

MFP-031

Interviewee: Bright Winn

Interviewer: Dr. Paul Ortiz

Date: August 6, 2004

O: Mr. Winn, I wonder if you could start by having you just state your full name and where and when you were born?

W: My full name is Bright Winn; B-R-I-G-H-T W-I-N-N, and I was born at Santa Maria, California and raised in San Francisco, in 1944, the date of my birth.

O: Okay. Mr. Winn, can you—thinking about your early life—were there events or experiences that you had that, thinking now, maybe some of these experiences might have led you into becoming active in the Movement?

W: We grew up in a predominately white—well, we grew up in an all-white community. There was not rampant racism within the community . . . but the word amongst people of nigger, was used. And there was an attitude, somewhat, of a negative attitude towards black people or people of color. However, in my home, when I brought the word nigger home from school—maybe three or four times, my father stopped the conversation and, never with anger, explained to me how hurtful that word was and how wrong the word was. And that, he admonished me that I should not use that word. It probably took three or four times in my younger years for him to give me the same lecture, for him to get the point home. But also, when social debates, political debates, debates went on amongst his peers in my home; he always had a liberal and giving attitude about black people. So, I probably—

O: Why is that, why, why was he different than other people?

W: Well . . . I don't know, because he grew up in Missouri in a segregated society, he went to a segregated school, he . . . and just maybe because he was a good person. Maybe he got the idea, somewhere along the way. And I know he had it young, because when I went to his hometown as a seventeen-year-old and met an old black woman who told me that, Fred Winn was the nicest white man I've ever known in my life. Those were her—she was ninety years old when she told me that. He just plain didn't have hate in him and didn't accept segregation and negative attitude toward black people, and I was raised under that. Then, when I was eighteen years old, it came to light after my parents divorced that I had a younger sister and she was bi-racial. So, at eighteen, if I had to stop and think about black people, realizing now, I had a younger sister who was half black. So I paid closer attention to the things that were going on in Civil Rights and that would have been—eighteen would have put me about 1950 . . . 1961, [19]62; about that. Things were going on in Civil Rights and I was paying attention and I was learning from that, with this new—which at the time, it's been, it was a burden to have had a younger sister who was born out of wedlock and was bi-racial in a predominantly white society. As a young person, this was upsetting to me. Two strikes, bi-racial and out of wedlock. But, it caused me to think and I did, and I

came with the idea that yes, you had to be right with black people. So, those were probably those things that pointed me in the direction.

O: Okay, from there, what was the next step in getting you to Mississippi?

W: Well, I arrived in Mississippi in [19]64. Then, probably in 1962, SNCC sent a speaker to my campus. Now, I think his name was Block . . .

O: Sam Block.

W: He was a black Mississippian and I think his name was Block. I don't remember his first name and he told us about the happenings in Mississippi.

O: Which campus was that?

W: College of Marin, in Marin County. It's a junior college. And this was the first firsthand account I had of segregation. The following year, SNCC sent Charles McLaurin, who perchance would be my project director. And he again told us about segregation in Mississippi and what SNCC was doing. He may have passed the hat. Third year, another fellow came, a white fellow and told us about Mississippi and told us about the Freedom Summer and I was sold. And as it turns out, I was finishing that college. I was going to be between colleges at that summer and I made the commitment to come. And my father supported it and my mother threatened to sue the college. [Laughter]

O: But there was kind of an a cumulative impact of all these . . .

W: Yes, yes. And in there, we were having these Civil Rights demonstrations and Auto Row in San Francisco on fair hiring, on the Sheraton Palace

demonstrations on fair hiring, where people of color were only at the bottom echelon—there was no one up. And these things were working on me. It was not a born-again discovery. It took over a three year period of time, I became educated. And there was a moral issue. Something wrong was being done in my country, and I was a moral young man and I, I took up the cry.

O: So you went directly from California to Mississippi?

W: From California on a Greyhound bus to Oxford, Columbia; Oxford, Ohio, where we had a one-week training. From there, by group bus to Mississippi.

O: As the word began getting out about more of the activities and the difficulties down south on your way down there, did you have second thoughts?

W: No. I was afraid, but I didn't have second thoughts. So, I came right on in, I did not hesitate. And there were some—my roommate at Oxford chose to not come, you know. The fact that the three disappeared scared the bejeezus out of all of us, but I stuck with the program.

O: So that's the summer that you came, is in [19]64?

W: Yes.

O: Okay. Did the program—how, in your opinion, did the program prepare you for working as a Civil Rights worker?

W: Possibly not too well. Can I just speak to this gentleman?

O: Oh, sure.

O: So, you're saying how the—

W: How well did it prepare us? Well, it taught us how to take a beating, you know, if—to act non-violently, to dive onto the ground, to cover your vital, your head and your ears and to throw your body over the other person who is being beaten. They had lawyers, they had John Dohr talk to us about the Justice Department. They had other play games. It didn't prepare us. There was no way they could prepare us to enter a society that was so foreign to what we were used to. And as a young white fellow who had grown up in a white community, I was not in culture shock with being in the black community, but it was a different community. I felt as strange as though I had gone to Mexico, except we spoke somewhat of a common language. It did not prepare me for the hate that people gave me, that white people gave me on the street; the glares, the words, the finger, the absolute hate that you felt walking down the street. There's no way you can be prepared for that. It also didn't prepare us for group dynamics. We were kids, fresh out of home, fresh out of college, put into a high . . . tense situation, assigned leaders who had no real leadership training, and told to do it. Now, come on, you know it's—how do you react, how do you act? Who's the secretary, who's the leader, who's the natural leader, and how do you take orders? And when you are totally tense, you know, I mean now, my goodness, big industry spends millions of dollars to teach their people how to interact in an office. Without the threat of death. [Laughter] You know? And with air conditioning.

O: Exactly.

W: We were in rooms—twelve of us, as big as this room, without air conditioning, with the threat of death . . . with no formal program as how you're going to do a day's work and told to do it. Now, of course, there was no one in the entire SNCC/COFO organization that had the foresight to do this. So, that was as difficult a time, being with one another under this strenuous circumstances as it was dealing with everything else.

O: Right.

W: You know.

O: Mr. Winn, what were your first activities then, once you got to Mississippi?

W: My first activities, I was a handy man. And, while other people were doing voter registration and were teaching classes, I came down with my tools. I had already been in plumbing—I wasn't a journeyman, but I came down with tools. And so, the first thing I did in Ruleville was to start building bookshelves and hanging new doors and putting together makeshift desks. I just fell right in to being the school handyman, and before I knew it, I was going out in the community and fixing stoves and changing thermal couples and running new water pipe for people within the community. And I stayed in Ruleville for a week and a half until . . . or two weeks, until they opened up Shaw, and I went over to Shaw and I felt again . . . I was putting screen doors and hinged windows and the first month in Mississippi, I was a handyman, which I felt quite comfortable

doing. Then the teacher who would open Ruleville came to Indianola to open up Ruleville and she called and said . . .

O: Now when you say, open up, was that . . . ?

W: That means they had an empty building and they were going to make a school.

O: A Freedom School?

W: A Freedom School, yeah, and she called me over and this is where I ended up in Indianola. Again, doing handyman work there and the specific slot for Communication Directors was open, so they made me Communications Director. So my job was tools and communication.

O: With the Freedom Schools, as people were talking about today, what is your estimation the impact of the Freedom Schools?

W: The Freedom Schools was short-lived. They really were just the summer program. There was a little bit after, but the intensity of them was for that summer. And whether any number of children really became better readers or learned better math . . . I really don't know. The fact that they were there, they were thinking about freedom, they were thinking about Civil Rights, they were in an atmosphere that said, you can make a difference and you can organize and you can go from here—that was what made the difference. You see, well, now, Zoley, Zoley was thirteen, and she went to Georgia and Georgia said, this is a great writing, this is a great writing. And Georgia stopped me on the street and she said, read this. And I read that, and I said, Zoley, this is great, it's a wonderful story.

Zoley is now in the Poet Hall of Fame in England because somebody said to her, that's great. So, you know, what measurable impact, well, that's a big measure right there. But in the entire community, what benefit in academics was there with that three month period of time? I wouldn't even try to measure it, except it was a point, it was a rallying point for those young people, to become aware that black was beautiful; that they in fact had a sense of being; that they, too, were important, and that they could get involved and make a change. That's what I think the importance was. So Freedom School, just freedom point of rallying.

O: Mr. Winn, how long were you in Mississippi?

W: A year.

O: A year, okay.

W: From June [19]64 on into June of [19]65.

O: Okay, so you saw a lot of the—participated in a lot of the Freedom Democratic Party?

W: Yes, yes, I went out and got registered, registered people for the Freedom Democratic Party, brought them their ballots, took their ballots, you know, counted them, did the whole thing, yes.

O: What was it like to be part of that experience?

W: It was—well, first of all, damn, it was hot! [Laughter] You know, it was hot! Anything you did, it was hot! In all the homes you're going to, at best they had a fan. So, exciting, it was hot. And . . . now, in after fact, it was exciting to have been there. But, in being there at the time, it was hot, it

was hard work, it was scared, you were scared. I was scared all the time. Walk out in the road, look left, look right—are there any white guys? Is the policeman there? You know, what's going to happen next? Call people to a rally at the Freedom School—we had the weekly mass meeting—I was there, I heard a damn plane flying over, it was dropping incendiaries on us. You know. So, was I excited at the time to doing Freedom Democratic? No, I was scared and I was tired and I was hot and I knew it was right, but it wasn't a point of excitement at the time. You know . . . excitement isn't the right word. [Laughter]

O: Mr. Winn, how did the Movement change your life, your outlook on life, your subsequent life?

W: Well, the Movement itself gave me a greater understanding of justice, gave me a greater understanding of the need for equality. Gave me a greater respect for the individual and what we can do, the realization that just a few can make a little bit of a difference and a few more can make a greater difference. You know that we, the people, and in this democratic process can make a difference. The Movement itself did that to me, helped me along that road. Being in Mississippi wiggled me out, and turned my . . . mind around. I returned to San Francisco suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Except we didn't know it at that time. I was totally angry and frustrated with the United States government, totally broken that my government acted—or worse yet, didn't act in the way that it should have, you know. I quite easily fell into the hippie [19]60s,

because I was a disenchanting, alienated person. And, it took a number of years of wandering and . . . trying to re-find myself. You know, so the Movement on one hand, the Movement was wonderful, you know, and gave me great . . . Mississippi and the United States government wiggled me out! So . . .

O: I've heard, somebody else was telling me that when John Dohr came in to speak, people had a very mixed reaction to his address.

W: Yes, yes. Well, you see, the thing is, John Dohr represented the government. He represented the Justice Department, and if you look at the score card of the Justice Department and of the FBI, they did not live up over the last fifty years, or over the previous fifty years to that. I mean they didn't investigate the lynchings, they didn't investigate and prosecute disenfranchisement of the voters. They didn't do a whole much of things. John Dohr comes and says, hi, I'm the Justice Department. Right! You know, tell, impress me. John Dohr was a wonderful, well-intended, hard-working individual, and he was one of those individuals that helped turn the Justice Department and point it in the right direction. He was just like the one or two individuals here on each block that helped turn that block to the Freedom Democratic Party and to register. John Dohr did his part in the Justice Department. And, in fact, if I could study the history, I would probably find, yes, there were many John Dohrs. But you see the whole Justice Department, was controlled much by Senator Eastland and his committee. So, yeah, what did you say, that—I'm going to get angry.

[Laughter] That racist . . . dog. Selfish individual. That non-Christian, horrible individual; held the Justice Department and the FBI and the whole thing by the, like this, as did all of the other segregationist senators and congressmen that were self-perpetuating because they had the disenfranchisement. So, yes, there were John Dohr and wonderful people in the Justice Department could not flex their muscle over the years because of the same system that they were trying to overthrow.

O: If you could sum up your activities in the Civil Rights Movement, Mr. Winn, what would be the—what would be the way you'd like to be remembered in that kind of activity, if you had somebody sum up your story?

W: Well, I think it was summed up today by those speakers. We did make a difference. I would ingratiate myself if I said, we came down, we worked, they worked, we sacrificed, they sacrificed . . . [Crying] And after thirty-five years, we made a difference. [Crying]

O: Well, Mr. Winn, thank you so much for sharing your story and for . . .

[Laughter]

[End of interview]

Final edited by: Diana Dombrowski, July 17, 2013