W: This is Marna Weston in Cleveland, Mississippi for the Sam Proctor Oral History Program at the Sam Block, Junior Civil Rights Foundation speaking with SNCC veteran and Hall of Fame activist Margaret Block. Thank you very much for speaking with me today, Margaret.

B: Oh, you’re welcome.

W: I’m really excited. You know, our program has changed in leaps and bounds since our association with you and, you know, finding out about your definition of leadership and you talking to us about the struggle. We really appreciate this opportunity.

B: Oh, you’re welcome.

W: Could you talk a little bit about your level of current activism? What are you currently doing in the community here in Cleveland?

B: I’m currently working against the housing, with fair housing and fair rent for people that’s over there in this community called Eastgate, which was built by the National Council of Negro Women with the intentions on people owning their own homes. But, some people in Leland, white people, took over, and they raised, tripled people’s rent, so I worked with them. Along with—I got the Mississippi Justice Center to come up here and help those people out, so we still struggling with that. But they can’t just raise people’s rent.

W: Definitely.

B: Then, I’m working with the schools, against the schools, because they haven’t compiled or concurred with anything that the Justice Department told them to do. So, I’m still working with them, and then I’m trying to get something done about the school board, because I found out they have catered lunch—they catered their dinners before the school board meetings, which I thought was illegal. I know it’s unfair for them to cater and have a dinner before they have the board meeting, and then the taxpayers are paying for the catered dinners that they have. I’m going to get—I’m working on trying to get somebody to do something about that. Besides, I’m teaching and touring and whatever, you know.

W: Well, the young people that work with our program are always so impressed when they get a chance to meet you, and you’ve inspired us all to work harder to uncover the elements of the struggle. I’m just curious, how is it that you find the energy and the time to be involved in so many activities on behalf of others?

B: Well, I guess I was born to do it. I don’t know, it’s just, I’m the type of person who thinks that injustice in any form is wrong and I’m going to try to do something about it. If it’s injustices, it’s not good for the person that’s perpetrating the racism, and it’s not good for us that’s on the receiving end, because the person that’s perpetrating the racism, they are ignorant and they need to get an education. Then, on the other hand, we need to get an education. We better start educating our children ourselves and don’t trust the public schools to educate them, especially when it comes to their own history. My brother was, you know, an icon in the civil rights movement. The kids over at Eastside had never heard of him, and he graduated from Eastside. But, when they had the Hall of Fame, they didn’t have my brother’s picture over there anywhere. They had all of the football players in their Hall of Fame, and I’m going, well, why isn’t he up there? Asked me, well, what did he do? I go, no further questions, don’t ask me anything else. But we got to start teaching our own children our own history.

W: With so much information available to people through the internet and through civil rights websites, and also through the many museums and foundations that are out there, why do you think so many young people are unaware of the contributions of persons like Sam Block or, even yourself, featured today in the local newspaper?

B: Well, if you don’t know it, the parents don’t know it and the teachers don’t know, then who’s going to tell them? The teachers don’t know and they don’t care. They’re not teaching it in the schools. Parents, you know, most of these parents—I realize that they’re young, single mothers, a lot of them. They’re trying to figure out how they’re going to make it from day to day, so they don’t even have time to think about what their children are learning in history, they just miss it as just something that they got to take. They think, well, math and science is important, but that’s what most of them focusing on, the math and science. I’m going, you got to teach them how to read. But I don’t know. It’s just something to do, because this is a boring town. If I wasn’t doing something, I think I’d be living in San Francisco.

W: [Laughter] What do you think of the greatest needs for this community?

B: We need decent housing, we need jobs, we need to get felon’s rights reinstated so they can vote and they can get different benefits that they can’t get now because they felons. That’s another thing I’m working on, is trying to get felon’s rights reinstated. Because they did their time, so why are they going to be punished for the rest of their life? They can’t vote because they committed a crime? If you go to jail and do your time, then they should not hold that against you for the rest of your life. That’s so unfair. It pisses me off when I talk about it, too.

W: So you believe in the automatic restoration of civil rights for a person immediately when they finish their sentence?

B: Yeah. If you sentence me to fifteen years, if I do my fifteen years, that should be the end of it. Now, why you got to make me be disenfranchised for the rest of my life because I made a mistake and went to jail?

W: Now, some people would say that’s just you suffering for the wrongs that you did. Why do you believe it’s important to have a person’s civil rights, such as the right to vote, restored once they finish a sentence?

B: Because it’s their human right. As a human being, you’re supposed to treat everybody as a human being. Then, it’s a ploy—you know they don’t want black people, black men, to get educated, and they don’t want them to vote. I see what it is. It’s just like it’s not Jim Crow now, it’s the Mr. James Crow. They got a way to keep you from voting still, and to keep you from getting educated. That’s their main focus. They don’t want these black men educated, either.

W: So you feel that education, in addition to rehabilitation, would be a way to decrease crime, increase civil responsibility?

B: It would be a way to—I don’t know about decreasing crime, but it would be a way to do civil responsibility. People wanted to vote for Obama, but they couldn’t, because they were felons, which was bad. They’re going to make it worse on these—I keep telling these youngsters, they going to make it worse on you, because that’s why we were getting killed in the [19]60s, because they didn’t want Obama. They know, the day going to come when we had a black president, and that’s what they was trying to avoid at all costs. They still trying to avoid it.

W: What is it about your life that’s shaped the long-term views that you have? I thought that that was really very interesting, how you pointed out, this is why it’s happened, to keep an Obama from being elected one day. You’ve put a lot of thought into what happens in the past and how it connects to the future. What has shaped those views?

B: I don’t know, I guess it’s just my way of thinking. Then, my brother had a big influence on me, and so did my parents, because my father led a strike against the National Compress in 1947, and that was something—I mean, a black man, my Uncle Louie and my daddy, Sam Block Senior, they led a safety strike at the Federal Compress. So we had always—then, my people were the type of people that just didn’t get it from nobody, white folks, black folks. They would stand up. I guess that was instilled in us, to stand up for your own self.

W: You’ve talked about civil rights leaders, like Amzie Moore’s home being restored, and you also talked about a leader in Clarksdale.

B: Medgar Evers.

W: Yeah. Why do you think it’s important that—

B: Not Medgar. Dr. Henry.

W: Yes, Dr. Aaron Henry. Why do you think that something like that is important, and why would you say to someone listening to this interview, as to why it would be important to restore Aaron Henry’s home in Clarksdale and Amzie Moore’s home in Cleveland?

B: It’s important to preserve your history and to know exactly what happened and who did what, and that house, Dr. Henry’s house and Amzie Moore’s house were, you know, an important center, because nobody had anywhere to go but to Amzie Moore’s when they came to town. Like when Thurgood Marshall came to town, he was in Mound Bayou with Dr. Howard, but he also came to Amzie Moore’s house. I mean, just great people came. Ella Baker came to that house. Miss Septima Clark, great people came to that house, and it was a lot of organizing going on. That’s where we had our planning meetings at, in Amzie’s house. Now, I didn’t work in Clarksdale, but I know that Dr. Henry was significant enough for somebody to do something and restore that house and preserve that history, because we’re losing our history and we’re not preserving it. We need to preserve our own history.

W: You knew Fannie Lou Hamer personally. What was it about her that inspired you?

B: Well, I guess her singing, and then the way she spoke, and she was way older than us, so she treated us like her daughters. You know? She would tell you what’s right, and sometimes we’d listen to her. Most of the time we did. [Laughter] You know, we were going to do what we were going to do. Because, at the time when I was in the movement, it was three women, that was Fannie Lou Hamer in Ruleville, and Lois Rodgers in Cleveland and myself, we were the only three women in the movement in [19]62—well, it was [19]62 and [19]63. Mrs. Hamer, I admired her, the way she just left off of that plantation and didn’t look back. The best thing they could have done was to let her vote and kept her on that plantation, because she came off of that plantation and brought the world, got the world’s attention about what was going on. Ms. Hamer talked about me one time, me and I think that was Unita, and Mr. Hartman Turnbow, who was from Holmes County, Mississippi. We were at a meeting, and Mr. Turnbow told us, what we got to do is, let’s get us some guns and let’s shoot up a few of them. I heard that and I went, yeah. Mr. and Mrs. Hamer got mad with us and, y’all know we nonviolent. I went, yeah, that’s what you think. [Laughter] But Mr. Turnbow was right.

W: Well, now, you were noted as a veteran of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Are you suggesting there was some tension between those that believed in nonviolent resistance and those that believed in something else?

B: No, not at all. There was no—because they didn’t know what we were thinking or planning. But no, there was no tension, not at all.

W: How about personal tension? Did you feel committed to the nonviolent struggle, or were you more of, well, I’m going to be violent, nonviolent if people allow me to be nonviolent?

B: I felt like that, because if I believed in an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, you hit me, I’m going to hit you back. If you’re white, like how do you explain it? If white people come up to me and I know they’re going to kill me, what make you think I’m going to be nonviolent and let them kill me? Mm-hm, that’s the way I feel about it. Those people weren’t nonviolent when they came out there in Glendora, out on Sharkey Road to shoot us up. If we had not shot at them, they would have probably tried to bomb us or do anything to us.

W: Could you tell that story? Because there was also an eighty-year-old lady who you said inspired you, and there was kind of an interesting anecdote about what happened on Sharkey Road.

B: Oh, yeah, you’re talking about Ms. Brewer. Ms. Janie Brewer? Well, when I first went out there, I was the first person out there. I was working all by myself. So, one day I came home, Mrs. Brewer asked me, what does SNCC mean? I told her, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. She pulled that big old rifle from behind her chair and she said, shit, we ain’t—I mean, they ain’t nonviolent. I went, oh, I’m in there, now. [Laughter] But then, the night of the shootout, they were making Molotov cocktails, and Ms. Brewer was in the kitchen, too, trying to pour the gas in the bottles. Her hands were shaking and she was wasting gas everywhere. I’m going, okay. [Laughter] Ed Brown was looking at me, and he says, do you know, if she had set this house on fire, they’d have swore the Klan killed us, burned us out, and it would have been Mr. Brewer wasting all this gas up in here.

W: [Laughter] So, what happened with the shooting?

B: Oh, we shot at them first. We had some people, our farmers, all in the field with spotlights. When they got almost to where they were coming to our house, this lady named Essie Mae Brewer, who was Miss Jamie Brewer’s daughter, stepped out of the field and put a huge spotlight on them and blinded them. We shot up in the air. They took off, they almost ran into each other trying to back up out of that place.

W: Now, these were people that originally had been chasing you?

B: Yeah.

W: But they didn’t know that there were people waiting in the field when they were continuing the chase.

B: No. They didn’t know. They didn’t expect us to shoot at them that night, either.

W: [Laughter] Do you feel that those kind of surprises were warranted?

B: Yeah. If they hadn’t been over down there, they wouldn’t have got shot at.

W: And, of course, no one was hurt.

B: No one was hurt. We shot up in the air. Well, I didn’t shoot, because my job was to bring the Molotov cocktails around the house, and we were going to—me and Gwen Gillman—I thinking this lady named Tina Lowndes, we were going to—and Ms. Brewer—we were going to—and Ed Brown—we had our positions, we were going to light the thing and throw it at them if it had come to that. But it didn’t come to that, because when we shot at them, they ran out, and we found out then that they were cowards.

W: You recently have come back from Selma and been awarded a Spirit Award as a Keeper of the Flame. Could you talk about that experience, going to Selma?

B: It was . . . cold. And rainy. But it was okay, because I felt good about getting an award and finally being recognized—although, like I told them, I don’t have to be recognized for nothing, because you do what you do what you in the name of whatever it is that you believe in, but you have to do what you do. But I’m glad that I was finally recognized, because I always get awards, like from Mississippi Valley State and from wherever; you know, University of Arkansas, all over. But that award was special because of what happened that Sunday. We were commemorating Bloody Sunday, where they marched across the bridge on March 7 and got beat really, really bad. During that march, Mrs. Viola Luizzo, who was transporting people back and forth, got killed. So her daughter was there, and I think they received—she got an award on behalf of her mom, and to be on the same program with her, with Dick Gregory, because he did his share for us in the [19]60s. Like, every week, he’d send a plane full of food down here because the white people had, people used to get commodities when they couldn't work in the wintertime. The government would give commodities, and they decided to stop giving the farmworkers and people commodities, so Sam, my brother, called Dick Gregory, and Dick Gregory would send tons of food down here every month.

W: Let me be sure I understand what you're saying. You're saying the federal government had a food program, but the local authorities cancelled it.

B: Yeah.

W: As retaliation against people in the movement?

B: Yeah. Against people trying to register to vote, to go beyond, just anything they were doing. So they cut the program, which they couldn't do, because it was a federal food program. But Dick Gregory fixed them. He just started bringing all kinds of food. People had never tasted any Velveeta cheese until—I mean, he sent stuff down here, it was good food. I remember one day, we had taken some food out to some old people that lived somewhere out in the country, almost out to Skene. They were sitting up there, just sitting around so hungry. When Lois and I got out of that car with all of that food, the old man started crying. He said he was so hungry, they didn't know what they was going to do. But then we just started taking them food out there. Every time we'd go to Greenwood and pick up a shipment of food, we'd take it out there. That's how we fed them in the wintertime, by taking food from Dick Gregory and people from the North that sent down here like Ivanhoe Donaldson. We would take food out to different people all around in different areas, and that's how they ate. They ate better that winter than they ever ate, because we had whole, nutritious foods, I mean food in there. It wasn't the hogs or whatever they were getting, the government cheese and government beans, whatever that stuff was they had in that tin. Mama called it dog food, that meat. She used to give that meat to our dog, Butch.

W: Are you talking about spam?

B: Oh, no. It wasn't spam, it was like pulled pork or something, it was all packed down in a can. Yeah, and she used to feed Butch that stuff.

W: This is such an important story. Why do you think we have to, in 2011, come to Cleveland find Margaret Block to hear this story? Why isn't this in the textbooks? Why aren't more people already aware of this history?

B: I don't know. Like I said, who's writing the textbooks? Like I said, you got to look at who's writing the textbooks, the people in Texas, which is outrageous. I had no idea, but I consider myself, just did what I was supposed to do. Ain't no heroics or nothing about it. Nothing, it's just what--anybody, I know people didn't do it, but I felt like I would be feeling like some of these people feel now, hating on me cause of it. You know, they're trying to be smart and hate on, make little smart comments because I got—how come you got it? I'm going, well, where were you? Why didn't you get it? You know, crazy stuff like that. How come they gave it to you, when I met with the, who were they? Oh, the U.N. The High Commissioners for Human Rights, the first thing Simmons asked me, why come they talk to you? I said, well, I guess they didn't figure you were significant enough for them to talk to.

W: So, the years of activism that you're involved in isn't considered sufficient reason that you would be a contact, and you might have met somebody prior, or something like that.

B: I don't think so. I don't know. I just try to mind my business. Anyway, I was so devastated and traumatized when I first left Mississippi, my children didn't even know about--my oldest daughter did, but my other two, they be reading now, go, Ma, how come you didn't tell me this? I'm going, cause I've tried to put it behind me, especially how I was treated by SNCC, the Howard Mafia. That's what we called Stokely and, I mean, people that come down from Howard. They came down and took over, so we call them to Howard Mafia. Besides getting ran and threatened and all that stuff, I just tried to forget about it.

W: So many people do look at you as a leader, not only in this community, but in all the communities that you've lived in. I'm curious, with people saying that, do you believe you are a leader? And what is your definition of leadership?

B: I'm not a leader. Somebody try to follow me, they're going to be in bigtime trouble. [Laughter] I don't consider myself a leader. I'm outspoken, and if I see something wrong, I'm going to say something about it, because that's my nature. You can't sit up and see something wrong and not do anything about it, but I don’t consider myself a leader. I'm just a citizen that's doing what you're supposed to do, is being a citizen.

W: Well, I appreciate you taking just a few minutes to speak with me. On behalf of our program, we appreciate you, as always. That concludes the interview from my point of view, except that I like to finish the interview with giving the person who's giving me their time the opportunity to make any kind of closing comments. So, if there's a thought on your mind or maybe something we didn't talk about, or you want to promote some thought with us, when you finish those comments, that'll conclude the interview.

B: Well, I'm interested in what's going to happen now with the Freedom Riders, because everybody think they coming to Mississippi, but they're not. I'm interested now, I'm trying to work and see, what can I do to make these people see that Hank Thomas does not constitute the whole Freedom Ride, all of the Freedom Riders? He's selling out and he's going to Jackson. Then, that's why I don't want to be bothered with the veterans, because I don't want to talk to them at this time. They letting old Haley Barbour dupe them into giving them a reception at the governor's mansion. Some of them call themselves, like the Chairperson of the Veteran's Movement, now, she wasn't no Veteran. How you going to lead me and I'm the one that had to teach you some Freedom Songs? If she was in SNCC, she would have known about the Freedom Songs. That's the first thing you learn, was singing the Freedom Songs. So I just . . . I don't know, but I'm going to send them a letter of my discontent, and tell them. I'm going to Georgia State, I guess, and I can't do all that traveling, like be down there and then go to Georgia State on the 26, that'll be too much on me. But, let them do what they may, what they want to do. We got people like C.T., Vivian, and Diane, and they older than me, so we really need to get their stories and get them to make it very clear how they feel about Mississippi. They already did, but I think the last time I heard from them, they're going to be on Oprah Winfrey's show, which is, you know, going to be a good thing if she does a show on the Freedom Riders. Yeah, you can cut that off, I can tell you about this play that I went to Delta State to see.

[End of interview]

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