

Voices from the Grassroots Oral History Project

Detroit Equity Action Lab

Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights

Wayne State University Law School

Detroit, MI

MARIAN KRAMER

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER AND ORIANA YILMA

March 2, 2019

Detroit, MI

Narrator

Marian Kramer is a veteran organizer with roots in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She is the national president of the National Welfare Rights Union, a member of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, and a member of the People's Water Board. Kramer was a lead organizer with the Congress for Racial Equality in the Civil Rights movement. She organized all over the south with a specific focus on Louisiana and Texas. She moved to Detroit, Michigan in 1965 and continued her activism through her involvement in union organizing, organizing against water shutoffs, advocating for access to affordable water, as well as protecting the rights of women and children who use welfare.

Interviewer

Peter Blackmer is a Research Fellow at the Detroit Equity Action Lab, an initiative of the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University Law School.

Oriana Yilma is an undergraduate student at Wayne State University majoring in Psychology and minoring in African American Studies.

Abstract

In this interview, Marian Kramer discusses her experiences growing up in Port Allen, Louisiana and Dallas, Texas and how that inevitably influenced her passion for organizing. Kramer talks about her time as an organizer in the Civil Rights movement. She shares stories of engaging in direct actions against police and heroic community moments that largely allowed for her and her fellow CORE organizers to sustain themselves as full-time organizers. Kramer also details her relocation to Detroit in the 1960s, including lessons she learned as a union organizer and how it continued to inform her organizing approach.

Keywords

1967 Detroit rebellion; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Civil Rights movement; Congress of Racial Equality; Dallas, Texas; Deacons for Defense and Justice; Detroit, Michigan; Freedom Summer; Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union;

Housing; Jonesboro, Louisiana; Labor unions; Monroe, Louisiana; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; New Orleans, Louisiana; Port Allen, Louisiana; Southern University; St. Francisville, Louisiana; Water shutoffs; Welfare rights; West Central Organization

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Transcript of interview conducted March 2, 2019 with:

Marian Kramer [MK]

Detroit, MI

By: Peter Blackmer [PB] and Oriana Yilma [OY]

PB: Ms. Kramer, thank you so much for coming to speak with us today. I have to say to be an honor at the [Charles H.] Wright Museum [of African American History], which is really exciting. Just to give you an idea about why we are doing this--Martina and I are both with the Detroit Equity Action Lab, and this project that we're working on is to document and...and preserve and present voices from the grassroots, particularly those who have been on the frontline since emergency management, so that we can better understand, educate, inspire, empower current and future generations of organizers in Detroit [Michigan] and elsewhere. So, just want to start by asking you your name, where you live, and what organizations and affiliations you have?

MK: Oh, my God. My name is Marian Kramer-Baker, but, you know, sometime I just use one name or two names, but it's Baker because I still honor my husband. And what was the other question?

PB: Where you live and what organization.

MK: I live in Highland Park, Michigan, and the various organizations I'm a part of... I'm the national president of the National Welfare Rights Union. I'm a member of Michigan Welfare Rights, my base. Oh, my God. My brain just... Oh, I'm a part of the General Baker Institute. Let's skip and just keep going. We can go on and on

and on. Oh yeah, and I'm a part of [Black Legacy Coalition], the coalition of people that came together around the Afro-American Museum and the whole struggle that is taking place over there at this time. You name it. I have to have somebody else with me to tell me what I'm a part of. [laughs]

[0:01:16]

PB: Could you tell us a little...just describe your neighborhood when you first got to Detroit?

MK: The other organization that's important to me is the People's Water Board. Okay. And you wanted me to describe Detroit when I got here? When I got here, I thought the place was on fire and that was in the...19 what? I'll have to come back to that. [laughs] But it was right after the Civil Rights movement, and my ex-husband [Dave Kramer?] and I came up here because he had...they had request...some people had request that he come up here and help out with the organizing that was taking place in a Saul-Alinsky-type atmos--you know, organizing. So when I got here, the first thing I began to watch, I mean, kind of concentrate on is it was cold, and it looked like fire was coming up out of the streets. And I was wondering was Detroit on...on fire? So, it was quite interesting because I never been in that type of atmosphere. You know, I'm used to the South. I was at that time. So, it was a shocking type of thing.

[0:02:34]

PB: So, could you tell us a little bit about how you first got active in civil rights, both in the South and up here in Detroit?

MK: Well, I got...I was inducted into the Civil Rights movement at a young age of five years old when my grandfather was working at a tavern across the street from my house on Atchafalaya Street in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. It's Port Allen [Louisiana]. They call it Port Allen, a section west Baton Rouge. And my grandfather was working at a second job across the street, and he had told this young man, "You hit me once more, and that will be three strikes and you're out."

This young man was young enough to be his great--I mean, grandchild. He did not respect my grandfather because he figured that Blacks, they can treat 'em--treat us--any kind of way, and that was a piece of they property. But I was raised in a family, some kind of way, you organize and fight back. But he hit my grandfather again, and my grandfather did stab him. It was just a little wound, and he came home, and I remember my mother and my grandmother talking about what are we going to do. You know, because you didn't retaliate like that against any white person without the [Ku Klux] Klan or somebody coming out, and I remember family on both sides of my family, on my father's side and my mother's side, coming up to our home. Now, you can see this house. This house is one with two bedrooms, a...a bathroom and a living room and a kitchen, and all these people came in to try to see what they were gonna do as far as helping my grandfather to get out of Louisiana, and it was interesting to try to figure out what was going on.

So that was my first introduction in that, but I didn't realize it was, but they...they got him out. They had someone to drive in from...from Detroit--I mean, not Detroit--from Dallas, Texas and snuck my grandfather out late at night. He had...they had moved him around way that no one can find him, and he left. And about a year and a half later, my grandmother and I took a trip to Dallas. I didn't realize what we were going there for, but it was for us to be able to relocate the family to Dallas, Texas because we didn't know as to...did not understand whether or not my grandfather...they were still trying to get my grandfather. That was four children, my older brother Sam, who I...I was next to, and two younger brothers and al--my grandmother, my grandfather, and my mother. All of us were in the same car. That was those old cars you get a whole lot into.

And we moved to Dallas, and it was different than what I knew in Louisiana. Our church was right down the street, and everybody in the neighborhood seemed to be related, but we were not, but that's how they operated. And [coughs] I was enrolled in school, and the school was different than the school I had attended in Louisiana. I didn't have to go outside to the outhouse, you know, in order to take care of my business. So, you know, all these people were new. And so, we were in the... My brother Sam and I were in the first grade, and the next year my brother Alan was coming into school with us. But my mother, on the fourth year, she kind of didn't like the way the schools were operated and was able to get a scholarship for us to go Catholic school. But she wasn't too much on that, you know, because we were not Catholics, and it was a continu--it was always a way that they would

try to recruit you. And we were already in a...in a church that was very active in the community because it was the beginning time in the [19]50s of the Civil Rights movement. Our church was participating in at that time. So finally, she put us back in our public school.

My brother started retaliating and shooting hooky from school, and when he did show up--his name was Sam, Sam Bernard--when he first...when he...when he would come to school, he knew more than we did, and I would be angry. I'm out here in school all the time, and you come in here and understand everything we're talking about. But, Sam never did like school. We found out he was...he was right. He was smarter than a lot of us, but he, you know, he and some other kids started getting in more trouble and stuff like that. And so, my mother not only had to... Not only was she working, my grandfather was working. My grandmother would greet us everyday when we would get home from school, and my mother kept us active in anything that was going on at the church at the time because everything was segregated.

So, I was used to being around a family, a large family. I would be in Louisiana. I was either going to my other grandmother's house or staying home where I was, you know, where my, you know, to visit everybody. That's the type of family I came from. My father was a carpenter. His brothers were either painters, electricians, and stuff like that, but they could not bid on any jobs. They had a white friend that bidded for them because that was forbidden--forbidden at that time, but they built a lot of homes in Louisiana. But, you know, we were not able to be in none of those homes that they built at that time. Later on when I got older, he built a home for us, but it was... That's how we lived, you know, from family or from neighbor to neighbor. Sometime, I'd been ate twice before I got home because I visited somebody in the neighborhood. I was always there, you know. It was that. It was a huge family, but my mother began to explain to us that Dallas, Texas was still like Louisiana, and that is, you know, Blacks--particular males--could not look at a...at a white woman even going down the street, you know, and that type of stuff. The rules that we lived by in Louisiana was some of the same rules in Dallas, Texas.

[0:10:21]

So we grew up with that, and eventually she got us... We joined the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], youth NAACP. I didn't like it at first--you know, too much at the time because they looked like they wouldn't let us do too much. You know, it was good to hear the information and stuff like that and go on little trips, but it was not fulfilling to me at the time. But our church was involved, and our minister encouraged us to be active.

Then came the time when I was in the fifth grade that one of my favorite teachers and her husband ended up in the news, and everybody down on the street--you know, in the neighborhood was at our house looking at the one TV, you know, and it was about they bought a house in a neighborhood that was forbidden--forbidden from Blacks moving in in a particular area. In...in Dallas, there's Oak Cliff. It used to be a little town at one time by itself, but it's a, you know, it's part of Dallas, Texas and stuff like that. But they said that no...no...no one working for the Board of Education and...and if they Black, they could not move in Skyline Heights. That is forbid. That's for whites, and that's it. My teacher and her husband moved in one of those homes because it was during the period of time that we were all fighting within the...the Civil Rights Movement was beginning to bud, you know, and people were organized, beginning to get involved. He lost his job, and his job, it was interesting. He was a salesperson. He was. He sold quite a few things, and one thing that you would never forget, he sold women's girdles. You know, this is my teacher husband, and we were always proud of her 'cause she was so good with her arts and teaching us a lot of stuff.

Well, the stand that they took began to usher on a movement in Dallas, and my minister encouraged all of us, each household, that we must become a part of it. I was proud 'cause that was, you know, I didn't know what to question. I look back, I was proud of what my, you know, teacher was doing because I didn't think it was right for us to be treated different than anyone else, and, you know, my mother kept...she kept teaching us.

My grandmother, she was a fiery little old lady. She say, "Did anyone hit you or anybody come say anything or spit on you? You let me know." Now, I always was at both of 'em. My grandmother on my mother's side, my grandmother on my father's side, they were some fiery little women. They, you know. People would

say they were the head of their households. They were right, although they would tell us, "Naww, your grandfather's the head of the household." We knew who the head of the households were. And so, they, you know, they encouraged us being involved, but we were little bitty things. Involved meant going with my mother to something or not, you know, not going out there and getting into a march or nothing like that, but those are the...at that period of time, that's what we were doing as far as the Civil Rights movement.

The...the big thing happened there when they told us that the rule on the State Fair still was in, and that is Blacks could only go to the State Fair one day out of the period of time that it was open. Boy, that... We wanted to go to the State Fair, and my grandmother told me--I'll never forget my boots that she put on, my white boots and everything. I was going to the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], I mean, YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association], and they had--and I'm surprised 'cause they had a Black one for the Blacks in...in Dallas, and we had to march in a...in a parade. My grandmother had my little white boots, white. I mean, she had me fixed up, and then she told me, "Here's the rule: when you get to that gate of the State Fair, you stand right there. Do not go in. You stand right there until we get--and you watch for us. Do not move." Well, when we marched, we were so proud. You know, we marching and stuff, but we didn't exactly understand a lot of the things, and we...we were in front of the gate, and I stood there, and my friends kept saying, "Come on, Marian. We got to go in and ride. This is the only day we can ride." I said, "I'm waiting on my family." You know, well, I went with my friends inside and to ride, and my grandmother... You know, I kept thinking, "Ooo, don't let it be my grandmother that finds me. Make my mother 'cause my grandmother is going to be angry." It was a...it was a lesson because she took me through it again. We should not be paying our money to a State Fair that won't even allow us to even come in but one day out of the year.

I...I learned from that. I learned a lot. If...if you going to participate--and it was through the years I began to connect the dots, you know--if you have agreed to participate in something, you...you need to carry it out, and that was a rude awakening because not only did I get a little spanking, but I also was on punishment, and I never forgot that. And I, you know, as I look back, I'm happy that she kept on me and taught me. Then, it eventually... You want to ask me a question? Another question? Unless you want me to go on...

[0:17:02]

PB: I'm happy to let you go on, and I also want to shift us towards, like, how that upbringing in the South impacted your political thought and your experiences when you got to Detroit [Michigan]. So, a little organizing...

MK: That's a jump.

PK: Yeah, I'm sorry. [laughs]

MK: You understand I went to school in Dallas, Texas, and when I went, when I would go back to Louisiana and...and see my cousins and them, they were all, a lot of 'em, were going to Southern University. Then, the year came that the...the Southern University Black students decided to march to downtown Baton Rouge, and we heard about it all through Dallas. It was national news because they were protesting that Southern University was not getting the same equipment, not the same books and stuff like that as...as...as LSU [Louisiana State University]. Now, picture this--have you ever been to Louisiana? You have. You know Baton Rouge?

OY: Yeah.

MK: You know where LSU is?

OY: Kinda, yeah.

MK: Ok, if you understand this: LSU is at...on one part of the city where a lot of Blacks lived, but we could not go past their gates unless you worked there. Southern University is way out in Scotlandville [Louisiana], but...but it's part of, still, you know, somewhat part of Baton Rouge, and a lot of the Blacks, my uncle and all of 'em that lived around there, were angry about the fact that they

couldn't go, were not allowed to go into LSU like anyone else, but they were...they were allowed to go there and be, you know, and...and work there and actually be slaves almost there. So, he took me up there one day and...and began to tell me about that area. So, it was the older generation a lot of time in the family that would end up telling us what, you know, "I'm taking you here because you have to understand you cannot go across that line." And, you know, after you hear that a lot... I was getting angrier and angrier and angrier.

And when I went to Southern University, I got this pep talk from my mother. "They have demonstrated at Southern University. You need...we are sending you there to get an education, and you...you need to go on and do that." Now mind you, hearing your parents participating and helping out with the Civil Rights movement, but you telling me to go on and get an education. So, I went on to it with the thought of getting an education. I went back to Louisiana, lived with my father and my step mother. I was fortunate enough then to end up having two mothers in the sense 'cause you know our family worked like that. When my mother and father divorced, they made sure that all the children never were, you know, [inaudible] like, because you got a different mother or different father you're not brothers or sisters. So, it ended up being ten of us.

I went to Southern University, and my cousins had told me, "Look, all of us that was put out of Southern University last year, a lot of us are still high from that," and...and...and...and, you know. I said, "Well, count me in 'cause now I'm 18 now, my God," you know, and my aunt--I was fortunate enough that my aunt had a cafe a few steps away from the line for Port Allen, you know, getting out of, you know, the line...the border for...for Port Allen, and a lot of the students came over from Southern University to her cafe on the weekends after games and stuff like. So, you know, I was feeling good that I was going to Southern and at the same time looked like there was going to be some more organizing up there. And once the organizers began to get on with it, I...I began to work with them passing out leaflets on campus for folks to come to the...to the meetings and stuff like that.

And after a year and a half at Southern University, I kind of got homesick, and I went back to Dallas. That was interesting, although I helped in Louisiana and...and learned what a picket line was there because some of the white owners thought they could just, again, do anything they could to us, and one young guy was shot

in Baton Rouge for going in the grocery store, and the owner said to to the young people that were there, "Look here. I don't have to have this store over here in West Baton Rouge. I have another one in"--I mean, in...in Baton Rouge. He said, "I have another one in West Baton Rouge."

Well, be...before I--let me back up. Before I went to Dallas, back to Dallas, my aunt that owned the cafe called a meeting of long...some of the longshoremen. Now see, she was in with them, she and my uncle. and say, "Look, we can't let this go down. We got to call for a demonstration and close that man down." I said, "I'm included. I'm on...I'm on the front line now," and my uncle that worked in the longshoremen, they...they came out, and they were around us, the young folks, as--there's a street that goes...one of the side streets in...in Port Allen that would pass the houses and go into a section that was all white. They took that land from us, and they would be honking they horns...horns and say, "Niggers, go home," you know, and all that stuff. Now, my... You know how short I am. My aunt was a little shorter than me, and I never forget she had a pink and some Buick, some color Buick, and she had a pistol in her bra--that's how the women used to be--and she parked her car. She said, "Let one more come by here again." With her little self, little legs and stuff, she jumped in her car and rode behind him and made him pull over, and she said, "Let me tell you something. If any hair on...on any of those children get harmed, you gonna be the next person that get harmed." And, you know, she said, "Don't...don't come through our neighborhoods like that."

So, it...it kind of was a rippling effect. More people in the neighborhood came out to protect us and...and took...began to participate in...in the demonstration, and we were successful. He left Port Allen, and that was good, but in Dallas things wasn't too good because it still was segregated as far as the...the counters and...and the different stores that you could eat and everything, and I, you know. They were not as organized as Baton Rouge was at the time because in Baton Rouge the civil rights workers were coming from school in the summertime and helping out. But they finally did get organized, and I'm...I'm glad to say that our church was still involved, and I was happy about that

But I eventually went back to Louisiana, joined...joined the task force workers for CORE, Congress of Racial Equality, and my father say, "Well, you going to school,

right?" I said, "I ain't got time for that! I'm going...I just got recruited to be one of the workers." He said, "What workers?" I said, "We're going...I'm...I'm a task force worker for CORE. I'm full time now," and all of them talked to me. I mean, it was a shocking thing to them. "Look, I don't know if you want to go. You could stay at home and do this. You were doing a good job now." I said, "I'm going on...I'm going on...I'm going to be one of the task force workers." I'm going into those areas where they, you know, the Klans, are the worst, and I was assigned to up north in Louisiana around the northern cities around Grambling [State] University and all that type of stuff, and I was there for like a...a half a year there and a half a year in Johns--in Monroe, Louisiana.

[0:26:46]

And I tell you, I got a...I learned a lot by the community people. They taught me a lot--not just me, I'm talking about all of us--and they appreciated us for what we were doing. And then, I found out not just me, but Claudia and I, who I was working with 'cause we was assigned to the office at the time, and we were doing testing of when the civil rights... After the civil rights bill was passed, we had to go out and do testing at restaurants and different places, and she and I was the ones doing...assigning people out, and young people were coming forth, and we didn't know that the...there was certain folks in the community that was watching out for us. The Muslims, I...I would go next door like always and try to get my haircut at the barbershop and found out that the...all these brothers were Muslim. They said, "Marian, don't worry. Don't y'all worry. We...we watch out for y'all all the time," and they cracked me up when they said, "And we even watch out for the blonde, blue-eyed devils y'all working with!" I said, "Who you talking about?" Yeah, I...I didn't know at that time that that's what they had labeled some of the young whites that were there with us, but they...they were out there for all of us, the...the Black Muslims at that time.

So, you began to recognize who were a part of the movement. You might see me, but there were other folks that were a part of the movement and working just as hard as us because there were communities. If you been South, there's...if you have a...if you live in an alley, there were people sitting on their porches at night time letting us get some sleep. We didn't know because the word was out in Monroe, Louisiana that no white person other than the ones that's, you know, a

part of the movement could come up in that alley because the Klans had put out a what their plans was gonna be. They were going to try and come in there and try to probably burn mama's--I mean, burn the houses where we were. I found that out from the community because I was one that was grow--I grew up, you know, in Louisiana and...and in Dallas and stuff, but I...they told me, said--every night, I...every night, I tried to go sit on...sit on the front porch with 'em and tell 'em what went on that day. They...they said, "That's alright 'bout the night 'cause we got the night. We been looking over y'all." These some people in the community, seniors and all. "We look over y'all every night. No white person can come up in here other than the ones that's working in the Civil Rights movement."

You know, that...that made tears come to your heart 'cause you thought that, you know, you might've been just at the Freedom House and wondering who's going through that alley and what is happening, but we finally found out, you know, the community was participating to a cert--it...it changes you. It made me feel still like a family-type atmosphere because that, you know, that's how my family tended to work, but at the same time, these folks were unsung heros and was inner (??) part of...of the Civil Rights movement.

When I got thrown in--not just me. When we were thrown in jail for, at one time, in Jonesboro, Louisiana--I got reassigned to Jonesboro. What they did was when...when you get all the knowledge that they want you in, they usually assign you out to another area, and you might be head of that area. So Jonesboro, if you...if you know the history, was one of the places--was the place that the Deacons for Self-Defense [Deacons for Defense and Justice] was organized. These were people that were coming back from the services and stuff like that, and they would be out in the streets also when we would demonstrate, when we march, and what have you. They said, "Naww, we not leav...losing another person." And so, we had to...decided one day to have a big demonstration there in...in Jonesboro. At one point, they had beaten up the Klan, had beaten up the sheriff, and told them not to come back over to our Freedom House and have...and speak with us, you know. Well, I guess that beating wasn't enough for him because he came back and, you know, we treated him good, gave him some coffee 'cause we wasn't mad at him 'bout nothing like that. They beat him up real bad and...and then gave him his job back.

This was people that were posing as, you know, as police but also member of the KKK [Ku Klux Klan]. See, you got the White Citizen Council that puts the money in for the KKK, and the KKK was the ones that would carry out all the brutality and stuff there, and the White Citizen Council would be, oh, really over the city and all that type of stuff, and you got to know who they were because they wasn't afraid or nothing like that, but they start getting afraid when the De...Deacon for Self Defense was organized because they were not gonna be blowing up none of the houses we were in no more. And on the other hand, too, we found out that the gentleman across the street from us who was in the military was looking over us also because, I mean, it was getting heated in a sense. He said that every night he set out with his shot gun and watch over us, and one night, we heard these shots, and one night...and...and the sheriff and them came over there to arrest him, and he had already called his Lieutenant, and this Lieutenant brought some of the soldiers over there and said, "You're not taking him because he is with us," and they tried to take him to trial but could not. The army would not let that happen, but like I said, unsung heroes.

I got put in jail. We all got put in jail for eight days and eight nights. I had to stand up in the cell. They threw my little behind in a place that someone had knocked out the screen in the...in the cell to stop the mosquitoes and stuff like that, and what happened was here I am in there. A...after one day, they threw me over there. We sung all night long, and we found out from the jailer that--white jailer--that if you flush the toilet a lot in where the women were, it would flood the, you know, the water would go down in the courtroom. So that's what they had to be welcomed to, and we sung all night. And then, we found out by singing all night we were not hurting nobody but the jailer and his wife who had to live there. So, we stopped singing all night because we...this man and his wife was taking chances with us. He snuck...they snuck up pop to us, you know, and he...they would take out numbers of us to be able to go take showers 'cause he had...they had gave him specific orders we could not take no showers, no special treatments for us. We were treated worse than any other. If a person had killed someone, we were treated worse than that, and don't do no special stuff for us.

Well, he and the trustees that were in there that were living in the same community we had been living in would get out information to us, and then he came one day and say, "Alright, people are coming for me when they gon..." They...they march into the jail, and this is a rally for the movement, and that was

great, that really was. A lot of that, it puts more enthusiasm in 'cause we had been in there eight...eight days and eight nights.

One young lady from California that they put next to me--see, they didn't give me no... [laughs] nobody to talk to, but I screamed, you know, and she wanted...she say, "I want to get out of here, Marian." I say, "I want you to be patient. We gonna be out of here soon, and if you can--you have any cards over there?" She say, "No." I say, "Do you know how to play spades?" She said, "No." I said, "Well, what do you know?" She say, "I want to get out of here." I say, "Well, we'll make sure you one of the first people that get out of here." Because even prior to, we screened people going in, and she said, "I...I got to go to jail," but I didn't know I was gonna have to usher her all the way 'til the day that she got out in order for her to be able to not lose her mind.

They brought one of the young white guys there and throw him in jail, but they put him in a cell with nothing but folks that were a member of the Klans. They beat him up, and...and the other person that was already in jail with us 'cause they all had us all separated, women, Black women together, Black men together, white men. So they had...they could beat the hell out of this...out of them. They whooped him, so we made so much noise they could hear us in the community almost, but he had to go be taken to the hospital, and we found out also that his father...either he was a Senator--I can't think that far back--a Senator or something like that.

[0:37:41; jump cut]

MK: I was so glad to get out of that jail, but it was through the people bringing the pressure, and...and they didn't like the idea that the Deacon for Self-defense was built over there in Jonesboro, Louisiana, and not only were they built. Let me tell you how we got to jail that day. We let the young people do the organizing, and this was a grocery store also, just like in Port Allen, of a guy who thought that he could, you know, sell anything and talk about Blacks any kind of way. We had just had a demonstration in front of his...his grocery store the weekend, and people came from everywhere. And then that Monday, the young people say, "Okay, this is the second round of this." I say, "Okay, I'm ready to go." All of us walk down to the grocery store and start--young folks start singing, and we're letting nobody go

in the grocery store. Period. You cross that line, you...you going against the people in the community.

And then, I'm sitting up on the car kind of getting a little rest. And then all of a sudden, the lieutenant come out there, the one that just hated us, and said, "Miss Kramer, I need you to get off that." He didn't say Miss Kramer. You better know he didn't say Miss Kramer. He said, "Marian, get down off that car. I need you off the car." I said, "Well, I'm taking my...my break." He said, "Oh, no. Get down," and we were trying to figure out why they were bringing the garbage truck in front of the place. He said, "I'm bringing out this family." I said, "That's your own decision, you know. I don't, you know. I'm not touching the family or nothing like that." But he...I felt that then... They...they say, "As of now, you are under arrest." Now, I'm wondering what they taking me in, but I wish you could've seen this. The Deacon for Self-defense had brought their pistol--their shotguns out there. See, in Louisiana, there's a thing that you can carry your pistols and stuff as long as you got, you know, the right paperwork. They were all standing. People took off from work, and we had all these young people holding...holding that door down and not letting those folks out.

I looked up. They done took me to the garbage truck and threw my lil' ole behind in the garbage. Now, this is one of these garbage trucks that rotated around like this, and I was pissed because I had just had a shower and they had threw my butt in there, you know. They had just dumped the garbage truck, and you had to think, "What am I gonna hold on to once they start moving this garbage truck?" Now mind you, the only time we get some air, it was when they were putting somebody in there so that all the people that were arrested that day were put in the garbage truck. You could imagine what we were smelling like when we got to jail, and...and thank goodness that...thank goodness for that jailer. Two days later, he let us take a shower. We had to, you know, take a shower in s...in some of our clothing because we...we couldn't look like that had happened, you know, but he made us... He said, "Marian, I just want one promise, and that is that all of you do not say nothing. Don't say nothing about you taking a shower or us bringing this...bringing you, you know, some snacks at night." We say, "Our mouths are sealed." He said, "Because I understand that the job you guys are doing fighting for civil rights, that's fighting for my s--fighting for us also because we can't help for, you know. Whatever they give you, they gonna give to us, and, you know, our

rights are even get better, and that we don't have to be treated also like inhuman," and that type of stuff.

And we was so... We kept that stuff silent. But once we got out, we found out that the young man that lived in the neighborhood where we were--we had told him stop coming 'round the freedom house 'cause they watching you. He would get put in on the weekend sometime because Jonesboro was dry. In other words, they didn't sell no liquor in Jonesboro, and he was bootlegging. You know what bootlegging is? I see two hand...I see two hands going down, okay. And they ended up going to his house one night and beating him, and they killed him for participating, you know, and being around us. And so, you know, I'm...I'm...I'm fortunate. I might have been on the frontlines, but we couldn't have done what we did without the people in the neighborhoods, without the people bringing us food, everything. It was...it was amazing. It was an army of folks. It did not build up overnight.

When you organize, you know, like even here around the water thing--I...I don't want to jump that far, but I want to get this in around the water thing. When Maureen [Taylor] and I were sitting down looking at this water situation, we were in our office, and people start coming in for help with utilities, and two days had passed. I said, "Okay, this line, this is...this is getting worse and worse." I said, "Maureen, when they come in next time, let's have something about their water bills." I say, "Because usually when people come in here about utilities, it's about all of 'em, poor people." And we found out that day that we decided to question them about that, that their water was off also, and they were afraid to say anything, afraid to go to the...to...through the Welfare Department because they knew the rumor that their children could get snatched.

So, you know, even like those type of ways of hiding certain things, the people...the people begin to learn how to survive, and that's the same thing. And you know when we were in the Civil Rights movement in Baton Rouge, people were participating I didn't know nothing about. My uncle and all of 'em would come out there when we were on the picket line or marching and what have you, the longshore men and all, and those folks were not what the news focused on, you know. They were focusing on the students taking, you know, marching and getting beat up and stuff like that.

One day in Monroe, we had to go test, and I said, "I'm going out here with these young folks. I'm going testing." Now mind you, I was young, too. I was 18...18 or 19. I can't even remember, and I went to the count...to the county 'cause we all had to be trained. We would teach people through... You wouldn't come and join unless you've gone through a workshop, and what that means is you had to learn how to fall if they knocked you off of a counter--I mean, not a counter--a stool, how to hold, how to protect your head, you know, 'cause the police really believe in hitting you with those sticks, and...and then you had to learn about tear gas. So, it's just like Rosa Parks had to learn to do what she had to do, we had to learn to protect ourselves out there, and...and never be left out...never be outside, particularly at night time, by yourself.

And so, the community participated in a lot of that, and those are the people you kind of think back a lot of time on and said I wish they were here to be a part of this water fight because they would be all in it. But that's...and...and I'mma finish the civil rights thing right now in a minute because that's how I learned to drive is our lawyers called...

[0:46:50 Jump cut]

MK: the attorney called [laughs] and said, "You and your two...other two buddies, y'all got to get this paper work up to St. Francisville [Louisiana]," and he said, "Marian, look here. I know you know how to sign my name because I've seen you sign my name before." [laughs] I said, "What...what do you want me to do?" He say, "You gonna have to sign my name and take it over there to the court in the morning because I have to have that filed to remove their...remove them out of the lower court into the higher court," because if they had stayed in lower court, they probably would've went to prison. There were three of us, no driver's license, but one of the fr--one of the cars that we operated was there. I didn't...I didn't know how to operate that car. I know how to...how my father and them would make me drive, and I just...after that, I said, "Naww, I don't want to drive. I got y'all to chauffeur me around." I said, "Oh, we got to drive this car," and the car was way out in a...another area and said, they said, "Marian, how we gonna get there?" I said, "We gonna tell the barber to take us out there," and he took us. We

got...and when he left, they said, "We got to get the car back to the...we gon have to drive the car back to..." I said, "Yeah, we gonna have to drive to St. Francisville, and, check this, we're gonna have to drive in the traffic." That was during the period of the day, you know, when traffic was heavy.

And we all looked at each other and said, "Who gonna take that? Who's gonna be the first one to drive?" The other two said, "You are," and that was during the period of time when people were smoking cigarettes and stuff like that. We got on the highway, and we going like this [mimes driving] on the highway on the high...Airline Highway going back to St. Francisville, and I told one of the people, I said, "Give me a cigarette." She say, "Here," and she over there doing this. [mimes holding out cigarette] I did not realize she gave me the...the pl--the part where you light the cigarette, and I burnt my lips that night. Can you imagine? Here we are, scared as hell, thinking we gonna get stopped by the police. I mean, the...whatever you call them, by the cops. And by the time we get to St. Fran--we made it to St. Francisville and to get over to that neighborhood, you had to go across a track. And to go across that track, you went between two ditches, right, and...and I asked them, "Y'all go stand up there," and it was night time. I say, "And be sure to tell me if I'm going too far to this side or too far to this side," and we made it across, you know. I got the car across, but I told one of them, "You...you...you're driving this car back across because I think I done sweated enough. I lost some weight on this one, and to top it all off, my lips are burnt."

We made it back to the house. And then all of a sudden the next morning, they say, "Well, how we get..." We say, "How we gonna get to work 'cause we got to open up the office?" The reason why this happened is because Mississippi was setting up freedom schools, and they said that we had to come to Mississippi to get some of the books to begin to help setting up freedom schools in Baton Rouge and stuff. And so the director of the project, of the...where, you know, in the project we were under, and my ex-husband had to drive to Mississippi, so it left nobody to...to drive us, and we were saying, "Oh, my God, we gonna get in trouble. How we gonna tell them how this car got here? How are we gonna tell [laughs] them what happened and everything? Well, we just gonna tell 'em." And all of a sudden, they drove up behind the car we had, but we were in the office at the time, and the guys in the barbershop was cracking up laughing 'cause they know this was gonna be funny.

They ran in, and they was sweating, and they was saying, "Wow, we got something to tell y'all." We say, "Yeah, yeah. Y'all talk first." He said, "You know the Mississippi Bridge is getting painted." Every so often, they paint that bridge. You ever go down to Louisiana, you'll see that bridge. It's a huge bridge, and the train is...travels in between the two bridges that are connected together. And that particular day that they were coming back from Mississippi, they thought they still had to go up the ramp where they had gone before going out to Mississippi, and they found out they were on the wrong side, and there is nowhere to turn around on that bridge, and they had a...a load of books and a trailer. Have you ever drove or tried to move a trailer? It is hard trying to move that trailer. They were at the top of the bridge, and we sitting up there, "What? Well, how'd you get it down? Weren't you afraid? You know, we fell...we really feel for y'all." They had to stop the traffic. The cops had to stop the traffic and let them back that trailer all the way back down that bridge. Now, that bridge was huge. It's like the Ambassador Bridge, bigger than that, and it was amazing. We said, "Oh, we so glad y'all made it. Ooh, let us hug you. We are really glad y'all made it." They said, "What y'all have to tell us?" "Well, our stuff is not as interesting as yours," and when we told 'em what happened, they said, "Oh, no. It's a wonder that the cops didn't stop you." We said, "It's a wonder they didn't put you in jail."

[0:53:34]

So, you know, you took chances on a lot of things, and you didn't know at the end of...you didn't know how it was gonna turn out, but that's exactly how I learned to drive. That's how--and then I was ready to learn. I was ready to drive when we always had to go to a state meeting. All the...all of us had to report to some state meetings, and...and we always had to go past the Klans. They had certain stations, and we always put the the fastest driver that could rat--handle the car. We put two good drivers in cars, and we had about three cars. But mind you, the Klans knew our cars, and they knew exactly what road, you know, what...what highway we would be taking, and we knew exactly... You get to the point you knew where they were gonna try to hit you, and we had in the community this...this Black priest, and one of the little areas, little towns, we would always turn off, and they didn't realize it. You know, the Klans, they think they got us, but the community again would come ahead along with this priest that had organized stuff. They would hide our cars, and we...and we would take off, and we figured they would--the

community--would watch out for us. And then, we eventually, later in the night, we would take off and go on through Mississippi back into Louisiana just to go to a meeting to summarize where we were as far as our programs and that type of stuff.

One last thing: we had a campaign to register people to vote to show to the feds there's a lot of people out here that want to vote, but they are forbidden to vote--you know, to vote. We called for a...for a--what is it?--for a demonstration, a big one, in New Orleans [Louisiana], and it was right at the French Quarters. We out there, lined up, lined up, and we got a huge contingent 'cause we brought all the projects together in Louisiana, and here were the prostitutes out there and they call themselves, "Why don't y'all take your little old behinds back home? You messing up our business." We say, "No, we out here protecting you and your business 'cause you can't even vote. You ain't nothing but another slave." You know, tryna teach these women. But eventually, the police moved 'em, but they was...they used them as a...a...a tool to try to harass us. You know, we didn't put 'em down or nothing like that. We knew. But we got some of them, you know, we tried to get more and more of them to sign this, the form that you had to end up signing for to become a registered voter. The registered voter form was like signing something to go to get your Ph.D. And so, it was really amazing, but people...the people... That was like my last time there in Louisiana because we had decided--'cause we had came up here during the holidays and told 'em, yeah, we would be back to help out up here.

But, Detroit was different. Detroit--I had never been around that many cars. My husband at the time came here from...from--where was he from? [laughs] Let me think. This...this is bad. That's why I better sit down and write all this stuff down. He was from... Not Philly [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania], but... What's the next biggest city in...in Pennsylvania?

[0:58:06]

PB: Pittsburgh?

MK: Yep. He grew up in that town. He went to school there, and he got hired by Ford Motor Company to design cars. He...he ended up... How we met, he ended up coming to Louisiana because he had saw all the stuff on TV, and he said, "I'm going to volunteer and do this." He came there. He was only supposed to be there three months. He stayed there. He...he ended up with me. Him and I both got involved in the West Central Organization here, and that's when I began to learn what unions were all about. And I was working at...I got a job at Hotel, Motel, and Restaurant Workers. And eventually, me and the president couldn't get along because I didn't like the way they were treating a lot of us there, and he always tried to use me to take information back to the WCO. I said, "No. I'm not here working for you for that." I said, "I learned a lot in the Civil Rights movement. You not gonna use me like that. You have someone that you have working over there, I mean, that's a part of WCO. You should let your representative from the community take back with 'em." So Mark Ferrai (??) and I didn't get along too well, but eventually they...they fired me, but that's another long story, but I got what I wanted out of that. I learned about unions and ended up getting hired by WCO, West Central Org...organization.

My first husband and I got divorced. I ended up with his job, but I was there when the...when the when the rebellion hit. I was living on Lincoln and Forest when the rebellion hit, and my brother was living upstairs and I was living downstairs in a two-family home, and...and I was always out there trying to make sure that we were making...trying to make sure no one got hurt because they came through during the rebellion talking about martial law. There was no martial law, you know. They told us we had to get up on the...on the porch. No martial law had been passed at that time, and so it gave us an opportunity not only to get to know our neighbors better, but to get to help out in a lot of stuff as well as make sure that people did not get hurt. And the community came together even much better, and that was one of the communities that we were organizing in. We were organizing around housing. This was housing over here. We...we ended up saving the library at the corner of Temple and...and Trumbull. And as well as--I got you--as well as fighting, that's where I started getting my education around how to take on slum landlords. Oh, I...I enjoyed that, going...taking out...going out to Grosse Pointe [Michigan] picketing the slum landlords, and they...they would run back in there to try and take care of their properties when we show up.

But it goes on and on, and I been in the movement, like I said, since I was five. I'm now--I always have to think--I'm 74 now. In two months, I'll be 75, and I hope I can always be out here until--I told my daughters, I say, "When I die, don't...don't be taking me no funeral home. Take me out and stand me up by a pole, and if they say, 'Have you seen your mother?' Say 'Naw, we looking for her,' and don't come and claim me 'cause don't give nobody one penny. Don't give 'em nothing for burying for me, and I want you to take me over to Wayne State [University] to Body Bequest." And we...and that's how my husband went, General Baker, and a lot of other people. We learned that from Maureen's [Taylor] mother and all of us went and signed up. So, you know, it's...it's a whole thing.

I always tell people, I...I guess I'm a stick and stay 'cause I'm still fighting for a better community--not just community, but for a better world, and I, you know. I...this mess that's going on in...in Michigan and throughout the country around the water. We got to bring these corporations down, and I want to be on the frontline to make sure that that happen. People always say, "How long you...how many times you been in jail?" Well, I don't know. All I know, I go in there and get some sleep, and then I'm out again, you know. But the thing is is to be able to fight for the next generation and make sure that they don't have to go through what we thought no one was going to have to go through this again. But it's work. They don't need us no more in the factory. My husband worked in the factories for years. My daught--one of my daughters did. They're not needed no more 'cause the name of the game is taking--I mean, the name of the game is computers and everything. And if that's so, then therefore why are people out here starving, not...not getting a good educa--education should be free from birth to death. I worked, and I learned to...how to struggle against poverty with welfare. I got a rude awakening in there, and some smart women in there, and I'm, you know, I'mma keep doing that as long as I can. Thank you. I have to leave, y'all.