L.C. DORSEY: I should warn you that sometimes when I get to talking, I get carried away. I will move. You'll have to tell me to be still or do something.

MARTIN: Move, you go forward, go back, that kind of thing. Does that chair rock a little bit? If you can try not to rock it, only because that begins to become distracting to the viewer.

LD: I won't rock the chair, but I will do this on a point. Look like I'm going right across this desk. [Laughter] You just forget about it. You forget what you're doing.

ROBERT KORSTAD: You do whatever you want. That's all right. That's fine. We want you to forget about the tape recorder if you can.

LD: Neil, what is your last name?

NB: It's Boothby. B-O-O-T-H-B-Y.

RK: One of the things that we're interested in, in all of the people we're talking to, is some sense of the [Interruption]

LD: And they didn't want to have to do the paperwork that the federal government required them to do, the "fill in the stuff." It was a nuisance and a hassle to them, and they didn't want them to have it. So they tried to do everything they could to discourage people from pursuing it. They got it anyway. They were hauling water from Rosedale, so why couldn't they continue to do that? Any time you try to make change, of course, you always have problems like that, but it was very crazy. And I thought that that was part of their problem. They had worked and perfected the Save the Children, and worked and perfected their skill in overseas programs, and just hadn't quite figured out how you do this in America. What do you do with people in the United States? What do you do with kids who are malnourished in the United States and how do you avoid the political consequences of exposing child health problems or exposing dysentery from contaminated water, children being poisoned by pesticides. And I haven't figured out if they have a political agenda, or whether they just....

NB: I don't think they've learned to work with the different kinds of politics that child survival, child health ( ). They haven't looked at very fully the human rights thing.

LD: That's right. That's right. I don't know where they were with the children's summit the other year, too, because I haven't seen anything in that literature.

NB: They were there behind ( ). They were supportive but not actively supportive. We worked in the Middle East, for example, and they backed off on a report that talked about the rights of Palestinian children. They thought that was real political and didn't want to support it, though it was factual and accurate, because of the donor. So they're not real....

LD: Well, we've taken a position that they either get real [laughter], or we will do whatever we can.

NB: ( )

LD: Yeah. They either will get real, or we will just do whatever we can with the kids that we have. We have a very
selfish interest in working with the kids, and it has to do with trying to save some of them, of course, but more importantly, trying to develop leadership. To make sure that we've invested in people who understand the broad issues and who are preparing themselves to take these roles, to become the superintendents of education, the educators, the doctors, the director of the Delta Health Center, the historians recording what's going on, and whatever else. We want them to understand that they can do that, and our commitment is to try to help them do that, and providing recreation and health services and dental services is all part of the preparation. To make sure they're well, but the real thing is to understand the political, social, and economic structures, and how you overcome if they are barriers or how you seize control of or utilize to get to that point of leadership development. And if they're just going to bog us down with pieces of paper that say how much of your time was spent doing this and doing that and stuff like that, we're going to have to leave them alone and move on, you know [laughter].

RK: Get real or get out.
LD: Yeah, you have to do that.
NB: We had to do the same thing with the kids. They had to understand the political origins of the war that they were sort of in. That was part of the treatment, part of the get better stuff. They got a little wishy-washy on that, and I had to ( )

LD: Well, usually with a new person you can get some things done, so that you can do that.
RK: One of the things we're trying to do in talking with different people is get some sense of where people's commitment to these issues came from, and usually tracing that back to someone's childhood and family and their kind of upbringing is one place to start. It's not true for everybody, but I thought maybe you could just talk a little bit about your family, about growing up. I know you've written about it some. That would be helpful to us.

LD: Okay.
RK: Could you talk a little bit about your family and the things that you remember and some sense of how you felt about the world and things as a child, too?

LD: Sure. As long as you understand that I really didn't know anything was wrong with the world until I became an adult [laughter]. Okay, no, I can do that. Let me know when you're ready.

RK: We're ready.
LD: I grew up in the plantation system of the Mississippi Delta, and really for a long time I thought everybody was on plantations. I really didn't have a sense of poverty, in the sense that I understand it as an adult, because everybody I knew and everybody I visited and everybody I went to school and played with, lived in the same conditions. We all lived in houses on the plantation. They were all more or less the same kind of houses. Nobody I knew as a child owned their house or owned land even, that lived on the plantation. There were a few people in the little towns who owned houses, but their houses were very
similar to the ones we had on the plantation, shotgun, three room houses. We had a sense of real poor people, because they were the ones who didn't have gardens, who often didn't have clothes to wear, whose mothers didn't sew or make dresses from the feedsacks like our mothers did or like some mothers did. We also had a sense of real poor people as those people who didn't quite know how to take care of themselves, who didn't plan for the winter, who didn't cut wood, didn't work hard and diligent. That was, in my opinion, the poor people, but they were included in the network of support on the plantation. Everybody always planted some extra vegetables, saved the extra rabbits that they caught, for those families. They were the people who didn't quite get it together.

I had a happy childhood. I was sick a lot. Had asthma. Had pneumonia a couple of times before I was ten years old. We were fortunate enough to live on a plantation where the owner believed in having or providing a doctor for the tenants. So we had health care. If fact, my birth was attended by both a midwife, which was the general OB/GYN services for people in that area, both white and black, and a doctor. Dr. Robey actually delivered me. My mother was weak and tired and thirty-eight years old when I was born, and I had a difficult time coming into this world. So he was called and actually made the delivery. That was unusual in the Mississippi Delta but the Walkers, Ben Walker, was an unusual man who really did not believe in all of the nonsense that some of the other plantation owners professed.

This was later born out in the '60s with the civil rights movement when the people struck on Andrews plantation. They were blacklisted. They were not allowed to work in the place, and they couldn't get water from any place for the tents that they pitched. Ben Walker was one of the farmers in the area who told them that they could get water from his place as often as they wanted. Well, that was where I spent the first eight years of my life, on that plantation.

My father was a very industrious person, my step-father rather, who fished, hunted, made his own boat to do this in. He caned chairs for people. He repaired shoes. He had his own equipment to do shoe repair. He and my mother made baskets from the bark of trees, just like they used for the rebottoming of chairs. They picked fruit when the blackberry season came. He and my mother spent days picking berries. Some they sold; others she canned for the winter and made jelly. They did the same thing with muscadines in the fall of the year. So we always had enough food. There was always food in the house, I never knew hunger in the sense that people talk about. Fresh fruit was either whatever they picked or we got a lot of it at Christmas time, but that was it. There was not a lot of clothing. My mother sewed and you could buy material for 15 or 20 cent a yard.

Then, at that time also, flour and chops for the chicken came in print sacks. So we had a lot of print dresses made from those feed sacks and flour sacks. And it wasn't a source of embarrassment. Everybody else had pretty much the same thing, and the kids who didn't, you just sort of looked at them and knew they were special and lucky, but there wasn't the kind of
competition that you see now with kids who have Reeboks and kids who don't have Reeboks or whatever, Air Jordan, of whatever the latest fad is. It wasn't that kind of stuff or that kind of yearning and resentment and longing. We just didn't have it.

I grew up in a house where there were not a lot of books. My father could not read and write. He'd never had the opportunity to go to school. My mother had gone to school in Alabama where her people were land owners. She was living with aunts and uncles because her parents had separated, and her mother had gone off to become a missionary in Liberia. So she went to school through the third grade, but she could read and write very well, do math. I remember weekends, spending entire weekends or most of the weekend, with my mother reading to us from the Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago Defender. My father was anxious and interested in knowing what was happening to blacks in other parts of the country, and you could always buy these newspapers at the black barber shops or the beautician shops. So we always knew what was happening in the rest of the world, and I had this fantastic dream of going to Chicago. Everybody on every plantation we lived on had somebody in Chicago or Milwaukee. And every summer by the time I was in high school, every summer when school was out everybody caught the Greyhounds and Trailway buses and went to Chicago for the summer, and they worked. They came back, and they had fancy clothes, and they had money, and they looked good. I really felt that we were deprived in the sense that we had no relatives in Chicago.

So we spent our summer chopping cotton and carrying water. I started work when I was eight years old on the Walker's plantation. I was at the house with my younger sister, and Mr. Walker came by, one of the sons, who I think was Benjamin, came by and saw me there and went to the field where my mother was chopping, and asked if I could carry water for them, because there was nobody in the field but women, and they would have had to stop to get water. She was, of course, agreeable to that. It pleased her. There was extra money coming to the house. So at eight I became a wage earner, making $1.25 a day. And the women liked the fact that I didn't dawdle. I pumped the water off until it was real cold in this eight-pound lard bucket, and I walked fast so it wouldn't get warm on the way. As soon as I got back to the house, I started the whole process all over again. And I felt really great because the women who were chopping cotton weren't making but $2.50 a day. See, I was making almost as much money as a full-grown woman. I think that really had a positive impact on my development in terms of understanding the relationship between work and reward, and the good feelings you had knowing that you were contributing to something, the praise from the women who I was bringing water to. It sort of set the tone for having a positive relationship with work.

RK: Did you get to spend, did you get to keep a little bit of that?

LD: Well, listen, just a little bit. I remember being very disappointed because I'd made up my list of all the things I was going to buy with the money. Get paid on Saturday afternoon. And I didn't even get the money. The money was given to my
mother, who gave me a quarter. And I remember being so frustrated. I mean, what could I do with a quarter? I had planned for all kinds of fantastic things with this money. There weren't a lot of things you could do on the plantation, but of course, you could buy four or five Baby Ruth candy bars and ice cream and Coca Cola and Nehi root beers and all of the other stuff. And none of that happened, of course. And later on, when I got over being mad with just having 25 cents, you really could buy a lot of stuff with 25 cent at that time. So that was what happened with the money. It went to support the family's other needs that I wasn't old enough, at eight years old, to appreciate or to deal with.

RK: We were talking. . . .

MARTIN: I'm sorry. I just want to say one thing. You remember last time when Steve dubbed your feedback. It doesn't bother me, but if someone ever is trying to edit this, they're going to wonder where the. . . .

RK: I'm trying not to do that.

MARTIN: And if you'll give me a half second, I'll make an adjustment here and I promise I won't want to make any more.

LD: What is the feedback you're doing?

RK: Well, when I say hm-hm, you know ( ). These microphones are so sensitive, they pick all that up. When they get ready to do a television documentary, they. . . .

LD: It's so good to help you keep focused. I mean, to help the speaker keep focused.

RK: I know. It's hard to do it with your eyes.

LD: Yes. And it's hard to imagine--I guess actors do this all the time--that you're talking to somebody if you're sitting there like a mannikin [laughter].

[Interrupted]

RK: One of the things we were talking about as we were driving down is how the culture today, with television and all this, how it affects people in poverty. How you see all the wealth and opulence of some people. What kind of impact do you think that has on children growing up, say, in the Delta today? How that differs from the world that you grew up in?

LD: I think the impact of television on our children is very devastating, compared to listening to the radio or the Grand Ole Opry when I was eight, nine, ten, thirteen years old, or WDIA, or looking at the pictures in the Chicago Defender or the Pittsburgh Courier, or the occasional Look magazine that had pictures of black folks. During my era, those stories and those images of people with a better life became symbols of hope and goals to achieve. You understood very clearly from those images that came to us, via the radio, whether it was Joe Louis beating up on somebody or Jackie Robinson's breakthrough or whatever other sensational activity that was happening, that the conditions that we lived under in Mississippi, as black people in a plantation system and in these towns, was not universal. And that if you could get out of here to those places, your life would be different. And there was very clearly a difference. We understood early on, number one, our place. Now, even as a child, my earliest remembrance of encounters with white people,
that whole business of our places in relationship to white folks, the posturing, the behavior, the subservience was ingrained, and people did it deliberately, parents did it deliberately, because it was also felt that your life depended on understanding those relationships. The images that came to us via the newspapers and the radio, via people coming back to visit, indicated that our place was expanded in these other places. And that one of the ways to expand it was through education, was through citizenship, being responsible, participating in the structures of society, made your place bigger, made your place have more status, and certainly had more fairness.

I was also influenced in a way that enhanced those images by my father's response to white and black relationships. He really was a separatist in philosophy, in the sense that he simply didn't need integration. He didn't need to go to their churches, schools, restaurants, visit with them in their homes. But he was adamant, he was emphatic that if he did the work that the white man did and did it as well, he should paid the same wages. He also felt that in courts, and these were the two things I remember him being adamant about, that color should have no place. If he had been wronged by a white person, the court should have been the person who made it right, irrespective of color. He felt that if he got in a fight, a physical fight, with a white person, if he beat the white man, that should have been the end of it. If the white man beat him, that should have been the end of it. It should not have been a situation where, what he called the mob crew, which was another name for the Ku Klux Klan, came to his house in the middle of the night and dragged him and his family out and killed them or burned down the people or killed other black folks in retaliation.

The television images that kids watch today really impact their sense of self concept as measured in material things. In other words, you are what you own, and that gets reenforced over and over again. We see images of what is considered beauty, and the child who is fat, the child who has a wide nose, the child who has kinky hair, is faced with the concept that I'm not beautiful. Achievement is so much more individualized as opposed to group efforts that we saw when I was a kid. The race was advancing by Joe Louis knocking out Max Smelling. The race was advancing when Jackie Robinson became a member of a professional ball team. The race was advancing when people integrated Central High School in Arkansas. And you don't see that from television now. The individual has overcome and excelled and he is being rewarded or she is being rewarded. Bryant Gumbel is not seen as an outgrowth of efforts that started years ago with the NAACP. And for us, we understood that each accomplishment that was reported in the Chicago Defender or in the Pittsburgh Courier or in Ebony was the result of a group of people in the background pushing others ahead. Young people are given an image today via the television and via the movies that they can have it all, and that it's perfectly all right to cut corners and to do things that their parents and grandparents never thought of doing to get it all. The value system is different. They're conflicted. They're in a house where somebody does not have enough money to
have food and clothes, and they're seeing all these images come into this poverty of what should be happening and what can be happening with no mechanism to explain the differences between where they are and what they see on this television. And it's very misleading. And I absolutely am preoccupied with the business of alienation. I think very young children, given so many hours of television, gory scenes, are impacted in a very negative way about their feelings for other people, and I think that that's one of things that television does that didn't happen to us. I remember a cartoon that I saw someplace. It was like it was branded on my brain. But it showed these people driving around a mountain, somewhere in the United States, and they lost control on the car. It's a husband and a wife and a child in the back seat. The car is plunging off the mountain down into this ravine, and the child in the background in screaming, "Change the channel. Change the channel." And I think there is a group of young people who watch television who are very confused about reality, in terms of what is real and what is television. I know there are studies that support both, but in terms of being able to quickly shift from reality to playthings, I'm not sure that all kids are able to make that shift. I think of that, in a sense, is a different kind of outside stimulus than we had, growing up in the Mississippi Delta in a different time period and with a different value system.

NB: I remember a couple of summers ago I was out in Los Angeles in the Watts area, and there was a black youth who had kind of orchestrated this play. It was quite wonderful actually. At the end, he sort of stood up ( ) and he said, "To be or not to be is no longer the question. It's to become or be forgotten."

LD: That's right.

NB: It strikes me that you're talking in many ways, this instantaneous gratification somehow, to become or to have is who we are, or if you don't have. . . .

LD: You don't exist. That's right. And we see it a lot in the community work that we do. In the very poor families, two or three days a year are very special days. It's an attempt, especially in families headed by females, to compensate for all of the things that the kids don't have the rest of the year. So you get, sometimes I think, an abundance of toys, too much money spent on clothes, too much money spent on whatever is the "in" thing for kids to wear. Right now, for instance, little girls are wearing these strange hats, and they cruise the malls. And people spend a lot of money doing these things because they really want to compensate for the disparity between what they see on television, which is a great marketing opportunity, and what they really have in their home. And sometimes these choices are made by parents at the expense of things that are much more needed by the family, which might be insurance, which might be health care, which might be money for educational needs, and other stuff. And you really can't blame the parents for making those choices because they're looking at this continuing assessment of them as parents, who also aren't able to provide all these material things that you're supposed to have. Like
each child is supposed to have a bedroom with a window and Priscilla curtains. In most families, if you have more than 1.4 children, you can't afford this many bedrooms with Priscilla curtains. It's all part of the frustration, I think, that people have in terms of what's going on. The thing that I think is most telling of the influence that the television of materialism has had on people is when you read these news stories in the media about kids killing each other for a jacket with some silly symbol on it, or a pair of sneakers, or some emblem that costs a lot of money but somehow adds to the status of the person who has it. When you have that kind of strong imaging going forth, with acceptance level in the peer group, overlooking how you came by the jacket or the shoes, then there's something really wrong with the country. I don't know that we can blame all of that on the television. But we certainly do market acceptability by these things, and I think that has had a tremendous impact on the formation of character, personalities, and coping abilities in young people that was totally foreign in my era.

NB: I'd really like to come back to this thing with restoration of values and if you use that in your work and how. But earlier you had said when you were growing up, you had a consciousness of the world, and it wasn't until you became an adult that you actually began to see some of the economic problems, some of the injustice problems. Could you go back to that time after or in your childhood when you first started noticing (       )? That not everything was OK?

LD: Well, when I became a teenager, I think your whole world changes, and I'm not always sure it's for the best. We might should be able to delay that process a little longer. When I was in the eighth grade, I must have been thirteen, maybe I was twelve for part of that year and thirteen for the other part. But anyway, that was a critical year for me in my recollection. I'm sure it had a lot to do with becoming an adolescent, and it had a lot more to do with noticing boys. I'd always played with boys. I was always popular with boys because I could pitch, run, and catch, and could hit the ball. So I was always very popular. But when I was thirteen, our relationship began to change. They noticed me as a girl, instead of just who would fight over whose team I'd be on at recess. I started noticing other girls -- who they spent time with -- how they looked, what they did with their hair, how they dressed, and you began to see the difference. The dungarees weren't there. The old T-shirts and stuff weren't there. They were wearing dresses and shoes and stuff. So that stuff became important, and I had to figure out how we could get some of that. Part of what had happened in almost all our years on the plantation, we never cleared any money. You know how that system works where you get all these advances, and at the end of year you settle up, and you're supposed to have money, and we never had any. I figured out, I had excellent teachers in these little one-room school houses who taught us incredible stuff, like how to keep books, basic bookkeeping, in math classes and stuff. I decided, and I'm not sure how I arrived at this conclusion, and I'm sure Miss Higgins, who was my teacher, influenced that by impressing us with the importance of knowing
how to do these things, so that we would be more responsible in managing our money and stuff. So somehow I made the quantum leap from learning all that stuff, and decided that the reason black folks never cleared any money from this operation was because we didn't keep any records. So when we started the crop year when I was in the eighth grade, I made a deal with Daddy that we were going to do better. We were going to become responsible. I would keep the books for him, and when settling day came, we would have a record of how much we owed the man, how much he owed us, and it would be fair. He would recognize our responsibility in keeping records. Daddy, I'm pretty sure, much have been very amused by this little simple logic that I'd come up with [laughter], but he played along. We got a Blue Horse notebook. I don't know if you guys ever saw a Blue Horse notebook, but it was the "in" book to have at school. It was put together well. The paper was sewn in and then it was covered with a piece of stuff. Not like the frivolous stuff you have now that falls apart. But we set it up, and I set it up the way I had learned in school with expense columns and income columns, and every day I would come home and listen to the market on the radio, where they broadcast how much cotton was selling for. Helena, Arkansas, had that every day between eleven and twelve. I forget the name of the radio station. And every thing we got, I listed in that expense column. We started getting a furnish in March, so from March through August you got that $50.00 a month. That was put down. The light bills, the gas bills, all these things that we had. Anybody who went to the doctor. And then everybody knew that there was a catch-all in the plantation system called plantation expenses. It was what they dragged out when they added everything they could legitimately add and then added plantation expenses. I guess the equivalent of that today at a university would be overhead or whatever. [Interruption]

NB: Boy, this is the first time I ever heard anybody get excited about bookkeeping [laughter].
LD: Well, I met one other woman who had the same experience, in Marshall County, Mississippi. She decided in high school, she had made the high school, that that was exactly what was wrong, and went to her father and said, "I'm going to keep your books for you." And she is Cora Nash, the financial services director here. She read something I'd written one time, and she came to me and told me, "I don't believe this, but I did the same thing." Her fascination lead her to pursue accounting in college. Mine didn't [laughter].
NB: (                                     )
LD: I'm trying to think what was I really saying at this point.
NB: The plantation expenses as overhead.
LD: The plantation expenses was the catch-all for everything that they hadn't been able to legitimately charge you for. So I even included generous amounts, what I perceived to be generous amounts, for plantation expenses. The only way that we learned that the owners of the plantation made lots of money was they figured all bale weights, cotton bale weights, at 500
pounds, and we had, sometimes, bales that weighed 640 pounds. So there was another whole 140 pounds of cotton that you didn't get any credit for. So we put all that together, and then divided all the bale weights, divided all by 500 weights, and added up everything we could. You used the date of sale to actually determine what cotton sold for, because the price ranged that particular year, I remember one period during that year cotton was selling at 40 cent a pound, but it didn't matter if your person didn't sell on that day. So you had to figure out what days they sold. So when I'd come home from school, I'd ask, "Did he sell cotton today? Did Mr. Carl sell cotton today?" If he sold cotton today, you looked in the Press Semitar, which was a newspaper out of Memphis that pointed out how much they sold for, and you figured out how much they sold for that day. And kept fairly accurate books. I'm amazed now as an adult at how seriously I got into this at thirteen. And you really have to compare it when at kids now, because it's lipstick and make-up and eye shadow that was important. The day settling day finally came, and I gave Daddy the book and went over everything with him -- remember he couldn't read and write -- I went over everything with him and went to school. I don't remember paying much attention to what was happening in class because my mind was fixed on what was going on there. The way I had figured it, we would have come out with at least a couple of thousand dollars for us in this deal. That was with giving them the benefit of the doubt. That's with giving them half of the cotton you'd made. That's with giving them lots of money for the plantation expenses. When I came home that afternoon, my mother told me they had had the settlement, and instead of the $2,000 and some dollars that I thought we would get, we'd gotten like $600 and some dollars. Since it was the first money they had made in over thirty years of farming, they were pleased. I was devastated. I was absolutely, positively ill. How could this have gone wrong, and what had happened. And I don't know. I'm almost certain, I'm almost certain now that my father, who knew his place, hadn't brought out the book, hadn't challenged Mr. Carl's figures, and also I'm almost sure he didn't want me to know that he wouldn't do that. He couldn't possibly have wanted to hurt me by saying this won't work or discouraged by saying this won't work. So I don't know what happened in that place. He may really have, but I'm almost certain he didn't. At that point, I decided that there was no fairness in the system, and that somehow people had to escape the system. Because it was not ever going to be a situation where you could do anything to make it work for you. I mean, that was the end of me assuming responsibility for an unfair and unjust world. And while I thought Mr. Carl and Mr. Ferguson were neat people who shared stuff with us that they didn't have to share, who were kind, and all the things that good white folk in Mississippi are, you just understand that there was this system here, somehow, that kept people from doing what they knew was right. It never occurred to me that perhaps my figures were wrong. It never occurred to me that perhaps the local cotton sellers were not giving Mr. Carl the forty cents a pound that was on the national market. I mean, none of those things
figured in. I just decided it wasn't fair. And it never occurred to me that we could make it better through any of the action that we saw later on in the civil rights movement. It just became a situation that you escaped. And I understood why all of the people who came back had left the plantation. That it was not a thing they could make work. And they'd gone where they could work and be paid a fair wage for their labor. They'd gone to Chicago. They'd gone to California. They'd gone to Detroit, or they'd come no farther than Memphis. That's what had happened with my older brothers. They'd gone to Memphis because they'd gotten tired of working and not being paid. They'd gotten tired of not having political and social justice. They'd gotten tired of being fearful of having somebody accuse them of crimes and spending their lives in prison, and they just left. And when they left Mississippi, their goal was that if they didn't find fairness and employment in Memphis to go to St. Louis, and from St. Louis to Chicago, from Chicago to New York. They never got any further than Memphis, but they were content there that they were receiving a fair measure of justice for their efforts and for their work.

RK: How did you change after, that's a pretty powerful experience?

LD: Well, it was. It was experience where I was preoccupied with getting out. I spent the next ten years trying to figure out how to get out of Mississippi. I had no relatives in Chicago that could send for me. I didn't make the real connection that my ticket out could be education, although Miss Higgins tried very hard to drill that into us. I didn't make that connection very well. So later on I decided that maybe the best way to get out of here was to get married, because a lot of people did escape the whole process through marriage. They married men, who like my father, were very industrious and found different ways to make money to supplement whatever the system didn't pay you from the plantation system, or they moved off the plantation into town, and they went to work in plants and factories and for white people as domestics. And had steady income. They had houses. They lived decent lives. So I expected to just get out of that system, and I didn't expect that it would ever change. I didn't think there was anything we could do to make it change because that experience at thirteen was devastating. And these were like the better white people. They weren't like some of the other folks who shot people and who beat them up or who denied them health care, who denied them food, who kicked them off their plantation when they got sick. And if these were the best people, and we couldn't make it work with them, I lost faith in that system.

RK: So at some point you just stopped going, you didn't see education as really a viable way of getting out of here?

LD: No, I really didn't. I only saw education, let me tell you when I embraced education, was after I had married, had six kids, had been kicked off a plantation. Because I got married when I was seventeen to someone who had a lot more material things than I did. They had a car, nice furniture, instead of a shotgun house, they had a big four-room house. They had nice
clothes. All of the members of the family had come from people who lived in Mound Bayou, and Mound Bayou was a status symbol for black folks. It was the mecca. And so I really thought that that was my ticket out of the plantation system and poverty. And really got married, suffered my second major disappointment in life. I found out that it wasn't a magical place. I started having babies and never got off the plantation. I experienced deprivation in a different form than I had ever had at home, because there was hunger. My husband didn't hunt, didn't fish, didn't pick berries. He drank. The disappointment was just overwhelming. I started having babies and had them quickly and close together. I was sicker than I ever knew people could ever be! And became quite miserable. I picked cotton, chopped cotton. I worked incredibly long hours, and again, had very little at the end of the year to show for it. Got kicked off the plantation by an owner who wasn't cruel, but who had a small operation to start with, and who had bought himself a mechanical cotton picker and a combine, and who really had no need for a family. He had 80 or 100 acres and he just didn't need anybody. He worked himself. His son worked with him, and they didn't need the expense of a family. So we were asked to leave. We moved to Shelby, Mississippi, population about 2800 during that time, and assumed I would be able to go out and get a job. And ran face to face with the limitations of a high school drop-out. I couldn't do anything. If you have a town full of people trying to be domestics for white women, and you can't teach -- I didn't have a nursing degree or a teaching degree. There was nothing I could do. I remember having everybody look for a job for me because I really needed to work. We were living in a house that had been condemned. My husband was making $36.00 a week. We had five kids and I was pregnant. So we desperately. . .

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

LD: All the people who worked in banks, stores. The two plants in town were white. I mean, there just weren't any jobs for blacks, and that was understood. They wouldn't hire you. Baxter was here in Cleveland, but it didn't hire anybody but whites. There was one black person working as a janitor. No blacks were hired in any of the plants in the area. So there was nothing to do but try to find work keeping people's children, clearing up their houses, doing something like that. I went to everybody that was working for white folks and asked them to ask around if anybody needed anybody. I could do housework and take care of babies. I was very good at that. I remember Lula Mae McClain found a job for me with the Lamendorfs, and she came by and told me to get ready to go for the interview. So I got ready. The Lamendorfs were big people in Shelby. They owned the best dry goods store with the best clothes that all of the rich people shopped at, and all of the well-to-do blacks like school teachers and folks shopped at. They had a big house over in the
white section of town. So I put on my best clothes and dressed up and went up for my interview with Lula Mae. They had asked Lula Mae a lot of questions about my background, like had I gone to high school, and could I read and write well, all of these things. So I was really excited because I was sure that if they wanted to know all of that they wanted me to work in the store. Oh, good Lord, my feet couldn't hardly contain themselves as I rushed up to that store that morning for the interview. They asked me all kinds of questions about character, what kind of person you were and all that, which I thought was appropriate. Then they asked me questions that tested my academic ability, which I just was convinced was part of getting you ready for the store. And then they became very clear that they only wanted to know all of these things because they wanted a maid who could take business calls at the house, and who could keep good messages for them. So although I was a little bit disappointed, it was okay. There was still a job. Then we got into my hours. This job paid $19.00 per week, which was four dollars higher than the average that people were paying. So I was excited about that. But Mrs. Lamendorf wanted me to work seven days a week. I said, "Well, no, I have children. I think I should spend Sunday with them." And really we had so few things that we did together, Sunday School was one of the things that we always did together. We always got up and went to Sunday School together, and I couldn't imagine not being there to do that, really. So Mr. Lamendorf seemed to have been impressed with that. There was more evidence of character. So he said, "Okay." And I explained it to him, that I really took the kids to Sunday School. I didn't send them, and I would like not to have to work on Sunday morning. He was agreeable. He said okay. He said, "What you can do then is you can fix something for us on Saturday when you're there." And right there before me and Lula Mae, this couple got into an argument about my hours. She said, "Oh no, you know that's not right. She has to come." He said, "Oh, we can take care of ourselves one day." "Oh no, we can't. She has to come in." And with us standing there being totally flabbergasted, they argued back and forth. And although I needed that job desperately, I mean, I really needed it desperately, I had to make a decision, standing there watching them argue, that I couldn't take the job. And I couldn't take the job because we all knew enough about households in the South, that you had to go into a household where the man and wife were together, or you would get caught in the middle, and it could turn nasty. There were rumors when I was growing up of white women who had killed black women in these kinds of situations. So I really was afraid to take the job, understanding that there was conflict even before I became hired. The other thing that was very unsettling to Lula Mae and myself was that our image of white folks was that they never conducted themselves in the presence of black folks at the level of argument. That also was unsettling, because you could also get into trouble with people who didn't have character or who weren't quality people. I mean, people who had to do domestic work tried to work for people who were quality people, people who had class and who understood how to behave and conduct
themselves. So I said no to the job, and worried over whether I'd made the right decision, worried about whether I was denying food and health care to children, but feeling very much like I had no choice. That this really wasn't a job that I could afford to take. And it turned out that it probably was the best decision I made, and it was a guts decision. It certainly wasn't made from structural analysis or anything else [laughter]. It was just that, God, I'm going to be in the middle of these people, and I'm going to get hurt or probably get seriously damaged by this, and just gave it up. I never got a job as a domestic behind that. I went back to catching the truck and going to the field and chopping cotton. That was in '64 or early '65. Later on, the civil rights movement came to Shelby, Mississippi, and I became preoccupied with that. I learned along the way how to work the system. We didn't have food stamps at that period, but there were surplus commodities that I signed up for. So that supplemented our food supply. Chopping cotton whenever I was able gave us a little extra money. I became an expert, again, at managing the books, you know, in terms of taking twenty dollars, each week, which was what I got from my husband's wages, and paying all our bills, by spreading them out, paying the rent, which was ten dollars, one week, and the next week paying the utilities, which was never more then twenty dollars. Those were the good old days [laughter]. Making sure that we feed the family, very poor fare, but feed them three meals a day. When the civil rights movement really spread out, I became a volunteer with COFO, and as such received ten dollars or fifteen dollars a week stipend for community work. So we did a lot of voter registration, and the fifteen dollars also helped with some of the household things that we had to have. From that, the Johnson's poverty programs came to town, and that really freed a lot of black folks and poor whites from a strangle hold economy that just didn't let you live, or barely let you live. We went to work for wages that we never dreamed you could earn in Mississippi, and people were freed for the first time from a system that really controlled you through the threat of starvation. I mean, people put up with a lot of stuff on the plantation because you had a place to live. They gave you a shack to live in. They advanced you money, and they really bought your soul. You know, you just think about all the folks who endured mistreatment, who endured injustices, who endured brutality, to avoid having their wives and children put in the street. And we saw the horror that could happen to you when you didn't belong to a white man. That was what we saw with the Andrews' people. Everybody got kicked off that plantation, and every plantation was alerted not to hire them. So they not only could not work in any of the plants in town, they couldn't go to another plantation and go to work there. And it didn't matter if they had been leaders in the strike or if they had just decided, okay, we're getting off too. It was a horrible situation. The damage of that, some of those folks have never overcome. We didn't have psychological services and stuff at that time anyway, but they've never overcome that, because it was a kind of shunning that took place. It was some terrible times, but people
learned and eagerly volunteered to get out of that system.

RK: What was this early period of the civil rights movement like? What was it like going around doing voter registration? Was that an enervating moment or experience for you?

LD: Yes. You know, the only other time I had that kind of high, for lack of a better term, was that year that I was keeping books to show Mr. Carl that we knew what he was doing, and we were going to break up this nonsense of taking all our money. You know, it was bigger than Mr. Carl. I mean, I had latched on to what was wrong with the whole plantation system, and soon as we made it work with Mr. Carl, it was going to work for everybody else. Magically, it was going to be repeated. And the civil rights movement was an excitement. It was all of those stories that my mother had read to us across the years from the Chicago Defender and the Pittsburgh Courier. It was making up to Emmett Till for the helplessness that we all had felt for not being able to save him from that mob crew. It was making up to Willis for having to leave town and be scared to death for the rest of his life. It was for all of the atrocities, the lynchings, and the night riders, and all of the stuff that had been going on. It was our way of saying, "Okay, we're going to try to avenge all of this stuff that's been going down across the years." And while you may not have thought about it consciously, you know, it wasn't like it was a conscious thought in your head that, okay, this is for Emmett Till or this is for Mack Charles Parker. That wasn't going on in your head, but it was the same feeling that the folks exhibited when they would gather in my folks' house to listen to Jackie Robinson on the radio or to listen to Joe Louis whip somebody at night at the fights. I mean, we always had a radio with those long batteries, and the folks would sit around

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A    April 22, 1992

L.C. DORSEY: I should warn you that sometimes when I get to talking, I get carried away. I will move. You'll have to tell me to be still or do something.

MARTIN: Move, you go forward, go back, that kind of thing. Does that chair rock a little bit? If you can try not to rock it, only because that begins to become distracting to the viewer.

LD: I won't rock the chair, but I will do this on a point. Look like I'm going right across this desk. [Laughter] You just forget about it. You forget what you're doing.

ROBERT KORSTAD: You do whatever you want. That's all right.

That's fine. We want you to forget about the tape recorder if you can.

LD: Neil, what is your last name?

NB: It's Boothby. B-O-O-T-H-B-Y.

RK: One of the things that we're interested in, in all of the people we're talking to, is some sense of the [Interruption]

LD: And they didn't want to have to do the paperwork that the federal government required them to do, the "fill in the
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RK: One of the things that we're interested in, in all of the people we're talking to, is some sense of the [Interruption]

LD: And they didn't want to have to do the paperwork that the federal government required them to do, the "fill in the stuff." It was a nuisance and a hassle to them, and they didn't want them to have it. So they tried to do everything they could to discourage people from pursuing it. They got it anyway. They were hauling water from Rosedale, so why couldn't they continue to do that? Any time you try to make change, of course, you always have problems like that, but it was very crazy. And I thought that that was part of their problem. They had worked and perfected the Save the Children, and worked and perfected their skill in overseas programs, and just hadn't quite figured out how you do this in America. What do you do with people in the United States? What do you do with kids who are malnourished in the United States and how do you avoid the political consequences of exposing child health problems or exposing dysentery from contaminated water, children being poisoned by pesticides. And I haven't figured out if they have a political agenda, or whether they just . . .

NB: I don't think they've learned to work with the different kinds of politics that child survival, child health ( ). They haven't looked at very fully the human rights thing.

LD: That's right. That's right. I don't know where they were with the children's summit the other year, too, because I haven't seen anything in that literature.

NB: They were there behind ( ). They were supportive but not actively supportive. We worked in the Middle East, for example, and they backed off on a report that talked about the rights of Palestinian children. They thought that was real political and didn't want to support it, though it was factual and accurate, because of the donor. So they're not real...

LD: Well, we've taken a position that they either get real [laughter], or we will do whatever we can.

NB: ( )

LD: Yeah. They either will get real, or we will just do whatever we can with the kids that we have. We have a very selfish interest in working with the kids, and it has to do with trying to save some of them, of course, but more importantly, trying to develop leadership. To make sure that we've invested in people who understand the broad issues and who are preparing themselves to take these roles, to become the superintendents of
education, the educators, the doctors, the director of the Delta Health Center, the historians recording what's going on, and whatever else. We want them to understand that they can do that, and our commitment is to try to help them do that, and providing recreation and health services and dental services is all part of the preparation. To make sure they're well, but the real thing is to understand the political, social, and economic structures, and how you overcome if they are barriers or how you seize control of or utilize to get to that point of leadership development. And if they're just going to bog us down with pieces of paper that say how much of your time was spent doing this and doing that and stuff like that, we're going to have to leave them alone and move on, you know [laughter].

RK: Get real or get out.
LD: Yeah, you have to do that.
NB: We had to do the same thing with the kids. They had to understand the political origins of the war that they were sort of in. That was part of the treatment, part of the get better stuff. They got a little wishy-washy on that, and I had to [laughter]
LD: Well, usually with a new person you can get some things done, so that you can do that.
RK: One of the things we're trying to do in talking with different people is get some sense of where people's commitment to these issues came from, and usually tracing that back to someone's childhood and family and their kind of upbringing is one place to start. It's not true for everybody, but I thought maybe you could just talk a little bit about your family, about growing up. I know you've written about it some. That would be helpful to us.
LD: Okay.
RK: Could you talk a little bit about your family and the things that you remember and some sense of how you felt about the world and things as a child, too?
LD: Sure. As long as you understand that I really didn't know anything was wrong with the world until I became an adult [laughter]. Okay, no, I can do that. Let me know when you're ready.
RK: We're ready.
LD: I grew up in the plantation system of the Mississippi Delta, and really for a long time I thought everybody was on plantations. I really didn't have a sense of poverty, in the sense that I understand it as an adult, because everybody I knew and everybody I visited and everybody I went to school and played with, lived in the same conditions. We all lived in houses on the plantation. They were all more or less the same kind of houses. Nobody I knew as a child owned their house or owned land even, that lived on the plantation. There were a few people in the little towns who owned houses, but their houses were very similar to the ones we had on the plantation, shotgun, three room houses. We had a sense of real poor people, because they were the ones who didn't have gardens, who often didn't have clothes to wear, whose mothers didn't sew or make dresses from the feedsacks like our mothers did or like some mothers did. We also
had a sense of real poor people as those people who didn't quite know how to take care of themselves, who didn't plan for the winter, who didn't cut wood, didn't work hard and diligent. That was, in my opinion, the poor people, but they were included in the network of support on the plantation. Everybody always planted some extra vegetables, saved the extra rabbits that they caught, for those families. They were the people who didn't quite get it together.

I had a happy childhood. I was sick a lot. Had asthma. Had pneumonia a couple of times before I was ten years old. We were fortunate enough to live on a plantation where the owner believed in having or providing a doctor for the tenants. So we had health care. If fact, my birth was attended by both a midwife, which was the general OB/GYN services for people in that area, both white and black, and a doctor. Dr. Robey actually delivered me. My mother was weak and tired and thirty-eight years old when I was born, and I had a difficult time coming into this world. So he was called and actually made the delivery. That was unusual in the Mississippi Delta but the Walkers, Ben Walker, was an unusual man who really did not believe in all of the nonsense that some of the other plantation owners professed.

This was later born out in the '60s with the civil rights movement when the people struck on Andrews plantation. They were blacklisted. They were not allowed to work in the place, and they couldn't get water from any place for the tents that they pitched. Ben Walker was one of the farmers in the area who told them that they could get water from his place as often as they wanted. Well, that was where I spent the first eight years of my life, on that plantation.

My father was a very industrious person, my step-father rather, who fished, hunted, made his own boat to do this in. He canned chairs for people. He repaired shoes. He had his own equipment to do shoe repair. He and my mother made baskets from the bark of trees, just like they used for the rebottoming of chairs. They picked fruit when the blackberry season came. He and my mother spent days picking berries. Some they sold; others she canned for the winter and made jelly. They did the same thing with muscadines in the fall of the year. So we always had enough food. There was always food in the house, I never knew hunger in the sense that people talk about. Fresh fruit was either whatever they picked or we got a lot of it at Christmas time, but that was it. There was not a lot of clothing. My mother sewed and you could buy material for 15 or 20 cent a yard.

Then, at that time also, flour and chops for the chicken came in print sacks. So we had a lot of print dresses made from those feed sacks and flour sacks. And it wasn't a source of embarrassment. Everybody else had pretty much the same thing, and the kids who didn't, you just sort of looked at them and knew they were special and lucky, but there wasn't the kind of competition that you see now with kids who have Reeboks and kids who don't have Reeboks or whatever, Air Jordan, of whatever the latest fad is. It wasn't that kind of stuff or that kind of yearning and resentment and longing. We just didn't have it.

I grew up in a house where there were not a lot of books.
My father could not read and write. He'd never had the opportunity to go to school. My mother had gone to school in Alabama where her people were land owners. She was living with aunts and uncles because her parents had separated, and her mother had gone off to become a missionary in Liberia. So she went to school through the third grade, but she could read and write very well, do math. I remember weekends, spending entire weekends or most of the weekend, with my mother reading to us from the Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago Defender. My father was anxious and interested in knowing what was happening to blacks in other parts of the country, and you could always buy these newspapers at the black barber shops or the beautician shops. So we always knew what was happening in the rest of the world, and I had this fantastic dream of going to Chicago. Everybody on every plantation we lived on had somebody in Chicago or Milwaukee. And every summer by the time I was in high school, every summer when school was out everybody caught the Greyhounds and Trailway buses and went to Chicago for the summer, and they worked. They came back, and they had fancy clothes, and they had money, and they looked good. I really felt that we were deprived in the sense that we had no relatives in Chicago. So we spent our summer chopping cotton and carrying water. I started work when I was eight years old on the Walker's plantation. I was at the house with my younger sister, and Mr. Walker came by, one of the sons, who I think was Benjamin, came by and saw me there and went to the field where my mother was chopping, and asked if I could carry water for them, because there was nobody in the field but women, and they would have had to stop to get water. She was, of course, agreeable to that. It pleased her. There was extra money coming to the house. So at eight I became a wage earner, making $1.25 a day. And the women liked the fact that I didn't dawdle. I pumped the water off until it was real cold in this eight-pound lard bucket, and I walked fast so it wouldn't get warm on the way. As soon as I got back to the house, I started the whole process all over again. And I felt really great because the women who were chopping cotton weren't making but $2.50 a day. See, I was making almost as much money as a full-grown women. I think that really had a positive impact on my development in terms of understanding the relationship between work and reward, and the good feelings you had knowing that you were contributing to something, the praise from the women who I was bringing water to. It sort of set the tone for having a positive relationship with work.

RK: Did you get to spend, did you get to keep a little bit of that?

LD: Well, listen, just a little bit. I remember being very disappointed because I'd made up my list of all the things I was going to buy with the money. Get paid on Saturday afternoon. And I didn't even get the money. The money was given to my mother, who gave me a quarter. And I remember being so frustrated. I mean, what could I do with a quarter? I had planned for all kinds of fantastic things with this money. There weren't a lot of things you could do on the plantation, but of course, you could buy four or five Baby Ruth candy bars and ice
cream and Coca Cola and Nehi root beers and all of the other stuff. And none of that happened, of course. And later on, when I got over being mad with just having 25 cents, you really could buy a lot of stuff with 25 cent at that time. So that was what happened with the money. It went to support the family's other needs that I wasn't old enough, at eight years old, to appreciate or to deal with.

RK: We were talking. . . .
MARTIN: I'm sorry. I just want to say one thing. You remember last time when Steve dubbed your feedback. It doesn't bother me, but if someone ever is trying to edit this, they're going to wonder where the. . . .
RK: I'm trying not to do that.
MARTIN: And if you'll give me a half second, I'll make an adjustment here and I promise I won't want to make any more.
LD: What is the feedback you're doing?
RK: Well, when I say hm-hm, you know ( ). These microphones are so sensitive, they pick all that up. When they get ready to do a television documentary, they. . . .
LD: It's so good to help you keep focused. I mean, to help the speaker keep focused.
RK: I know. It's hard to do it with your eyes.
LD: Yes. And it's hard to imagine--I guess actors do this all the time--that you're talking to somebody if you're sitting there like a mannikin [laughter].
[Interruption]
RK: One of the things we were talking about as we were driving down is how the culture today, with television and all this, how it affects people in poverty. How you see all the wealth and opulence of some people. What kind of impact do you think that has on children growing up, say, in the Delta today? How that differs from the world that you grew up in?
LD: I think the impact of television on our children is very devastating, compared to listening to the radio or the Grand Ole Opry when I was eight, nine, ten, thirteen years old, or WDIA, or looking at the pictures in the Chicago Defender or the Pittsburgh Courier, or the occasional Look magazine that had pictures of black folks. During my era, those stories and those images of people with a better life became symbols of hope and goals to achieve. You understood very clearly from those images that came to us, via the radio, whether it was Joe Louis beating up on somebody or Jackie Robinson's breakthrough or whatever other sensational activity that was happening, that the conditions that we lived under in Mississippi, as black people in a plantation system and in these towns, was not universal. And that if you could get out of here to those places, your life would be different. And there was very clearly a difference. We understood early on, number one, our place. Now, even as a child, my earliest remembrance of encounters with white people, that whole business of our places in relationship to white folks, the posturing, the behavior, the subservience was ingrained, and people did it deliberately, parents did it deliberately, because it was also felt that your life depended on understanding those relationships. The images that came to us via the newspapers and
the radio, via people coming back to visit, indicated that our place was expanded in these other places. And that one of the ways to expand it was through education, was through citizenship, being responsible, participating in the structures of society, made your place bigger, made your place have more status, and certainly had more fairness.

I was also influenced in a way that enhanced those images by my father's response to white and black relationships. He really was a separatist in philosophy, in the sense that he simply didn't need integration. He didn't need to go to their churches, schools, restaurants, visit with them in their homes. But he was adamant, he was emphatic that if he did the work that the white man did and did it as well, he should paid the same wages. He also felt that in courts, and these were the two things I remember him being adamant about, that color should have no place. If he had been wronged by a white person, the court should have been the person who made it right, irrespective of color. He felt that if he got in a fight, a physical fight, with a white person, if he beat the white man, that should have been the end of it. If the white man beat him, that should have been the end of it. It should not have been a situation where, what he called the mob crew, which was another name for the Ku Klux Klan, came to his house in the middle of the night and dragged him and his family out and killed them or burned down the people or killed other black folks in retaliation.

The television images that kids watch today really impact their sense of self concept as measured in material things. In other words, you are what you own, and that gets reinforced over and over again. We see images of what is considered beauty, and the child who is fat, the child who has a wide nose, the child who has kinky hair, is faced with the concept that I'm not beautiful. Achievement is so much more individualized as opposed to group efforts that we saw when I was a kid. The race was advancing by Joe Louis knocking out Max Smelling. The race was advancing when Jackie Robinson became a member of a professional ball team. The race was advancing when people integrated Central High School in Arkansas. And you don't see that from television now. The individual has overcome and excelled and he is being rewarded or she is being rewarded. Bryant Gumbel is not seen as an outgrowth of efforts that started years ago with the NAACP. And for us, we understood that each accomplishment that was reported in the Chicago Defender or in the Pittsburgh Courier or in Ebony was the result of a group of people in the background pushing others ahead. Young people are given an image today via the television and via the movies that they can have it all, and that it's perfectly all right to cut corners and to do things that their parents and grandparents never thought of doing to get it all. The value system is different. They're conflicted. They're in a house where somebody does not have enough money to have food and clothes, and they're seeing all these images come into this poverty of what should be happening and what can be happening with no mechanism to explain the differences between where they are and what they see on this television. And it's very misleading. And I absolutely am preoccupied with the
business of alienation. I think very young children, given so
many hours of television, gory scenes, are impacted in a very
negative way about their feelings for other people, and I think
that that's one of things that television does that didn't happen
to us. I remember a cartoon that I saw someplace. It was like
it was branded on my brain. But it showed these people driving
around a mountain, somewhere in the United States, and they lost
control on the car. It's a husband and a wife and a child in the
back seat. The car is plunging off the mountain down into this
ravine, and the child in the background in screaming, "Change the
channel. Change the channel." And I think there is a group of
young people who watch television who are very confused about
reality, in terms of what is real and what is television. I know
there are studies that support both, but in terms of being able
to quickly shift from reality to playthings, I'm not sure that
all kids are able to make that shift. I think of that, in a
sense, is a different kind of outside stimulus than we had,
growing up in the Mississippi Delta in a different time period
and with a different value system.

NB: I remember a couple of summers ago I was out in Los
Angeles in the Watts area, and there was a black youth who had
kind of orchestrated this play. It was quite wonderful actually.
At the end, he sort of stood up ( ) and he said, "To
be or not to be is no longer the question. It's to become or be
forgotten."

LD: That's right.

NB: It strikes me that you're talking in many ways, this
instantaneous gratification somehow, to become or to have is who
we are, or if you don't have. . . .

LD: You don't exist. That's right. And we see it a lot in
the community work that we do. In the very poor families, two or
three days a year are very special days. It's an attempt,
especially in families headed by females, to compensate for all
of the things that the kids don't have the rest of the year. So
you get, sometimes I think, an abundance of toys, too much money
spent on clothes, too much money spent on whatever is the "in"
thing for kids to wear. Right now, for instance, little girls
are wearing these strange hats, and they cruise the malls. And
people spend a lot of money doing these things because they
really want to compensate for the disparity between what they see
on television, which is a great marketing opportunity, and what
they really have in their home. And sometimes these choices are
made by parents at the expense of things that are much more
needed by the family, which might be insurance, which might be
health care, which might be money for educational needs, and
other stuff. And you really can't blame the parents for making
those choices because they're looking at this continuing
assessment of them as parents, who also aren't able to provide
all these material things that you're supposed to have. Like
each child is supposed to have a bedroom with a window and
Priscilla curtains. In most families, if you have more than 1.4
children, you can't afford this many bedrooms with Priscilla
curtains. It's all part of the frustration, I think, that people
have in terms of what's going on. The thing that I think is most
telling of the influence that the television of materialism has had on people is when you read these news stories in the media about kids killing each other for a jacket with some silly symbol on it, or a pair of sneakers, or some emblem that costs a lot of money but somehow adds to the status of the person who has it. When you have that kind of strong imaging going forth, with acceptance level in the peer group, overlooking how you came by the jacket or the shoes, then there's something really wrong with the country. I don't know that we can blame all of that on the television. But we certainly do market acceptability by these things, and I think that has had a tremendous impact on the formation of character, personalities, and coping abilities in young people that was totally foreign in my era.

NB: I'd really like to come back to this thing with restoration of values and if you use that in your work and how. But earlier you had said when you were growing up, you had a consciousness of the world, and it wasn't until you became an adult that you actually began to see some of the economic problems, some of the injustice problems. Could you go back to that time after or in your childhood when you first started noticing (       )? That not everything was OK?

LD: Well, when I became a teenager, I think your whole world changes, and I'm not always sure it's for the best. We might should be able to delay that process a little longer. When I was in the eighth grade, I must have been thirteen, maybe I was twelve for part of that year and thirteen for the other part. But anyway, that was a critical year for me in my recollection. I'm sure it had a lot to do with becoming an adolescent, and it had a lot more to do with noticing boys. I'd always played with boys. I was always popular with boys because I could pitch, run, and catch, and could hit the ball. So I was always very popular.

But when I was thirteen, our relationship began to change. They noticed me as a girl, instead of just who would fight over whose team I'd be on at recess. I started noticing other girls -- who they spent time with -- how they looked, what they did with their hair, how they dressed, and you began to see the difference. The dungarees weren't there. The old T-shirts and stuff weren't there. They were wearing dresses and shoes and stuff. So that stuff became important, and I had to figure out how we could get some of that. Part of what had happened in almost all our years on the plantation, we never cleared any money. You know how that system works where you get all these advances, and at the end of year you settle up, and you're supposed to have money, and we never had any. I figured out, I had excellent teachers in these little one-room school houses who taught us incredible stuff, like how to keep books, basic bookkeeping, in math classes and stuff. I decided, and I'm not sure how I arrived at this conclusion, and I'm sure Miss Higgins, who was my teacher, influenced that by impressing us with the importance of knowing how to do these things, so that we would be more responsible in managing our money and stuff. So somehow I made the quantum leap from learning all that stuff, and decided that the reason black folks never cleared any money from this operation was because we didn't keep any records. So when we started the crop year when I
was in the eighth grade, I made a deal with Daddy that we were going to do better. We were going to become responsible. I would keep the books for him, and when settling day came, we would have a record of how much we owed the man, how much he owed us, and it would be fair. He would recognize our responsibility in keeping records. Daddy, I'm pretty sure, much have been very amused by this little simple logic that I'd come up with [laughter], but he played along. We got a Blue Horse notebook. I don't know if you guys ever saw a Blue Horse notebook, but it was the "in" book to have at school. It was put together well. The paper was sewn in and then it was covered with a piece of stuff. Not like the frivolous stuff you have now that falls apart. But we set it up, and I set it up the way I had learned in school with expense columns and income columns, and every day I would come home and listen to the market on the radio, where they broadcast how much cotton was selling for. Helena, Arkansas, had that every day between eleven and twelve. I forget the name of the radio station. We started getting a furnish in March, so from March through August you got that $50.00 a month. That was put down. The light bills, the gas bills, all these things that we had. Anybody who went to the doctor. And then everybody knew that there was a catch-all in the plantation system called plantation expenses. It was what they dragged out when they added everything they could legitimately add and then added plantation expenses. I guess the equivalent of that today at a university would be overhead or whatever. 

[ Interruption ]

NB: Boy, this is the first time I ever heard anybody get excited about bookkeeping [laughter].

LD: Well, I met one other woman who had the same experience, in Marshall County, Mississippi. She decided in high school, she had made the high school, that that was exactly what was wrong, and went to her father and said, "I'm going to keep your books for you." And she is Cora Nash, the financial services director here. She read something I'd written one time, and she came to me and told me, "I don't believe this, but I did the same thing." Her fascination lead her to pursue accounting in college. Mine didn't [laughter].

NB: (                                     )

LD: I'm trying to think what was I really saying at this point.

NB: The plantation expenses as overhead.

LD: The plantation expenses was the catch-all for everything that they hadn't been able to legitimately charge you for. So I even included generous amounts, what I perceived to be generous amounts, for plantation expenses. The only way that we learned that the owners of the plantation made lots of money was they figured all bale weights, cotton bale weights, at 500 pounds, and we had, sometimes, bales that weighed 640 pounds. So there was another whole 140 pounds of cotton that you didn't get any credit for. So we put all that together, and then divided all the bale weights, divided all by 500 weights, and added up everything we could. You used the date of sale to actually
determine what cotton sold for, because the price ranged that particular year, I remember one period during that year cotton was selling at 40 cent a pound, but it didn't matter if your person didn't sell on that day. So you had to figure out what days they sold. So when I'd come home from school, I'd ask, "Did he sell cotton today? Did Mr. Carl sell cotton today?" If he sold cotton today, you looked in the Press Semitar, which was a newspaper out of Memphis that pointed out how much they sold for, and you figured out how much they sold for that day. And kept fairly accurate books. I'm amazed now as an adult at how seriously I got into this at thirteen. And you really have to compare it when at kids now, because it's lipstick and make-up and eye shadow that was important. The day settling day finally came, and I gave Daddy the book and went over everything with him -- remember he couldn't read and write -- I went over everything with him and went to school. I don't remember paying much attention to what was happening in class because my mind was fixed on what was going on there. The way I had figured it, we would have come out with at least a couple of thousand dollars for us in this deal. That was with giving them the benefit of the doubt. That's with giving them half of the cotton you'd made. That's with giving them lots of money for the plantation expenses. When I came home that afternoon, my mother told me they had had the settlement, and instead of the $2,000 and some dollars that I thought we would get, we'd gotten like $600 and some dollars. Since it was the first money they had made in over thirty years of farming, they were pleased. I was devastated. I was absolutely, positively ill. How could this have gone wrong, and what had happened. And I don't know. I'm almost certain, I'm almost certain now that my father, who knew his place, hadn't brought out the book, hadn't challenged Mr. Carl's figures, and also I'm almost sure he didn't want me to know that he wouldn't do that. He couldn't possibly have wanted to hurt me by saying this won't work or discouraged by saying this won't work. So I don't know what happened in that place. He may really have, but I'm almost certain he didn't. At that point, I decided that there was no fairness in the system, and that somehow people had to escape the system. Because it was not ever going to be a situation where you could do anything to make it work for you. I mean, that was the end of me assuming responsibility for an unfair and unjust world. And while I thought Mr. Carl and Mr. Ferguson were neat people who shared stuff with us that they didn't have to share, who were kind, and all the things that good white folk in Mississippi are, you just understand that there was this system here, somehow, that kept people from doing what they knew was right. It never occurred to me that perhaps my figures were wrong. It never occurred to me that perhaps the local cotton sellers were not giving Mr. Carl the forty cents a pound that was on the national market. I mean, none of those things figured in. I just decided it wasn't fair. And it never occurred to me that we could make it better through any of the action that we saw later on in the civil rights movement. It just became a situation that you escaped. And I understood why all of the people who came back had left the plantation. That it
was not a thing they could make work. And they'd gone where they could work and be paid a fair wage for their labor. They'd gone to Chicago. They'd gone to California. They'd gone to Detroit, or they'd come no farther than Memphis. That's what had happened with my older brothers. They'd gone to Memphis because they'd gotten tired of working and not being paid. They'd gotten tired of not having political and social justice. They'd gotten tired of being fearful of having somebody accuse them of crimes and spending their lives in prison, and they just left. And when they left Mississippi, their goal was that if they didn't find fairness and employment in Memphis to go to St. Louis, and from St. Louis to Chicago, from Chicago to New York. They never got any further than Memphis, but they were content there that they were receiving a fair measure of justice for their efforts and for their work.

RK: How did you change after, that's a pretty powerful experience?

LD: Well, it was. It was experience where I was preoccupied with getting out. I spent the next ten years trying to figure out how to get out of Mississippi. I had no relatives in Chicago that could send for me. I didn't make the real connection that my ticket out could be education, although Miss Higgins tried very hard to drill that into us. I didn't make that connection very well. So later on I decided that maybe the best way to get out of here was to get married, because a lot of people did escape the whole process through marriage. They married men, who like my father, were very industrious and found different ways to make money to supplement whatever the system didn't pay you from the plantation system, or they moved off the plantation into town, and they went to work in plants and factories and for white people as domestics. And had steady income. They had houses. They lived decent lives. So I expected to just get out of that system, and I didn't expect that it would ever change. I didn't think there was anything we could do to make it change because that experience at thirteen was devastating. And these were like the better white people. They weren't like some of the other folks who shot people and who beat them up or who denied them health care, who denied them food, who kicked them off their plantation when they got sick. And if these were the best people, and we couldn't make it work with them, I lost faith in that system.

RK: So at some point you just stopped going, you didn't see education as really a viable way of getting out of here?

LD: No, I really didn't. I only saw education, let me tell you when I embraced education, was after I had married, had six kids, had been kicked off a plantation. Because I got married when I was seventeen to someone who had a lot more material things than I did. They had a car, nice furniture, instead of a shotgun house, they had a big four-room house. They had nice clothes. All of the members of the family had come from people who lived in Mound Bayou, and Mound Bayou was a status symbol for black folks. It was the mecca. And so I really thought that that was my ticket out of the plantation system and poverty. And really got married, suffered my second major disappointment in
life. I found out that it wasn't a magical place. I started having babies and never got off the plantation. I experienced deprivation in a different form than I had ever had at home, because there was hunger. My husband didn't hunt, didn't fish, didn't pick berries. He drank. The disappointment was just overwhelming. I started having babies and had them quickly and close together. I was sicker than I ever knew people could ever be! And became quite miserable. I picked cotton, chopped cotton. I worked incredibly long hours, and again, had very little at the end of the year to show for it. Got kicked off the plantation by an owner who wasn't cruel, but who had a small operation to start with, and who had bought himself a mechanical cotton picker and a combine, and who really had no need for a family. He had 80 or 100 acres and he just didn't need anybody. He worked himself. His son worked with him, and they didn't need the expense of a family. So we were asked to leave. We moved to Shelby, Mississippi, population about 2800 during that time, and assumed I would be able to go out and get a job. And ran face to face with the limitations of a high school drop-out. I couldn't do anything. If you have a town full of people trying to be domestics for white women, and you can't teach -- I didn't have a nursing degree or a teaching degree. There was nothing I could do. I remember having everybody look for a job for me because I really needed to work. We were living in a house that had been condemned. My husband was making $36.00 a week. We had five kids and I was pregnant. So we desperately.

LD: All the people who worked in banks, stores. The two plants in town were white. I mean, there just weren't any jobs for blacks, and that was understood. They wouldn't hire you. Baxter was here in Cleveland, but it didn't hire anybody but whites. There was one black person working as a janitor. No blacks were hired in any of the plants in the area. So there was nothing to do but try to find work keeping people's children, clearing up their houses, doing something like that. I went to everybody that was working for white folks and asked them to ask around if anybody needed anybody. I could do housework and take care of babies. I was very good at that. I remember Lula Mae McClain found a job for me with the Lamendorfs, and she came by and told me to get ready to go for the interview. So I got ready. The Lamendorfs were big people in Shelby. They owned the best dry goods store with the best clothes that all of the rich people shopped at, and all of the well-to-do blacks like school teachers and folks shopped at. They had a big house over in the white section of town. So I put on my best clothes and dressed up and went up for my interview with Lula Mae. They had asked Lula Mae a lot of questions about my background, like had I gone to high school, and could I read and write well, all of these things. So I was really excited because I was sure that if they
wanted to know all of that they wanted me to work in the store. Oh, good Lord, my feet couldn't hardly contain themselves as I rushed up to that store that morning for the interview. They asked me all kinds of questions about character, what kind of person you were and all that, which I thought was appropriate. Then they asked me questions that tested my academic ability, which I just was convinced was part of getting you ready for the store. And then they became very clear that they only wanted to know all of these things because they wanted a maid who could take business calls at the house, and who could keep good messages for them. So although I was a little bit disappointed, it was okay. There was still a job. Then we got into my hours.

This job paid $19.00 per week, which was four dollars higher than the average that people were paying. So I was excited about that. But Mrs. Lamendorf wanted me to work seven days a week. I said, "Well, no, I have children. I think I should spend Sunday with them." And really we had so few things that we did together, Sunday School was one of the things that we always did together. We always got up and went to Sunday School together, and I couldn't imagine not being there to do that, really. So Mr. Lamendorf seemed to have been impressed with that. There was more evidence of character. So he said, "Okay." And I explained it to him, that I really took the kids to Sunday School. I didn't send them, and I would like not to have to work on Sunday morning. He was agreeable. He said okay. He said, "What you can do then is you can fix something for us on Saturday when you're there." And right there before me and Lula Mae, this couple got into an argument about my hours. She said, "Oh no, you know that's not right. She has to come." He said, "Oh, we can take care of ourselves one day." "Oh no, we can't. She has to come in." And with us standing there being totally flabbergasted, they argued back and forth. And although I needed that job desperately, I mean, I really needed it desperately, I had to make a decision, standing there watching them argue, that I couldn't take the job. And I couldn't take the job because we all knew enough about households in the South, that you had to go into a household where the man and wife were together, or you would get caught in the middle, and it could turn nasty. There were rumors when I was growing up of white women who had killed black women in these kinds of situations. So I really was afraid to take the job, understanding that there was conflict even before I became hired. The other thing that was very unsettling to Lula Mae and myself was that our image of white folks was that they never conducted themselves in the presence of black folks at the level of argument. That also was unsettling, because you could also get into trouble with people who didn't have character or who weren't quality people. I mean, people who had to do domestic work tried to work for people who were quality people, people who had class and who understood how to behave and conduct themselves. So I said no to the job, and worried over whether I'd made the right decision, worried about whether I was denying food and health care to children, but feeling very much like I had no choice. That this really wasn't a job that I could afford to take. And it turned out that it probably was the best
decision I made, and it was a guts decision. It certainly wasn't made from structural analysis or anything else [laughter]. It was just that, God, I'm going to be in the middle of these people, and I'm going to get hurt or probably get seriously damaged by this, and just gave it up. I never got a job as a domestic behind that. I went back to catching the truck and going to the field and chopping cotton. That was in '64 or early '65. Later on, the civil rights movement came to Shelby, Mississippi, and I became preoccupied with that. I learned along the way how to work the system. We didn't have food stamps at that period, but there were surplus commodities that I signed up for. So that supplemented our food supply. Chopping cotton whenever I was able gave us a little extra money. I became an expert, again, at managing the books, you know, in terms of taking twenty dollars, each week, which was what I got from my husband's wages, and paying all our bills, by spreading them out, paying the rent, which was ten dollars, one week, and the next week paying the utilities, which was never more then twenty dollars. Those were the good old days [laughter]. Making sure that we feed the family, very poor fare, but feed them three meals a day. When the civil rights movement really spread out, I became a volunteer with COFO, and as such received ten dollars or fifteen dollars a week stipend for community work. So we did a lot of voter registration, and the fifteen dollars also helped with some of the household things that we had to have. From that, the Johnson's poverty programs came to town, and that really freed a lot of black folks and poor whites from a stranglehold economy that just didn't let you live, or barely let you live. We went to work for wages that we never dreamed you could earn in Mississippi, and people were freed for the first time from a system that really controlled you through the threat of starvation. I mean, people put up with a lot of stuff on the plantation because you had a place to live. They gave you a shack to live in. They advanced you money, and they really bought your soul. You know, you just think about all the folks who endured mistreatment, who endured injustices, who endured brutality, to avoid having their wives and children put in the street. And we saw the horror that could happen to you when you didn't belong to a white man. That was what we saw with the Andrews' people. Everybody got kicked off that plantation, and every plantation was alerted not to hire them. So they not only could not work in any of the plants in town, they couldn't go to another plantation and go to work there. And it didn't matter if they had been leaders in the strike or if they had just decided, okay, we're getting off too. It was a horrible situation. The damage of that, some of those folks have never overcome. We didn't have psychological services and stuff at that time anyway, but they've never overcome that, because it was a kind of shunning that took place. It was some terrible times, but people learned and eagerly volunteered to get out of that system.

RK: What was this early period of the civil rights movement like? What was it like going around doing voter registration? Was that an enervating moment or experience for you?

LD: Yes. You know, the only other time I had that kind of
high, for lack of a better term, was that year that I was keeping books to show Mr. Carl that we knew what he was doing, and we were going to break up this nonsense of taking all our money. You know, it was bigger than Mr. Carl. I mean, I had latched on to what was wrong with the whole plantation system, and soon as we made it work with Mr. Carl, it was going to work for everybody else. Magically, it was going to be repeated. And the civil rights movement was an excitement. It was all of those stories that my mother had read to us across the years from the Chicago Defender and the Pittsburgh Courier. It was making up to Emmett Till for the helplessness that we all had felt for not being able to save him from that mob crew. It was making up to Willis for having to leave town and be scared to death for the rest of his life. It was for all of the atrocities, the lynchings, and the night riders, and all of the stuff that had been going on. It was our way of saying, "Okay, we're going to try to avenge all of this stuff that's been going down across the years." And while you may not have thought about it consciously, you know, it wasn't like it was a conscious thought in your head that, okay, this is for Emmett Till or this is for Mack Charles Parker. That wasn't going on in your head, but it was the same feeling that the folks exhibited when they would gather in my folks' house to listen to Jackie Robinson on the radio or to listen to Joe Louis whip somebody at night at the fights. I mean, we always had a radio with those long batteries, and the folks would sit around and listen to it and cheer and be happy and really be free for a little moment, because Jackie had really made it possible for them or Joe Louis had really made it possible for them. And I felt an excitement that somehow what we were doing, and the magic of the vote, was going to eradicate all of the inequities that we were experiencing. Somehow, the magic of the vote was going to make people pay us better wages for our labor. It was going to make us be able to not be fearful of policemen when we saw them.

It was going to make mob crews disappear, you know, the Klan disappear. It was going to make the Lambadors not fight about how many days I would work. It was all of those things, and it was an exhilarating, powerful thing. You walked on to somebody's plantation, and you said to the owner, "My name is L.C. Dorsey. I'm with COFO, and I'm here to register any of your people who want to register. Do you have any objection?" You dared them to have any objection. You know, you never said it, but you dared them to. Or you went in and you didn't bother to go talk to the owner of the plantation. You went to the peoples' houses and said, "I've come to take you to register to vote, and here's why you should register to vote. Here's why you should be concerned about this. These are the things that we can correct and change." And to have people, based on you telling them that, to get up from where they were sitting, and get in the car with you, and go off to a fate unknown to do this. And then one day, I had my comeuppance on that, too. I was at some plantation up between Alligator and Duncan. I don't remember the man. He was out there working on a tractor with one of the equipment operators, and I went up. I was working with the Johnson boy from Cleveland. We were working under Owen Brooks who had dropped us
off. We're out in this cotton field some place without even a way to get out. I told the man who I was, and what I was there for, and asked him if he had any objections to me going around to the tenants and talking to them. He told me, "Nah, you can take them all to vote." I thought, ah, this is a piece of cake, because this was a tough guy, and everybody had warned us about him. I said this is a piece of cake. So I was walked on off to go to the first house, and he said, "Oh, by the way, now, when you finish with them registering to vote, don't bring them back here. Take them to your plantation." Well, I felt like I'd been hit in the stomach with a fist, and it was not anything that had been in any of workshops we'd been in. We were prepared for him to hit me, and I knew exactly what to do. To spit on me, I knew exactly what to do with that. We were prepared for the possibility for him to pull a gun and even shoot me. We left home with the understanding that it may have been the last time we saw our children, our families, or anything else. And that was heady stuff. It just emboldened us to do what we did. I had not been prepared for the guy who cooperated, who said, "Okay, take them, but don't bring them back there." I had to deal with what do you do, and what is your responsibility with this?" And again, I had to make a quick choice without adequate preparation and on my feet. I didn't like the choice I made. I thought about all the things that could happen. Tent City had not gone well, the Andrews' people, and we all knew that. I lived in a house that was condemned by the City of Shelby. I couldn't bring anybody home. We had three rooms that we were living in, three rooms and a kitchen. I didn't know of any other facility where we could take these folks. Mount Beulah had taken in some people, but that was so far away. And here we were in this cotton field with no car even. So I went back to the people who we had talked to already on the plantation, talked to Curtis Johnson, who was with me, and I told them what the man had said.

I apologized to the people on that plantation, and told them that I couldn't take the responsibility for them not having a place to come back to. And I was sick for the rest of that week because I felt I had let the people down. I'd psyched them up, gotten them ready, and walked out and left them. I encouraged the people, on their own, to go down to the courthouse and register. Later on, several weeks later, I ran into one of the people who had been on the plantation, who called me aside to tell me that they had done just that. They'd all gotten together and gone down to the courthouse in different cars and at different times, and all of them had registered. I felt better. I didn't know enough about organization and empowerment to realize that that was my most successful encounter. That I had simply given information, and they'd made the decisions on their own. Their decision was much better than the one we had been prepared to make. I learned all that later, but at the time I felt relieved that my contribution to their situation had been negative, and that I'd been able to do anything about it. But later on, looking back over all of the people that I contacted and all the folks we carried off plantations to go register, I really feel that that was the most significant and successful
voter registration day I had in that whole period of time.

[Interruption]

NB: '64-'65?

LD: Yeah, '64-'65.

NB: So you had six kids at this point?

LD: At that point I had six kids. The oldest was born in '56, so what is that, eight? So they're from infants to, Chip wasn't born 'till '65, my youngest one. So they're pre-birth to eight, I think. They were very young.

RK: That, in itself, was a full-time job.

LD: Oh, it was, it was. They were dragged around to a lot of meetings. I think it rubbed off on them. The older ones are all politically active. Another friend of mine who's a movement person said, "We've raised a generation of humanists." Many of them aren't activists, but they understand the difference and political structures in life.

RK: You mentioned that quickly after the civil rights movement came to Mississippi, the War on Poverty was started too, and federal money and intervention and help came. Maybe you could just talk a little bit about how you first kind of confronted that or saw that and some of the jobs—there were better jobs for people. Talk a little bit about what those were and what that meant.

LD: One of the things that the Mississippi Delta, and I guess the Black Belt all up and down the United States, had attempted to do was control the black population. We were always the majority of the population. And they'd used several structures to do that very effectively. One was just brute force. If somebody got out of their place, you were immediately dealt with, and you were dealt with visibly and in a way that sort of put fear into the hearts of other people. One of my earliest memories is this fear of black people discussing white people in whispers, you know. Of worrying that somebody was eavesdropping outside of the houses at night to see if they were talking about white people. Of black folks running away, just like slaves, running away from plantations in the middle of the night with nobody knowing where they went and how they got away.

So you had this sense of fear early on. Fear was one of the things that people used to keep black people in control.

The other thing that people used to keep people in control was the economic system. Black people were totally dependent on white people for everything that had to do with their survival. You bought it from the commissary or you got it from the office or something. It was just how you got things. Everything that you needed from a match to a doctor, you had to go through these people to get. And they had the power to give it to you or to deny it. They had the power even to make sure you didn't get it any place else. So folk were totally controlled by these two ventures. Anybody who attempted to stand up to this system was dealt with swiftly. For instance, if I lived on Mr. Bob's plantation, and Mr. Bob was paying two dollars a day for wages, and I wanted to go to work on Mr. Neil's plantation who was paying three dollars a day. Mr. Bob could actually punish me by taking me up and physically whipping me or making me leave the
plantation. And because Mr. Neil understood the need to support this nonsense, you couldn't go to work for Mr. Neil's plantation. It was like you were really blacklisted between both people. And if Mr. Neil had been letting you work, after he realized that Mr. Bob was upset about it, you couldn't work there any more. So you family was faced with the possibility of starving to death.

Later on, when people started mumbling about civil rights and human rights and political rights after the Montgomery activity, the successful Montgomery bus boycott and related activities, there was a conscious move by white landowners to clamp down. One of the things that they did was actually put in place those things that would result in people being staved to death. For instance, after November when most of the cotton was harvested, people lived on money they borrowed from the plantation owners until March when they got furnishes. You never got enough, because money was allocated to you by family size, and you never really got enough. You may not have only gotten fifty dollars or a hundred dollars to take you from November to March. And what people usually did was bought up all of the meal, flour, lard, sugar, coffee that they could with that money. Bought kerosene and stuff. And then they hustled, you know. If there was some cotton left in the field, you picked that on dry days and cold days and sold it. Or you picked wild greens, or they had turnip patches that the good boss people planted for folk, and you hunted rabbits. And you picked up here in Bolivar County and other places, you picked up pecans from the levy and sold them. That'd help you buy salt meat; it'd help you buy medicine; it'd help you buy other things you need. We watched them fence off the levy and put trespassing signs up so you couldn't do that. And when people went over the fences and went under the fences, they were actually arrested and put in jail. Now, you have to understand that the levy is federally owned property. It doesn't belong to any individual farmers or anybody else, but that was the things they did.

 Commodities was the first effort that they had to try to keep you from starving to death. You had to go through a lot of changes to get that. You had to actually, on some plantations, be approved by the owner of the plantations to go into town, the welfare department distributed them, and get the commodities. And you didn't get very much, but every little bit was a big help. And there were stories that were told during this era, that butter had been allocated to give to families, and before the white people who were passing out the commodity would give butter to them, they'd bury it. I mean, they just threw it in the city dump and buried it. The commodities help people eat better, but it just really staved off starvation and tightened control on folk. The civil rights groups that came to town really started looking at ways to break that strangle hold, and they started bringing in food. You saw the film and the books of pictures of Dick Gregory with truckloads of food and stuff in areas. Church groups up north sent down tons of food, so that people really had a way to live.

The most significant organized program that helped break that economic stranglehold on people was the CDGM Project. It
was Operation Headstart, where children were put in programs that gave them food, education, and health care, and their mamas was hired to take care of them, to teach them, to be teaching assistants. It gave the women from the plantations and from these families an independent income that had nothing to do with the plantation, and that couldn't be controlled by the plantation, that couldn't be controlled by the powers that be in the political arenas in Mississippi and other southern states. In their wisdom, the people who shaped the program, allowed it to come into the state if it came through colleges. Independent colleges in some of the southern states were the grant recipients for these programs. The organized plantation people did not take this sitting down. They fought against it. They used people that we used to call "Uncle Toms"-- we don't do that anymore--to try to block it in the black communities. Churches where the classes were held were bombed. But people recognized that this was an opportunity to feed their families, to have health care for their families, and to begin to break that stranglehold. I don't know if it was ever perceived by large groups of people at any single time as a mechanism breaking the economic stranglehold, but certainly people understood the direct benefit of their family by having a job that wasn't totally dependent on the plantation owner.

Other programs came in about the same time, health care programs, that hired people. Community action programs that provided jobs in other areas for people who previously had been unable to be employed. People learned skills because many of the jobs had provisions in them where folk were taught paraprofessional skills, and became employable. They weren't high school dropouts standing up at Lambadors, trying to convince them that they could do a job.

NB: I believe it was in 1966 that you began as a Headstart teacher?

LD: That's right.

NB: How did that, you've talked about that in general, in your own sort of personal experience, how did that kind of further your sense of mission and perhaps...?

LD: Survival [laughter]. I had gotten involved in some volunteer work with the CDGM movement. We'd gone to workshops and training programs, but I was not, because of some of the political activities that I had been involved in in my local community, there was a certain amount of fear on the part of people who were in charge of the program locally that I would bring to the program if I was hired, -- problems. That because of my controversy and my role in voter registration and challenging white folks and leading boycotts that somehow they might suffer fire bombings. They may not even get the funds if I was hired. So I wasn't hired with the group that all the other activists were hired for in Mississippi. Robert Gray, really, when he was director of program, gave me a chance to work in opposition to some of the less progressive black folks who had been involved in what became known as the white folks Headstart. They also didn't want me [laughter] in the program. I saw the program, not as an opportunity to further any political agendas,
I didn't see it as an opportunity to impact the next generation of leadership. I really saw the Headstart program and my employment in it as a personal opportunity to earn a living for my kids and myself. In 1966, when I went to work for Headstart, I had six children, and I was very concerned that they have an education and not live the life I had lived after marrying, because I really didn't think much was wrong with my life [laughter] before that. But I didn't want them to wind up being cotton choppers and cotton pickers. I felt that the opportunity for them to even do that was less, and that they had to be able to take care of themselves. So going to work for Headstart represented for me an opportunity to be employed. We had been in town for three years. It had been a rough three years. It was the first time, in fact, in 1965, where I had been totally without food. I had one horrible, nightmarish night where we cooked the last food at noon. It was enough food at noon for everybody to get enough to eat, and we went to bed that night hungry. My husband did not come home with his paycheck. We had no money and no food in the house, and it was a situation where I kept thinking he would be in because he knew we didn't have any food, and it became too late to go to any neighbor's house, knocking on the door, saying, "Do you have any food?" And I didn't ever want that to happen again. So Headstart offered an opportunity for me never to have to subject the children to that. And you can't appreciate how horrible that is unless you've lived through it. It's one thing to be hungry yourself. It is an entirely different thing to know that your children are hungry, and to put them to bed knowing they're hungry, and listen to them cry themselves to sleep. It is even more devastating, and it hurts even to talk about it now, to have the older children, who are only ten or so, be just as hungry but try not to let you hear them cry. That is something that helps you understand why women become prostitutes, why people rob and break in stores, and why they take what they want to deal with this. It's most horrible. I didn't ever want to have to live through that again, and Headstart represented for me, more than any movement goals, an opportunity not to ever have to hear a hungry child crying in my bed at night.

I went to work there, and I learned a lot about the organized workplace. A Headstart classroom was quite different than the plantation. Teaching in a classroom had a certain amount of power, that I'd never envisioned, that you never perceived being a student. And you could impact on the people in that classroom in a very positive way. And I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the dynamics. I enjoyed the interaction, but more importantly I enjoyed the learning experience, because we were being taught also. They had teachers, and they had consultants, and they brought in people. And we were learning, and it was a whole new world. I read all the stuff they brought as voraciously as I had read the Freedom School material, because it opened up another whole world, that being in the plantation, and the limitations of the educational experiences that the plantation had offered, had denied us. And I realized that there was a hunger there that I hadn't recognized that was akin to this
whole business of keeping records in that Blueback notebook when I was thirteen. And that was the excitement about that whole business. I was on that Headstart from '66 until the end of December of '67. At that time, the Tufts-Delta Health Center had opened, and it was really a fascinating program. I had been recruited by John Hatch who was director of Community Health Action, together with other community activists to do workshops as part of the training program for their staff, and that was heady stuff. Here you were teaching people how to make the system work for them, how to go to the Welfare Department with records and demand your rights, how to go to elected officials and get things done in your community. It was fascinating to see a program that embodied, in a much more compelling way than Operation Headstart had, all of the things that we'd talked about in the civil rights movement, of empowering people to take control of their communities. This health program had organized classes to teach people. This health program had brought in people like myself and Owen Brooks to show people how to do things politically. This health program was talking about water systems and sanitary outdoor toilets, which we later learned was environmental health concerns. This health program was talking about building houses for people. And if you've ever lived in a plantation house with holes in the roof that you have to set pans and buckets under when it rains, with cracks in the walls that you had to stuff cotton and paper in to keep out the cold on winter days, then you can really appreciate some group from up north, where we understood the freedom was anyway, coming in, talking about helping to do all of these things. I debated, within myself, if I wanted to come to work for this organization or if I should stay with Headstart, because most people felt that Headstart was going to be around for a long time. We weren't sure about this group from up North. If they were going to be here, or if it was going to be like so many of programs during that time, they come in and was out. I talked again to Robert Gray, who I respected, who was educated, but who also cared about the community and was approachable. He was director of the Headstart program. I asked him if he thought this program was going to be here, told him I was interested in working for them, and got his opinion. He told me he thought with the money they were putting into buildings and what they were doing, that they would be here, and encouraged me to go for it. I came to work in 1967 under John Hatch, who was chairman of Community Health Action, but whose program included training and environmental health components, social work, and several other areas. I went to work in a training department under Danny Mitchell. I got a chance to be paid to all the stuff I learned to do through the civil rights movement, of not only training people like the nurses' assistants and environmental assistants and all those folks, with how to access institutions and make referrals and do all that stuff, but also how to help people get together in their communities to address issues, local issues, that collectively they could do something about, and individually they would not be able to do as much about. You really felt like it was a continuation of the civil rights movement, in the sense that in a
different way you were still building on that foundation that had been laid down. You was adding layers of power and abilities in specific areas. This is what you do in Symonds, Mississippi to get water, and this is what you do up in Roundlake to bring a recreation center to the community for the kids, and this is what I did in Shelby, Mississippi, at the Contact Center for kids, you know, to have a place to have a party or to dance and do stuff, and this is what you do with parents who are having problems with their kids. You had a sense that you were continuing with the civil rights movement in this work.

RK: You knew at that time, you had that sense?
LD: Oh yes.
RK: You felt very strongly?
LD: I felt very strongly, and I felt that that was the difference between what we were doing here than what was happening in Headstart. I felt there was a place for Headstart, but I really felt that it wasn't making the kind of changes that this place had the potential to make. And I didn't know at the time that all the leadership of this place had themselves been activists in the civil rights movement. John had been in the civil rights movement. Jack had been in the civil rights movement. Bob Smith out of Jackson, who had really been one of the people who helped force folks to come and address some of the issues of health care, had been picketing and involved in getting this together.

RK: Was frustration part of this, the frustration with the kind of limitations of, say, just voting? I mean, did you have some sense that wasn't, I mean, obviously you had the sense that wasn't enough, but was there...

LD: I don't think I had a sense of frustration that was as clearly defined then. I think that I was on a growth spurt, a personal growth spurt. I don't know how to say this without it sounding cocky, but I think I quickly outgrew Headstart. This person who had been awakened by the civil rights movement needed something else, needed that challenge, needed that excitement, needed that sense of still challenging the system, and I don't think it was being met in Headstart. I mean, I felt good personally when I had this little boy who had not spoken, was five years old, Michael Bobo, who hadn't talked, and who I worked with personally every day to try to get him to say something. And when he was with me one day and said, "Look at that big, old dog." I mean, I just almost went right on up in the sky. But I don't think it was enough. I really didn't have the sense that what we were doing was as important as what we later did when we organized the farm coop, when I was out on plantations again with Willie May Osborne and Bernice Trigg, and we were knocking on doors. This time, not to tell people about registering to vote because everybody was, but to say, "Hey, listen, there's a new program in town that's offering health care to people, and they've got social workers and doctors and nurses. And they're getting food for people, and they're taking care of your children. And you need to come on in and talk to them." It may have been that I was more comfortable doing that than I was teaching, I don't know. But I think that I just really outgrew
the challenge of Headstart quickly, and had to move on.

RK: Well, I think that is important, this kind of personal
development, and your relationship to the various organizations
and things that they're doing. We're finding that with some
other people, too, that once you unleash people like yourself,
it's pretty hard to keep them under control or contained.

LD: That's right.

RK: Your ambitions had been. . . .

LD: Awakened [laughter]. Discovered.

RK: Yeah. In your case, there are no boundaries. You just
keep going and going and going. It's important, it seems to me,
that organizations know how to respond to people like that.
Always keep giving them those opportunities. Don't put them in
situations where they don't have the chance to really grow.

LD: That's right. In the private sector, they know how to
do that very well, but we really haven't understood that as well
in social service type organizations or non-profit organizations.

We really haven't capitalized on that as well, because we
haven't recognized it. And quite frequently, the people don't
recognize it themselves. I did not understand, at all, in '67
why I wanted to leave Headstart. I mean, all of the things that
I now understand about it just wasn't there. I just felt that
what they were doing here would probably result in more change
than what was happening in Headstart. My own relationship and my
own contribution to that wasn't as clearly defined. It just
wasn't, because I hadn't grown enough to catch up with what was
happening to me or to understand all the dynamics of change that
I was involved in. You tend to think about these experiences and
things as things that you do without understanding the impact
that the things have on you. I understood that I was fascinated
with the things that I learned in the movement, and with the
things I saw. You don't see a Fannie Lou Hamer, and you don't
talk to her, and you don't have her explain things to you,
without being forever changed in terms of the charisma of the
woman, the depth of her. You don't live with an Owen Brooks and
listen to his analysis of events that you just see without
understanding, without having that have an impact on you. And
both of them had the ability, Fannie Lou Hamer and Owen Brooks,
in different ways had the ability to, at the same time, make you
believe that you could go get the moon and bring it back, and
make you believe that you had a responsibility to go get it and
bring it back, without any of the guilt if you didn't get it. I
mean, I don't know how to tell you how they did that, but they
had the ability to do that. Anzie Moore and people like that,
who had been out there for a long time, before the civil rights
movement, trying to raise consciousness and being successful in
doing it to a large extent, all those people impacted what you
became, without you really understanding what you were. Because
you thought you were doing things, and really, I'm sure they
understood that when they set these things up, it wasn't about
what you would be doing, it was about what they would be doing to
you and what these processes would make of you. You don't see
all of that, and perhaps it's very good that you don't. Because
if you start out with a bunch of people who are new to the whole
process, if they understood everything that was involved, they would not only see the positive but they would also see the negatives. And they wouldn't rush out to be killed every morning, thinking that was heady stuff. They would stay home [laughter].

RK: Right.
LD: They would stay home. Wait for John to do it. **
END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B
stuff." It was a nuisance and a hassle to them, and they didn't want them to have it. So they tried to do everything they could to discourage people from pursuing it. They got it anyway. They were hauling water from Rosedale, so why couldn't they continue to do that? Any time you try to make change, of course, you always have problems like that, but it was very crazy. And I thought that that was part of their problem. They had worked and perfected the Save the Children, and worked and perfected their skill in overseas programs, and just hadn't quite figured out how you do this in America. What do you do with people in the United States? What do you do with kids who are malnourished in the United States and how do you avoid the political consequences of exposing child health problems or exposing dysentery from contaminated water, children being poisoned by pesticides. And I haven't figured out if they have a political agenda, or whether they just.

NB: I don't think they've learned to work with the different kinds of politics that child survival, child health ( ). They haven't looked at very fully the human rights thing.

LD: That's right. That's right. I don't know where they were with the children's summit the other year, too, because I haven't seen anything in that literature.

NB: They were there behind ( ). They were supportive but not actively supportive. We worked in the Middle East, for example, and they backed off on a report that talked about the rights of Palestinian children. They thought that was real political and didn't want to support it, though it was factual and accurate, because of the donor. So they're not real...

LD: Well, we've taken a position that they either get real [laughter], or we will do whatever we can.

NB: ( )

LD: Yeah. They either will get real, or we will just do whatever we can with the kids that we have. We have a very selfish interest in working with the kids, and it has to do with trying to save some of them, of course, but more importantly, trying to develop leadership. To make sure that we've invested in people who understand the broad issues and who are preparing themselves to take these roles, to become the superintendents of education, the educators, the doctors, the director of the Delta Health Center, the historians recording what's going on, and whatever else. We want them to understand that they can do that, and our commitment is to try to help them do that, and providing recreation and health services and dental services is all part of the preparation. To make sure they're well, but the real thing is to understand the political, social, and economic structures, and how you overcome if they are barriers or how you seize control of or utilize to get to that point of leadership development. And if they're just going to bog us down with pieces of paper that say how much of your time was spent doing this and doing that and stuff like that, we're going to have to leave them alone and move on, you know [laughter].

RK: Get real or get out.
LD: Yeah, you have to do that.

NB: We had to do the same thing with the kids. They had to understand the political origins of the war that they were sort of in. That was part of the treatment, part of the get better stuff. They got a little wishy-washy on that, and I had to

LD: Well, usually with a new person you can get some things done, so that you can do that.

RK: One of the things we're trying to do in talking with different people is get some sense of where people's commitment to these issues came from, and usually tracing that back to someone's childhood and family and their kind of upbringing is one place to start. It's not true for everybody, but I thought maybe you could just talk a little bit about your family, about growing up. I know you've written about it some. That would be helpful to us.

LD: Okay.

RK: Could you talk a little bit about your family and the things that you remember and some sense of how you felt about the world and things as a child, too?

LD: Sure. As long as you understand that I really didn't know anything was wrong with the world until I became an adult [laughter]. Okay, no, I can do that. Let me know when you're ready.

RK: We're ready.

LD: I grew up in the plantation system of the Mississippi Delta, and really for a long time I thought everybody was on plantations. I really didn't have a sense of poverty, in the sense that I understand it as an adult, because everybody I knew and everybody I visited and everybody I went to school and played with, lived in the same conditions. We all lived in houses on the plantation. They were all more or less the same kind of houses. Nobody I knew as a child owned their house or owned land even, that lived on the plantation. There were a few people in the little towns who owned houses, but their houses were very similar to the ones we had on the plantation, shotgun, three room houses. We had a sense of real poor people, because they were the ones who didn't have gardens, who often didn't have clothes to wear, whose mothers didn't sew or make dresses from the feedsacks like our mothers did or like some mothers did. We also had a sense of real poor people as those people who didn't quite know how to take care of themselves, who didn't plan for the winter, who didn't cut wood, didn't work hard and diligent. That was, in my opinion, the poor people, but they were included in the network of support on the plantation. Everybody always planted some extra vegetables, saved the extra rabbits that they caught, for those families. They were the people who didn't quite get it together.

I had a happy childhood. I was sick a lot. Had asthma. Had pneumonia a couple of times before I was ten years old. We were fortunate enough to live on a plantation where the owner believed in having or providing a doctor for the tenants. So we had health care. If fact, my birth was attended by both a midwife, which was the general OB/GYN services for people in that
area, both white and black, and a doctor. Dr. Robey actually delivered me. My mother was weak and tired and thirty-eight years old when I was born, and I had a difficult time coming into this world. So he was called and actually made the delivery. That was unusual in the Mississippi Delta but the Walkers, Ben Walker, was an unusual man who really did not believe in all of the nonsense that some of the other plantation owners professed.

This was later born out in the '60s with the civil rights movement when the people struck on Andrews plantation. They were blacklisted. They were not allowed to work in the place, and they couldn't get water from any place for the tents that they pitched. Ben Walker was one of the farmers in the area who told them that they could get water from his place as often as they wanted. Well, that was where I spent the first eight years of my life, on that plantation.

My father was a very industrious person, my step-father rather, who fished, hunted, made his own boat to do this in. He caned chairs for people. He repaired shoes. He had his own equipment to do shoe repair. He and my mother made baskets from the bark of trees, just like they used for the rebottoming of chairs. They picked fruit when the blackberry season came. He and my mother spent days picking berries. Some they sold; others she canned for the winter and made jelly. They did the same thing with muscadines in the fall of the year. So we always had enough food. There was always food in the house, I never knew hunger in the sense that people talk about. Fresh fruit was either whatever they picked or we got a lot of it at Christmas time, but that was it. There was not a lot of clothing. My mother sewed and you could buy material for 15 or 20 cent a yard.

Then, at that time also, flour and chops for the chicken came in print sacks. So we had a lot of print dresses made from those feed sacks and flour sacks. And it wasn't a source of embarrassment. Everybody else had pretty much the same thing, and the kids who didn't, you just sort of looked at them and knew they were special and lucky, but there wasn't the kind of competition that you see now with kids who have Reeboks and kids who don't have Reeboks or whatever, Air Jordan, of whatever the latest fad is. It wasn't that kind of stuff or that kind of yearning and resentment and longing. We just didn't have it.

I grew up in a house where there were not a lot of books. My father could not read and write. He'd never had the opportunity to go to school. My mother had gone to school in Alabama where her people were land owners. She was living with aunts and uncles because her parents had separated, and her mother had gone off to become a missionary in Liberia. So she went to school through the third grade, but she could read and write very well, do math. I remember weekends, spending entire weekends or most of the weekend, with my mother reading to us from the Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago Defender. My father was anxious and interested in knowing what was happening to blacks in other parts of the country, and you could always buy these newspapers at the black barber shops or the beautician shops. So we always knew what was happening in the rest of the world, and I had this fantastic dream of going to Chicago.
Everybody on every plantation we lived on had somebody in Chicago or Milwaukee. And every summer by the time I was in high school, every summer when school was out everybody caught the Greyhounds and Trailway buses and went to Chicago for the summer, and they worked. They came back, and they had fancy clothes, and they had money, and they looked good. I really felt that we were deprived in the sense that we had no relatives in Chicago.

So we spent our summer chopping cotton and carrying water. I started work when I was eight years old on the Walker's plantation. I was at the house with my younger sister, and Mr. Walker came by, one of the sons, who I think was Benjamin, came by and saw me there and went to the field where my mother was chopping, and asked if I could carry water for them, because there was nobody in the field but women, and they would have had to stop to get water. She was, of course, agreeable to that. It pleased her. There was extra money coming to the house. So at eight I became a wage earner, making $1.25 a day. And the women liked the fact that I didn't dawdle. I pumped the water off until it was real cold in this eight-pound lard bucket, and I walked fast so it wouldn't get warm on the way. As soon as I got back to the house, I started the whole process all over again. And I felt really great because the women who were chopping cotton weren't making but $2.50 a day. See, I was making almost as much money as a full-grown woman. I think that really had a positive impact on my development in terms of understanding the relationship between work and reward, and the good feelings you had knowing that you were contributing to something, the praise from the women who I was bringing water to. It sort of set the tone for having a positive relationship with work.

RK: Did you get to spend, did you get to keep a little bit of that?

LD: Well, listen, just a little bit. I remember being very disappointed because I'd made up my list of all the things I was going to buy with the money. Get paid on Saturday afternoon. And I didn't even get the money. The money was given to my mother, who gave me a quarter. And I remember being so frustrated. I mean, what could I do with a quarter? I had planned for all kinds of fantastic things with this money. There weren't a lot of things you could do on the plantation, but of course, you could buy four or five Baby Ruth candy bars and ice cream and Coca Cola and Nehi root beers and all of the other stuff. And none of that happened, of course. And later on, when I got over being mad with just having 25 cents, you really could buy a lot of stuff with 25 cent at that time. So that was what happened with the money. It went to support the family's other needs that I wasn't old enough, at eight years old, to appreciate or to deal with.

RK: We were talking. . . .

MARTIN: I'm sorry. I just want to say one thing. You remember last time when Steve dubbed your feedback. It doesn't bother me, but if someone ever is trying to edit this, they're going to wonder where the. . . .

RK: I'm trying not to do that.

MARTIN: And if you'll give me a half second, I'll make an
adjustment here and I promise I won't want to make any more.

LD: What is the feedback you're doing?
RK: Well, when I say hm-hm, you know ( ). These microphones are so sensitive, they pick all that up. When they get ready to do a television documentary, they. . . .
LD: It's so good to help you keep focused. I mean, to help the speaker keep focused.
RK: I know. It's hard to do it with your eyes.
LD: Yes. And it's hard to imagine--I guess actors do this all the time--that you're talking to somebody if you're sitting there like a mannikin [laughter].

[Interruption]
RK: One of the things we were talking about as we were driving down is how the culture today, with television and all this, how it affects people in poverty. How you see all the wealth and opulence of some people. What kind of impact do you think that has on children growing up, say, in the Delta today? How that differs from the world that you grew up in?
LD: I think the impact of television on our children is very devastating, compared to listening to the radio or the Grand Ole Opry when I was eight, nine, ten, thirteen years old, or WDIA, or looking at the pictures in the Chicago Defender or the Pittsburgh Courier, or the occasional Look magazine that had pictures of black folks. During my era, those stories and those images of people with a better life became symbols of hope and goals to achieve. You understood very clearly from those images that came to us, via the radio, whether it was Joe Louis beating up on somebody or Jackie Robinson's breakthrough or whatever other sensational activity that was happening, that the conditions that we lived under in Mississippi, as black people in a plantation system and in these towns, was not universal. And that if you could get out of here to those places, your life would be different. And there was very clearly a difference. We understood early on, number one, our place. Now, even as a child, my earliest remembrance of encounters with white people, that whole business of our places in relationship to white folks, the posturing, the behavior, the subservience was ingrained, and people did it deliberately, parents did it deliberately, because it was also felt that your life depended on understanding those relationships. The images that came to us via the newspapers and the radio, via people coming back to visit, indicated that our place was expanded in these other places. And that one of the ways to expand it was through education, was through citizenship, being responsible, participating in the structures of society, made your place bigger, made your place have more status, and certainly had more fairness.

I was also influenced in a way that enhanced those images by my father's response to white and black relationships. He really was a separatist in philosophy, in the sense that he simply didn't need integration. He didn't need to go to their churches, schools, restaurants, visit with them in their homes. But he was adamant, he was emphatic that if he did the work that the white man did and did it as well, he should paid the same wages. He also felt that in courts, and these were the two things I
remember him being adamant about, that color should have no place. If he had been wronged by a white person, the court should have been the person who made it right, irrespective of color. He felt that if he got in a fight, a physical fight, with a white person, if he beat the white man, that should have been the end of it. If the white man beat him, that should have been the end of it. It should not have been a situation where, what he called the mob crew, which was another name for the Ku Klux Klan, came to his house in the middle of the night and dragged him and his family out and killed them or burned down the people or killed other black folks in retaliation.

The television images that kids watch today really impact their sense of self concept as measured in material things. In other words, you are what you own, and that gets reinforced over and over again. We see images of what is considered beauty, and the child who is fat, the child who has a wide nose, the child who has kinky hair, is faced with the concept that I'm not beautiful. Achievement is so much more individualized as opposed to group efforts that we saw when I was a kid. The race was advancing by Joe Louis knocking out Max Smelling. The race was advancing when Jackie Robinson became a member of a professional ball team. The race was advancing when people integrated Central High School in Arkansas. And you don't see that from television now. The individual has overcome and excelled and he is being rewarded or she is being rewarded. Bryant Gumbel is not seen as an outgrowth of efforts that started years ago with the NAACP. And for us, we understood that each accomplishment that was reported in the Chicago Defender or in the Pittsburgh Courier or in Ebony was the result of a group of people in the background pushing others ahead. Young people are given an image today via the television and via the movies that they can have it all, and that it's perfectly all right to cut corners and to do things that their parents and grandparents never thought of doing to get it all. The value system is different. They're conflicted. They're in a house where somebody does not have enough money to have food and clothes, and they're seeing all these images come into this poverty of what should be happening and what can be happening with no mechanism to explain the differences between where they are and what they see on this television. And it's very misleading. And I absolutely am preoccupied with the business of alienation. I think very young children, given so many hours of television, gory scenes, are impacted in a very negative way about their feelings for other people, and I think that that's one of things that television does that didn't happen to us. I remember a cartoon that I saw someplace. It was like it was branded on my brain. But it showed these people driving around a mountain, somewhere in the United States, and they lost control on the car. It's a husband and a wife and a child in the back seat. The car is plunging off the mountain down into this ravine, and the child in the background in screaming, "Change the channel. Change the channel." And I think there is a group of young people who watch television who are very confused about reality, in terms of what is real and what is television. I know there are studies that support both, but in terms of being able
to quickly shift from reality to playthings, I'm not sure that all kids are able to make that shift. I think of that, in a sense, is a different kind of outside stimulus than we had, growing up in the Mississippi Delta in a different time period and with a different value system.

NB: I remember a couple of summers ago I was out in Los Angeles in the Watts area, and there was a black youth who had kind of orchestrated this play. It was quite wonderful actually. At the end, he sort of stood up ( ) and he said, "To be or not to be is no longer the question. It's to become or be forgotten."

LD: That's right.

NB: It strikes me that you're talking in many ways, this instantaneous gratification somehow, to become or to have is who we are, or if you don't have. . . .

LD: You don't exist. That's right. And we see it a lot in the community work that we do. In the very poor families, two or three days a year are very special days. It's an attempt, especially in families headed by females, to compensate for all of the things that the kids don't have the rest of the year. So you get, sometimes I think, an abundance of toys, too much money spent on clothes, too much money spent on whatever is the "in" thing for kids to wear. Right now, for instance, little girls are wearing these strange hats, and they cruise the malls. And people spend a lot of money doing these things because they really want to compensate for the disparity between what they see on television, which is a great marketing opportunity, and what they really have in their home. And sometimes these choices are made by parents at the expense of things that are much more needed by the family, which might be insurance, which might be health care, which might be money for educational needs, and other stuff. And you really can't blame the parents for making those choices because they're looking at this continuing assessment of them as parents, who also aren't able to provide all these material things that you're supposed to have. Like each child is supposed to have a bedroom with a window and Priscilla curtains. In most families, if you have more than 1.4 children, you can't afford this many bedrooms with Priscilla curtains. It's all part of the frustration, I think, that people have in terms of what's going on. The thing that I think is most telling of the influence that the television of materialism has had on people is when you read these news stories in the media about kids killing each other for a jacket with some silly symbol on it, or a pair of sneakers, or some emblem that costs a lot of money but somehow adds to the status of the person who has it. When you have that kind of strong imaging going forth, with acceptance level in the peer group, overlooking how you came by the jacket or the shoes, then there's something really wrong with the country. I don't know that we can blame all of that on the television. But we certainly do market acceptability by these things, and I think that has had a tremendous impact on the formation of character, personalities, and coping abilities in young people that was totally foreign in my era.

NB: I'd really like to come back to this thing with
restoration of values and if you use that in your work and how. But earlier you had said when you were growing up, you had a consciousness of the world, and it wasn't until you became an adult that you actually began to see some of the economic problems, some of the injustice problems. Could you go back to that time after or in your childhood when you first started noticing (       )? That not everything was OK?

LD: Well, when I became a teenager, I think your whole world changes, and I'm not always sure it's for the best. We might should be able to delay that process a little longer. When I was in the eighth grade, I must have been thirteen, maybe I was twelve for part of that year and thirteen for the other part. But anyway, that was a critical year for me in my recollection. I'm sure it had a lot to do with becoming an adolescent, and it had a lot more to do with noticing boys. I'd always played with boys. I was always popular with boys because I could pitch, run, and catch, and could hit the ball. So I was always very popular.

But when I was thirteen, our relationship began to change. They noticed me as a girl, instead of just who would fight over whose team I'd be on at recess. I started noticing other girls -- who they spent time with -- how they looked, what they did with their hair, how they dressed, and you began to see the difference. The dungarees weren't there. The old T-shirts and stuff weren't there. They were wearing dresses and shoes and stuff. So that stuff became important, and I had to figure out how we could get some of that. Part of what had happened in almost all our years on the plantation, we never cleared any money. You know how that system works where you get all these advances, and at the end of year you settle up, and you're supposed to have money, and we never had any. I figured out, I had excellent teachers in these little one-room school houses who taught us incredible stuff, like how to keep books, basic bookkeeping, in math classes and stuff. I decided, and I'm not sure how I arrived at this conclusion, and I'm sure Miss Higgins, who was my teacher, influenced that by impressing us with the importance of knowing how to do these things, so that we would be more responsible in managing our money and stuff. So somehow I made the quantum leap from learning all that stuff, and decided that the reason black folks never cleared any money from this operation was because we didn't keep any records. So when we started the crop year when I was in the eighth grade, I made a deal with Daddy that we were going to do better. We were going to become responsible. I would keep the books for him, and when settling day came, we would have a record of how much we owed the man, how much he owed us, and it would be fair. He would recognize our responsibility in keeping records. Daddy, I'm pretty sure, much have been very amused by this little simple logic that I'd come up with [laughter], but he played along. We got a Blue Horse notebook. I don't know if you guys ever saw a Blue Horse notebook, but it was the "in" book to have at school. It was put together well. The paper was sewn in and then it was covered with a piece of stuff. Not like the frivolous stuff you have now that falls apart. But we set it up, and I set it up the way I had learned in school with expense columns and income columns, and every day
I would come home and listen to the market on the radio, where they broadcast how much cotton was selling for. Helena, Arkansas, had that every day between eleven and twelve. I forget the name of the radio station. And every thing we got, I listed in that expense column. We started getting a furnish in March, so from March through August you got that $50.00 a month. That was put down. The light bills, the gas bills, all these things that we had. Anybody who went to the doctor. And then everybody knew that there was a catch-all in the plantation system called plantation expenses. It was what they dragged out when they added everything they could legitimately add and then added plantation expenses. I guess the equivalent of that today at a university would be overhead or whatever.

[Interuption]

NB: Boy, this is the first time I ever heard anybody get excited about bookkeeping [laughter].

LD: Well, I met one other woman who had the same experience, in Marshall County, Mississippi. She decided in high school, she had made the high school, that that was exactly what was wrong, and went to her father and said, "I'm going to keep your books for you." And she is Cora Nash, the financial services director here. She read something I'd written one time, and she came to me and told me, "I don't believe this, but I did the same thing." Her fascination lead her to pursue accounting in college. Mine didn't [laughter].

NB: ( )

LD: I'm trying to think what was I really saying at this point.

NB: The plantation expenses as overhead.

LD: The plantation expenses was the catch-all for everything that they hadn't been able to legitimately charge you for. So I even included generous amounts, what I perceived to be generous amounts, for plantation expenses. The only way that we learned that the owners of the plantation made lots of money was they figured all bale weights, cotton bale weights, at 500 pounds, and we had, sometimes, bales that weighed 640 pounds. So there was another whole 140 pounds of cotton that you didn't get any credit for. So we put all that together, and then divided all the bale weights, divided all by 500 weights, and added up everything we could. You used the date of sale to actually determine what cotton sold for, because the price ranged that particular year, I remember one period during that year cotton was selling at 40 cent a pound, but it didn't matter if your person didn't sell on that day. So you had to figure out what days they sold. So when I'd come home from school, I'd ask, "Did he sell cotton today? Did Mr. Carl sell cotton today?" If he sold cotton today, you looked in the Press Semitar, which was a newspaper out of Memphis that pointed out how much they sold for, and you figured out how much they sold for that day. And kept fairly accurate books. I'm amazed now as an adult at how seriously I got into this at thirteen. And you really have to compare it when at kids now, because it's lipstick and make-up and eye shadow that was important. The day settling day finally came, and I gave Daddy the book and went over everything with him.
-- remember he couldn't read and write -- I went over everything with him and went to school. I don't remember paying much attention to what was happening in class because my mind was fixed on what was going on there. The way I had figured it, we would have come out with at least a couple of thousand dollars for us in this deal. That was with giving them the benefit of the doubt. That's with giving them half of the cotton you'd made. That's with giving them lots of money for the plantation expenses. When I came home that afternoon, my mother told me they had had the settlement, and instead of the $2,000 and some dollars that I thought we would get, we'd gotten like $600 and some dollars. Since it was the first money they had made in over thirty years of farming, they were pleased. I was devastated. I was absolutely, positively ill. How could this have gone wrong, and what had happened. And I don't know. I'm almost certain, I'm almost certain now that my father, who knew his place, hadn't brought out the book, hadn't challenged Mr. Carl's figures, and also I'm almost sure he didn't want me to know that he wouldn't do that. He couldn't possibly have wanted to hurt me by saying this won't work or discouraged by saying this won't work. So I don't know what happened in that place. He may really have, but I'm almost certain he didn't. At that point, I decided that there was no fairness in the system, and that somehow people had to escape the system. Because it was not ever going to be a situation where you could do anything to make it work for you. I mean, that was the end of me assuming responsibility for an unfair and unjust world. And while I thought Mr. Carl and Mr. Ferguson were neat people who shared stuff with us that they didn't have to share, who were kind, and all the things that good white folk in Mississippi are, you just understand that there was this system here, somehow, that kept people from doing what they knew was right. It never occurred to me that perhaps my figures were wrong. It never occurred to me that perhaps the local cotton sellers were not giving Mr. Carl the forty cents a pound that was on the national market. I mean, none of those things figured in. I just decided it wasn't fair. And it never occurred to me that we could make it better through any of the action that we saw later on in the civil rights movement. It just became a situation that you escaped. And I understood why all of the people who came back had left the plantation. That it was not a thing they could make work. And they'd gone where they could work and be paid a fair wage for their labor. They'd gone to Chicago. They'd gone to California. They'd gone to Detroit, or they'd come no farther than Memphis. That's what had happened with my older brothers. They'd gone to Memphis because they'd gotten tired of working and not being paid. They'd gotten tired of not having political and social justice. They'd gotten tired of being fearful of having somebody accuse them of crimes and spending their lives in prison, and they just left. And when they left Mississippi, their goal was that if they didn't find fairness and employment in Memphis to go to St. Louis, and from St. Louis to Chicago, from Chicago to New York. They never got any further than Memphis, but they were content there that they were receiving a fair measure of justice for their efforts and
for their work.

RK: How did you change after, that's a pretty powerful experience?

LD: Well, it was. It was experience where I was preoccupied with getting out. I spent the next ten years trying to figure out how to get out of Mississippi. I had no relatives in Chicago that could send for me. I didn't make the real connection that my ticket out could be education, although Miss Higgins tried very hard to drill that into us. I didn't make that connection very well. So later on I decided that maybe the best way to get out of here was to get married, because a lot of people did escape the whole process through marriage. They married men, who like my father, were very industrious and found different ways to make money to supplement whatever the system didn't pay you from the plantation system, or they moved off the plantation into town, and they went to work in plants and factories and for white people as domestics. And had steady income. They had houses. They lived decent lives. So I expected to just get out of that system, and I didn't expect that it would ever change. I didn't think there was anything we could do to make it change because that experience at thirteen was devastating. And these were like the better white people. They weren't like some of the other folks who shot people and who beat them up or who denied them health care, who denied them food, who kicked them off their plantation when they got sick. And if these were the best people, and we couldn't make it work with them, I lost faith in that system.

RK: So at some point you just stopped going, you didn't see education as really a viable way of getting out of here?

LD: No, I really didn't. I only saw education, let me tell you when I embraced education, was after I had married, had six kids, had been kicked off a plantation. Because I got married when I was seventeen to someone who had a lot more material things than I did. They had a car, nice furniture, instead of a shotgun house, they had a big four-room house. They had nice clothes. All of the members of the family had come from people who lived in Mound Bayou, and Mound Bayou was a status symbol for black folks. It was the mecca. And so I really thought that that was my ticket out of the plantation system and poverty. And really got married, suffered my second major disappointment in life. I found out that it wasn't a magical place. I started having babies and never got off the plantation. I experienced deprivation in a different form than I had ever had at home, because there was hunger. My husband didn't hunt, didn't fish, didn't pick berries. He drank. The disappointment was just overwhelming. I started having babies and had them quickly and close together. I was sicker than I ever knew people could ever be! And became quite miserable. I picked cotton, chopped cotton. I worked incredibly long hours, and again, had very little at the end of the year to show for it. Got kicked off the plantation by an owner who wasn't cruel, but who had a small operation to start with, and who had bought himself a mechanical cotton picker and a combine, and who really had no need for a family. He had 80 or 100 acres and he just didn't need anybody.
He worked himself. His son worked with him, and they didn't need the expense of a family. So we were asked to leave. We moved to Shelby, Mississippi, population about 2800 during that time, and assumed I would be able to go out and get a job. And ran face to face with the limitations of a high school drop-out.

I couldn't do anything. If you have a town full of people trying to be domestics for white women, and you can't teach -- I didn't have a nursing degree or a teaching degree. There was nothing I could do. I remember having everybody look for a job for me because I really needed to work. We were living in a house that had been condemned. My husband was making $36.00 a week. We had five kids and I was pregnant. So we desperately.

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

LD: All the people who worked in banks, stores. The two plants in town were white. I mean, there just weren't any jobs for blacks, and that was understood. They wouldn't hire you. Baxter was here in Cleveland, but it didn't hire anybody but whites. There was one black person working as a janitor. No blacks were hired in any of the plants in the area. So there was nothing to do but try to find work keeping people's children, clearing up their houses, doing something like that. I went to everybody that was working for white folks and asked them to ask around if anybody needed anybody. I could do housework and take care of babies. I was very good at that. I remember Lula Mae McClain found a job for me with the Lamendorfs, and she came by and told me to get ready to go for the interview. So I got ready. The Lamendorfs were big people in Shelby. They owned the best dry goods store with the best clothes that all of the rich people shopped at, and all of the well-to-do blacks like school teachers and folks shopped at. They had a big house over in the white section of town. So I put on my best clothes and dressed up and went up for my interview with Lula Mae. They had asked Lula Mae a lot of questions about my background, like had I gone to high school, and could I read and write well, all of these things. So I was really excited because I was sure that if they wanted to know all of that they wanted me to work in the store. Oh, good Lord, my feet couldn't hardly contain themselves as I rushed up to that store that morning for the interview. They asked me all kinds of questions about character, what kind of person you were and all that, which I thought was appropriate. Then they asked me questions that tested my academic ability, which I just was convinced was part of getting you ready for the store. And then they became very clear that they only wanted to know all of these things because they wanted a maid who could take business calls at the house, and who could keep good messages for them. So although I was a little bit disappointed, it was okay. There was still a job. Then we got into my hours.

This job paid $19.00 per week, which was four dollars higher than the average that people were paying. So I was excited about
that. But Mrs. Lamendorf wanted me to work seven days a week. I said, "Well, no, I have children. I think I should spend Sunday with them." And really we had so few things that we did together, Sunday School was one of the things that we always did together. We always got up and went to Sunday School together, and I couldn't imagine not being there to do that, really. So Mr. Lamendorf seemed to have been impressed with that. There was more evidence of character. So he said, "Okay." And I explained it to him, that I really took the kids to Sunday School. I didn't send them, and I would like not to have to work on Sunday morning. He was agreeable. He said okay. He said, "What you can do then is you can fix something for us on Saturday when you're there." And right there before me and Lula Mae, this couple got into an argument about my hours. She said, "Oh no, you know that's not right. She has to come." He said, "Oh, we can take care of ourselves one day." "Oh no, we can't. She has to come in." And with us standing there being totally flabbergasted, they argued back and forth. And although I needed that job desperately, I mean, I really needed it desperately, I had to make a decision, standing there watching them argue, that I couldn't take the job. And I couldn't take the job because we all knew enough about households in the South, that you had to go into a household where the man and wife were together, or you would get caught in the middle, and it could turn nasty. There were rumors when I was growing up of white women who had killed black women in these kinds of situations. So I really was afraid to take the job, understanding that there was conflict even before I became hired. The other thing that was very unsettling to Lula Mae and myself was that our image of white folks was that they never conducted themselves in the presence of black folks at the level of argument. That also was unsettling, because you could also get into trouble with people who didn't have character or who weren't quality people. I mean, people who had to do domestic work tried to work for people who were quality people, people who had class and who understood how to behave and conduct themselves. So I said no to the job, and worried over whether I'd made the right decision, worried about whether I was denying food and health care to children, but feeling very much like I had no choice. That this really wasn't a job that I could afford to take. And it turned out that it probably was the best decision I made, and it was a guts decision. It certainly wasn't made from structural analysis or anything else [laughter]. It was just that, God, I'm going to be in the middle of these people, and I'm going to get hurt or probably get seriously damaged by this, and just gave it up. I never got a job as a domestic behind that. I went back to catching the truck and going to the field and chopping cotton. That was in '64 or early '65. Later on, the civil rights movement came to Shelby, Mississippi, and I became preoccupied with that. I learned along the way how to work the system. We didn't have food stamps at that period, but there were surplus commodities that I signed up for. So that supplemented our food supply. Chopping cotton whenever I was able gave us a little extra money. I became an expert, again, at managing the books, you know, in terms of
taking twenty dollars, each week, which was what I got from my
husband's wages, and paying all our bills, by spreading them out,
paying the rent, which was ten dollars, one week, and the next
week paying the utilities, which was never more than twenty
dollars. Those were the good old days [laughter]. Making sure
that we feed the family, very poor fare, but feed them three
meals a day. When the civil rights movement really spread out, I
became a volunteer with COFO, and as such received ten dollars or
fifteen dollars a week stipend for community work. So we did a
lot of voter registration, and the fifteen dollars also helped
with some of the household things that we had to have. From
that, the Johnson's poverty programs came to town, and that
really freed a lot of black folks and poor whites from a strangle
hold economy that just didn't let you live, or barely let you
live. We went to work for wages that we never dreamed you could
earn in Mississippi, and people were freed for the first time
from a system that really controlled you through the threat of
starvation. I mean, people put up with a lot of stuff on the
plantation because you had a place to live. They gave you a
shack to live in. They advanced you money, and they really
bought your soul. You know, you just think about all the folks
who endured mistreatment, who endured injustices, who endured
brutality, to avoid having their wives and children put in the
street. And we saw the horror that could happen to you when you
didn't belong to a white man. That was what we saw with the
Andrews' people. Everybody got kicked off that plantation, and
every plantation was alerted not to hire them. So they not only
could not work in any of the plants in town, they couldn't go to
another plantation and go to work there. And it didn't matter if
they had been leaders in the strike or if they had just decided,
okay, we're getting off too. It was a horrible situation. The
damage of that, some of those folks have never overcome. We
didn't have psychological services and stuff at that time anyway,
but they've never overcome that, because it was a kind of
shunning that took place. It was some terrible times, but people
learned and eagerly volunteered to get out of that system.

RK: What was this early period of the civil rights movement
like? What was it like going around doing voter registration?
Was that an enervating moment or experience for you?
LD: Yes. You know, the only other time I had that kind of
high, for lack of a better term, was that year that I was keeping
books to show Mr. Carl that we knew what he was doing, and we
were going to break up this nonsense of taking all our money.
You know, it was bigger than Mr. Carl. I mean, I had latched on
to what was wrong with the whole plantation system, and soon as
we made it work with Mr. Carl, it was going to work for everybody
else. Magically, it was going to be repeated. And the civil
rights movement was an excitement. It was all of those stories
that my mother had read to us across the years from the Chicago
Defender and the Pittsburgh Courier. It was making up to Emmett
Till for the helplessness that we all had felt for not being able
to save him from that mob crew. It was making up to Willis for
having to leave town and be scared to death for the rest of his
life. It was for all of the atrocities, the lynchings, and the
night riders, and all of the stuff that had been going on. It was our way of saying, "Okay, we're going to try to avenge all of this stuff that's been going down across the years." And while you may not have thought about it consciously, you know, it wasn't like it was a conscious thought in your head that, okay, this is for Emmett Till or this is for Mack Charles Parker. That wasn't going on in your head, but it was the same feeling that the folks exhibited when they would gather in my folks' house to listen to Jackie Robinson on the radio or to listen to Joe Louis whip somebody at night at the fights. I mean, we always had a radio with those long batteries, and the folks would sit around and listen to it and cheer and be happy and really be free for a little moment, because Jackie had really made it possible for them or Joe Louis had really made it possible for them. And I felt an excitement that somehow what we were doing, and the magic of the vote, was going to eradicate all of the inequities that we were experiencing. Somehow, the magic of the vote was going to make people pay us better wages for our labor. It was going to make us be able to not be fearful of policemen when we saw them. It was going to make mob crews disappear, you know, the Klan disappear. It was going to make the Lambadors not fight about how many days I would work. It was all of those things, and it was an exhilarating, powerful thing. You walked on to somebody's plantation, and you said to the owner, "My name is L.C. Dorsey. I'm with COFO, and I'm here to register any of your people who want to register. Do you have any objection?" You dared them to have any objection. You know, you never said it, but you dared them to. Or you went in and you didn't bother to go talk to the owner of the plantation. You went to the peoples' houses and said, "I've come to take you to register to vote, and here's why you should register to vote. Here's why you should be concerned about this. These are the things that we can correct and change." And to have people, based on you telling them that, to get up from where they were sitting, and get in the car with you, and go off to a fate unknown to do this. And then one day, I had my comeuppance on that, too. I was at some plantation up between Alligator and Duncan. I don't remember the man. He was out there working on a tractor with one of the equipment operators, and I went up. I was working with the Johnson boy from Cleveland. We were working under Owen Brooks who had dropped us off. We're out in this cotton field some place without even a way to get out. I told the man who I was, and what I was there for, and asked him if he had any objections to me going around to the tenants and talking to them. He told me, "Nah, you can take them all to vote." I thought, ah, this is a piece of cake, because this was a tough guy, and everybody had warned us about him. I said this is a piece of cake. So I was walked on off to go to the first house, and he said, "Oh, by the way, now, when you finish with them registering to vote, don't bring them back here. Take them to your plantation." Well, I felt like I'd been hit in the stomach with a fist, and it was not anything that had been in any of workshops we'd been in. We were prepared for him to hit me, and I knew exactly what to do. To spit on me, I knew exactly what to do with that. We were prepared for the
possibility for him to pull a gun and even shoot me. We left home with the understanding that it may have been the last time we saw our children, our families, or anything else. And that was heady stuff. It just emboldened us to do what we did. I had not been prepared for the guy who cooperated, who said, "Okay, take them, but don't bring them back there." I had to deal with what do you do, and what is your responsibility with this?" And again, I had to make a quick choice without adequate preparation and on my feet. I didn't like the choice I made. I thought about all the things that could happen. Tent City had not gone well, the Andrews' people, and we all knew that. I lived in a house that was condemned by the City of Shelby. I couldn't bring anybody home. We had three rooms that we were living in, three rooms and a kitchen. I didn't know of any other facility where we could take these folks. Mount Beulah had taken in some people, but that was so far away. And here we were in this cotton field with no car even. So I went back to the people who we had talked to already on the plantation, talked to Curtis Johnson, who was with me, and I told them what the man had said. I apologized to the people on that plantation, and told them that I couldn't take the responsibility for them not having a place to come back to. And I was sick for the rest of that week because I felt I had let the people down. I'd psyched them up, gotten them ready, and walked out and left them. I encouraged the people, on their own, to go down to the courthouse and register. Later on, several weeks later, I ran into one of the people who had been on the plantation, who called me aside to tell me that they had done just that. They'd all gotten together and gone down to the courthouse in different cars and at different times, and all of them had registered. I felt better. I didn't know enough about organization and empowerment to realize that that was my most successful encounter. That I had simply given information, and they'd made the decisions on their own. Their decision was much better than the one we had been prepared to make. I learned all that later, but at the time I felt relieved that my contribution to their situation had been negative, and that I'd been able to do anything about it. But later on, looking back over all of the people that I contacted and all the folks we carried off plantations to go register, I really feel that that was the most significant and successful voter registration day I had in that whole period of time.

[Interruption]

NB: '64-'65?
LD: Yeah, '64-'65.
NB: So you had six kids at this point?
LD: At that point I had six kids. The oldest was born in '56, so what is that, eight? So they're from infants to, Chip wasn't born 'til '65, my youngest one. So they're pre-birth to eight, I think. They were very young.
RK: That, in itself, was a full-time job.
LD: Oh, it was, it was. They were dragged around to a lot of meetings. I think it rubbed off on them. The older ones are all politically active. Another friend of mine who's a movement person said, "We've raised a generation of humanists." Many of
them aren't activists, but they understand the difference and political structures in life.

RK: You mentioned that quickly after the civil rights movement came to Mississippi, the War on Poverty was started too, and federal money and intervention and help came. Maybe you could just talk a little bit about how you first kind of confronted that or saw that and some of the jobs—there were better jobs for people. Talk a little bit about what those were and what that meant.

LD: One of the things that the Mississippi Delta, and I guess the Black Belt all up and down the United States, had attempted to do was control the black population. We were always the majority of the population. And they'd used several structures to do that very effectively. One was just brute force. If somebody got out of their place, you were immediately dealt with, and you were dealt with visibly and in a way that sort of put fear into the hearts of other people. One of my earliest memories is this fear of black people discussing white people in whispers, you know. Of worrying that somebody was eavesdropping outside of the houses at night to see if they were talking about white people. Of black folks running away, just like slaves, running away from plantations in the middle of the night with nobody knowing where they went and how they got away.

So you had this sense of fear early on. Fear was one of the things that people used to keep black people in control.

The other thing that people used to keep people in control was the economic system. Black people were totally dependent on white people for everything that had to do with their survival. You bought it from the commissary or you got it from the office or something. It was just how you got things. Everything that you needed from a match to a doctor, you had to go through these people to get. And they had the power to give it to you or to deny it. They had the power even to make sure you didn't get it any place else. So folk were totally controlled by these two ventures. Anybody who attempted to stand up to this system was dealt with swiftly. For instance, if I lived on Mr. Bob's plantation, and Mr. Bob was paying two dollars a day for wages, and I wanted to go to work on Mr. Neil's plantation who was paying three dollars a day. Mr. Bob could actually punish me by taking me up and physically whipping me or making me leave the plantation. And because Mr. Neil understood the need to support this nonsense, you couldn't go to work for Mr. Neil's plantation.

It was like you were really blacklisted between both people. And if Mr. Neil had been letting you work, after he realized that Mr. Bob was upset about it, you couldn't work there any more. So you family was faced with the possibility of starving to death.

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NB: I believe it was in 1966 that you began as a Headstart teacher?
LD: That's right.
NB: How did that, you've talked about that in general, in your own sort of personal experience, how did that kind of further your sense of mission and perhaps... .

LD: Survival [laughter]. I had gotten involved in some volunteer work with the CDGM movement. We'd gone to workshops and training programs, but I was not, because of some of the political activities that I had been involved in in my local community, there was a certain amount of fear on the part of people who were in charge of the program locally that I would bring to the program if I was hired, -- problems. That because of my controversy and my role in voter registration and challenging white folks and leading boycotts that somehow they might suffer fire bombings. They may not even get the funds if I was hired. So I wasn't hired with the group that all the other activists were hired for in Mississippi. Robert Gray, really, when he was director of program, gave me a chance to work in opposition to some of the less progressive black folks who had been involved in what became known as the white folks Headstart.

They also didn't want me [laughter] in the program. I saw the program, not as an opportunity to further any political agendas, I didn't see it as an opportunity to impact the next generation of leadership. I really saw the Headstart program and my employment in it as a personal opportunity to earn a living for my kids and myself. In 1966, when I went to work for Headstart, I had six children, and I was very concerned that they have an education and not live the life I had lived after marrying, because I really didn't think much was wrong with my life [laughter] before that. But I didn't want them to wind up being cotton choppers and cotton pickers. I felt that the opportunity for them to even do that was less, and that they had to be able to take care of themselves. So going to work for Headstart represented for me an opportunity to be employed. We had been in town for three years. It had been a rough three years. It was the first time, in fact, in 1965, where I had been totally
without food. I had one horrible, nightmarish night where we cooked the last food at noon. It was enough food at noon for everybody to get enough to eat, and we went to bed that night hungry. My husband did not come home with his paycheck. We had no money and no food in the house, and it was a situation where I kept thinking he would be in because he knew we didn't have any food, and it became too late to go to any neighbor's house, knocking on the door, saying, "Do you have any food?" And I didn't ever want that to happen again. So Headstart offered an opportunity for me never to have to subject the children to that. And you can't appreciate how horrible that is unless you've lived through it. It's one thing to be hungry yourself. It is an entirely different thing to know that your children are hungry, and to put them to bed knowing they're hungry, and listen to them cry themselves to sleep. It is even more devastating, and it hurts even to talk about it now, to have the older children, who are only ten or so, be just as hungry but try not to let you hear them cry. That is something that helps you understand why women become prostitutes, why people rob and break in stores, and why they take what they want to deal with this. It's most horrible. I didn't ever want to have to live through that again, and Headstart represented for me, more than any movement goals, an opportunity not to ever have to hear a hungry child crying in my bed at night.

I went to work there, and I learned a lot about the organized workplace. A Headstart classroom was quite different than the plantation. Teaching in a classroom had a certain amount of power, that I'd never envisioned, that you never perceived being a student. And you could impact on the people in that classroom in a very positive way. And I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the dynamics. I enjoyed the interaction, but more importantly I enjoyed the learning experience, because we were being taught also. They had teachers, and they had consultants, and they brought in people. And we were learning, and it was a whole new world. I read all the stuff they brought as voraciously as I had read the Freedom School material, because it opened up another whole world, that being in the plantation, and the limitations of the educational experiences that the plantation had offered, had denied us. And I realized that there was a hunger there that I hadn't recognized that was akin to this whole business of keeping records in that Blueback notebook when I was thirteen. And that was the excitement about that whole business. I was on that Headstart from '66 until the end of December of '67. At that time, the Tufts-Delta Health Center had opened, and it was really a fascinating program. I had been recruited by John Hatch who was director of Community Health Action, together with other community activists to do workshops as part of the training program for their staff, and that was heady stuff. Here you were teaching people how to make the system work for them, how to go to the Welfare Department with records and demand your rights, how to go to elected officials and get things done in your community. It was fascinating to see a program that embodied, in a much more compelling way than Operation Headstart had, all of the things that we'd talked about
in the civil rights movement, of empowering people to take control of their communities. This health program had organized classes to teach people. This health program had brought in people like myself and Owen Brooks to show people how to do things politically. This health program was talking about water systems and sanitary outdoor toilets, which we later learned was environmental health concerns. This health program was talking about building houses for people. And if you've ever lived in a plantation house with holes in the roof that you have to set pans and buckets under when it rains, with cracks in the walls that you had to stuff cotton and paper in to keep out the cold on winter days, then you can really appreciate some group from up north, where we understood the freedom was anyway, coming in, talking about helping to do all of these things. I debated, within myself, if I wanted to come to work for this organization or if I should stay with Headstart, because most people felt that Headstart was going to be around for a long time. We weren't sure about this group from up North. If they were going to be here, or if it was going to be like so many of programs during that time, they come in and was out. I talked again to Robert Gray, who I respected, who was educated, but who also cared about the community and was approachable. He was director of the Headstart program. I asked him if he thought this program was going to be here, told him I was interested in working for them, and got his opinion. He told me he thought with the money they were putting into buildings and what they were doing, that they would be here, and encouraged me to go for it. I came to work in 1967 under John Hatch, who was chairman of Community Health Action, but whose program included training and environmental health components, social work, and several other areas. I went to work in a training department under Danny Mitchell. I got a chance to be paid to all the stuff I learned to do through the civil rights movement, of not only training people like the nurses' assistants and environmental assistants and all those folks, with how to access institutions and make referrals and do all that stuff, but also how to help people get together in their communities to address issues, local issues, that collectively they could do something about, and individually they would not be able to do as much about. You really felt like it was a continuation of the civil rights movement, in the sense that in a different way you were still building on that foundation that had been laid down. You was adding layers of power and abilities in specific areas. This is what you do in Symonds, Mississippi to get water, and this is what you do in Roundlake to bring a recreation center to the community for the kids, and this is what I did in Shelby, Mississippi, at the Contact Center for kids, you know, to have a place to have a party or to dance and do stuff, and this is what you do with parents who are having problems with their kids. You had a sense that you were continuing with the civil rights movement in this work.

RK: You knew at that time, you had that sense?
LD: Oh yes.
RK: You felt very strongly?
LD: I felt very strongly, and I felt that that was the
difference between what we were doing here than what was happening in Headstart. I felt there was a place for Headstart, but I really felt that it wasn't making the kind of changes that this place had the potential to make. And I didn't know at the time that all the leadership of this place had themselves been activists in the civil rights movement. John had been in the civil rights movement. Jack had been in the civil rights movement. Bob Smith out of Jackson, who had really been one of the people who helped force folks to come and address some of the issues of health care, had been picketing and involved in getting this together.

RK: Was frustration part of this, the frustration with the kind of limitations of, say, just voting? I mean, did you have some sense that wasn't, I mean, obviously you had the sense that wasn't enough, but was there...

LD: I don't think I had a sense of frustration that was as clearly defined then. I think that I was on a growth spurt, a personal growth spurt. I don't know how to say this without it sounding cocky, but I think I quickly outgrew Headstart. This person who had been awakened by the civil rights movement needed something else, needed that challenge, needed that excitement, needed that sense of still challenging the system, and I don't think it was being met in Headstart. I mean, I felt good personally when I had this little boy who had not spoken, was five years old, Michael Bobo, who hadn't talked, and who I worked with personally every day to try to get him to say something. And when he was with me one day and said, "Look at that big, old dog." I mean, I just almost went right on up in the sky. But I don't think it was enough. I really didn't have the sense that what we were doing was as important as what we later did when we organized the farm coop, when I was out on plantations again with Willie May Osborne and Bernice Trigg, and we were knocking on doors. This time, not to tell people about registering to vote because everybody was, but to say, "Hey, listen, there's a new program in town that's offering health care to people, and they've got social workers and doctors and nurses. And they're getting food for people, and they're taking care of your children. And you need to come on in and talk to them." It may have been that I was more comfortable doing that than I was teaching, I don't know. But I think that I just really outgrew the challenge of Headstart quickly, and had to move on.

RK: Well, I think that is important, this kind of personal development, and your relationship to the various organizations and things that they're doing. We're finding that with some other people, too, that once you unleash people like yourself, it's pretty hard to keep them under control or contained.

LD: That's right.

RK: Your ambitions had been....

LD: Awakened [laughter]. Discovered.

RK: Yeah. In your case, there are no boundaries. You just keep going and going and going. It's important, it seems to me, that organizations know how to respond to people like that. Always keep giving them those opportunities. Don't put them in situations where they don't have the chance to really grow.
LD: That's right. In the private sector, they know how to do that very well, but we really haven't understood that as well in social service type organizations or non-profit organizations.

We really haven't capitalized on that as well, because we haven't recognized it. And quite frequently, the people don't recognize it themselves. I did not understand, at all, in '67 why I wanted to leave Headstart. I mean, all of the things that I now understand about it just wasn't there. I just felt that what they were doing here would probably result in more change than what was happening in Headstart. My own relationship and my own contribution to that wasn't as clearly defined. It just wasn't, because I hadn't grown enough to catch up with what was happening to me or to understand all the dynamics of change that I was involved in. You tend to think about these experiences and things as things that you do without understanding the impact that the things have on you. I understood that I was fascinated with the things that I learned in the movement, and with the things I saw. You don't see a Fannie Lou Hamer, and you don't talk to her, and you don't have her explain things to you, without being forever changed in terms of the charisma of the woman, the depth of her. You don't live with an Owen Brooks and listen to his analysis of events that you just see without understanding, without having that an impact on you. And both of them had the ability, Fannie Lou Hamer and Owen Brooks, in different ways had the ability to, at the same time, make you believe that you could get the moon and bring it back, and make you believe that you had a responsibility to go get it and bring it back, without any of the guilt if you didn't get it. I mean, I don't know how to tell you how they did that, but they had the ability to do that. Anzie Moore and people like that, who had been out there for a long time, before the civil rights movement, trying to raise consciousness and being successful in doing it to a large extent, all those people impacted what you became, without you really understanding what you were. Because you thought you were doing things, and really, I'm sure they understood that when they set these things up, it wasn't about what you would be doing, it was about what they would be doing to you and what these processes would make of you. You don't see all of that, and perhaps it's very good that you don't. Because if you start out with a bunch of people who are new to the whole process, if they understood everything that was involved, they would not only see the positive but they would also see the negatives. And they wouldn't rush out to be killed every morning, thinking that was heady stuff. They would stay home [laughter].

RK: Right.

LD: They would stay home. Wait for John to do it. **

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B
and listen to it and cheer and be happy and really be free for a little moment, because Jackie had really made it possible for them or Joe Louis had really made it possible for them. And I felt an excitement that somehow what we were doing, and the magic of the vote, was going to eradicate all of the inequities that we were experiencing. Somehow, the magic of the vote was going to make people pay us better wages for our labor. It was going to make us be able to not be fearful of policemen when we saw them. It was going to make mob crews disappear, you know, the Klan disappear. It was going to make the Lambadors not fight about how many days I would work. It was all of those things, and it was an exhilarating, powerful thing. You walked on to somebody's plantation, and you said to the owner, "My name is L.C. Dorsey. I'm with COFO, and I'm here to register any of your people who want to register. Do you have any objection?" You dared them to have any objection. You know, you never said it, but you dared them to. Or you went in and you didn't bother to go talk to the owner of the plantation. You went to the peoples' houses and said, "I've come to take you to register to vote, and here's why you should register to vote. Here's why you should be concerned about this. These are the things that we can correct and change." And to have people, based on you telling them that, to get up from where they were sitting, and get in the car with you, and go off to a fate unknown to do this. And then one day, I had my comeuppance on that, too. I was at some plantation up between Alligator and Duncan. I don't remember the man. He was out there working on a tractor with one of the equipment operators, and I went up. I was working with the Johnson boy from Cleveland. We were working under Owen Brooks who had dropped us off. We're out in this cotton field some place without even a way to get out. I told the man who I was, and what I was there for, and asked him if he had any objections to me going around to the tenants and talking to them. He told me, "Nah, you can take them all to vote." I thought, ah, this is a piece of cake, because this was a tough guy, and everybody had warned us about him. I said this is a piece of cake. So I was walked on off to go to the first house, and he said, "Oh, by the way, now, when you finish with them registering to vote, don't bring them back here. Take them to your plantation." Well, I felt like I'd been hit in the stomach with a fist, and it was not anything that had been in any of workshops we'd been in. We were prepared for him to hit me, and I knew exactly what to do. To spit on me, I knew exactly what to do with that. We were prepared for the possibility for him to pull a gun and even shoot me. We left home with the understanding that it may have been the last time we saw our children, our families, or anything else. And that was heady stuff. It just emboldened us to do what we did. I had not been prepared for the guy who cooperated, who said, "Okay, take them, but don't bring them back there." I had to deal with what do you do, and what is your responsibility with this?" And again, I had to make a quick choice without adequate preparation and on my feet. I didn't like the choice I made. I thought about all the things that could happen. Tent City had not gone well, the Andrews' people, and we all knew that. I lived in a
house that was condemned by the City of Shelby. I couldn't bring anybody home. We had three rooms that we were living in, three rooms and a kitchen. I didn't know of any other facility where we could take these folks. Mount Beulah had taken in some people, but that was so far away. And here we were in this cotton field with no car even. So I went back to the people who we had talked to already on the plantation, talked to Curtis Johnson, who was with me, and I told them what the man had said. I apologized to the people on that plantation, and told them that I couldn't take the responsibility for them not having a place to come back to. And I was sick for the rest of that week because I felt I had let the people down. I'd psyched them up, gotten them ready, and walked out and left them. I encouraged the people, on their own, to go down to the courthouse and register. Later on, several weeks later, I ran into one of the people who had been on the plantation, who called me aside to tell me that they had done just that. They'd all gotten together and gone down to the courthouse in different cars and at different times, and all of them had registered. I felt better. I didn't know enough about organization and empowerment to realize that that was my most successful encounter. That I had simply given information, and they'd made the decisions on their own. Their decision was much better than the one we had been prepared to make. I learned all that later, but at the time I felt relieved that my contribution to their situation had been negative, and that I'd been able to do anything about it. But later on, looking back over all of the people that I contacted and all the folks we carried off plantations to go register, I really feel that that was the most significant and successful voter registration day I had in that whole period of time.

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LD: That's right.

NB: How did that, you've talked about that in general, in your own sort of personal experience, how did that kind of further your sense of mission and perhaps....

LD: Survival [laughter]. I had gotten involved in some volunteer work with the CDGM movement. We'd gone to workshops and training programs, but I was not, because of some of the political activities that I had been involved in in my local community, there was a certain amount of fear on the part of people who were in charge of the program locally that I would bring to the program if I was hired, -- problems. That because of my controversy and my role in voter registration and challenging white folks and leading boycotts that somehow they might suffer fire bombings. They may not even get the funds if I was hired. So I wasn't hired with the group that all the other activists were hired for in Mississippi. Robert Gray, really, when he was director of program, gave me a chance to work in opposition to some of the less progressive black folks who had been involved in what became known as the white folks Headstart. They also didn't want me [laughter] in the program. I saw the program, not as an opportunity to further any political agendas, I didn't see it as an opportunity to impact the next generation of leadership. I really saw the Headstart program and my employment in it as a personal opportunity to earn a living for my kids and myself. In 1966, when I went to work for Headstart, I had six children, and I was very concerned that they have an education and not live the life I had lived after marrying, because I really didn't think much was wrong with my life [laughter] before that. But I didn't want them to wind up being cotton choppers and cotton pickers. I felt that the opportunity for them to even do that was less, and that they had to be able to take care of themselves. So going to work for Headstart represented for me an opportunity to be employed. We had been in town for three years. It had been a rough three years. It was the first time, in fact, in 1965, where I had been totally without food. I had one horrible, nightmarish night where we cooked the last food at noon. It was enough food at noon for everybody to get enough to eat, and we went to bed that night hungry. My husband did not come home with his paycheck. We had no money and no food in the house, and it was a situation where I kept thinking he would be in because he knew we didn't have any food, and it became too late to go to any neighbor's house, knocking on the door, saying, "Do you have any food?" And I didn't ever want that to happen again. So Headstart offered an opportunity for me never to have to subject the children to that. And you can't appreciate how horrible that is unless you've
lived through it. It's one thing to be hungry yourself. It is an entirely different thing to know that your children are hungry, and to put them to bed knowing they're hungry, and listen to them cry themselves to sleep. It is even more devastating, and it hurts even to talk about it now, to have the older children, who are only ten or so, be just as hungry but try not to let you hear them cry. That is something that helps you understand why women become prostitutes, why people rob and break in stores, and why they take what they want to deal with this. It's most horrible. I didn't ever want to have to live through that again, and Headstart represented for me, more than any movement goals, an opportunity not to ever have to hear a hungry child crying in my bed at night.

I went to work there, and I learned a lot about the organized workplace. A Headstart classroom was quite different than the plantation. Teaching in a classroom had a certain amount of power, that I'd never envisioned, that you never perceived being a student. And you could impact on the people in that classroom in a very positive way. And I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the dynamics. I enjoyed the interaction, but more importantly I enjoyed the learning experience, because we were being taught also. They had teachers, and they had consultants, and they brought in people. And we were learning, and it was a whole new world. I read all the stuff they brought as voraciously as I had read the Freedom School material, because it opened up another whole world, that being in the plantation, and the limitations of the educational experiences that the plantation had offered, had denied us. And I realized that there was a hunger there that I hadn't recognized that was akin to this whole business of keeping records in that Blueback notebook when I was thirteen. And that was the excitement about that whole business. I was on that Headstart from '66 until the end of December of '67. At that time, the Tufts-Delta Health Center had opened, and it was really a fascinating program. I had been recruited by John Hatch who was director of Community Health Action, together with other community activists to do workshops as part of the training program for their staff, and that was heady stuff. Here you were teaching people how to make the system work for them, how to go to the Welfare Department with records and demand your rights, how to go to elected officials and get things done in your community. It was fascinating to see a program that embodied, in a much more compelling way than Operation Headstart had, all of the things that we'd talked about in the civil rights movement, of empowering people to take control of their communities. This health program had organized classes to teach people. This health program had brought in people like myself and Owen Brooks to show people how to do things politically. This health program was talking about water systems and sanitary outdoor toilets, which we later learned was environmental health concerns. This health program was talking about building houses for people. And if you've ever lived in a plantation house with holes in the roof that you have to set pans and buckets under when it rains, with cracks in the walls that you had to stuff cotton and paper in to keep out the cold on
winter days, then you can really appreciate some group from up north, where we understood the freedom was anyway, coming in, talking about helping to do all of these things. I debated, within myself, if I wanted to come to work for this organization or if I should stay with Headstart, because most people felt that Headstart was going to be around for a long time. We weren't sure about this group from up North. If they were going to be here, or if it was going to be like so many of programs during that time, they come in and was out. I talked again to Robert Gray, who I respected, who was educated, but who also cared about the community and was approachable. He was director of the Headstart program. I asked him if he thought this program was going to be here, told him I was interested in working for them, and got his opinion. He told me he thought with the money they were putting into buildings and what they were doing, that they would be here, and encouraged me to go for it. I came to work in 1967 under John Hatch, who was chairman of Community Health Action, but whose program included training and environmental health components, social work, and several other areas. I went to work in a training department under Danny Mitchell. I got a chance to be paid to all the stuff I learned to do through the civil rights movement, of not only training people like the nurses' assistants and environmental assistants and all those folks, with how to access institutions and make referrals and do all that stuff, but also how to help people get together in their communities to address issues, local issues, that collectively they could do something about, and individually they would not be able to do as much about. You really felt like it was a continuation of the civil rights movement, in the sense that in a different way you were still building on that foundation that had been laid down. You was adding layers of power and abilities in specific areas. This is what you do in Symonds, Mississippi to get water, and this is what you do up in Roundlake to bring a recreation center to the community for the kids, and this is what I did in Shelby, Mississippi, at the Contact Center for kids, you know, to have a place to have a party or to dance and do stuff, and this is what you do with parents who are having problems with their kids. You had a sense that you were continuing with the civil rights movement in this work.

RK: You knew at that time, you had that sense?
LD: Oh yes.
RK: You felt very strongly?
LD: I felt very strongly, and I felt that that was the difference between what we were doing here than what was happening in Headstart. I felt there was a place for Headstart, but I really felt that it wasn't making the kind of changes that this place had the potential to make. And I didn't know at the time that all the leadership of this place had themselves been activists in the civil rights movement. John had been in the civil rights movement. Jack had been in the civil rights movement. Bob Smith out of Jackson, who had really been one of the people who helped force folks to come and address some of the issues of health care, had been picketing and involved in getting this together.
RK: Was frustration part of this, the frustration with the kind of limitations of, say, just voting? I mean, did you have some sense that wasn't, I mean, obviously you had the sense that wasn't enough, but was there...

LD: I don't think I had a sense of frustration that was as clearly defined then. I think that I was on a growth spurt, a personal growth spurt. I don't know how to say this without it sounding cocky, but I think I quickly outgrew Headstart. This person who had been awakened by the civil rights movement needed something else, needed that challenge, needed that excitement, needed that sense of still challenging the system, and I don't think it was being met in Headstart. I mean, I felt good personally when I had this little boy who had not spoken, was five years old, Michael Bobo, who hadn't talked, and who I worked with personally every day to try to get him to say something. And when he was with me one day and said, "Look at that big, old dog." I mean, I just almost went right on up in the sky. But I don't think it was enough. I really didn't have the sense that what we were doing was as important as what we later did when we organized the farm coop, when I was out on plantations again with Willie May Osborne and Bernice Trigg, and we were knocking on doors. This time, not to tell people about registering to vote because everybody was, but to say, "Hey, listen, there's a new program in town that's offering health care to people, and they've got social workers and doctors and nurses. And they're getting food for people, and they're taking care of your children. And you need to come on in and talk to them." It may have been that I was more comfortable doing that than I was teaching, I don't know. But I think that I just really outgrew the challenge of Headstart quickly, and had to move on.

RK: Well, I think that is important, this kind of personal development, and your relationship to the various organizations and things that they're doing. We're finding that with some other people, too, that once you unleash people like yourself, it's pretty hard to keep them under control or contained.

LD: That's right.
RK: Your ambitions had been. . .
LD: Awakened [laughter]. Discovered.
RK: Yeah. In your case, there are no boundaries. You just keep going and going and going. It's important, it seems to me, that organizations know how to respond to people like that. Always keep giving them those opportunities. Don't put them in situations where they don't have the chance to really grow.
LD: That's right. In the private sector, they know how to do that very well, but we really haven't understood that as well in social service type organizations or non-profit organizations. We really haven't capitalized on that as well, because we haven't recognized it. And quite frequently, the people don't recognize it themselves. I did not understand, at all, in '67 why I wanted to leave Headstart. I mean, all of the things that I now understand about it just wasn't there. I just felt that what they were doing here would probably result in more change than what was happening in Headstart. My own relationship and my own contribution to that wasn't as clearly defined. It just
wasn't, because I hadn't grown enough to catch up with what was happening to me or to understand all the dynamics of change that I was involved in. You tend to think about these experiences and things as things that you do without understanding the impact that the things have on you. I understood that I was fascinated with the things that I learned in the movement, and with the things I saw. You don't see a Fannie Lou Hamer, and you don't talk to her, and you don't have her explain things to you, without being forever changed in terms of the charisma of the woman, the depth of her. You don't live with an Owen Brooks and listen to his analysis of events that you just see without understanding, without having that have an impact on you. And both of them had the ability, Fannie Lou Hamer and Owen Brooks, in different ways had the ability to, at the same time, make you believe that you could go get the moon and bring it back, and make you believe that you had a responsibility to go get it and bring it back, without any of the guilt if you didn't get it. I mean, I don't know how to tell you how they did that, but they had the ability to do that. Anzie Moore and people like that, who had been out there for a long time, before the civil rights movement, trying to raise consciousness and being successful in doing it to a large extent, all those people impacted what you became, without you really understanding what you were. Because you thought you were doing things, and really, I'm sure they understood that when they set these things up, it wasn't about what you would be doing, it was about what they would be doing to you and what these processes would make of you. You don't see all of that, and perhaps it's very good that you don't. Because if you start out with a bunch of people who are new to the whole process, if they understood everything that was involved, they would not only see the positive but they would also see the negatives. And they wouldn't rush out to be killed every morning, thinking that was heady stuff. They would stay home [laughter].

RK: Right.
LD: They would stay home. Wait for John to do it. **

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B
L.C. DORSEY: I should warn you that sometimes when I get to talking, I get carried away. I will move. You'll have to tell me to be still or do something.

MARTIN: Move, you go forward, go back, that kind of thing. Does that chair rock a little bit? If you can try not to rock it, only because that begins to become distracting to the viewer.

LD: I won't rock the chair, but I will do this on a point. Look like I'm going right across this desk. [Laughter] You just forget about it. You forget what you're doing.

ROBERT KORSTAD: You do whatever you want. That's all right.

That's fine. We want you to forget about the tape recorder if you can.

LD: Neil, what is your last name?
NB: It's Boothby. B-O-O-T-H-Y.
RK: One of the things that we're interested in, in all of the people we're talking to, is some sense of the [Interruption]
LD: And they didn't want to have to do the paperwork that the federal government required them to do, the "fill in the stuff." It was a nuisance and a hassle to them, and they didn't want them to have it. So they tried to do everything they could to discourage people from pursuing it. They got it anyway. They were hauling water from Rosedale, so why couldn't they continue to do that? Any time you try to make change, of course, you always have problems like that, but it was very crazy. And I thought that that was part of their problem. They had worked and perfected the Save the Children, and worked and perfected their skill in overseas programs, and just hadn't quite figured out how you do this in America. What do you do with people in the United States? What do you do with kids who are malnourished in the United States and how do you avoid the political consequences of exposing child health problems or exposing dysentery from contaminated water, children being poisoned by pesticides. And I haven't figured out if they have a political agenda, or whether they just . . .

NB: I don't think they've learned to work with the different kinds of politics that child survival, child health ( ). They haven't looked at very fully the human rights thing.

LD: That's right. That's right. I don't know where they were with the children's summit the other year, too, because I haven't seen anything in that literature.

NB: They were there behind ( ). They were supportive but not actively supportive. We worked in the Middle East, for example, and they backed off on a report that talked about the rights of Palestinian children. They thought that was real political and didn't want to support it, though it was factual and accurate, because of the donor. So they're not real...

LD: Well, we've taken a position that they either get real [laughter], or we will do whatever we can.

NB: ( )
LD: Yeah. They either will get real, or we will just do
whatever we can with the kids that we have. We have a very selfish interest in working with the kids, and it has to do with trying to save some of them, of course, but more importantly, trying to develop leadership. To make sure that we've invested in people who understand the broad issues and who are preparing themselves to take these roles, to become the superintendents of education, the educators, the doctors, the director of the Delta Health Center, the historians recording what's going on, and whatever else. We want them to understand that they can do that, and our commitment is to try to help them do that, and providing recreation and health services and dental services is all part of the preparation. To make sure they're well, but the real thing is to understand the political, social, and economic structures, and how you overcome if they are barriers or how you seize control of or utilize to get to that point of leadership development. And if they're just going to bog us down with pieces of paper that say how much of your time was spent doing this and doing that and stuff like that, we're going to have to leave them alone and move on, you know [laughter].

RK: Get real or get out.
LD: Yeah, you have to do that.
NB: We had to do the same thing with the kids. They had to understand the political origins of the war that they were sort of in. That was part of the treatment, part of the get better stuff. They got a little wishy-washy on that, and I had to ( )
LD: Well, usually with a new person you can get some things done, so that you can do that.
RK: One of the things we're trying to do in talking with different people is get some sense of where people's commitment to these issues came from, and usually tracing that back to someone's childhood and family and their kind of upbringing is one place to start. It's not true for everybody, but I thought maybe you could just talk a little bit about your family, about growing up. I know you've written about it some. That would be helpful to us.
LD: Okay.
RK: Could you talk a little bit about your family and the things that you remember and some sense of how you felt about the world and things as a child, too?
LD: Sure. As long as you understand that I really didn't know anything was wrong with the world until I became an adult [laughter]. Okay, no, I can do that. Let me know when you're ready.
RK: We're ready.
LD: I grew up in the plantation system of the Mississippi Delta, and really for a long time I thought everybody was on plantations. I really didn't have a sense of poverty, in the sense that I understand it as an adult, because everybody I knew and everybody I visited and everybody I went to school and played with, lived in the same conditions. We all lived in houses on the plantation. They were all more or less the same kind of houses. Nobody I knew as a child owned their house or owned land even, that lived on the plantation. There were a few people in
the little towns who owned houses, but their houses were very similar to the ones we had on the plantation, shotgun, three room houses. We had a sense of real poor people, because they were the ones who didn't have gardens, who often didn't have clothes to wear, whose mothers didn't sew or make dresses from the feedsacks like our mothers did or like some mothers did. We also had a sense of real poor people as those people who didn't quite know how to take care of themselves, who didn't plan for the winter, who didn't cut wood, didn't work hard and diligent. That was, in my opinion, the poor people, but they were included in the network of support on the plantation. Everybody always planted some extra vegetables, saved the extra rabbits that they caught, for those families. They were the people who didn't quite get it together.

I had a happy childhood. I was sick a lot. Had asthma. Had pneumonia a couple of times before I was ten years old. We were fortunate enough to live on a plantation where the owner believed in having or providing a doctor for the tenants. So we had health care. In fact, my birth was attended by both a midwife, which was the general OB/GYN services for people in that area, both white and black, and a doctor. Dr. Robey actually delivered me. My mother was weak and tired and thirty-eight years old when I was born, and I had a difficult time coming into this world. So he was called and actually made the delivery. That was unusual in the Mississippi Delta but the Walkers, Ben Walker, was an unusual man who really did not believe in all of the nonsense that some of the other plantation owners professed. This was later born out in the '60s with the civil rights movement when the people struck on Andrews plantation. They were blacklisted. They were not allowed to work in the place, and they couldn't get water from any place for the tents that they pitched. Ben Walker was one of the farmers in the area who told them that they could get water from his place as often as they wanted. Well, that was where I spent the first eight years of my life, on that plantation.

My father was a very industrious person, my step-father rather, who fished, hunted, made his own boat to do this in. He caned chairs for people. He repaired shoes. He had his own equipment to do shoe repair. He and my mother made baskets from the bark of trees, just like they used for the rebottoming of chairs. They picked fruit when the blackberry season came. He and my mother spent days picking berries. Some they sold; others she canned for the winter and made jelly. They did the same thing with muscadines in the fall of the year. So we always had enough food. There was always food in the house, I never knew hunger in the sense that people talk about. Fresh fruit was either whatever they picked or we got a lot of it at Christmas time, but that was it. There was not a lot of clothing. My mother sewed and you could buy material for 15 or 20 cent a yard.

Then, at that time also, flour and chops for the chicken came in print sacks. So we had a lot of print dresses made from those feed sacks and flour sacks. And it wasn't a source of embarrassment. Everybody else had pretty much the same thing, and the kids who didn't, you just sort of looked at them and knew
they were special and lucky, but there wasn't the kind of competition that you see now with kids who have Reeboks and kids who don't have Reeboks or whatever, Air Jordan, of whatever the latest fad is. It wasn't that kind of stuff or that kind of yearning and resentment and longing. We just didn't have it.

I grew up in a house where there were not a lot of books. My father could not read and write. He'd never had the opportunity to go to school. My mother had gone to school in Alabama where her people were land owners. She was living with aunts and uncles because her parents had separated, and her mother had gone off to become a missionary in Liberia. So she went to school through the third grade, but she could read and write very well, do math. I remember weekends, spending entire weekends or most of the weekend, with my mother reading to us from the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Chicago Defender*. My father was anxious and interested in knowing what was happening to blacks in other parts of the country, and you could always buy these newspapers at the black barber shops or the beautician shops. So we always knew what was happening in the rest of the world, and I had this fantastic dream of going to Chicago. Everybody on every plantation we lived on had somebody in Chicago or Milwaukee. And every summer by the time I was in high school, every summer when school was out everybody caught the Greyhounds and Trailway buses and went to Chicago for the summer, and they worked. They came back, and they had fancy clothes, and they had money, and they looked good. I really felt that we were deprived in the sense that we had no relatives in Chicago.

So we spent our summer chopping cotton and carrying water. I started work when I was eight years old on the Walker's plantation. I was at the house with my younger sister, and Mr. Walker came by, one of the sons, who I think was Benjamin, came by and saw me there and went to the field where my mother was chopping, and asked if I could carry water for them, because there was nobody in the field but women, and they would have had to stop to get water. She was, of course, agreeable to that. It pleased her. There was extra money coming to the house. So at eight I became a wage earner, making $1.25 a day. And the women liked the fact that I didn't dawdle. I pumped the water off until it was real cold in this eight-pound lard bucket, and I walked fast so it wouldn't get warm on the way. As soon as I got back to the house, I started the whole process all over again. And I felt really great because the women who were chopping cotton weren't making but $2.50 a day. See, I was making almost as much money as a full-grown women. I think that really had a positive impact on my development in terms of understanding the relationship between work and reward, and the good feelings you had knowing that you were contributing to something, the praise from the women who I was bringing water to. It sort of set the tone for having a positive relationship with work.

**RK:** Did you get to spend, did you get to keep a little bit of that?

**LD:** Well, listen, just a little bit. I remember being very disappointed because I'd made up my list of all the things I was going to buy with the money. Get paid on Saturday afternoon.
And I didn't even get the money. The money was given to my mother, who gave me a quarter. And I remember being so frustrated. I mean, what could I do with a quarter? I had planned for all kinds of fantastic things with this money. There weren't a lot of things you could do on the plantation, but of course, you could buy four or five Baby Ruth candy bars and ice cream and Coca Cola and Nehi root beers and all of the other stuff. And none of that happened, of course. And later on, when I got over being mad with just having 25 cents, you really could buy a lot of stuff with 25 cent at that time. So that was what happened with the money. It went to support the family's other needs that I wasn't old enough, at eight years old, to appreciate or to deal with.

RK: We were talking. . . .
MARTIN: I'm sorry. I just want to say one thing. You remember last time when Steve dubbed your feedback. It doesn't bother me, but if someone ever is trying to edit this, they're going to wonder where the. . . .
RK: I'm trying not to do that.
MARTIN: And if you'll give me a half second, I'll make an adjustment here and I promise I won't want to make any more.
LD: What is the feedback you're doing?
RK: Well, when I say hm-hm, you know (            ). These microphones are so sensitive, they pick all that up. When they get ready to do a television documentary, they. . . .
LD: It's so good to help you keep focused. I mean, to help the speaker keep focused.
RK: I know. It's hard to do it with your eyes.
LD: Yes. And it's hard to imagine--I guess actors do this all the time--that you're talking to somebody if you're sitting there like a mannikin [laughter].
[Interruption]
RK: One of the things we were talking about as we were driving down is how the culture today, with television and all this, how it affects people in poverty. How you see all the wealth and opulence of some people. What kind of impact do you think that has on children growing up, say, in the Delta today? How that differs from the world that you grew up in?
LD: I think the impact of television on our children is very devastating, compared to listening to the radio or the Grand Ole Opry when I was eight, nine, ten, thirteen years old, or WDIA, or looking at the pictures in the Chicago Defender or the Pittsburgh Courier, or the occasional Look magazine that had pictures of black folks. During my era, those stories and those images of people with a better life became symbols of hope and goals to achieve. You understood very clearly from those images that came to us, via the radio, whether it was Joe Louis beating up on somebody or Jackie Robinson's breakthrough or whatever other sensational activity that was happening, that the conditions that we lived under in Mississippi, as black people in a plantation system and in these towns, was not universal. And that if you could get out of here to those places, your life would be different. And there was very clearly a difference. We understood early on, number one, our place. Now, even as a
child, my earliest remembrance of encounters with white people, that whole business of our places in relationship to white folks, the posturing, the behavior, the subservience was ingrained, and people did it deliberately, parents did it deliberately, because it was also felt that your life depended on understanding those relationships. The images that came to us via the newspapers and the radio, via people coming back to visit, indicated that our place was expanded in these other places. And that one of the ways to expand it was through education, was through citizenship, being responsible, participating in the structures of society, made your place bigger, made your place have more status, and certainly had more fairness.

I was also influenced in a way that enhanced those images by my father's response to white and black relationships. He really was a separatist in philosophy, in the sense that he simply didn't need integration. He didn't need to go to their churches, schools, restaurants, visit with them in their homes. But he was adamant, he was emphatic that if he did the work that the white man did and did it as well, he should paid the same wages. He also felt that in courts, and these were the two things I remember him being adamant about, that color should have no place. If he had been wronged by a white person, the court should have been the person who made it right, irrespective of color. He felt that if he got in a fight, a physical fight, with a white person, if he beat the white man, that should have been the end of it. If the white man beat him, that should have been the end of it. It should not have been a situation where, what he called the mob crew, which was another name for the Ku Klux Klan, came to his house in the middle of the night and dragged him and his family out and killed them or burned down the people or killed other black folks in retaliation.

The television images that kids watch today really impact their sense of self concept as measured in material things. In other words, you are what you own, and that gets reenforced over and over again. We see images of what is considered beauty, and the child who is fat, the child who has a wide nose, the child who has kinky hair, is faced with the concept that I'm not beautiful. Achievement is so much more individualized as opposed to group efforts that we saw when I was a kid. The race was advancing by Joe Louis knocking out Max Smelling. The race was advancing when Jackie Robinson became a member of a professional ball team. The race was advancing when people integrated Central High School in Arkansas. And you don't see that from television now. The individual has overcome and excelled and he is being rewarded or she is being rewarded. Bryant Gumbel is not seen as an outgrowth of efforts that started years ago with the NAACP. And for us, we understood that each accomplishment that was reported in the Chicago Defender or in the Pittsburgh Courier or in Ebony was the result of a group of people in the background pushing others ahead. Young people are given an image today via the television and via the movies that they can have it all, and that it's perfectly all right to cut corners and to do things that their parents and grandparents never thought of doing to get it all. The value system is different. They're conflicted.
They're in a house where somebody does not have enough money to have food and clothes, and they're seeing all these images come into this poverty of what should be happening and what can be happening with no mechanism to explain the differences between where they are and what they see on this television. And it's very misleading. And I absolutely am preoccupied with the business of alienation. I think very young children, given so many hours of television, gory scenes, are impacted in a very negative way about their feelings for other people, and I think that that's one of things that television does that didn't happen to us. I remember a cartoon that I saw someplace. It was like it was branded on my brain. But it showed these people driving around a mountain, somewhere in the United States, and they lost control on the car. It's a husband and a wife and a child in the back seat. The car is plunging off the mountain down into this ravine, and the child in the background in screaming, "Change the channel. Change the channel." And I think there is a group of young people who watch television who are very confused about reality, in terms of what is real and what is television. I know there are studies that support both, but in terms of being able to quickly shift from reality to playthings, I'm not sure that all kids are able to make that shift. I think of that, in a sense, is a different kind of outside stimulus than we had, growing up in the Mississippi Delta in a different time period and with a different value system.

NB: I remember a couple of summers ago I was out in Los Angeles in the Watts area, and there was a black youth who had kind of orchestrated this play. It was quite wonderful actually. At the end, he sort of stood up ( ) and he said, "To be or not to be is no longer the question. It's to become or be forgotten."

LD: That's right.

NB: It strikes me that you're talking in many ways, this instantaneous gratification somehow, to become or to have is who we are, or if you don't have...

LD: You don't exist. That's right. And we see it a lot in the community work that we do. In the very poor families, two or three days a year are very special days. It's an attempt, especially in families headed by females, to compensate for all of the things that the kids don't have the rest of the year. So you get, sometimes I think, an abundance of toys, too much money spent on clothes, too much money spent on whatever is the "in" thing for kids to wear. Right now, for instance, little girls are wearing these strange hats, and they cruise the malls. And people spend a lot of money doing these things because they really want to compensate for the disparity between what they see on television, which is a great marketing opportunity, and what they really have in their home. And sometimes these choices are made by parents at the expense of things that are much more needed by the family, which might be insurance, which might be health care, which might be money for educational needs, and other stuff. And you really can't blame the parents for making those choices because they're looking at this continuing assessment of them as parents, who also aren't able to provide
all these material things that you're supposed to have. Like each child is supposed to have a bedroom with a window and Priscilla curtains. In most families, if you have more than 1.4 children, you can't afford this many bedrooms with Priscilla curtains. It's all part of the frustration, I think, that people have in terms of what's going on. The thing that I think is most telling of the influence that the television of materialism has had on people is when you read these news stories in the media about kids killing each other for a jacket with some silly symbol on it, or a pair of sneakers, or some emblem that costs a lot of money but somehow adds to the status of the person who has it. When you have that kind of strong imaging going forth, with acceptance level in the peer group, overlooking how you came by the jacket or the shoes, then there's something really wrong with the country. I don't know that we can blame all of that on the television. But we certainly do market acceptability by these things, and I think that has had a tremendous impact on the formation of character, personalities, and coping abilities in young people that was totally foreign in my era.

NB: I'd really like to come back to this thing with restoration of values and if you use that in your work and how. But earlier you had said when you were growing up, you had a consciousness of the world, and it wasn't until you became an adult that you actually began to see some of the economic problems, some of the injustice problems. Could you go back to that time after or in your childhood when you first started noticing (       )? That not everything was OK?

LD: Well, when I became a teenager, I think your whole world changes, and I'm not always sure it's for the best. We might should be able to delay that process a little longer. When I was in the eighth grade, I must have been thirteen, maybe I was twelve for part of that year and thirteen for the other part. But anyway, that was a critical year for me in my recollection. I'm sure it had a lot to do with becoming an adolescent, and it had a lot more to do with noticing boys. I'd always played with boys. I was always popular with boys because I could pitch, run, and catch, and could hit the ball. So I was always very popular. But when I was thirteen, our relationship began to change. They noticed me as a girl, instead of just who would fight over whose team I'd be on at recess. I started noticing other girls -- who they spent time with -- how they looked, what they did with their hair, how they dressed, and you began to see the difference. The dungarees weren't there. The old T-shirts and stuff weren't there. They were wearing dresses and shoes and stuff. So that stuff became important, and I had to figure out how we could get some of that. Part of what had happened in almost all our years on the plantation, we never cleared any money. You know how that system works where you get all these advances, and at the end of year you settle up, and you're supposed to have money, and we never had any. I figured out, I had excellent teachers in these little one-room school houses who taught us incredible stuff, like how to keep books, basic bookkeeping, in math classes and stuff. I decided, and I'm not sure how I arrived at this conclusion, and I'm sure Miss Higgins, who was my teacher,
influenced that by impressing us with the importance of knowing how to do these things, so that we would be more responsible in managing our money and stuff. So somehow I made the quantum leap from learning all that stuff, and decided that the reason black folks never cleared any money from this operation was because we didn't keep any records. So when we started the crop year when I was in the eighth grade, I made a deal with Daddy that we were going to do better. We were going to become responsible. I would keep the books for him, and when settling day came, we would have a record of how much we owed the man, how much he owed us, and it would be fair. He would recognize our responsibility in keeping records. Daddy, I'm pretty sure, much have been very amused by this little simple logic that I'd come up with [laughter], but he played along. We got a Blue Horse notebook. I don't know if you guys ever saw a Blue Horse notebook, but it was the "in" book to have at school. It was put together well. The paper was sewn in and then it was covered with a piece of stuff. Not like the frivolous stuff you have now that falls apart. But we set it up, and I set it up the way I had learned in school with expense columns and income columns, and every day I would come home and listen to the market on the radio, where they broadcast how much cotton was selling for. Helena, Arkansas, had that every day between eleven and twelve. I forget the name of the radio station. And every thing we got, I listed in that expense column. We started getting a furnish in March, so from March through August you got that $50.00 a month. That was put down. The light bills, the gas bills, all these things that we had. Anybody who went to the doctor. And then everybody knew that there was a catch-all in the plantation system called plantation expenses. It was what they dragged out when they added everything they could legitimately add and then added plantation expenses. I guess the equivalent of that today at a university would be overhead or whatever. [ Interruption]

NB: Boy, this is the first time I ever heard anybody get excited about bookkeeping [laughter].

LD: Well, I met one other woman who had the same experience, in Marshall County, Mississippi. She decided in high school, she had made the high school, that that was exactly what was wrong, and went to her father and said, "I'm going to keep your books for you." And she is Cora Nash, the financial services director here. She read something I'd written one time, and she came to me and told me, "I don't believe this, but I did the same thing." Her fascination lead her to pursue accounting in college. Mine didn't [laughter].

NB: (                                     )

LD: I'm trying to think what was I really saying at this point.

NB: The plantation expenses as overhead.

LD: The plantation expenses was the catch-all for everything that they hadn't been able to legitimately charge you for. So I even included generous amounts, what I perceived to be generous amounts, for plantation expenses. The only way that we learned that the owners of the plantation made lots of money was
they figured all bale weights, cotton bale weights, at 500 pounds, and we had, sometimes, bales that weighed 640 pounds. So there was another whole 140 pounds of cotton that you didn't get any credit for. So we put all that together, and then divided all the bale weights, divided all by 500 weights, and added up everything we could. You used the date of sale to actually determine what cotton sold for, because the price ranged that particular year, I remember one period during that year cotton was selling at 40 cent a pound, but it didn't matter if your person didn't sell on that day. So you had to figure out what days they sold. So when I'd come home from school, I'd ask, "Did he sell cotton today? Did Mr. Carl sell cotton today?" If he sold cotton today, you looked in the Press Semitar, which was a newspaper out of Memphis that pointed out how much they sold for, and you figured out how much they sold for that day. And kept fairly accurate books. I'm amazed now as an adult at how seriously I got into this at thirteen. And you really have to compare it when at kids now, because it's lipstick and make-up and eye shadow that was important. The day settling day finally came, and I gave Daddy the book and went over everything with him -- remember he couldn't read and write -- I went over everything with him and went to school. I don't remember paying much attention to what was happening in class because my mind was fixed on what was going on there. The way I had figured it, we would have come out with at least a couple of thousand dollars for us in this deal. That was with giving them the benefit of the doubt. That's with giving them half of the cotton you'd made. That's with giving them lots of money for the plantation expenses. When I came home that afternoon, my mother told me they had had the settlement, and instead of the $2,000 and some dollars that I thought we would get, we'd gotten like $600 and some dollars. Since it was the first money they had made in over thirty years of farming, they were pleased. I was devastated. I was absolutely, positively ill. How could this have gone wrong, and what had happened. And I don't know. I'm almost certain, I'm almost certain now that my father, who knew his place, hadn't brought out the book, hadn't challenged Mr. Carl's figures, and also I'm almost sure he didn't want me to know that he wouldn't do that. He couldn't possibly have wanted to hurt me by saying this won't work or discouraged by saying this won't work. So I don't know what happened in that place. He may really have, but I'm almost certain he didn't. At that point, I decided that there was no fairness in the system, and that somehow people had to escape the system. Because it was not ever going to be a situation where you could do anything to make it work for you. I mean, that was the end of me assuming responsibility for an unfair and unjust world. And while I thought Mr. Carl and Mr. Ferguson were neat people who shared stuff with us that they didn't have to share, who were kind, and all the things that good white folk in Mississippi are, you just understand that there was this system here, somehow, that kept people from doing what they knew was right. It never occurred to me that perhaps my figures were wrong. It never occurred to me that perhaps the local cotton sellers were not giving Mr. Carl the forty cents a pound
that was on the national market. I mean, none of those things figured in. I just decided it wasn't fair. And it never occurred to me that we could make it better through any of the action that we saw later on in the civil rights movement. It just became a situation that you escaped. And I understood why all of the people who came back had left the plantation. That it was not a thing they could make work. And they'd gone where they could work and be paid a fair wage for their labor. They'd gone to Chicago. They'd gone to California. They'd gone to Detroit, or they'd come no farther than Memphis. That's what had happened with my older brothers. They'd gone to Memphis because they'd gotten tired of working and not being paid. They'd gotten tired of not having political and social justice. They'd gotten tired of being fearful of having somebody accuse them of crimes and spending their lives in prison, and they just left. And when they left Mississippi, their goal was that if they didn't find fairness and employment in Memphis to go to St. Louis, and from St. Louis to Chicago, from Chicago to New York. They never got any further than Memphis, but they were content there that they were receiving a fair measure of justice for their efforts and for their work.

RK: How did you change after, that's a pretty powerful experience?

LD: Well, it was. It was experience where I was preoccupied with getting out. I spent the next ten years trying to figure out how to get out of Mississippi. I had no relatives in Chicago that could send for me. I didn't make the real connection that my ticket out could be education, although Miss Higgins tried very hard to drill that into us. I didn't make that connection very well. So later on I decided that maybe the best way to get out of here was to get married, because a lot of people did escape the whole process through marriage. They married men, who like my father, were very industrious and found different ways to make money to supplement whatever the system didn't pay you from the plantation system, or they moved off the plantation into town, and they went to work in plants and factories and for white people as domestics. And had steady income. They had houses. They lived decent lives. So I expected to just get out of that system, and I didn't expect that it would ever change. I didn't think there was anything we could do to make it change because that experience at thirteen was devastating. And these were like the better white people. They weren't like some of the other folks who shot people and who beat them up or who denied them health care, who denied them food, who kicked them off their plantation when they got sick. And if these were the best people, and we couldn't make it work with them, I lost faith in that system.

RK: So at some point you just stopped going, you didn't see education as really a viable way of getting out of here?

LD: No, I really didn't. I only saw education, let me tell you when I embraced education, was after I had married, had six kids, had been kicked off a plantation. Because I got married when I was seventeen to someone who had a lot more material things than I did. They had a car, nice furniture, instead of a
shotgun house, they had a big four-room house. They had nice clothes. All of the members of the family had come from people who lived in Mound Bayou, and Mound Bayou was a status symbol for black folks. It was the mecca. And so I really thought that that was my ticket out of the plantation system and poverty. And really got married, suffered my second major disappointment in life. I found out that it wasn't a magical place. I started having babies and never got off the plantation. I experienced deprivation in a different form than I had ever had at home, because there was hunger. My husband didn't hunt, didn't fish, didn't pick berries. He drank. The disappointment was just overwhelming. I started having babies and had them quickly and close together. I was sicker than I ever knew people could ever be! And became quite miserable. I picked cotton, chopped cotton. I worked incredibly long hours, and again, had very little at the end of the year to show for it. Got kicked off the plantation by an owner who wasn't cruel, but who had a small operation to start with, and who had bought himself a mechanical cotton picker and a combine, and who really had no need for a family. He had 80 or 100 acres and he just didn't need anybody.

He worked himself. His son worked with him, and they didn't need the expense of a family. So we were asked to leave. We moved to Shelby, Mississippi, population about 2800 during that time, and assumed I would be able to go out and get a job. And ran face to face with the limitations of a high school drop-out.

I couldn't do anything. If you have a town full of people trying to be domestics for white women, and you can't teach -- I didn't have a nursing degree or a teaching degree. There was nothing I could do. I remember having everybody look for a job for me because I really needed to work. We were living in a house that had been condemned. My husband was making $36.00 a week. We had five kids and I was pregnant. So we desperately.

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

LD: All the people who worked in banks, stores. The two plants in town were white. I mean, there just weren't any jobs for blacks, and that was understood. They wouldn't hire you. Baxter was here in Cleveland, but it didn't hire anybody but whites. There was one black person working as a janitor. No blacks were hired in any of the plants in the area. So there was nothing to do but try to find work keeping people's children, clearing up their houses, doing something like that. I went to everybody that was working for white folks and asked them to ask around if anybody needed anybody. I could do housework and take care of babies. I was very good at that. I remember Lula Mae McClain found a job for me with the Lamendorfs, and she came by and told me to get ready to go for the interview. So I got ready. The Lamendorfs were big people in Shelby. They owned the best dry goods store with the best clothes that all of the rich people shopped at, and all of the well-to-do blacks like school
teachers and folks shopped at. They had a big house over in the white section of town. So I put on my best clothes and dressed up and went up for my interview with Lula Mae. They had asked Lula Mae a lot of questions about my background, like had I gone to high school, and could I read and write well, all of these things. So I was really excited because I was sure that if they wanted to know all of that they wanted me to work in the store. Oh, good Lord, my feet couldn't hardly contain themselves as I rushed up to that store that morning for the interview. They asked me all kinds of questions about character, what kind of person you were and all that, which I thought was appropriate. Then they asked me questions that tested my academic ability, which I just was convinced was part of getting you ready for the store. And then they became very clear that they only wanted to know all of these things because they wanted a maid who could take business calls at the house, and who could keep good messages for them. So although I was a little bit disappointed, it was okay. There was still a job. Then we got into my hours.

This job paid $19.00 per week, which was four dollars higher than the average that people were paying. So I was excited about that. But Mrs. Lamendorf wanted me to work seven days a week. I said, "Well, no, I have children. I think I should spend Sunday with them." And really we had so few things that we did together, Sunday School was one of the things that we always did together. We always got up and went to Sunday School together, and I couldn't imagine not being there to do that, really. So Mr. Lamendorf seemed to have been impressed with that. There was more evidence of character. So he said, "Okay." And I explained it to him, that I really took the kids to Sunday School. I didn't send them, and I would like not to have to work on Sunday morning. He was agreeable. He said okay. He said, "What you can do then is you can fix something for us on Saturday when you're there." And right there before me and Lula Mae, this couple got into an argument about my hours. She said, "Oh no, you know that's not right. She has to come." He said, "Oh, we can take care of ourselves one day." "Oh no, we can't. She has to come in." And with us standing there being totally flabbergasted, they argued back and forth. And although I needed that job desperately, I mean, I really needed it desperately, I had to make a decision, standing there watching them argue, that I couldn't take the job. And I couldn't take the job because we all knew enough about households in the South, that you had to go into a household where the man and wife were together, or you would get caught in the middle, and it could turn nasty. There were rumors when I was growing up of white women who had killed black women in these kinds of situations. So I really was afraid to take the job, understanding that there was conflict even before I became hired. The other thing that was very unsettling to Lula Mae and myself was that our image of white folks was that they never conducted themselves in the presence of black folks at the level of argument. That also was unsettling, because you could also get into trouble with people who didn't have character or who weren't quality people. I mean, people who had to do domestic work tried to work for people who were quality people,
people who had class and who understood how to behave and conduct themselves. So I said no to the job, and worried over whether I'd made the right decision, worried about whether I was denying food and health care to children, but feeling very much like I had no choice. That this really wasn't a job that I could afford to take. And it turned out that it probably was the best decision I made, and it was a guts decision. It certainly wasn't made from structural analysis or anything else [laughter]. It was just that, God, I'm going to be in the middle of these people, and I'm going to get hurt or probably get seriously damaged by this, and just gave it up. I never got a job as a domestic behind that. I went back to catching the truck and going to the field and chopping cotton. That was in '64 or early '65. Later on, the civil rights movement came to Shelby, Mississippi, and I became preoccupied with that. I learned along the way how to work the system. We didn't have food stamps at that period, but there were surplus commodities that I signed up for. So that supplemented our food supply. Chopping cotton whenever I was able gave us a little extra money. I became an expert, again, at managing the books, you know, in terms of taking twenty dollars, each week, which was what I got from my husband's wages, and paying all our bills, by spreading them out, paying the rent, which was ten dollars, one week, and the next week paying the utilities, which was never more then twenty dollars. Those were the good old days [laughter]. Making sure that we feed the family, very poor fare, but feed them three meals a day. When the civil rights movement really spread out, I became a volunteer with COFO, and as such received ten dollars or fifteen dollars a week stipend for community work. So we did a lot of voter registration, and the fifteen dollars also helped with some of the household things that we had to have. From that, the Johnson's poverty programs came to town, and that really freed a lot of black folks and poor whites from a strangle hold economy that just didn't let you live, or barely let you live. We went to work for wages that we never dreamed you could earn in Mississippi, and people were freed for the first time from a system that really controlled you through the threat of starvation. I mean, people put up with a lot of stuff on the plantation because you had a place to live. They gave you a shack to live in. They advanced you money, and they really bought your soul. You know, you just think about all the folks who endured mistreatment, who endured injustices, who endured brutality, to avoid having their wives and children put in the street. And we saw the horror that could happen to you when you didn't belong to a white man. That was what we saw with the Andrews' people. Everybody got kicked off that plantation, and every plantation was alerted not to hire them. So they not only could not work in any of the plants in town, they couldn't go to another plantation and go to work there. And it didn't matter if they had been leaders in the strike or if they had just decided, okay, we're getting off too. It was a horrible situation. The damage of that, some of those folks have never overcome. We didn't have psychological services and stuff at that time anyway, but they've never overcome that, because it was a kind of
shunning that took place. It was some terrible times, but people learned and eagerly volunteered to get out of that system.

RK: What was this early period of the civil rights movement like? What was it like going around doing voter registration? Was that an enervating moment or experience for you?

LD: Yes. You know, the only other time I had that kind of high, for lack of a better term, was that year that I was keeping books to show Mr. Carl that we knew what he was doing, and we were going to break up this nonsense of taking all our money. You know, it was bigger than Mr. Carl. I mean, I had latched on to what was wrong with the whole plantation system, and soon as we made it work with Mr. Carl, it was going to work for everybody else. Magically, it was going to be repeated. And the civil rights movement was an excitement. It was all of those stories that my mother had read to us across the years from the Chicago Defender and the Pittsburgh Courier. It was making up to Emmett Till for the helplessness that we all had felt for not being able to save him from that mob crew. It was making up to Willis for having to leave town and be scared to death for the rest of his life. It was for all of the atrocities, the lynchings, and the night riders, and all of the stuff that had been going on. It was our way of saying, "Okay, we're going to try to avenge all of this stuff that's being gone down across the years." And while you may not have thought about it consciously, you know, it wasn't like it was a conscious thought in your head that, okay, this is for Emmett Till or this is for Mack Charles Parker. That wasn't going on in your head, but it was the same feeling that the folks exhibited when they would gather in my folks' house to listen to Jackie Robinson on the radio or to listen to Joe Louis whip somebody at night at the fights. I mean, we always had a radio with those long batteries, and the folks would sit around and listen to it and cheer and be happy and really be free for a little moment, because Jackie had really made it possible for them or Joe Louis had really made it possible for them. And I felt an excitement that somehow what we were doing, and the magic of the vote, was going to eradicate all of the inequities that we were experiencing. Somehow, the magic of the vote was going to make people pay us better wages for our labor. It was going to make us be able to not be fearful of policemen when we saw them.

It was going to make mob crews disappear, you know, the Klan disappear. It was going to make the Lambadors not fight about how many days I would work. It was all of those things, and it was an exhilarating, powerful thing. You walked on to somebody's plantation, and you said to the owner, "My name is L.C. Dorsey. I'm with COFO, and I'm here to register any of your people who want to register. Do you have any objection?" You dared them to have any objection. You know, you never said it, but you dared them to. Or you went in and you didn't bother to go talk to the owner of the plantation. You went to the peoples' houses and said, "I've come to take you to register to vote, and here's why you should register to vote. Here's why you should be concerned about this. These are the things that we can correct and change." And to have people, based on you telling them that, to get up from where they were sitting, and get in the car with you,
and go off to a fate unknown to do this. And then one day, I had my comeuppance on that, too. I was at some plantation up between Alligator and Duncan. I don't remember the man. He was out there working on a tractor with one of the equipment operators, and I went up. I was working with the Johnson boy from Cleveland. We were working under Owen Brooks who had dropped us off. We're out in this cotton field some place without even a way to get out. I told the man who I was, and what I was there for, and asked him if he had any objections to me going around to the tenants and talking to them. He told me, "Nah, you can take them all to vote." I thought, ah, this is a piece of cake, because this was a tough guy, and everybody had warned us about him. I said this is a piece of cake. So I was walked on off to go to the first house, and he said, "Oh, by the way, now, when you finish with them registering to vote, don't bring them back here. Take them to your plantation." Well, I felt like I'd been hit in the stomach with a fist, and it was not anything that had been in any of workshops we'd been in. We were prepared for him to hit me, and I knew exactly what to do. To spit on me, I knew exactly what to do with that. We were prepared for the possibility for him to pull a gun and even shoot me. We left home with the understanding that it may have been the last time we saw our children, our families, or anything else. And that was heady stuff. It just emboldened us to do what we did. I had not been prepared for the guy who cooperated, who said, "Okay, take them, but don't bring them back there." I had to deal with what do you do, and what is your responsibility with this?" And again, I had to make a quick choice without adequate preparation and on my feet. I didn't like the choice I made. I thought about all the things that could happen. Tent City had not gone well, the Andrews' people, and we all knew that. I lived in a house that was condemned by the City of Shelby. I couldn't bring anybody home. We had three rooms that we were living in, three rooms and a kitchen. I didn't know of any other facility where we could take these folks. Mount Beulah had taken in some people, but that was so far away. And here we were in this cotton field with no car even. So I went back to the people who we had talked to already on the plantation, talked to Curtis Johnson, who was with me, and I told them what the man had said. I apologized to the people on that plantation, and told them that I couldn't take the responsibility for them not having a place to come back to. And I was sick for the rest of that week because I felt I had let the people down. I'd psyched them up, gotten them ready, and walked out and left them. I encouraged the people, on their own, to go down to the courthouse and register. Later on, several weeks later, I ran into one of the people who had been on the plantation, who called me aside to tell me that they had done just that. They'd all gotten together and gone down to the courthouse in different cars and at different times, and all of them had registered. I felt better. I didn't know enough about organization and empowerment to realize that that was my most successful encounter. That I had simply given information, and they'd made the decisions on their own. Their decision was much better than the one we had been
prepared to make. I learned all that later, but at the time I felt relieved that my contribution to their situation had been negative, and that I'd been able to do anything about it. But later on, looking back over all of the people that I contacted and all the folks we carried off plantations to go register, I really feel that that was the most significant and successful voter registration day I had in that whole period of time. [Interruption]

NB: '64-'65?
LD: Yeah, '64-'65.
NB: So you had six kids at this point?
LD: At that point I had six kids. The oldest was born in '56, so what is that, eight? So they're from infants to, Chip wasn't born 'til '65, my youngest one. So they're pre-birth to eight, I think. They were very young.
RK: That, in itself, was a full-time job.
LD: Oh, it was, it was. They were dragged around to a lot of meetings. I think it rubbed off on them. The older ones are all politically active. Another friend of mine who's a movement person said, "We've raised a generation of humanists." Many of them aren't activists, but they understand the difference and political structures in life.

RK: You mentioned that quickly after the civil rights movement came to Mississippi, the War on Poverty was started too, and federal money and intervention and help came. Maybe you could just talk a little bit about how you first kind of confronted that or saw that and some of the jobs--there were better jobs for people. Talk a little bit about what those were and what that meant.
LD: One of the things that the Mississippi Delta, and I guess the Black Belt all up and down the United States, had attempted to do was control the black population. We were always the majority of the population. And they'd used several structures to do that very effectively. One was just brute force. If somebody got out of their place, you were immediately dealt with, and you were dealt with visibly and in a way that sort of put fear into the hearts of other people. One of my earliest memories is this fear of black people discussing white people in whispers, you know. Of worrying that somebody was eavesdropping outside of the houses at night to see if they were talking about white people. Of black folks running away, just like slaves, running away from plantations in the middle of the night with nobody knowing where they went and how they got away.

So you had this sense of fear early on. Fear was one of the things that people used to keep black people in control.

The other thing that people used to keep people in control was the economic system. Black people were totally dependent on white people for everything that had to do with their survival. You bought it from the commissary or you got it from the office or something. It was just how you got things. Everything that you needed from a match to a doctor, you had to go through these people to get. And they had the power to give it to you or to deny it. They had the power even to make sure you didn't get it any place else. So folk were totally controlled by these two
ventures. Anybody who attempted to stand up to this system was dealt with swiftly. For instance, if I lived on Mr. Bob's plantation, and Mr. Bob was paying two dollars a day for wages, and I wanted to go to work on Mr. Neil's plantation who was paying three dollars a day. Mr. Bob could actually punish me by taking me up and physically whipping me or making me leave the plantation. And because Mr. Neil understood the need to support this nonsense, you couldn't go to work for Mr. Neil's plantation.

It was like you were really blacklisted between both people. And if Mr. Neil had been letting you work, after he realized that Mr. Bob was upset about it, you couldn't work there any more. So you family was faced with the possibility of starving to death.

Later on, when people started mumbling about civil rights and human rights and political rights after the Montgomery activity, the successful Montgomery bus boycott and related activities, there was a conscious move by white landowners to clamp down. One of the things that they did was actually put in place those things that would result in people being staved to death. For instance, after November when most of the cotton was harvested, people lived on money they borrowed from the plantation owners until March when they got furnishes. You never got enough, because money was allocated to you by family size, and you never really got enough. You may not have only gotten fifty dollars or a hundred dollars to take you from November to March. And what people usually did was bought up all of the meal, flour, lard, sugar, coffee that they could with that money.

Bought kerosene and stuff. And then they hustled, you know. If there was some cotton left in the field, you picked that on dry days and cold days and sold it. Or you picked wild greens, or they had turnip patches that the good boss people planted for folk, and you hunted rabbits. And you picked up here in Bolivar County and other places, you picked up pecans from the levy and sold them. That'd help you buy salt meat; it'd help you buy medicine; it'd help you buy other things you need. We watched them fence off the levy and put trespassing signs up so you couldn't do that. And when people went over the fences and went under the fences, they were actually arrested and put in jail. Now, you have to understand that the levy is federally owned property. It doesn't belong to any individual farmers or anybody else, but that was the things they did.

Commodities was the first effort that they had to try to keep you from starving to death. You had to go through a lot of changes to get that. You had to actually, on some plantations, be approved by the owner of the plantations to go into town, the welfare department distributed them, and get the commodities. And you didn't get very much, but every little bit was a big help. And there were stories that were told during this era, that butter had been allocated to give to families, and before the white people who were passing out the commodity would give butter to them, they'd bury it. I mean, they just threw it in the city dump and buried it. The commodities help people eat better, but it just really staved off starvation and tightened control on folk. The civil rights groups that came to town really started looking at ways to break that strangle hold, and
they started bringing in food. You saw the film and the books of pictures of Dick Gregory with truckloads of food and stuff in areas. Church groups up north sent down tons of food, so that people really had a way to live.

The most significant organized program that helped break that economic stranglehold on people was the CDGM Project. It was Operation Headstart, where children were put in programs that gave them food, education, and health care, and their mamas was hired to take care of them, to teach them, to be teaching assistants. It gave the women from the plantations and from these families an independent income that had nothing to do with the plantation, and that couldn't be controlled by the plantation, that couldn't be controlled by the powers that be in the political arenas in Mississippi and other southern states. In their wisdom, the people who shaped the program, allowed it to come into the state if it came through colleges. Independent colleges in some of the southern states were the grant recipients for these programs. The organized plantation people did not take this sitting down. They fought against it. They used people that we used to call "Uncle Toms"-- we don't do that anymore--to try to block it in the black communities. Churches where the classes were held were bombed. But people recognized that this was an opportunity to feed their families, to have health care for their families, and to begin to break that stranglehold. I don't know if it was ever perceived by large groups of people at any single time as a mechanism breaking the economic stranglehold, but certainly people understood the direct benefit of their family by having a job that wasn't totally dependent on the plantation owner.

Other programs came in about the same time, health care programs, that hired people. Community action programs that provided jobs in other areas for people who previously had been unable to be employed. People learned skills because many of the jobs had provisions in them where folk were taught paraprofessional skills, and became employable. They weren't high school dropouts standing up at Lambadors, trying to convince them that they could do a job.

NB: I believe it was in 1966 that you began as a Headstart teacher?

LD: That's right.

NB: How did that, you've talked about that in general, in your own sort of personal experience, how did that kind of further your sense of mission and perhaps.

LD: Survival [laughter]. I had gotten involved in some volunteer work with the CDGM movement. We'd gone to workshops and training programs, but I was not, because of some of the political activities that I had been involved in in my local community, there was a certain amount of fear on the part of people who were in charge of the program locally that I would bring to the program if I was hired, -- problems. That because of my controversy and my role in voter registration and challenging white folks and leading boycotts that somehow they might suffer fire bombings. They may not even get the funds if I was hired. So I wasn't hired with the group that all the other
activists were hired for in Mississippi. Robert Gray, really, when he was director of program, gave me a chance to work in opposition to some of the less progressive black folks who had been involved in what became known as the white folks Headstart. They also didn't want me [laughter] in the program. I saw the program, not as an opportunity to further any political agendas, I didn't see it as an opportunity to impact the next generation of leadership. I really saw the Headstart program and my employment in it as a personal opportunity to earn a living for my kids and myself. In 1966, when I went to work for Headstart, I had six children, and I was very concerned that they have an education and not live the life I had lived after marrying, because I really didn't think much was wrong with my life [laughter] before that. But I didn't want them to wind up being cotton choppers and cotton pickers. I felt that the opportunity for them to even do that was less, and that they had to be able to take care of themselves. So going to work for Headstart represented for me an opportunity to be employed. We had been in town for three years. It had been a rough three years. It was the first time, in fact, in 1965, where I had been totally without food. I had one horrible, nightmarish night where we cooked the last food at noon. It was enough food at noon for everybody to get enough to eat, and we went to bed that night hungry. My husband did not come home with his paycheck. We had no money and no food in the house, and it was a situation where I kept thinking he would be in because he knew we didn't have any food, and it became too late to go to any neighbor's house, knocking on the door, saying, "Do you have any food?" And I didn't ever want that to happen again. So Headstart offered an opportunity for me never to have to subject the children to that.

And you can't appreciate how horrible that is unless you've lived through it. It's one thing to be hungry yourself. It is an entirely different thing to know that your children are hungry, and to put them to bed knowing they're hungry, and listen to them cry themselves to sleep. It is even more devastating, and it hurts even to talk about it now, to have the older children, who are only ten or so, be just as hungry but try not to let you hear them cry. That is something that helps you understand why women become prostitutes, why people rob and break in stores, and why they take what they want to deal with this. It's most horrible. I didn't ever want to have to live through that again, and Headstart represented for me, more than any movement goals, an opportunity not to ever have to hear a hungry child crying in my bed at night.

I went to work there, and I learned a lot about the organized workplace. A Headstart classroom was quite different than the plantation. Teaching in a classroom had a certain amount of power, that I'd never envisioned, that you never perceived being a student. And you could impact on the people in that classroom in a very positive way. And I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the dynamics. I enjoyed the interaction, but more importantly I enjoyed the learning experience, because we were being taught also. They had teachers, and they had consultants, and they brought in people. And we were learning, and it was a
whole new world. I read all the stuff they brought as voraciously as I had read the Freedom School material, because it opened up another whole world, that being in the plantation, and the limitations of the educational experiences that the plantation had offered, had denied us. And I realized that there was a hunger there that I hadn't recognized that was akin to this whole business of keeping records in that Blueback notebook when I was thirteen. And that was the excitement about that whole business. I was on that Headstart from '66 until the end of December of '67. At that time, the Tufts-Delta Health Center had opened, and it was really a fascinating program. I had been recruited by John Hatch who was director of Community Health Action, together with other community activists to do workshops as part of the training program for their staff, and that was heady stuff. Here you were teaching people how to make the system work for them, how to go to the Welfare Department with records and demand your rights, how to go to elected officials and get things done in your community. It was fascinating to see a program that embodied, in a much more compelling way than Operation Headstart had, all of the things that we'd talked about in the civil rights movement, of empowering people to take control of their communities. This health program had organized classes to teach people. This health program had brought in people like myself and Owen Brooks to show people how to do things politically. This health program was talking about water systems and sanitary outdoor toilets, which we later learned was environmental health concerns. This health program was talking about building houses for people. And if you've ever lived in a plantation house with holes in the roof that you have to set pans and buckets under when it rains, with cracks in the walls that you had to stuff cotton and paper in to keep out the cold on winter days, then you can really appreciate some group from up north, where we understood the freedom was anyway, coming in, talking about helping to do all of these things. I debated, within myself, if I wanted to come to work for this organization or if I should stay with Headstart, because most people felt that Headstart was going to be around for a long time. We weren't sure about this group from up North. If they were going to be here, or if it was going to be like so many of programs during that time, they come in and was out. I talked again to Robert Gray, who I respected, who was educated, but who also cared about the community and was approachable. He was director of the Headstart program. I asked him if he thought this program was going to be here, told him I was interested in working for them, and got his opinion. He told me he thought with the money they were putting into buildings and what they were doing, that they would be here, and encouraged me to go for it. I came to work in 1967 under John Hatch, who was chairman of Community Health Action, but whose program included training and environmental health components, social work, and several other areas. I went to work in a training department under Danny Mitchell. I got a chance to be paid to all the stuff I learned to do through the civil rights movement, of not only training people like the nurses' assistants and environmental assistants and all those
folks, with how to access institutions and make referrals and do all that stuff, but also how to help people get together in their communities to address issues, local issues, that collectively they could do something about, and individually they would not be able to do as much about. You really felt like it was a continuation of the civil rights movement, in the sense that in a different way you were still building on that foundation that had been laid down. You was adding layers of power and abilities in specific areas. This is what you do in Symonds, Mississippi to get water, and this is what you do up in Roundlake to bring a recreation center to the community for the kids, and this is what I did in Shelby, Mississippi, at the Contact Center for kids, you know, to have a place to have a party or to dance and do stuff, and this is what you do with parents who are having problems with their kids. You had a sense that you were continuing with the civil rights movement in this work.

RK: You knew at that time, you had that sense?
LD: Oh yes.
RK: You felt very strongly?
LD: I felt very strongly, and I felt that that was the difference between what we were doing here than what was happening in Headstart. I felt there was a place for Headstart, but I really felt that it wasn't making the kind of changes that this place had the potential to make. And I didn't know at the time that all the leadership of this place had themselves been activists in the civil rights movement. John had been in the civil rights movement. Jack had been in the civil rights movement. Bob Smith out of Jackson, who had really been one of the people who helped force folks to come and address some of the issues of health care, had been picketing and involved in getting this together.

RK: Was frustration part of this, the frustration with the kind of limitations of, say, just voting? I mean, did you have some sense that wasn't, I mean, obviously you had the sense that wasn't enough, but was there...?
LD: I don't think I had a sense of frustration that was as clearly defined then. I think that I was on a growth spurt, a personal growth spurt. I don't know how to say this without it sounding cocky, but I think I quickly outgrew Headstart. This person who had been awakened by the civil rights movement needed something else, needed that challenge, needed that excitement, needed that sense of still challenging the system, and I don't think it was being met in Headstart. I mean, I felt good personally when I had this little boy who had not spoken, was five years old, Michael Bobo, who hadn't talked, and who I worked with personally every day to try to get him to say something. And when he was with me one day and said, "Look at that big, old dog." I mean, I just almost went right on up in the sky. But I don't think it was enough. I really didn't have the sense that what we were doing was as important as what we later did when we organized the farm coop, when I was out on plantations again with Willie May Osborne and Bernice Trigg, and we were knocking on doors. This time, not to tell people about registering to vote because everybody was, but to say, "Hey, listen, there's a new
program in town that's offering health care to people, and they've got social workers and doctors and nurses. And they're getting food for people, and they're taking care of your children. And you need to come on in and talk to them." It may have been that I was more comfortable doing that than I was teaching, I don't know. But I think that I just really outgrew the challenge of Headstart quickly, and had to move on.

RK: Well, I think that is important, this kind of personal development, and your relationship to the various organizations and things that they're doing. We're finding that with some other people, too, that once you unleash people like yourself, it's pretty hard to keep them under control or contained.

LD: That's right.

RK: Your ambitions had been...

LD: Awakened [laughter]. Discovered.

RK: Yeah. In your case, there are no boundaries. You just keep going and going and going. It's important, it seems to me, that organizations know how to respond to people like that. Always keep giving them those opportunities. Don't put them in situations where they don't have the chance to really grow.

LD: That's right. In the private sector, they know how to do that very well, but we really haven't understood that as well in social service type organizations or non-profit organizations. We really haven't capitalized on that as well, because we haven't recognized it. And quite frequently, the people don't recognize it themselves. I did not understand, at all, in '67 why I wanted to leave Headstart. I mean, all of the things that I now understand about it just wasn't there. I just felt that what they were doing here would probably result in more change than what was happening in Headstart. My own relationship and my own contribution to that wasn't as clearly defined. It just wasn't, because I hadn't grown enough to catch up with what was happening to me or to understand all the dynamics of change that I was involved in. You tend to think about these experiences and things as things that you do without understanding the impact that the things have on you. I understood that I was fascinated with the things that I learned in the movement, and with the things I saw. You don't see a Fannie Lou Hamer, and you don't talk to her, and you don't have her explain things to you, without being forever changed in terms of the charisma of the woman, the depth of her. You don't live with an Owen Brooks and listen to his analysis of events that you just see without understanding, without having that have an impact on you. And both of them had the ability, Fannie Lou Hamer and Owen Brooks, in different ways had the ability to, at the same time, make you believe that you could get the moon and bring it back, and make you believe that you had a responsibility to go get it and bring it back, without any of the guilt if you didn't get it. I mean, I don't know how to tell you how they did that, but they had the ability to do that. Anzie Moore and people like that, who had been out there for a long time, before the civil rights movement, trying to raise consciousness and being successful in doing it to a large extent, all those people impacted what you became, without you really understanding what you were. Because
you thought you were doing things, and really, I'm sure they understood that when they set these things up, it wasn't about what you would be doing, it was about what they would be doing to you and what these processes would make of you. You don't see all of that, and perhaps it's very good that you don't. Because if you start out with a bunch of people who are new to the whole process, if they understood everything that was involved, they would not only see the positive but they would also see the negatives. And they wouldn't rush out to be killed every morning, thinking that was heady stuff. They would stay home [laughter].

RK: Right.

LD: They would stay home. Wait for John to do it. **

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B