

YANCEY MARTIN

In 1972 he was minority affairs adviser to Democratic presidential nominee George McGovern. In 1955 he was a freshman in college.

I came home from college in 1955 in December for Christmas holidays and the boycott had already begun when I got home. I don't remember the exact date that they started, but they were still in the churches and they were still having the meetings in the evening and they were still organizing it. . . .

I talked with an old friend of the family, Ralph Abernathy, who I had been in a play with while Ralph was in college with my brother. We were in a play called *On Whitman Avenue* and I played his grandson. And so I talked with him about what we could do, and he told me the best thing I could do was organize some people to do some driving along the bus stop route and to pick up people. 'Cause what they were doing was they were telling folk just to stand on their regular bus stop route, but as the bus would come by, just to step back. And so all the guys who were on my street . . . and a group of other folk whose parents had cars, we would all get up in the morning as early as we could. I mean, there were some folk out there who had to leave by six o'clock in order to get to the white lady's kitchen, and many times they were just late getting there. We'd all get up in the morning and we'd drive that route, like some would drive the South Jackson route, some would drive the Old Boston bus route, some would drive the Washington Park route, and we'd just mix it around. . . .

two or three cars per route 'cause you end up with a lot of people. And what we had to do was we had to know the names of everybody in there or else the police would stop and try to charge you with operating an illegal jitney service. And so what we would do is, by knowing everybody's name, we'd just say that these are my cousins or these are friends of mine I'm giving a lift. There's no law against giving anybody a ride. But the police, when they found out what we were doing, they would patrol the bus routes just as much as we would.

After one of the mass meetings . . . I believe it was at Ralph's church, First Baptist Church, it was a decision made that people would not stand at the bus stop, would not get picked up at the bus stop, but either midway the block or just beyond the bus stop, so that police could not get you for picking people up at the bus stop. I don't know what kind of law that was, but for some reason or another that became a key issue as to where you picked people up and where you let them out. And then on Monroe Street just behind a building that was owned by a black doctor, . . . there was a parking lot for the patients he used to see and a taxi stand, black taxi stand. Well, that parking lot became a pick-up point.

But then what would happen . . . the tag numbers would be taken down by policemen, and then for other reasons you'd be harassed. Like, if you were out one night and you were at Gordon's Ice Cream Parlor, which was out on Hall Street, the police would see your car and know that you were one of the cars that were always involved in picking up the people. And then they'd just come in the place and ask who owned that car, and they'd say, "You're not parked close enough to the curb. . . ." They'd find something wrong to harass you about.

He still marvels at the response of black Montgomery during those first days of the boycott.

I had never seen that happen in Montgomery, and I must admit that I have never seen that happen *anywhere* among black people. I mean, they were more unified in Montgomery during the bus boycott than I think may have been the case in Selma during the voters' rights protests or in Birmingham or in any other city. Even the people who were not in attendance at the meetings, who are just sorta like people who don't get involved, decided to abide by the rules. . . .

I remember Mrs. A.W. West. Her husband was a dentist, very prominent dentist in town. . . . She was really Mrs. Middle Class Black America in Montgomery. She was like the chairman of the board, see.

And when Mrs. West got involved, even the ladies who were not directly involved and directly participating in meetings were supportive. Like my mother . . . she never attended a mass meeting, but she never rode a bus. She never objected to what I was doing with the car and she knew what I was doing. . . .

By early January, the boycott was going well, but it had become heavily dependent on its cadre of young drivers whose college holidays were ending.

I think that what happened . . . we saw the transportation end really kinda being the backbone of the movement because folks had to work and they had to have that little money. We didn't mind them getting to work late to keep Miss Ann from getting to her job on time, and of course, they was just tellin' Miss Ann, "We not ridin' the bus, and you can come pick me up, or you can find somebody else to get the job done, or you can quit yo' job and stay at home and keep your house and baby yourself. . . ."* But we did know that in order for the family to exist they had to have that money . . . they had to get back and forth to work. . . .

So about four or five of us said, "Well, why do we have to go back? It's important that we get a college education, but it's important that we win this thing now that we've gotten into it. . . ." So some of us went home and talked to our parents, who went up in arms, but who allowed us to stay at least till the end of the semester. Fortunately we got credits for it anyway. Most of us had to write a paper on why it was important for us to stay in Montgomery during that period of time.

But I thought it wasn't a symbolic gesture on the parts of the few that I know who stayed. It was just a realization of the fact that there was a need and there was nobody to fill that need. I could not guarantee that my daddy would find somebody who would be able to drive that car every day like I was driving it every day. So I went on and stayed.

And what was really interesting was that the black folk knew that the movement did not have any money to pay for all this stuff. They were spending enough money on trying to get people out on bail bond if they got arrested. So people started giving you the nickel or the dime or whatever it was that they would give you for the bus, but not let nobody see it, so you could buy some gasoline. At that time, gas was nineteen cents a

*"A lot of white folks were picking up their domestic workers and bringing them to the house and taking 'em home, because they had their job to get to and they needed the money, or else they couldn't keep a domestic worker and all that house they were living in or anything else. But the few who tried to fire or did fire, or release, black folk couldn't find replacements who were going to be any better in terms of time."

gallon or so, so you could just about get away without having to spend any of your own money on gasoline. Never asked anybody for anything, but they would just [say], "Here's a dime. . . . Here's a quarter I can give you to help you out with the gasoline." And I used to take that money and put it all back into the gas—well, almost all of it. I mighta saved a little bit of it out for a beer or something. [Laughs]

Do you have any recollections of your responses to Dr. King?

Oh, yeah, everybody was just captivated by the cat, man. He was a very articulate person. He sounded good, and it was just great to see a black person who could get up and move an audience the way he did without talking out of the Bible. I mean, he was talking about what we oughta have, and what we oughta be, and what the situation oughta be in the South, and what kind of country we oughta live in. He was saying the thing and he was saying it so well. You know, Martin was one of your great orators. . . .

I can remember one incident that he wrote about and Ralph talks about a lot. I happened to be in church that day when we had a meeting. That was at Day Street that night. Martin asked this old lady, he said, "Now listen . . . you have been with us all along, so now you go on and start back to ridin' the bus, 'cause you are too old to keep walking. . . ."

She said, "Oh, no." She said, "Oh, no." Said, "I'm gonna walk just as long as everybody else walks. I'm gonna walk till its over."

So he said, "But aren't your feet tired?"

She said, "Yes, my feets is tired, but my soul is rested." [Laughs] Yes, sir, and that was kind of like a story he used to tell a lot in the Movement throughout the years. As he'd go somewhere and he'd think people would be getting a little tired of marchin', he'd tell that story about the lady who said, "My feets is tired, but my soul is rested."