

The interview was conducted on March 24, 2011 by students from McComb High School and the Urban School of San Francisco as part of the [Telling Their Stories Oral History Archives Project](#).

## Marion Barry, Part 2

00:00:00 Female Voice: Um, so what is your earliest memory?

Marion Barry: Of what?

Female Voice: As a child of anything?

Marion Barry: Oh my god. I was born in the Delta of Mississippi in a town called Itta Bena, about 15 miles from Greenwood. About 35 miles from Greenville.

00:00:31 About 10 or 15 miles from Indianola, where B.B. King grew up. Uh, my mother and father were sharecroppers, that means that they bought the cotton seeds from some white man, planted the seeds, harvested the cotton, plowed the fields, and on the side we, uh, had a garden, and had pigs, hogs, and chicken. And [anything] to survival. Everything in the town was owned by white people.

00:01:11 Used to saying white man. The grocery store. The, uh, little clothing store. The gas station. So, we never had a car when I was growing up so it didn't matter. And everything. And looking back upon it, I'm sure that the white man sold the seeds, the cotton seeds higher than what he paid for them and bought the cotton lower than he sold it for.

00:01:41 Which was exploitation at the highest. And I remember just growing up, um, my mother used to wake me up and drag me on a cotton sack. A cotton sack is about this, maybe a little bit longer than this. And she's picking cotton, both roles, and I'm on the end of a cotton sack. Just we had no babysitters. Uh, she had to work, so she took me to the fields with her.

00:02:08 Uh, we lived a long distance from anybody else. I had two sisters, one went - a mere nine months, uh, younger, three years younger, two of them. But my youngest sister and oldest sister had gone to Chicago. For three years I was by myself. And I was - we didn't have any outdoor, any indoor plumbing. Didn't have any lights.

00:02:36 We had to use kerosene lamps. Didn't have any indoor water. Didn't have any bathrooms. Had to use the outhouse. And, uh, we had a tin roof on the house. And it was like a shotgun house. And I remember just playing by myself till I got to school age when I, uh, had some friend way down the road somewhere and we used to walk down the road.

00:03:02 And, uh, one of my favorite sports was going up to the highway, watching the Greyhound go by, on its way to Chicago. And, uh, went to a one-room school. Was about 40 or 50 students in it, segregated. One teacher teaching 40 kids. And, uh, that wasn't good memories. I just, I don't remember learning very, very much because she couldn't get around to us with 40, 50 kids in the class.

00:03:39 Uh, the teacher never visited my house or I don't think visited anybody. First of all, it was long distance between all these kids. And a lot of the kids had to walk to school. They didn't have any school buses. Had school buses for white people, but not for black people. We had to walk and walk and walk. Some of them had to go out, get their parents to, uh, drop them off in a mule and wagon.

00:04:04 Uh, because there were no - very few cars then. And then I went to Memphis.

Female Voice: When you and your sisters went to the highway to watch the Greyhound bus go by, did that symbolize something to you all?

Marion Barry: Well, you know, I heard even when I was young that a lot of black people were going to Chicago. My grandmother lived in Chicago. And I heard that the Greyhound bus went to Memphis. From Memphis to Chicago. And, uh, that - we probably did. At the time thinking about it, and you know, as I think about it, probably we wished we were on that bus, get the hell out of there, you know. Yeah.

Female Voice: Can you give a brief timeline of where you were born and then all the way up to when you got to McComb, Mississippi?

00:04:56 Marion Barry: Well, I was born in 1936, so, um, uh, 15, 25, 20, 25, at McComb in 1961. So, that was 25 years.

Female Voice: Um, but how did you get to McComb? What brought you there?

Marion Barry: Well, I was working in the civil rights movement with [SNCC]. In fact, I was one of the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in April 1960. And, uh, James Foreman was our Executive Director. And I was in graduate school in the, uh, the fall and spring at the University of Tennessee, working on my PhD in chemistry.

00:05:43 And each summer from '61 going on to '64 I worked in the summer in the movement in the south. Um, trying to register people to vote. And Bob Moses had been to McComb, Mississippi. We had been to - he had been up in Cleveland with Amzie Moore. And SNCC developed a project in McComb, Mississippi. We had - we had a division in SNCC between direct action and voter registration.

00:06:14 But we decided those who wanted to do direct action, do that. Those who want to do voter registration, do that. We were all field secretaries for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And, uh, James Foreman said during your summer go to Miss- go to McComb. And I stopped in Greenwood first. That's where we had a major project.

00:06:39 And I took the bus, uh, with Reggie Robinson who was another field secretary down in Washington, DC. And we went to, uh, McComb. The local people had made arrangements. We had - we had this philosophy in SNCC of living with the local people, not living in hotels, not living in motels, but living with the people. Because if you live with the people, the people will protect you. Protect you.

00:07:10 I can't remember the lady's name. Her first name was Mama [Quinn] somebody, been so long we moved in and I slept in the same room. And we then started organizing. We were very good at organizing. We knew where to start. You know, going out, talking to people. And it just happened, it happened about a week or two after Herbert Lee, he'd gotten killed on the courthouse steps, uh, of Pike County. So that gave us an organizing tool, you know, to protest the killing of Herbert Lee.

00:07:42 And it's easier to organize from around death and justice, so we started doing that. Started having mass meetings in McComb. Uh, above the Berglund Super Market. That was a Masonic temple. Uh, we'd usually have our mass meetings in churches, uh, but I can't recall why we didn't have it in the church at McComb. Might have been the minister is too scared, I don't know. But, uh, we went to the Masonic temple which is a black organization.

00:08:15 And that's how I got to McComb, Mississippi.

Female Voice: And when you arrived in McComb did you - or what was the racial situation like? How did they receive you?

Marion Barry: Oh, they - they said, oh, the Freedom Fighters, the Freedom Riders are coming, is what we were called.

00:08:33 Freedom Riders. The Freedom Riders are coming, you know, like Paul Revere warning to tell them about the British coming. Freedom Riders. Freedom Riders

are coming. We were welcomed. Now, of course, there were some black people scared to death because white folks made them think they ought to be scared. And, uh, we did [warmly] and as I said we lived in the community, uh, so during the day I'm walking in the community, talking to people, organizing people.

00:09:00      Getting, we had an old raggedy car that we drove out in the back woods. Um, Mister Steptoe and others, going outside of the city. No, we were greeted warmly. And with the local place called the Little - The Hole in the Wall, where they served beer and barbeque and etc. So, after every, uh, mass meeting we walked down there and sat and talked about things and events, about the strategy for tomorrow.

00:09:26      See the movement was well organized. It wasn't done happenstance. You just go, say go sit in without a plan of action. And so, uh, we were very well received by the people in - in McComb, Mississippi. As I said, some of them were scared. No question about it. I understand why some of them were scared because a lot of them depended on white people for their livelihood. And white people would fire you if you messed with them Freedom Riders. You know?

00:09:52      But most of the people were farmers, independent, uh, we met a number of people in McComb who worked for the school system. And they were half scared, but they at least, uh, they didn't say anything negative about us. And all the black leadership, the most, uh, encouraging people were black preachers. And black preachers independent of anybody. They didn't depend on white folks for their money. They didn't depend on white folk for anything.

00:10:26      They didn't depend on white folk for their - for their gospel, for their - for their god. None of that stuff. You know. And so the black preachers were there - not all of them, but enough. We'd go, on Sundays we'd go - divide up and go to the various churches, talk about the movement. You know, we're going to march tomorrow, on Monday. Everybody be there at 10 o'clock kind of thing. Um, only two that walked out.

We had a rally that same night. The place was full, packed with people, and supporting the students.

00:11:00      So that - that was - it was - all that happened all over. It happened up in Ruleville with Miss Hamer. You know, people were - you know, they were not well educated by the standard of education. Many of them had not finished high school. Like my mother went to the third grade, father the fourth grade. Couldn't get out - cotton - pick cotton or, uh, down in that part of Mississippi they did a lot of woods, a lot of, uh, wood-cutting. Had to go to work for survival.

Female Voice:      Now by you coming to McComb, how did it affect you personally? Coming here and seeing the things that's going on, you know, working on it hands on. How did that affect you personally coming here with the people that you stayed with? How did it affect you personally? How did it change you as a person?

00:11:49      Marion Barry:      Well, I grew up in an urban city called Memphis, Tennessee. And, uh, I went to a school, I went to Fisk University in Nashville, another urban city. And, uh, there was poverty but, you know, you didn't see it the same way. Uh, I grew up very, very poor. Uh, And I had been in and out of the rural south during the summer of, uh, '60, sitting in, etc. But I had not been to the deep, deep rural south, even though I was born in the deep, deep rural south, but you know I was eight years old when I left there.

00:12:33      And so, uh, coming to McComb was, uh, I was excited about it. It was a challenge, though. I didn't know, uh, how we would find the people. I suspected that they would be receptive. And, uh, I talked to people who had been there before, but the beauty of coming to McComb, Mississippi was about a week or two after I got there I met Curtis. I met with Curtis Hayes there. And Hollis Watkins. And they were just a breath of fresh air.

00:13:10 They must have been 18, 19 years of age. And they were with us every day. Learning what we were learning, how to organize people, how to get people motivated, uh, how to start singing Freedom Songs and etc. And they gave me - I would - had inside up here in my head, you know, about the conditions, but you don't understand the conditions until you really are in the conditions and seeing people live the way they do.

00:13:44 Had the same feelings when I went to South Africa. And I went to Soweto to see the conditions of people there. And I was a strong support of the ANC, but you never get it till you get it right up there, right in your front door, where you had to live it, and live it, and you know, you can see the hurt. See the pain. See the tiredness on the part of those farmers who had been farming for 40 years and are still farming, not making any money. To see those wood cutters down in that area of Mississippi, logging, cutting into innocent logs as opposed to their own logs.

00:14:22 You know, so that - it was - it didn't change very much. It gave me more insight and it moved me and my heart was strong. Made me more committed to do what I had to do because there was pain and suffering and injustice going on. But because Herbert Lee had been killed, it gave us something to organize around. Usually in every movement you have to have to organize around. You can't organize around nothing.

00:14:51 And during the '60s we organized around the lunch counters, sitting in. We organized around the, uh, libraries, the swimming pools, the other segregated situations. And that's what Mississippi, we organized around, uh, that as well as the right to vote. We were registering voters, I mean, Herbert Lee got killed trying to register to vote in America. Got killed for doing that. And not only did he get killed [by E.H. Hurst], he got acquitted, that hung jury acquitted by 12 white men.

00:15:28 We started breaking up that all white jury system, which was wrong. So, out of that McComb experience came so many other good things to happen. Brenda

Travis, uh, who emerged, she was a sophomore at, uh, uh, what's the name of the school at that time?

Female Voice: Berglund?

Marion Barry: Berglund High School. And to lead - and how old is she, 16, 17, to lead a movement of students out of the school and the students rallied. You know, they didn't know anything about the civil rights movement.

00:16:03 They didn't know anything about white folks caused that mess over there. Uh, they didn't. But they got it - they caught onto it. I don't know how you all feel about all that now. I suspect I know. But in the absence of our history there is no way to feel, uh, that you ought to be free because you remember where you came from. You may not know where you going, you may go anywhere. You know, go anyway. All roads leads to nowhere.

End of Recording.

### **Marion Barry, Part 3**

Female Voice: I want to take you back a little bit and actually what event occurred in your life personally that encouraged you to join SNCC.

Marion Barry: You know, I asked myself that question, uh, in Memphis there was not a major movement. There was the NAACP, but they were mostly legal. Uh, I, um, went to a high school, an athletic high school. There were no movements or anything there.

00:00:29 Went to college. I guess God was moving, when I got to college I got very active in student government and etc. Uh, I - I suspect that one of the things that propelled me into the movement was in 1958 I was a senior at LeMoyne College, the

African American College, HBU, and first black president. We had a member of the board of directors, uh, was white, um, named Chandler. Walter Chandler. His father had been mayor.

00:01:20 Grandfather had been mayor. He had been mayor. So, to get him on the board of directors was good for the college because he helped raise some money for LeMoyne, LeMoyne College. But he also was a lawyer for the city and the NAACP sued the city because the buses were segregated, segregated. We had to sit in the back and we'd get into a part of town we'd start filling with white people, you had to get up from your seat and go to the back.

00:01:51 Not as bad as New Orleans when they had the sign they put there, you know, black people back here, white people up here. And, uh, he said some negative things about black folks in his argument to the court. You know, you treat negroes, that's how he said it, negroes, uh, like little brothers, you know, that's condescending. And I was, uh, president of the LeMoyne chapter of the NAACP. And, uh, I decided to write a letter to the president complaining about that. Saying that Walter Chandler you got to apologize to the students or resign. That he's - doesn't represent the best that there is to represent. In a time - on a black college board of directors, going to talk about that, talk to us like that, I wasn't going to take it. Wasn't going to take it.

00:02:53 We had a newspaper, little mimeograph newspaper that came out on a Friday called The Magician. I wrote a letter on Thursday morning, sent it over to the president, and told the president and put it in the box in his home. And so a friend of mine who was the editor of The Magician said why'd you put this in the paper? I said, all right, it ran in the paper front page Magician. Barry asks Chandler to Resign or Apology.

00:03:27 We have a paper called the Memphis Commercial Appeal, the morning paper. That Saturday morning it was the front page of the, uh, paper, you know, that black man - how dare - how dare him tell Chandler to resign or apologize, the former mayor of Memphis, Tennessee. And that was the talk all over town, front page. That

Monday the president called me in. Said Mr. Barry, you're an embarrassment to the college. Black man.

00:04:04 And I said, I'm not embarrassed, but he's an embarrassment, not me. He said, you know, I think I'm going to have to - to dismiss you. Because here I'm a senior now, about three weeks from graduating and I said you're not dismissing me. I said we're going to close the college down. Through that went back nine, ten students in the committee. Said, well, it happened, it's in your [unintelligible 00:04:31]. So we started putting out leaflets. Let's close it down. Let's close it down if Chandler doesn't apologize or doesn't resign.

00:04:44 You know, it really reminded me of some of the movies and that are [released now], demanding the resignation of the president, except this time demanding resignation from the Chandler. You know, I hadn't thought about that in a long time, but if there's any one event that started me in this movement, it was that. And also I guess god just - I had no role models around me. Nobody was protesting. Nobody was raising hell. People were accepting that segregated situation because white people had conditioned us to accept that.

00:05:16 You know, the slave master tried to condition the slaves to accept slavery. Said [unintelligible 00:05:51] because of all the hard work you had to do. But we had been conditioned that you have been conditioned to accept certain things in this society, unless somebody intervenes to say, well, that's not right. To accept - you - you accept it. That's why education is so important. Knowledge of our self. Knowledge of our history.

00:05:42 Knowledge of the struggle. Knowledge of the people who fought a long time before we were even born. Has to be in our head. And so that was the first event. And then I went to, uh, that same - that same, uh, spring I went to Fisk University in the fall, working on my master's degree. And in the fall of, uh, 1959 I met somebody by the name of James Lawson who was the first African American student at Vanderbilt Divinity School.

00:06:19 He came over to Fisk. It was, uh, Diane Nash, myself, uh, Anthony Butler, uh, and then John Lewis who is now a congressman, James Bevel, and Bernard Lafayette was at a Divinity School called American Baptist Seminary. He brought them over together, a few students of Tennessee State, our state university. And started nonviolent direct training, teaching us how to sit in, get hit, how to get hit, and then on February 1st four brave, courageous, A&T students decided to sit at that counter. Sparked a movement.

00:07:09 The next Saturday about 300 of us went downtown, got arrested. When I was growing up my mother said if you ever get arrested, unless you've ever done something bad, also I didn't work with a nonviolent, we weren't shooting and killing each other like they're doing now. We used to, you know, fight a lot, you know, on the fringe we fight. The fringe right and go on to be friends. And we got out on that Monday and Dr. King scheduled to come to Fisk anyway that Monday night. He came and congratulated us.

00:07:49 Urged us to keep on fighting etc., etc., etc. And then after that mass meeting I think about a dozen of us, about two hours just talking about nonviolence and helping us understand the Montgomery bus boycott that I had read about. Understand the struggle that we as a people. And that sort of got me propelled. And so '60, yeah, I was graduating in '60. I went to the University of Tennessee. And, no, I went to the University of Kansas for a year.

00:08:36 Hated it out in Kansas. Got transferred to the University of Tennessee in '61. And started working then. And that's when I left the University of Tennessee in '61, the summer, went to McComb. That's a long story around to McComb. But a good story.

Female Voice: It is. Can you tell us about the, um, your strongest memory of, uh, racial injustices?

Marion Barry: Oh, god. That's - there are so many. I mean, we went - everywhere you went. Went up in Memphis. I walked past a recreational center. I lived on the street. The street was all black. The perpendicular streets were all white. It was Third Street, which is a business quarter, coming into Mississippi. And then on that side was all black.

00:09:37 And so I carried the newspapers, both morning and evening, and about 40% of my, uh, customers were white people, had to collect money from them. Uh, so I faced it, passed by all white swimming pools. You know, I faced it in a rather personal way. Uh, I lived in a neighborhood where there were some white boys that carried papers, too. We knew each other. And there was a site that later became the first Holiday Inn in America.

00:10:11 A big old ball field. I don't know who initiated it, but every Thanksgiving we had what we called the Blood Bowl. Because you didn't play with any kind of tackles or any kind of shoulder pads or any cleats or anything. Nothing. Just boots and - and - and yourself. That's why we called it the Blood Bowl because you get your teeth kicked out and all that kind of stuff.

00:10:42 The white boys would play the black boys. Obviously we kicked their ass, you know, all the time. We would mix it up. White and black like that. And the first time we did that the cops came up there and wanted to break it up. Wanted to break it up. Said, no, and the white boys said, no, you're not breaking this up. We're having fun. And they didn't do it. We played that game I guess for three or four years, uh, till I left.

00:11:11 But everywhere I went, uh, I had to go to the Memphis Zoo. My day was Thursday. And if Thursday fell on a holiday, like Thanksgiving and Christmas and New Year sometimes we couldn't go. We couldn't go. We couldn't travel in clothes at Goldsmith downtown in Memphis. Couldn't travel in a hat. Couldn't travel in a jacket or a suit. Had to take it home and couldn't bring it back.

00:11:45 The restroom, segregated. When I was carrying papers, uh, there was a restaurant at the corner of Third and East [unintelligible 00:11:55] Boulevard in Memphis. I couldn't go in to get a cup of coffee. Had to go to the back to get a cup of coffee. A cup of coffee. I wanted to go to the bathroom, but they didn't have a colored bathroom there because black people had no business being in there. I don't know where their cooks went. I guess they went somewhere.

00:12:24 And at the, uh, gas station, we called them service stations at the time, next door, they had a colored and a white bathroom. That is, uh, an indignity. You pay your money for the same gas, but got to go to a separate bathroom. I could name so many of them, you know, just - I tell you all a real big one for me.

00:12:56 At the Memphis Commercial PO had these contests. For each 15 new customers, you know, promoting customers, you get a prize. For the white boys the prize was going to New Orleans. And for the black boys, until we protested, nothing happened. Nothing happened. Nothing. And just so happened some of us, you know, I really think that that might have been the beginning, not LeMoyne College, because I had a cousin who lives in the Northeast. Someone else had a cousin who lived over here in South Memphis. We said we're going to stop carrying the paper.

00:13:42 And back in the day it wasn't computerized. The name was in a little book. Marion Barry, so and so and so, so and so and so. Was in a little book. And so we kept our books. For three days they couldn't deliver the paper. They tried to figure out. They could not deliver the paper. Had stacks of paper in the paper route. People complaining where's my paper, where's my paper. Couldn't, couldn't, couldn't deliver the paper.

00:14:11 So finally the, uh, top people in the paper met with about a dozen of us, it really started to spread. You know, we started with maybe half a dozen of us doing it who knew each other. That was still in our house some black people, boys, carried their route. They couldn't carry my route. I had about 75 papers. Maybe 125 papers. The

other guys had 70 some papers. They met with us. What do you all want? We want to go to New Orleans like everybody else. We went to New Orleans. Go to New Orleans.

00:14:50 Well, you can't - you can't do that. Why? Well, even though we - we leased the bus from Greyhound, they still got segregated laws in the south that we can't carry you on the bus. And I said let's just sit in the back. And I'm not sitting in the back of the bus. I'm not doing that. That's when I developed my leadership then. But the bottom line is is they say, okay, we'll give them black carriers a trip to St. Louis, which is not segregated.

00:15:23 But prior to that, I know what they were doing, they were giving us bicycles prior to that. Bicycles compared to New Orleans. There's no equity in that at all. So, we went to St. Louis. And, uh, but all over. I remember I was, uh, we had a Memphis Fair. Fairgrounds, and all these farmers and rides and all this other kind of thing. Uh, our day was Monday, Wednesday, something like that.

00:16:06 And I got a white friend of mine to buy ten tickets to the fair. We had two cars. We went in and it happened so fast, we gave our tickets, kept walking. Before anybody could say anything. We been there about ten minutes, the cops came. You can't - you got to leave. I said we got our tickets. We don't give a damn what you got. You going to leave this place. You're violating the law. If you don't leave in three or four minutes, five minutes, we're going to arrest you.

00:16:47 We didn't go out there to arrested. One thing about the movement, the movement was rather planned. Planned to get arrested, so we'd get organized to follow up on it. And so we left. And, uh, there were just so many places. I used to - I'll tell you another, one, too that was just made me think about it. I used to wait tables when I was in high school, I mean, in college. I picked cotton when I was in high school. At a place called the Peabody Hotel, one of the biggest hotels in the south, man.

00:17:23 Big old chandeliers, etc., got these ducks that come from the penthouse and march all up in the lobby. The hotel was totally segregated. And so those of us who waited tables and banquets had to go through the alley, go up the freight elevator to the, uh, serving room, who was serving banquets, couldn't get off any floor. Only folks allowed on the floors were black chamber maids. Yet those damn ducks up there in the penthouse can get out and walk on the ground floor. And people would take pictures and stuff like that with them.

00:18:08 And that's another indignity. We got over on them, though. We'd tell the sheriff if we even cooked 800 steaks, 700 steaks, cook us a few dozen. And we took steaks out of there. You know, we were. And I worked at the American Legion, all white, um, people there. And we had to give you tickets. You buy five tickets to buy five drinks or four drinks. So, if you order, we had a deal with the bartender, if you ordered five drinks we gave him four tickets. And we keep the extra ticket. We split half and half.

00:18:55 And so that we ran game, made \$15, \$20 a night in running games like that. See, black people have to learn how to survive anyway.

Female Voice: Yeah.

Marion Barry: Had to be ingenious to get around white folks bullshit. You know, that kind of stuff that had to happen. And at the American Legion, white people get drunk, argh, hey nigger, and I told one of them, I said I'm going to be [unintelligible 00:19:19] you know. My name is Mr. Barry. And, argh, I get ready to do something, I went to the manager and told the manager you got to stop him. And they put him out. About two or three days later same thing happened. I quit. I'm not going to be in jail. I couldn't take that from them.

End of Recording.

## Marion Barry, Part 4

00:00:00 Female Voice: Going back to, um, the work that you did in SNCC, what exactly did you do?

Marion Barry: It depends on where I was. In McComb I was organizing. Uh, in '62 I think we went back to McComb in '62. In '63 I was in school in Knoxville at University of Tennessee and I was organizing in Knoxville. Uh, people were segregated all over the place. Started a newspaper called the Knoxville Crusader.

00:00:44 And then went to Washington in August of '63. In '64, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was organizing and trying to unseat the all-white Mississippi democratic party. And my job was to go around the country, two of us, and try to get state legislators and state parties to vote to unseat the all-white party. We needed so many votes to do that.

00:01:19 And I went all over. I went to Chicago. I went to San Francisco. I went to Milwaukee. I went to, uh, from Washington State, went to Oregon, went to Massachusetts, went to New York. Went to all the northern states, Pennsylvania, trying to get these state parties to unseat this all-white, uh, delegation. And I went to Atlantic City in '64. We slept on the boardwalk in Atlantic City. Miss Hamer was our leader.

00:01:50 And she wanted to be seated. She appeared before the credentials committee. You might have heard some of her last night if you were over at the - were you at [unintelligible 00:02:00] last night? Oh, you missed it because people gave a - a history of what Miss Hamer said. I think there's a book called Hands on the Plow. You ought to get that book.

00:02:14 It's 52 black women talking about their experiences in the movement. You got to get it. And, uh, Hubert Humphrey was running for president at that time. And Johnson was the president. Had taken JFK's place. And, uh, he wanted to give us two seats. We said hell no. We don't want to do that. And that was the same summer that

Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney had, uh, been assassinated in Philadelphia [MS]. And SNCC had sent out a major mailing to people to support the people in the south.

00:03:03      So, after I left Atlantic City, James Forman asked me to go to New York and try to get rid of - get this mail in the bank. We had over a million dollars in mail bags and things sitting around in the New York office cause nobody to figure out how to get it in the bank. I went up there and got it organized. This seemed very simple, first of all open the mail. That's the first thing you do is at least open it. You got to see if there's cash in there, no name, you put the cash in this tray over here.

00:03:35      Threw the envelope away. If there's an envelope with cash and a name on it, put it over here so we can send people a thank you. If it was a check, uh, with a name and address on the check, you go copy the check and put the check over here. Took me - took me six weeks to get a million dollars in the bank, which I did. And, um, and then in December of, uh, '64, James Forman asked me to go to New York, I mean go to Washington.

00:04:05      We had a white director at the Washington office, Jim Mansonas. He said we need a black director in Washington, the majority black town. Majority of the black students in the south fighting. So, I go to Washington to lobby for us and to try to raise money. Went to Washington in '65. And, uh, have been there ever since. I've been involved in politics 31 years in Washington. Mayor 16 years. City Council, uh, another 16 years. School board president. The movement did all that.

00:04:43      The movement propelled me into - into leadership skills development. The problem with you young people now, you had nothing like the anti-Vietnam War movement. You don't have the civil rights movement to organize. And it's hard to organize what you have to try to organize around now. You organize against violence, against drugs, and all this stuff, but that's hard to catch onto because they're not universal. Whereas the thirst for freedom was universal.

00:05:13 You know, people didn't come out and act on it sometimes, but they felt it in their hearts. So with each segregation, everybody could feel that, could see it, feel it. Anti-Vietnam War, uh, ideologically you could identify with being against the war. You organize going to Washington. Organizing, having protests in your cities, uh, except for in the south it was very difficult because people didn't feel the same way.

00:05:39 But now we - we don't have any of that. And you all got to tell me what we need to do to organize these young people. What do we need to do?

Female Voice: I mean, we talked about these before in class. And I just believe that we need more motivation towards the things that needs to be done. I feel we just - we need people like you, somebody that we know that has done something meaningful. We need more motivation to motivate us to do things to change more things so other people can have motivation from us. Do you hear - we need—

Female Voice: Someone to look up to.

Female Voice: Yeah, we need, you know.

Female Voice: I think if they're aware of the past and the struggle and everything black people did to get us to where we are today, they're ignorant to the past so I think that's another reason why it's hard to grab your attention.

Female Voice: And some people just really don't want to know.

00:06:39 They're like, you know, well, that's back then, doesn't matter now. But what they do not know is it matters. It matters a whole lot what happened then. It's still happening now and it's still present to this day. They don't understand that. You know, people are so narrow minded to the fact that, you know, oh, well it's back then, it doesn't matter anymore, but it does matter. It matters a lot. You know, what happened then, it matters now. That's what they don't understand. That's what they need to understand.

And in order for them to understand it, you know, like she said, they're ignorant, so we need people to motivate us to motivate them.

00:07:19 You know, and I think this class did a whole lot to motivate us and to help us do all this, you know, meeting you and everything else. We need more motivation like this through after school, throughout everywhere.

Female Voice: Mm-hmm. Much more.

Marion Barry: Well I'm really impressed with you all, you know, the questions and the attentiveness, you - you're giving the subject.

00:07:39 Uh, how do you get more students at your school to do more?

Female Voice: I think even though, you know, motivation comes from people like you, I think coming from us, being their age, I think it helps more. I think they understand more coming from us, but you know like I said, some people, you know, no matter what they say or what you do, they still, if they don't want to listen they're not going to listen.

Marion Barry: Well, they've been - they've been brainwashed. You know, you don't see us in the textbook. Uh.

Female Voice: African American studies is out.

Marion Barry: You know, that kind of stuff.

00:08:19 And a sense of our history so we can feel good and great. And a lot of students are struggling financially. Their mothers and fathers don't have much money, particularly if they're on welfare. They just got meager amounts of money. They see

these Nike shoes, they want some of them too. They see these other kind, they want some of them too, the name brands.

Female Voice: One parent homes.

Marion Barry: Yeah. Single parent heads of household. Uh, there are a lot of conditions. You know, I have a 30-year-old son. And he knows about the movement because he grew up with me after I got to Washington. Born in 1980.

00:08:58 But I talk to him about it. I take him to conferences. But he said, dad, you know, I - I know, we admire what you did, but the tactics that you all used back then won't work now. And he's right. He said, dad, can you imagine you're all going to picket a crack house, you get killed. That's what would happen to you. And so the conditions are a lot different, so we got to try to figure out how to deal with the uniqueness of this society right now. How do we - how do we get these guns off the streets?

Female Voice: See, I really don't understand them because they see us as African Americans, we had rage then. But it's now we have rage, but it's like -

Marion Barry: Turned inside of us.

Female Voice: Right.

Marion Barry: [Unintelligible 00:09:36].

Female Voice: It's not, I mean, why do we have rage within ourselves between each other when we shouldn't? Do you get what I'm saying?

00:09:44 Rage, it does a lot. And I think of us now in this decade, we act up on our rage. Shooting and all of that. It's not really [helpful].

Marion Barry: And it didn't just start that way. It started with slavery. The goal of the white man and the slave master was to keep us divided. You know, the field negro from the house negro.

Female Voice: And it still like that.

Marion Barry: You know, the big lipped negro from the thin lipped. The nappy head from the straight hair.

00:10:16 The light skin from the dark skin. It started that way. And so we are now suffering from what I call Akbar. You got to read that book, Akbar, talks about psychological slavery. We are - some of us are still in psychological slavery, even though we removed the physical barriers, um, psychological slavery is there. You know, the jealousies are there. The divisions are there. You know, I go to a church, a temple of praise where the pastor preaches about life living.

00:10:50 Uh, and the kind of life we ought to be living as people first and as Christians, you know, and etc. He says if Miss Joan gets a new car, rather than saying let me figure out how she got it, so I can do the same thing and get me a new car, he say how'd you get that car, she must have been doing something wrong to get that car. You know, hating. You know, we got a lot of haters out here, yeah.

Female Voice: Anything that's very memorable to you?

Marion Barry: Memorable about McComb?

00:11:19 Well, first of all it's been a long time. '61, 39, 49 years. Uh, I tell you - I tell you an experience I had in 1994. The 30-year reunion of the Mississippi Project.

Female Voice: We saw that.

Marion Barry: I came to Jackson and I wanted to go to - I had my son with me - and my wife, and I said I'm going back to McComb. And I went back to McComb, had a black sheriff, which is just a - that poor issue. And I had three out of the five members of the board of commissions of Pike County was there.

00:12:11 And went to this restaurant owned by white people, said meet me there. Had a big round table, that sits sort of like a Chinese table, you sit around it. Served by white people. Uh, that was memorable. I mean, that's - to come back 30 years later and white people serving me and our delegation as opposed to me serving them, etc.

00:12:38 Uh, you know, there's just so many. I remember going out to my step-daughter's farm. Had all her lights out. Had to keep them out. People be shooting in there. So, we drove up, peaked out, lights are down. Finally came to the door, who out there? Back with Marion so and so. Who out there? Told him, he said walk slower now. Walk slowly. Don't - don't come up here too fast.

00:13:17 Now he, he knew me, but it was still kind of real dark. There were no - there were no lights on the road. The dark lights getting up in there, so we finally go there. He had a shotgun in his hands. [Unintelligible 00:13:28]. He said, man, you better be careful out here because I don't know who's up here. These white folks are awfully mean. They'd be coming to - to get me. And they ain't going to get me. I'm going to get them first. That's why I keep the lights out. I got the lamp on in the back back there. I can see in the house.

00:13:49 But that, I mean, that was very, uh, memorable to me. Another time I was in McComb and we were down to the, uh, little, we called it a beer garden, a place down there. And Reggie Robinson who was my, uh, roommate, went in the there. Usually at the end of the mass we would go down there and we'd drink beer and eat ribs and sort of talk about what's going on for the day going forward, strategizing.

00:14:16 He came running down, he came running down the, uh, street and “Marion Barry, guess what happened.” He said somebody just shot into a house. And the bullet hit where you would have been if you’d been there. If you had been there. That was God.

Female Voice: No doubt.

Marion Barry: That was God. That was God doing that.

00:14:41 Uh, there were other incidents in McComb, but I just remember the people more than anything else. Just the tenacity to stand up. And not everybody, but enough people did that. But it was the students I remembered the most. But revolutions are started by young people. If you study the Cuban revolution, the other revolutions, they’re started by young people.

00:15:10 SNCC, student movement, started by young people. Four guys Ezell Blair and others, at the lunch counter. On the other hand you had, uh, Montgomery, Rosa Parks. That was unusual. That was unusual that you had an older person starting that movement. That’s unusual. Because young people are more idealistic. They got more energy, more zeal and zest. They don’t have the financial worries that older people have who’ve got children, got mortgages to pay. There’s no excuse why you shouldn’t be involved.

00:15:46 But certainly if you had to worry about all that, you know -

Female Voice: Worry.

Marion Barry: You can go to jail and you can come out of jail and, uh, it’s not going to be on your record because of the civil rights kind of movement. It’s just much - every movement, even Mao Zedong in China started a long time ago before he took over China in the civil, even the Russian Revolution, even though the peasants were the

ones who went and pushed it, it was young peasants who pushed against the Tsars and all that kind of stuff.

00:16:16 I'll tell you something else the movement did for me and I hope it does it for you. It taught me about Africa. It taught me about Africa. When I was growing up, long before you all were born, I asked to go to the movie and see Tarzan. You all remember Tarzan?

Female Voice: Mm-hmm.

Marion Barry: Tarzan and Jane and Cheetah. I thought that's what Africa was about. I thought black folk were eating people up and - and - and just savages. Because white people wanted us to think that.

00:16:47 They wanted to depict us - depict us as savage beasts and etc. And I remember first time I went to Africa, Senegal, my wife and I, and, uh, I got off the plane I was mailed in. They had all this red carpet and the Vice President of Senegal was there. And in Africa - in Africa they drum you in. They drum you - had three different tribes of drummers. And, uh, I walked down the steps, the first thing I did I just said speak to me. Kissed the ground.

00:17:21 Kissed the ground. Glad to be home. Glad to be home. And, uh, the other thing it - it taught me, I went to an island called Goree Island where it's called the Door to Last Passage, no, the Door to Nowhere. And it's the last place, they had these little things about this tall that you kept slaves in. You could not stand up the whole time. You could barely lie down because there were other slaves in there, so you had to sort of sleep the best way you could.

00:17:57 And you'd walk off that plane out into the ocean, you would never see it again. And they tell me you had gear on, put your gear on, there's a storyteller, he spoke in French, said there was [unintelligible 00:18:14], but he had an interpreter to tell

you the story. You had to cry and know that your ancestors had to endure all of that. They'd go. And finally they learned where they were going and some of them would go.

00:18:30 But in terms of McComb, it really was, uh, life - life changing for me.

Female Voice: Well thank you so much. Thank you for telling us your story.

Marion Barry: Thank you all. Good luck. Keep fighting.

Female Voice: Thank you.

Marion Barry: I'm glad we've got this collaborative between San Francisco and McComb.

Female Voice: Yeah, it's great.

Marion Barry: Reminds me of Mississippi when white people and other people came up from the north to the south.

Female Voice: It's their first time.

Marion Barry: That's great. All right.

Female Voice: Thank you.

Marion Barry: Thank you.

Female Voice: Thank you so much.

Marion Barry: Thank you.

End of Recording.