“My Witness” Podcast Transcript
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MMR: Welcome to the “My Witness” podcast, a collaboration between One Voice Nashville and Metro Arts to support *Witness Walls*, Nashville’s Civil Rights-inspired public artwork, next to the Historic Metro Courthouse. In creating these podcasts, we hope to honor the fight for racial equality during the Nashville Civil Rights movement, educate youth about this history, and continue the conversation about social justice in our community.

LW: Civil rights history is really a complicated history and I lump it all in with a part of the freedom movement among African-Americans.

WD: My name is Westley Dunn, I am a junior at Hillsboro High School.

LW: And I’m Linda Wynn—I’m a Professor of History at Fisk University where I teach several courses, including the Introduction to the History of Women in the Civil Rights Movement, Civil Rights through African-American History, and also Introduction to Public Administration. In addition to my duties as a professor at Fisk University, I am an assistant director for state programs at the Tennessee Historical Commission.

WD: Why did Nashville become such a center of civil rights activity?

LW: Nashville’s forefront status was due to an intentional leadership, a training program based upon nonviolence, and as a result of the training, leaders had a profound impact upon nearly every major movement development up until 1965. Including the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, the march on Washington, the birth of SNCC, the emergence of black power, the direction of NCLC after 1962, the impact on the thinking of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Birmingham campaign, Selma, voting rights campaign…

WD: Who were the leaders, and what made them the most suited to be the leaders?

LW: Within the Nashville movement, there were approximately seven “leaders”. You had the convergence of the leaders from other locales who came and settled in Nashville between 1951 and 1959. It made the city the most organized and disciplined in the region. In every case, they were prepared from childhood to become local change agents. This leadership was a combination of seminary students and those students were John Lewis, James Bevel, and Bernard Lafayette…you had regular college students, such as Diane Nash and an assortment of ministers—Kelly Miller Smith, C.T. Vivien, and the Rev. James Lawson, Jr. I think more than any other individuals, this group accounted for conceiving, planning, developing, and executing the major facets of the early phases of the Nashville movement. Giving the local movement it’s distinctive Gandhian-inspired Christian nonviolent character. The Nashville group is very unique, in that it was a trained group. You know, usually when you think of the sit-ins—especially the date that always comes to mind is February 1st, 1960—when four male students at North

Carolina A&T staged a sit-in. The Nashville group actually preceded that February 1st 1960 date—what they were actually doing is conducting tests, what they called “test sit-ins”, in November and December of 1959. And they had workshops that basically taught the principles of nonviolence, and all of these were based on Christian leadership or Christian ideology. They also are responsible for basically shaping the ultimate character, I think, of SNCC—the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—and to some degree the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In Nashville, you had the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference. The Rev. Dr. Kelly Miller Smith was the on the board of SCLC and that inspired him to form a branch here in Nashville which was the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference. Of the seven people referred to as the leadership core, all but Diane Nash really were associated with a seminary or divinity school. Most of them had aspirations of becoming ministers. All of them were shaped by some childhood experience with discrimination. Everybody asks the question, “Why Nashville?” How did you have these seven core people ending up in Nashville? And I have heard some of the leaders express the idea that it was providence, and I think I named the individuals—Kelly Miller Smith, CT Vivien, James Lawson, John Lewis, Bernard Lafayette, James Bevel, Diane Nash, and many others. But most of these individuals not only understood the concept of providence, but they also considered it to be intertwined with—and that is the whole idea of providence—what is their guiding spirit. And if you look at it, it gives the Nashville movement, especially its primary leadership, that sense of power. It also helps to fortify their nerves, because if you’re familiar with what went on not necessarily on February the 13th but certainly by February the 27th, when the students experienced violence. They had to have a sense of something greater than “me.” That is my guiding force. And you know, when you look at the cadre of leadership that was in Nashville and goes on beyond the boundaries of Nashville, they all earn a reputation of fearlessness. And how do you have that fearlessness if you don’t have something from within that is your guiding force? When you look at the Nashville sit-in movement and the early desegregation of selected downtown lunch counters—that was done on May the 10th, 1960. Nashville became the first major city in the South to desegregate its lunch counters. And so, it established Nashville as one of the most organized and successful sit-in movements in the country. When King came here after the April 19th bombing of attorney Z. Alexander Looby’s home, he said he did not come to inspire the movement in Nashville, but to gain inspiration. The most, I think it was, the most successful movement in the country. Nashville and its student leaders began to serve as models for others to follow. They attracted national attention, network film crews who produced two documentaries on the Nashville sit-ins. It was thought that because of Diane Nash’s skills and leadership ability, that she would become the first leader of SNCC. That did not happen, but her schoolmate Marion Berry became the first leader of SNCC. It was reported that the Rev. James Lawson was very much involved in the sanitation workers’ strike of 1968. And we all know the unfortunate outcome of that strike, because on April the 4th, 1968, Martin Luther King is assassinated. But it was Lawson who brought King to Memphis. When Lawson is arrested—and I believe that date is somewhere around March the 3rd, 1960—his having worked with and trained the students when that leadership board was created by his arrest, the students kept right in step…kept going. Why? Because they had gained confidence in themselves. They were very familiar with the uncompromising core principles of direct nonviolence. And so, you know, the sit-ins really sets up a small group of students not only to invigorate the sit-ins, but also to be perfectly positioned to take control of the next stage of the modern movement. And that next stage would be in 1961—the Freedom Rides. The Nashville phase also served as a catalyst for several other local movements, for example, you had their activism in Jackson and Greenwood, Mississippi. They were in Albany, Georgia. Activists involved in the Nashville phase descended upon Jackson and they scattered across

Mississippi. This development brought Diane Nash and Bevel into the national limelight. While she and Bevel were in Mississippi, they inspired and trained Jackson youth to stage sit-ins. James Bevel, after leaving Jackson, ventured to Sunflower County where he motivated Fannie Lou Hamer to become a member of the voting rights struggle. The impetus for the Albany movement came from the Nashville phase of the Freedom Rides. So you can see that those Nashville students…they all spread out across the nation. I'm sure you have probably seen one of the iconic pictures of the Freedom Rides where John Lewis is literally beaten to a pulp. John Lewis, today is Congressman Lewis, he's still very much involved in justice movements. They just spread out across the region. When you look at James Bevel, for example, he was instrumental in the idea, when he was in Mississippi, of having children involved. When you look at the Freedom Rides, the Freedom Rides helped the movement cross a threshold made evident when Diane Nash was contacted by John Seigenthaler (worked with Robert Kennedy, the attorney general). And they were trying to have the Freedom Rides stopped. You really have to understand why that was going on. Why did President Kennedy want the Freedom Rides stopped? He was getting ready to meet with Nikita Khrushchev.

LW: And the last thing you needed as the President of the United States is Nikita Khrushchev being able to use his propaganda. Your own citizens in your country are not free. Look at what is happening to them. I believe President Kennedy made the statement that he didn't care when they sat in, rolled in, whatever they were going to stage as long as they didn't take place when he was getting ready to meet with Nikita Khrushchev. That does not put forth a very good picture for a country that attempts to epitomize democracy and is trying to spread democracy across the globe, when you are denying democracy to citizens in your own country. So that puts Nash on a national threshold. Also when you think about those students that came out of Nashville in the Freedom Rides, they actually signed wills and things. They were well aware that they may not make it back alive. That if they came back, they could very well be in a coffin. All along the way, I think largely because of the Nashville phase, we have new activists and influences that are being attracted to the movement. For example, you have northerners both black and white who come south in significant numbers to join the struggle. Some of these were not indoctrinated in the philosophy of nonviolence. And when you look at the movement, you have to look at both of these philosophical ideas. Those who were a part of the Nashville student movement—they practiced what they believed, okay? It was a philosophy of nonviolence…it was not tactical. With a tactical philosophy, you do what is necessary to meet—to get to the end goal you're trying to get to. But the other, the philosophical part, that becomes a way of life. Many people look at nonviolence, the philosophy of nonviolence, as being somewhat of a coward's way. If you look at what they endured, that's not a coward's way. It's very easy to retaliate. And that's the basic human instinct—if I hit you, you're gonna hit me back. Especially if I hit you in anger…you're gonna hit back. If you do not hit back, how much courage does that take? How much commitment to a philosophy and a cause does that take? That takes a lot of restraint. It takes a lot of belief in the philosophy that you are adhering to. It's not a coward's way out. It's a very courageous way. And it also, I think to some degree, if those who perpetrate violence could step back and think about it, you have been made to act on someone that really hasn't perpetrated any violence against you. If you stop and think about it, as an individual, what does that say about you? So I think it's a very courageous way to handle a conflict. If I may digress just for a minute, I think if we could get more of conflict resolution into schools, we may not have some of the problems that are existing today. I don't think they talk enough about conflict resolution and that can come out of this philosophy of nonviolence.

WD: Alright, so how open was Nashville to change, with regards to like, how the police reacted to the movement?

LW: I think Nashville was forced to become open to change. In terms of police brutality, Nashville had some brutality but nothing like that that was experienced in the deeper south states. What brought Nashville to its knees, really, was the economic boycott. There was a professor at Fisk University by the name of Vivian Henderson. He was a professor of economics. And he had calculated that Nashville blacks contributed about $50 million a year to the downtown businesses. And he and others proposed an economic withdrawal around Easter, which was one of the most busiest times of the year. And while African-Americans did not purchase from downtown merchants and continued to hold sit-ins, it also has an impact on whites who were coming downtown. And they stopped coming. So in addition to losing the revenue from African-Americans, you also began to lose revenue from other citizens in the Nashville community. The leaders thought, in the words of 1960, “These are not our Negroes who are perpetrating the difficulty.” Which was not the case—I mean, you had students on the various campuses, but when it came to the economic withdrawal…that’s your citizens. And so, you know, while they did participate in other ways, if I withdraw my money…that’s an impact. And so it causes city officials and businesspeople to really capitulate. On April 19th, when Diane Nash asked then-Mayor Ben West, “Do you think that it is fair”—and I’m paraphrasing her—“Is it fair for African-Americans to spend their money and not be able to eat at an establishment? Is it okay for us to be able to purchase goods but not a service?” And he basically says that it’s not right. And Mayor West admitted that he was not speaking as a politician, but he was speaking as a man. And there’s a difference in speaking as man and speaking as a politician. And so, with that statement, that is what really starts the ball to rolling in terms of desegregating those first seven restaurants that were desegregated, on May the 13th, 1960. Now that does not end the sit-ins, because you only had seven stores that agreed and those were the original seven stores that were targeted. Sit-ins continue almost up until 1965. And not only what the students in Nashville did—in addition to sit-ins, they started sleep-ins, they went after the hotels. They did stand-ins, going after the movie theatres. They did swim-ins, which really didn’t work because Nashville decided rather than to desegregate its swimming pool in Centennial Park, that it would just put a building on top of it and nobody would swim. But you know, it does begin the process.

WD: How do you think the current Black Lives Matter could learn from the Civil Rights Movement?

LW: I think the Black Lives Matter movement could profit from the strategies that was used. Also, there was dialogue between the younger members of the movement and the older members of the movement. Now, dialogue does not mean that you agree, necessarily, but at least there is dialogue and you know where each one is coming from. I think Black Lives Matter movement is a little bit different than the Modern Civil Rights movement and the student movements that we’ve been talking about. It germinated from young African-Americans being brutalized and killed by police officers. So it is different, but some of those strategies I think that were employed are employable with Black Lives Matter. You know, there have been several responses to Black Lives Matter, like Every Life Matter, and when you say that you’re missing the whole point. You know, you need to look at the number of black lives that have been lost. We talk about Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin, and Zimmerman seems to stay in the news, to Mike Brown in Ferguson, to Freddy Grey and the other individuals. Sandra Bland, I don’t want to leave females because they have suffered police brutality. I see some of the same elements at

work, and I think some of those elements are racial discrimination, I think some of those elements are a bias toward African-Americans in particular. I don't think the language of the political movement right now is helping anything. I think it's only exacerbating what has taken place in this country. And it's really interesting to note—there is an unrest in America, but there's also an unrest around the world. And you know, I'm just trying to bring in somewhat of a global perspective. So that's definitely something going on, but to get back to Black Lives Matter and the Modern Civil Rights movement and the students of the Modern Civil Rights movement, I think Black Lives Matter can benefit. Now in order to benefit, you have to know the history of the Modern Civil Rights movement. And unfortunately, I don't think that history's fully understood.

MMR: We hope you enjoyed listening to this "My Witness" podcast. To hear more podcasts or for more information on the *Witness Walls* public artwork, go to witnesswalls.org. Metro Arts' Public Art Collection is funded through the Percent for Public Art Program with support from the Tennessee Arts Commission.

Transcribed by Allison Summers, Metro Arts Commission, 2016