture, and I really think that Spelman and Morehouse have expanded their foreign, you know study abroad programs so that now almost any student who wants to do it can do it and I think that's vital.

Interviewer: So you came back in September to the Atlanta Student Movement.

Challenor: Yes, this was the year after it was started. But even before the Atlanta Student Movement began as the student movement, I'm sure, well I don't know, you haven't talked with any Spelman students. Am I the first Spelman student?

Interviewer: Uh well, Dr. Pope and Dr. Middlebrooks.

Challenor: Okay, but I'm the first one you've spoken to.

Interviewer: Yes, the first one.

Challenor: Okay well we had a professor. Oh God, you see old age, trying to think of his name. Howard Zinn. Howard Zinn was a Social Science professor. We didn't have a major in say political science, and so I had to do social science curriculum which was fine. And he influenced many of us. He was a Jewish American out of New York, brash and bright and unusual. And so he was a great influence on the Spelmanites and so even before the beginning of the student movement he insisted that we go to places to try out some of the white churches. I was physically removed from a white church, and I can tell you it changed my attitude. That and going to South Africa and seeing how the South Africans used religion as a weapon against black South Africans.

But, it was Howard Zinn that started pushing us out to do things that African Americans didn't usually do. One of the most profound exper- well it was silly, I mean it's nothing. I went to Fox, to the Fox, and I just went once, it was raining. And I don't know if you know it but at that time African Americans had to walk outside and it was raining that day and we could not sit on the first level. We had to walk outside to get to the balcony. Those were good seats but I went that once and I think I've only been back once since. It was a humiliating experience. At Spelman we didn't often use the buses. We were so restricted and I don't know if others have talked to you about. Well, I don't know, you've talked with Morris, and he's a southerner.

Interviewer: I know that the gates were closed.

Challenor: Oh, so you've heard about the restrictions?

Interviewer: And you could not get in or out. You guys had a curfew.

Challenor: Oh, yes, we did, and while my parents you know, when my sister and I had our first dates, my father came and gave them the lecture so they weren't, I mean they were concerned that everything was handled properly.

But Spelman was different because we had visiting hours, and we couldn't go off campus alone. I remember if we had a date we had to go in a group with a chaperone and I just felt that was so ridiculous.

Interviewer: And that wasn't something you had experienced in your home life?

Challenor: No.

Interviewer: So it was stricter than home?

Challenor: Yes, because of the prejudice and all those things that could happen to a person here. So that was difficult. That was difficult.

Interviewer: So when you joined the Atlanta Student Movement as the co-chair, you were already aware then of all things that could happen because of what you were doing.

Challenor: That didn't seem to matter. It didn't seem to matter. As I said after I came back I just felt like here the African students had an opportunity to do things and to grow and I wanted an opportunity to protest, so it was just a natural. Obviously, I kept in touch with students through letters then, we didn't have cell phones. But, so I was informed about what was going on here, and so obviously wanted to be a part of it. So I think it was about the second day I was on campus when I returned in September of 1960 that Lonnie got in touch with me and we sat down and talked and it was kind of 'sign me up'! And I think next to the chance to spend the year in mainly in France but tour a lot of Europe, the student movement was one of the most important things I've been engaged in. And what I found intriguing was that you know when we went to jail, well, as you may know, the first, there were three times when students were arrested. The first time, and you'll hear this from Rosalyn Pope, was in March, I think it was the 13th, but they were arrested but were released on their own recognizance. It was only in the beginning of October 19th that, and it was Lonnie who took the decision and it made a lot of sense, he said we wanted to up the ante and so we

wanted to stay in jail really as another way of exerting economic pressure on, on the state of Georgia.

Interviewer: And that was when “jail, no bail.”

Challenor: That’s right, exactly.

Interviewer: Became the mantra.

Challenor: Exactly. And I must say to you, I mean you hear quite a lot of things as an African American female. I was very much concerned about being accosted by white jail keepers, whatever their names are. And, but I felt we had to do it. When we were arrested and there weren’t that... Well, maybe I should back up.

Because students, we were sitting in, and students could decide whether or not they wanted to go to jail or not. And there were no hard feelings either way. We recognized that for some students it just wasn’t something they wanted to do. But I guess when we were arrested there were about, say about 52 of us and I was with a group that was, went to the Atlanta jail and not to the state facility, and they called the Atlanta jail, what was it, the Atlanta Arms because it was so much nicer than the state prison. But that was, that was tough. We were put into a cell with about I would say 40 other women and we didn’t know what to expect. So we had appointed, we took turns, we had people designated to watch as guides over the women through the night. And everything was fine. The women who were in the cell were very protective of us and very proud of us and, that was encouraging.

The plan changed somewhat because the downtown businessmen said that they were willing to sit down and talk and so if we would stop the demonstrating then they would release us. But we were fine, I remember when the innkeepers came and told us we were all being released we were shocked. And I remember two of the students cried, “why are you releasing us? We are supposed to stay here.” Jail was not pleasant. Only if you were pregnant could you have regular milk with breakfast, otherwise it was buttermilk. It was some kind of gruel we had to eat, the food was terrible. But I must say we were never taken advantage of in any way and for that, I was most grateful. Because I think that’s the one thing that women fear the most, being raped or physically abused in some way forcefully when you have no power to respond.

But what surprised me was how willing the Atlanta Spelman students were. I will say, and Lonnie agrees with this with great reluctance, that Spelman had the largest percentage of students who participated in the Civil Rights Movement. And there were options, you could picket or you could come and make sandwiches or put together picket signs, so there were things you could do, you

weren't forced to go to jail. But many, many of the Atlanta students from Spelman decided to do so.

Interviewer: And that's interesting to me as a woman on a very personal level, and I wanted to ask you about that. So the number of Spelman women who took up this cause, this important cause, and you as a leader, how, how did that not only just, but how did you feel about that and negotiate those spaces as the co-chair of the movement and you were a woman?

Challenor: Okay, I guess the first should be underlined and Roslyn the same experience as she would tell you. When I came back from Europe I had to do an extra year, and so my classmates had already been graduated but they elected me in absentia to be president of the student body. The same thing occurred with Roslyn, and so I was in the leadership position at the time.

Interviewer: At Spelman.

Challenor: That I got involved in with the Atlanta Student Movement, yes, as was Roslyn. And when I went to Spelman I was elected president of the freshman class and so I was an outgoing person and so I liked doing things like that. The other thing too I think was coming, well being socialized in the North, well I guess the northerners were more assertive.

It was very difficult for some of the students at Spelman whose parents lived and worked in Atlanta, most as teachers, because they were threatened, "Look, do it and you'll lose your job." So there were many, many outsiders, well non-Atlanta students who were participants, probably disproportionate, a disproportionate number had to do it.

Interviewer: So kind of building on that experience. As the co-chair in addition to going to jail, in addition to doing the sit-ins, you also were Lonnie's co-chair when you all went to that secret Atlanta Chamber of Commerce meeting and you had to negotiate that as well. Was that something that for you as a young woman of color and here you are at what I think was a Chamber of Commerce meeting in March of 1961.

Challenor: All of the-

Interviewer: Where they called you both in there and tried to trick you into saying "hey, we're going to stop this if you all will agree..." I mean how was that for you as a young woman of color walking into this room of very powerful men at the time?

Challenor: Well, having been socialized in the North, it wasn't that big of a deal but the fact that these were, it was the leading business community of Atlanta and mainly we

listened, as you know it was the first time they had invited us in, they had already decided on their, on the substance of the agreement which was to seem to do something but to remain, to have everything remain the same. I think the main concern of the white political leadership in Atlanta was submit as they had to, to the Brown versus the Board of Education decision from the Supreme Court which would have enforced school desegregation and let the court and not a bunch of ragtag students be the determinant of them changing their minds. And so when you look at the final agreement, the final agreement was that they would not desegregate the counters until they enforced the Supreme Court's ruling to desegregate the schools.

Interviewer: That would have been until the next fall.

Challenor: It was the next fall, in September. After most of us had left the campus so it didn't give us the opportunity to benefit from, from the initiatives we had taken. But that was alright, and I have this document here, I must say that when the agreement that had been made between the students, well Lonnie and I were the only students in the room, and the negotiating committee for the white businessmen, we were very, Lonnie and I were very much against it and as this article says. And yes, this is a genuine issue of the *Atlanta Inquirer*. I guess you've been told that the *Atlanta Inquirer* was a newspaper that grew out of the student movement. Julian Bond was one of the main persons involved.

Interviewer: Will you hold it up a little bit for us?

Challenor: Yes. It was a weekly. And we felt we had to do this because even the African American owned newspaper refused to print the news of what was going on.

Interviewer: That was the *Atlanta Daily World*.

Challenor: The *Daily World*, that is correct. Eventually, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* did publish more and more about the student movement as it grew larger and it became a phenomenon in the South itself.

Interviewer: So after you left Chamber of Commerce, and my understanding from what Lonnie said, was that you know, the leaders of the white power structure said something that was not true, which was that you had already agreed. So were you at Warren Memorial that night when that crowd was so upset because they felt betrayed?

Challenor: Absolutely.

Interviewer: What was that like?

Challenor: Well, as this article says we felt very badly because we felt we did what we could, but we did not do what we thought we should have done. And so as you know we offered to resign our roles and at the church, they said no, no. And, and that was gratifying. That was gratifying. But I think the thing that impressed me the most was the extent to which these five institutions cooperated and often there was rivalry between the institutions, but there was none. If you were involved in the movement then you reported to our office at Rush Memorial and took the uh, you did the tasks that they asked you to do and gratefully. I was very much impressed by the extent to which African American cab drivers, they would come to our headquarters and take students, drive students down to their picketing sites. I must say that we were a very well-organized movement. Lonnie probably discussed the extent of which at one point. We were using walkie-talkies because we had to keep the picket lines going and the strategy with picketing was you go and sit in, and once the lunch counter shuts down, you move to another so it was hit and run, but we didn't run but the purpose was to shut it down because the secondary point was not only to inconvenience white purchases but also to have a little economic pain for the businessmen themselves, so there was an economic dimension to it.

Interviewer: And that was something I think that, and I wanted you before we ended have a chance to talk about what you would say to the youth of today who are still struggling for civil rights in 2017 because one of the successes that I've heard lots of movement veterans, a few movement veterans, talk about is that it wasn't just about the boycotts and the sit-ins, it was about the economic and the legal pressure that you all were able to bring to bear on the white power structure.

Challenor: Oh, absolutely. Oh, absolutely. No ML - Reverend King - said this very clearly. And it's often misunderstood. I was reading some things that had been printed up by dictionaries, by people who thought they understood what was going on. There were four distinct Civil Rights Movements. And obviously you are familiar with them, but NAACP in 1909 formed, intimidated by DuBois and others was the oldest, and they were interested in working through the court system. And then there was a movement, CORE, founded in Chicago in 1942 I believe, and so much more aggressive approach. Then, of course, SELC, SELC King's movement, 67. And then SNCC in 61, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And the direct action campaign was something that the students were much more interested in than the slower approach by the NAACP. I guess Lonnie told you how the college presidents told the students, "Be patient, let's go through the court system," but it was too slow and we were too anxious.

There were so many other things I wanted to tell you, and I...

Interviewer: Well like, so tell me. I would love to hear them. Like, you know, so when you all were forming and writing the appeal right, the Appeal for Human Rights, and all

those different sections of the appeal from law enforcement to education to voting rights, those are still things that aren't achieved today.

Challenor: No, that is correct, and of course Roslyn is the person to talk to you about that, Roslyn Pope. I must say though, on the 40th anniversary, I looked at those segments again and did another appeal, and things have gotten, in many ways, worse. And that was, that was a tragedy. I must confess that today I am much more concerned, not only by the, I don't think racism has increased, it's just more overt. And it's, it creates anxiety, and at the same time, it's disillusioning because you wonder... what was it all for? And we realize that with the Civil Rights Movement we could change behavior, but we couldn't guarantee that you could change attitude. And I think what is going on in our body politic is so reprehensible and unforgivable.

I just, in many ways what bothers me most about Trump is that I've never seen anyone who was so publicly masochistic, so self-absorbed, who has such disrespect for other people. And you know it's, we were raised a certain way and it's, when I think of all the Chiefs-of-State that came before him, I worry about this country. Because this is a man that cares about nothing but himself and his family, and just has no social graces. You know one of the things we were raised as, in my family, to believe that you were polite to people. If you had negative feelings and keep them to yourselves and have a quiet one-on-one discussion with that person. But you don't criticize people, you don't use vulgarity. And he seems to want to keep things confused all the time. And I think that there is a general feeling of anxiety because somehow with television you can't get away from it, it's hard to stay away. So I guess I feel that what I thought we had worked for and accomplished, not accomplished because as I say, you change rules, you don't change minds all the time, certainly not attitudes. But it's all gone down the drain now. It's open season.

I remember once during the sit-in movement, the Klan was marching on one side, picketing on one side of Rich's, and we were on the other side, but they were, they were respectful. I remember sitting at the counter and having a white man spit at me, and of course, we couldn't do anything, even turn our heads but, and that was good discipline. But I've never been so embarrassed by an individual as I am by our current president and I don't know why, and I have to say this, why white Americans won't put an end to this embarrassment and just impeach him. He's unfit to be president, and already you see an erosion in American authority and soft power is gone. It's gone. And I don't think that's, that will come back so easily. I don't know how people of good will, because we always talked about people of good will should do this, and I cannot understand Republicans who, I gather, are so interested in maintaining power in the Congress and otherwise.

I worked on the Hill, worked on the Hill for about 5 years, and it's a wonderful experience, and I think that more students should do internships on the Hill. I think it's a great thing to do. But everything is being demeaned, and nothing, it seems, is sacred, and I just find it quite troubling.

Interviewer: So what can we do? Can we go back to the appeal, can we write another appeal? What can young people today do?

Challenor: It's a different time. You know, we didn't have cell phones. I mean there are a number of things they can do. And I think the women, I thought had a start but I don't know, it's fizzled out. It's hard to maintain a movement. And you know I think now because after leaving Spelman, and I spent most of my time in Washington and Paris for my professional career, oh and New York. But I don't know what to tell them to do because I think you have to. One thing I did learn from the Civil Rights Movement is that, I try to remember, what was it, during the Asian, what was it, in the Middle East there was this, there was a period when all the countries in the Middle East were reassessing their status and trying to have a much greater democracy and a voice in their own governments. I forget.

Interviewer: Was it the Arab Spring?

Challenor: Ah, yes. The Arab Spring. And it didn't work. And it didn't work because culture is important. I don't want to talk about culture in the way that, of course, Trump does, but culture is important and those societies are fundamentally different. But I just said that to say that the culture, the environment in which you work has to be taken into account when you're deciding on a way to counteract something you dislike in your own society.

I don't know what, I have a question for you, what are you planning to do with all of this?

Interviewer: This project has four parts to it. The first part is we that are sitting down with veterans of the student movement and asking these kinds of questions so we are getting histories of the student movement and some advice from our elders. And those, the interviews, will be placed into a publicly accessible, publicly usable archive at KSU along with all the associated documents that are digitized. And then we are going to write up history lessons that are targeted at students in kindergarten all the way through high school. And we are going to push those lessons, those history lessons that are free, that are aligned to standards, that are usable by history teachers to try and reach our children throughout the country.

Challenor: Okay.

Interviewer: That's the first, that's kind the first part of all of this and of course we are also doing a documentary that we can push to the masses, to the general public.

Challenor: Again, using film.

Interviewer: Yes, and some archival footage and pieces and of course talks with you all, the folks that were there.

We're gonna go back through the transcripts that will be produced from these interviews to pick out the stories to piece everything together to tell a cohesive story amongst all of the people that are participating.

So our hope is to be able to reach everyone where they are. So the students in the digital spaces where they learn. And for me as a teacher, that part is really important because like you I believe that some of the folks who are out there now, I know Dr. Moss didn't want me to say this, I believe some of those folks are irredeemable, and the only way to truly effect some sort of change is with children whose minds are still somewhat open. So that, to me, is where my heart is here and also with the documentary to make sure everyone sees it. That's important. To hear the words of human and civil rights from the veterans who were there and to be able to see the documents as well. And are, we would love to hear your thoughts on that and where you think those things could be most impactful.

Challenor: Well I'd like to, to give it some thought.

Interviewer: I would love to sit down and have coffee or lunch and talk about what you think would really benefit the project in terms of how we could ensure that you know those goals of something that is publicly accessible but also publicly usable because a lot of things that live in archives can say they are publicly accessible, but unless they are promoted and pushed to audiences, they just sit there.

Challenor: No, that's true, and I think we get so many messages thrown at us, I don't know. I mean right now I can't think of the best way to attract one's attention. It's quite a challenge, it's quite a challenge. But I certainly salute you and wish you all success in what you're doing.

Interviewer: And we'll need your help. Thank you so much. And we need your help. Like I said I will be coming back to the well of your knowledge, again and again, to ask for help.

Interviewer: You're in Atlanta right?

Challenor: Yes.