

**“My Witness” Podcast Transcript
Metro Arts and One Voice Nashville
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Clarkston Ellerby, Hume-Fogg Academic Magnet School
Ernest “Rip” Patton, Civil Rights veteran who participated in Nashville Sit-ins and Freedom Rides
Mary Margaret Randall, One Voice Nashville

MMR: Welcome to the “My Witness” podcast, a collaboration between One Voice Nashville and Metro Arts to support Witness Walls, Nashville’s Civil Rights-inspired public artwork, next to the Historic Metro Courthouse. In creating these podcasts, we hope to honor the fight for racial equality during the Nashville Civil Rights movement, educate youth about this history, and continue the conversation about social justice in our community.

RP: When I speak at schools I always ask the teachers to do their research on Nashville, to learn about the people who were in the movement here in Nashville and the contributions that they made not only here in Nashville but throughout the United States and throughout the world.

CE: My name is Clarkston Ellerby, I am a junior at Hume-Fogg High School, and today I am interviewing Dr. Ernest “Rip” Patton, Jr.

RP: It’s good to be here, thank you.

CE: Would you please describe when you first became aware of racism and the whole situation involving different races?

RP: I think I was probably in the 3rd or 4th grade. I lived in North Nashville and I was the only kid my age that lived on the street that I lived on. But on the street behind me was a young white kid that was my age, and we were playmates. And his sister took him to the downtown theatre—all the downtown theatres were basically here on Church Street. And he was excited...he came back and told me about the movie that he saw and the inside of the theatre and all the nice things. He said, tell your mama to take you to see the movie. And I did. And we came downtown and as we were crossing Church Street from the north side over to the south side, I was gonna go to the front door, because that’s what my friend said. Then my mother said that we could not go in that door, and I started to say something to her about it but I changed my mind because I knew what would happen right there on Church Street. And so we had to go down an alley and all the way up the steps—dark steps—to the balcony of that particular theatre. And some years later, when I joined the movement—I was a student at Tennessee A&I (Agricultural and Industrial) University—that’s when my mother simply said, “I knew that you would be a part of the movement...simply what happened to you when you were a kid and you couldn’t go in the front door of the theatre.”

CE: How and when did you first hear that nonviolence trainings—they were being planned—and how did the trainings go about? How did they work? And can you describe how you felt during these trainings?

RP: I heard about them simply because of word of mouth. As you know, in the 60s there were no cell phones. No internets and tweets and what you have now. So it was a word of mouth all

over campus. And not only in the campus, but in the churches because Jim Lawson, at that time, you might say was our guru. He was the one who taught us about nonviolence. He had been in India for three years, studied the methods of Gandhi, studied the methods of nonviolence. And he was a student at Vanderbilt.

MM: While enrolled at Oberlin College Graduate School of Theology, Rev. James Lawson met Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King urged Lawson to put his studies on hold and take an active role in the Civil Rights Movement. "We don't have anyone like you," King told him. So Lawson moved to Nashville, enrolled in Vanderbilt University Divinity School and led student workshops on the tactics of nonviolent direct action. Soon after, Lawson was expelled due to his work in the movement.

RP: And so he taught us about nonviolence...not only what Gandhi did in India, but we studied the Bible. What would Jesus do? How is it that you can take a punch and not retaliate? It was very important to love thy neighbor as thyself. So without training, we started in the fall of 1959. And of course, we didn't have our first sit-in until 1960—February 13th, which I think was Valentine's Day that year.

CE: What thoughts went through your head as you prepared for the sit-ins and after you had left or you were in prison...what was going through your mind?

RP: Well, being a part of the sit-ins, going to the workshops, this was Nashville. This was happening in Nashville. And my attitude was that...this is my home. Tennessee State was a very popular school. People from all over came to Tennessee State and so, my attitude was, since this is my home, I need to do something about it and not just let out-of-state students do it all. That, plus what happened when I was a child, encouraged me to be a part of the movement. And I wanted to do all that I could to make change here in Nashville, but I didn't know that it would go from Nashville to the world.

CE: Were there any other experiences that pushed you to join Freedom Riders and just to join the movement?

RP: Well I had already been—for 1960, I already had been taking part in the sit-ins here in Nashville. I was not arrested...we played different roles here in Nashville. I had a different role. I was what you call a runner, or a person that actually stood outside the stores that were being tested and when students were arrested, I would go to the nearest phone, call the church, which was only three blocks from here—First Baptist Capitol Hill was on 8th Avenue and we were having our demonstrations on 5th Avenue. I would call the church because we had a system where if a group of students were arrested at Walgreen's right there by the Arcade, I would call the church and say that Walgreen's students are being arrested. So then, the second group that was assigned to Walgreen's would come from the church and fill up those stools again. There might be a third group—for example. There was no arrests made until the 27th of February, but we knew they were going to arrest students on that day. So, that was a really hot day for us. And so this was a time we didn't know we were gonna be a part of the Freedom Riders a year later, but this was preparation for us to do bigger and better things. To make changes. So when we heard about the Freedom Rides...I think it was May 17th. When CORE was attacked in Anniston, Alabama and Birmingham, I believe that was the same day that we had—a Sunday—that we had integrated all the theatres downtown. And so it was like a bittersweet day for us

because we were, I believe, having a picnic to celebrate the opening of all the theatres. And John Lewis was a part of the first Freedom Ride with CORE (Congress of Racial Equality). But he had to get off the bus before they made it to Anniston to come back to Nashville so, when that bus was burned in Anniston and the beating of the people on Trailway in Birmingham, John Lewis was here that Sunday. I think that was Mother's Day 1961. And so, we had a meeting, immediately had a meeting, where Diane Nash called Jim Farmer, who was the director of CORE, and asked him for his permission to restart the Freedom Rides. Not only did Farmer say, "you see what happened to us in Anniston and Birmingham, it's too dangerous"—because that's where CORE ended the Freedom Rides, in Birmingham—"it's over." Not only did he say that we were going to get somebody killed...John Seigenthaler, who was working for Bobby Kennedy, also called Diane Nash and told her the same thing. "You're gonna get somebody killed. Stop the Freedom Rides, stop the kids from coming out of Nashville." But we were determined to complete the Freedom Ride. And so we got our groups together, just like the sit-ins—when one group was arrested, we might have four or five groups assigned to that particular store. That was the difference between Nashville and CORE. CORE only had one group on Trailway and one on Greyhound. They did not have a back-up group. And so, we went over to First Baptist Capitol Hill, I believe that Sunday night, or maybe Monday night, and then asked for monies to buy tickets for our first group. And it just so happened that I ended up in the third group to leave Nashville so, no matter what happened to the first group or second group, I was determined to leave in that third group. And so the first group that left, they made it as far as Birmingham. They were arrested, and then later on, a day or two later, they were taken out of jail, brought back to the Tennessee/Alabama state line, which is Ardmore. As the chief of police of Birmingham is bringing out the first group from Birmingham back to the state line...he said he was going to bring them back to Fisk University, which he did not, so when we found out they had been taken out of jail, our second group immediately left Nashville for Birmingham by train and car. They did not go by bus. Kwame Leo Lillard went to Ardmore, found them, took them back to Birmingham. And so finally they get a bus out of Birmingham to Montgomery, and this is where our Nashville group was attacked. In Montgomery. I think there were over 3,000 people in Montgomery that day just to beat up the Freedom Riders, but they started in with the reporters. Those who had cameras...they beat up the reporters first, because they didn't want this to go out on the news. And then they beat up some of the Freedom Riders and the majority of them got away. We had two white females in that group and they were running towards the police and the policeman said, "I could kill you if I wanted to." And there wasn't anything to be done about it. And so our group immediately got them out of Montgomery on a train back to Nashville and if you've seen the documentary "Freedom Riders" you see where John Seigenthaler is trying to get a young lady in a car. Because he was there.

MM: John Seigenthaler, a native of Nashville, worked as a newspaper reporter at *The Nashville Tennessean* before going to work as a special assistant to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. In 1961, Kennedy dispatched Seigenthaler to Alabama to serve as an intermediary between the federal government, the Freedom Riders, and white segregationist state officials.

RP: John Seigenthaler, he was also beaten. Hit with a lead pipe and pushed under the car that he was trying to get this young lady into for her safety. But because of her nonviolent training, she told him that I've been trained in nonviolence. While this young man is beating her up..."I can take this." And so, we were really a dedicated group. And I had a chance to sit and say okay, the clan has burned a bus in Anniston with people on it. They've beaten up people in Birmingham, they've attacked our group. Do I want to go to Mississippi? 'Cause that was the next stop—

Jackson, Mississippi. And so I thought about it, and I said well...I'm in the third group. And so five of us, we drove from Nashville down to Montgomery on the 23rd of May 1961. On the 24th of May I was in the Greyhound bus terminal in Jackson, Mississippi. Walked in the front door accompanied with John Lewis and a young lady by the name of Lucretia Collins, who was the head majorette of the Tennessee State marching band at that time. And Lucretia and I were arrested at the lunch counter. John Lewis walked into the white restroom which said "White Only", the other policeman got him out and he was arrested there. My parents didn't know that I was on the Freedom Ride...I just simply went home on the 23rd, I had been working in the office, went home, I knew it was time for my group to leave, I got whatever it was that I needed and we rented a car. Drove to Montgomery, stayed the night there, and a lady called my mother—she knew that I was working in the student office. She knew my schedule, that I had classes in the morning, in the afternoon I would be in the office and at night I was back at school practicing with the marching band. And the lady...was watching the TV and she saw me coming out of the white only Greyhound bus terminal, I walked out that door and it just so happened that the news camera caught me. She called my mother and said, "Where's your son?" And my mother said, "Well at this time of day, he's over at the office. He's helping with the Freedom Riders." So the other lady says, "No, honey, I just saw your son being arrested in Jackson, Mississippi." But I was determined to do what I needed to do.

CE: In general, how did you and the rest of the Riders keep your spirits up? What were things that you all did to keep yourselves going?

RP: Well, in some cases, we knew we made friends with some of the guards, not the guards but the trustees who would bring the food to us. And there were times where they would let us know that the other Freedom Riders were coming in. So that would lift up your spirit. The cell that we were in...you had one cell mate when they first started out. That cell was 8 x 6 with a double bunk, a little toilet, and a face bowl. That was it. And so when you would take your shower, that's the only time you would see the other people in that whole cellblock. There may have been 10 or 20 individual cells in that one block. We all had something different to offer. We did Bible study every day. There were ministers, so there were sermons—preaching didn't wait until Sunday. We talked about basically, "What are you going to do when you get out?" 'Cause we knew we were going to get out eventually. So what are you gonna do when you get out? That's what the men talked about. Plus we would sing all the time—that's why they would take things away from us, because it was almost like 24/7 singing. If the guard was there all the time, sitting down, wherever he was, we couldn't see him, but he couldn't sleep for the singing. And it's the singing that really takes away any kind of thought of depression. We told jokes on each other, we learned the Bible so well that instead of arguing with each other, we would go to a passage and read it to whoever it was that we were having a little argument with. Well it wasn't an argument, it was just one of those things where you usually learn more about the Bible. There were times, if I knew how to play chess, I would take some toilet tissue, wet it, put it in on the floor to make a chess board, and then they would give us grits sometimes for breakfast, and you could take the grits and once they get hard, you can make little chess pieces...kings, queens, all of that or if you wanted to play checkers. Something to do with your cellmate. In the ladies'—I've heard that some of the ladies knew different languages. They taught other ladies in their block different languages. There was one that was a ballet dancer. When she would go take her shower, she would show them a step or the move...so different things like that to keep us, and the other was what you gonna do when you get out?

The one thing that I did when I got out was, I was assigned to desegregate Kroger and H.G. Hills, because they did not hire blacks at those two stores. My job was to canvas the neighborhood around those stores, leave little leaflets—"Do Not Shop"—and the reason why you shouldn't shop. And so we were very successful in 1960, with the Easter boycott. So we tried that with the stores. Getting in their pockets, so that people could shop in other places. And we were successful with making it possible for colored people to have jobs in those two stores. Shortly after that, I was asked to come to New York and work for CORE. They asked for a Negro who was from the South who was on the Freedom Rides and so, because I was in contact with them every day...if you lived in the northeast, you had to come to Nashville to go on a Freedom Ride, because you had a day or two training. And then we would send you on to the Freedom Rides and let you know what to expect. And so I went to New York. I stayed there a year and worked for CORE. And my job with them was to go out and raise funds to talk about the Freedom Rides and how important it was.

CE: What do you want students to know if they don't know anything else about what happened here in Nashville?

RP: Well, I want them to not only know but do research and talk about the history of Nashville. What happened in Nashville? Why is it that they have the privileges that they do? For example, a 1st grader will probably go 12 years, all the way from 1st grade to 12th grade, and what he has learned about is Dr. King, Rosa Parks, and some of the older historians. Students don't know anything about Diane Nash, James Bevel, John Lewis. Eight out of Dr. King's 10 lieutenants came out of the Nashville movement. A lieutenant is a person where Dr. King might say, we're gonna go to Memphis and we're going to desegregate such-and-such in Memphis. Or we're going to start a movement of voter registration. And so a volunteer would do that. I'm gonna ask you a question—did you see the movie *Selma*?

CE: Yes, sir.

RP: Ok. When I saw the trailers for *Selma*, I called a friend of mine and said, "I don't see your name anywhere. I don't see a character being played by you." And that was Bernard Lafayette, who was a student at American Baptist during the time in 1960. I said, "I don't see you." He said, "Rip, it's a movie. Don't take it as a documentary, it's a movie." Bernard was the person, the one person, who went into—well he wasn't a student then, at least not here in Nashville—but he went into Selma because Dr. King had a board with different cities, where they were gonna go and do voter registration. There was a big "X" in Selma because none of the lieutenants wanted to go because of the Klan and what have you. So Bernard said, "Why is there an X there?" He said...nobody wants to go. He said, "I'll take that. I'll go to Selma." Bernard is the one who started the voter registration movement in Selma. But you have to go to Selma to their museum to learn that. So students...they don't know that. We here in Nashville—we really got the ball to rolling. We were also the first city to open up the lunch counters. It took from February the 13th...May the 10th is when our mayor said "I don't think it's fair that people can go downtown and shop and not be able to eat at the lunch counter." So that was kind of a hush-hush as to how we integrated the lunch counters, after the mayor has said we should integrate. And the managers wanted to integrate because they were losing money. And I'll say this—we learned from what Gandhi did, and the rest of the world learned from what we did. One of the things that we always say when we're speaking is: it only takes one to start a movement. And what are you gonna do for your generation?

[singing] “You can take our toothbrush, oh yes....you can take our toothbrush, oh yes...you can take our toothbrush, you can take our toothbrush, you can take our toothbrush, oh yes...you can take our mattress, oh yes...you can take our mattress, oh yes...you can take our mattress, you can take our mattress...”

MMR: We hope you enjoyed listening to this “My Witness” podcast. To hear more podcasts or for more information on the Witness Walls public artwork, go to witnesswalls.org. Metro Arts’ Public Art Collection is funded through the Percent for Public Art Program with support from the Tennessee Arts Commission.

Transcribed by Allison Summers, Metro Arts Commission, 2016