Rogers: This is a taped oral history interview with Mrs. Cora Fleming. It's conducted by Owen Brooks and Kim Rogers on August 16, 1995, in Indianola, Mississippi.

Ms. Fleming, do we have your permission to tape this?

Fleming: Yes, you do.

Rogers: And at the end of the interview we'll ask you to sign a consent form, which just says that you consent to have your tape put in the Tougaloo Archives. That's all right with you?

Fleming: That's fine.

Rogers: Well, thank you. I guess to start at the beginning, are you a native of Indianola? Are you from here?

Fleming: No. I'm from Starkville. That's my home.

Rogers: Where is that in relation to Indianola, Ms. Fleming?

Fleming: It's, I believe, about 103 or 105 miles from here.
Rogers: Oh, yes. That's up where Mississippi State is. Where were you in the family? Were you the eldest or--

Fleming: No, I'm the sixth child.

Rogers: What did your parents do?

Fleming: My mother, in the beginning, was a teacher, and my father was a farmer.

Rogers: Can you tell us what your family was like?

Fleming: My family had ten children. The oldest, he was a farmer until he left. The second one left when he was fourteen, went to Chicago. He ran off from home. [Laughter] The third one was a girl, Julia. She was the oldest girl. She kind of followed in my mother's footsteps. She taught school. My next sister, Mildred, she's just a plain housewife. So was I for a while. [Laughter] Then my next sister was Hattie. She was involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Also Mildred, who resides in Texas now. Hattie is deceased. She was very active in the Civil Right Movement, went to jail a lot of times.

Rogers: Here in Mississippi or in Texas?

Fleming: Here in Mississippi. Hattie lived here. Sister Hattie and Porter, he's deceased. He left Mississippi and went to Chicago at an early age. Hattie left Mississippi, too, after she was grown and finished school here, went to Chicago, and now she works in the public school system as a teacher's aid or assistant or something, I believe. My sister Dell, the baby girl, she married at an early age to Joe Henry Wiggins, who was in the Army. She didn't finish school at the time, but after that, she was married about twelve years, she went to
school and finished school, got two or three different degrees. Now she's working in North Carolina at one of the underprivileged children students places up there. She also working in the university as a counselor or something, I believe. She's also the owner and operator of a nine-unit beautician shop, beauty shop, salon.

Rogers: That's a lot.

Fleming: Yes. So she's doing well, the baby girl. The youngest one, the son, he lives here in the Delta. We're the only two that's here in the Delta. So all of them did certain things in the civil rights, not too much. Like Mildred and Hattie and myself, we did most of the civil rights work.

Rogers: What do you attribute that to, all of these girls doing the political stuff? Was there just something different about you girls?

Fleming: I guess so. We kind of fought behind the other girls. Mildred is older than I am, then me, then Hattie. We were the three that were close together, you know, in age, the three girls. I guess we came along at the time that things began to change, I reckon, want to be a change in the minds of the elderly people, want to change and see things better for their children, and they had it. I guess they couldn't act on it, but they had it in their minds, I believe.

Rogers: The older people.

Fleming: Right.

Rogers: Did you come from a religious family?
Fleming: Yes. Very much so.

Rogers: What church?

Fleming: Baptist. I came up a Baptist. Now I'm a Church of God in Christ.

Rogers: And what were your early experiences with school and work? Where did you go to school?

Fleming: I went to school at Chapel Hill Community in Starkville, the town seat and the county seat. I finished elementary school when I was, I believe, sixteen. Started high school when I was sixteen. I worked for a year, couldn't stand the field, hardships, thought it would be better if I married somebody so I married at an early age.

Rogers: Couldn't stand the field?

Fleming: Going to the field. The farm. Couldn't stand that digging for the devil's head, I did say when I was a child. [Laughter] So I married and left in 1951.

Brooks: You left Starkville in '51?

Fleming: Yes, '51.

Rogers: When were you born?

Fleming: June 3, 1933.
Rogers: That was right in the middle of the Depression.

Fleming: Yes, right. We changed, I guess. Was born different, I guess. Hard times. I remember a lot of stuff back when I was a child growing up, how we ate and how we got our food, how we came by the food we had. At that time, I believe we had--I can remember tokens. Everything was tokens we used back then to buy groceries. I just remember, like we used to ride the buses with in the North, we had tokens to buy food with, and then they had commodity--what did they call it in those days?

Brooks: Commodities.

Rogers: Was this from the federal government?

Fleming: Yes, federal government.

Rogers: What kind of food did you eat growing up?

Fleming: My mother generally raised a garden. We had vegetables, peas, butterbeans, corn, okra, all that kind of stuff. And they raised cows. They raised chickens. They raised hogs. So the hardest time was like in March and April, the worst time in our lives. The winter food was gone then. We had come through the winter fine, but then in March and April, everything had run out. You had to get other things trying to grow then, the vegetables to grow in the garden. So that was the worst time of our lives, I think, when I was growing up. We never went hungry, but just a shortage of food. You know what I mean.

Brooks: When you left Starkville in 1951, did you come right to Sunflower County?
Fleming: No. I went to Alabama first.

Brooks: What part of Alabama?

Fleming: Birmingham.

Rogers: What was Birmingham like then?

Fleming: Well, generally like it was in our area; black folks stayed in their place. [Laughter] Yes.

Brooks: How long did you stay in Alabama?

Fleming: About, maybe, a year.

Rogers: That's a tough town.

Fleming: Is it?

Rogers: It was. I think it's better now.

Fleming: From Alabama I went to Toledo, Ohio, and from Toledo to Cleveland, Ohio.

Rogers: You and your husband went these places?
Fleming: Yes. We were together at that time.

Rogers: What was he doing then?

Fleming: Well, he was a construction worker. He had been to the service. He had been in the service two or three years. He was out. He was doing construction work then. From there to Chicago. I was in Chicago thirteen years.

Rogers: What was Chicago like then?

Fleming: Well, it was a little different. There was still prejudice there, too, but it was not as bad as it was here. I remember I first tried to get a job. I tried for years to get a job in Chicago--for months, rather. I never could get a job. And when they asked me--I went to this last job, which was Wilson's Packing House in Chicago, and they asked me about my nationality, my race. You know what I put on the application? I put "Spookarican." [Laughter] I got the job, too. I got the job. A Negro. And a "rican" in it, Puerto Rican. They all got the jobs, you know, DP. They got all the jobs in those days, but they were hard workers, and they'd take less money for the work they were doing, and it was hard for black folks to get a job in those days in that area because of the DPs.

Brooks: Did you belong to the Packinghouse Workers when you worked for [unclear]?

Fleming: What, the union? No. I wasn't there long enough.

Brooks: How long did you stay?
Fleming: About two months.

Rogers: That was a hard job?

Fleming: A hard job. Yes. Then I left Chicago and went to Detroit, lived in Detroit for a while.

Rogers: What was that like for you?

Fleming: It was a little different. The people there in Detroit, the black people, had a little more insight on things. They were doing better than the people in Chicago, it seemed like to me. They were more apt to speak out, where they weren't as good in Chicago about speaking out.

Rogers: Detroit was more of a unionized town, too, wasn't it?

Fleming: Yes, I think so.

Rogers: There were a lot of black people in the UAW [United Auto Workers].

Fleming: Yes. At that time I didn't realize that, because I didn't have anything in my mind too much about the life we lived. I was young and from Mississippi and didn't know anything about anything. So finally I began to read the paper. I began to educate myself. [Laughter] I couldn't speak about anything. I'd get in a conversation with people, my conversation was limited because I didn't know what to talk about. I began to read the newspaper. I said that's one thing I could learn from, the current events, national events, everything. So I just began to read and study and learn a lot. So finally, in 1961, I came back to Mississippi. My mother had got sick, and I moved back here.
Rogers: That's why you moved back to Mississippi, because your mom was sick?

Fleming: Yes. She wasn't sick then, but I had a feeling like I had to come back here. I came here to visit at first. I came here in, I believe, December of ’60 to visit, and I stayed here about two months. I went back to Chicago and packed my clothes and moved back to Mississippi. I had to come back. I don't know why. My mother told me before she died, she said, ”The Lord sent you back here,” because I was needed down here.

Brooks: Did you go back to Starkville?

Fleming: I came back to the Delta. My father, they moved here in ’52. So when I came back here, I had the house right next door to them. So I came back here and started living here and bought this property for my mother and my father, and we settled here.

Brooks: So your mom and dad had already moved to the Delta?

Fleming: To the Delta, yes.

Brooks: To Indianola specifically?

Rogers: And you and your husband moved here?

Fleming: Yes. We came here.

Rogers: Did you have children?
Fleming: No. I didn't have any children at all. I never gave birth to any, but I raised a bunch of them.

[Laughter]

Rogers: What was Indianola like when you moved back? What was the Delta like?

Fleming: It was something else, and it still is, but not like it was when I first came here. Lots better. If you worked on a job for a whole week, you'd make fifteen dollars a week, and you had to say, "Yes, ma'am," and, "No, ma'am," to people. That was the man. And you didn't have any rights at all. The right to stay in the background. At that time, my mother had quit teaching school at an early age, too, because she had so many children and had to quit. She did private home work for a lot of people.

Brooks: Did she ever teach school here in the Delta?

Fleming: No. No. She worked in Starkville.

Rogers: What was that like for her? Did she have bad experiences doing that?

Fleming: She was accused of stealing something from somebody's house.

Brooks: So your mother worked in a private home?

Fleming: Yes.

Brooks: And what did your father do during that period?
Fleming: He was a blacksmith at that time.

Rogers: I imagine a lot of people still had mules.

Fleming: Yes. We had mules. I rode the mule many a day.

Rogers: I just read something a while ago saying mules are getting to be scarce, that whole generations of Mississippians grew up with mules, and now they're getting scarce.

Brooks: Did your father ever do any farming in the Delta?

Fleming: No. He did that blacksmith shop, and then he had--

Brooks: He had a blacksmith shop in Indianola?

Fleming: Yes, on Mill Street.

Rogers: And what did your husband do here?

Fleming: He never did live here. My first husband never did--I've been married a second time. He never lived here. The one had when I lived in Chicago, we divorced, [unclear] divorce. He told me he had filed for divorce. He died last month when I found out.

Rogers: So what kind of work did you do here when you moved back here?
Fleming: I did private home work for a while. I went to a field for a while. I didn't chop cotton; I picked cotton. Then I realized that wasn't my speed. [Laughter] So in ’76, ’75, or ’74, I began working at the compress. I married again in ’61.

Rogers: Right when you moved down here?

Fleming: Yes.

Rogers: And what did your husband do?

Fleming: He worked at Morning Line [phonetic] Products at that time.

Rogers: You said you and your two sisters were involved in the Movement. How did you start to get involved in that?

Fleming: I hadn't too long started living here. I didn't know too many people here, and my mother had had a stroke at that time. That was ’64. We were on the porch one day, and some civil rights folks came down the street.

Brooks: Do you know who it was?

Fleming: I think John Harris and Jimmy Dan [phonetic].

Brooks: In 1964 or ’63?
Fleming: It might have been '63. No, it happened in '64. Mother had the stroke in '64. It happened in '64. They were coming down the street, and I said, "Who are those people?"

Brooks: John Harris--

Fleming: And Jimmy Dan, and a lot more of them, different races all of them mixed up together coming down the street. That was unusual around here.

Brooks: Was that during the summer of '64?

Fleming: Yes.

Rogers: So this was quite unusual.

Fleming: Unusual, yes, to meet white folks and black folks together walking down the street, going to houses and knocking on doors and stuff. My mother looked at them, she said, "You know, I've lived all my life, worked all my life for nothing." And she said, "You go to church. When you get sick and get down, they don't know you." She said, "It's time now for a change to come about, and it's time for y'all to take an active role in it."

I said, "Do you mean that?"

She said, "Yes, I do."

So that night I went to the meeting, the first meeting I went to, at the Baptist school down here that they bombed later on.
Brooks: Where was that Baptist school?

Fleming: On Jefferson and Hannah.

Brooks: Is that where the civil rights folks were meeting, holding their meetings?

Fleming: Yes, yes. And the first meeting I went to, I made a speech that night.

Rogers: What did you say? What did you tell them?

Fleming: I wanted to tell them about the sharecroppers and all that stuff. I didn't know about sharecroppers.
I said, "We don't have any business doing that. You've got your own. Use your own mind, develop your own situation. Don't let anybody tell you how to live your life." I said, "You've been in the fields all your days. Now you're suffering for fifteen dollars a week. I'm working for the same thing. I made a hundred and some dollars a week in Chicago, and now you're making fifteen dollars a week. And what can you do with fifteen dollars? Nothing." Children in bare feet, hungry half the time, but that was the best they could do at that time.
And a lot of people who were going to that meeting, I know, didn't even realize what was going on, the changes that were taking place, a lot of people at that meeting. A lot of them were scared, but they went anyway. Lost their jobs. My sister lost her job. Mildred.

Brooks: Where was Mildred working during that time?

Fleming: At Hall Brothers Clinic.

Brooks: And they fired her?
Fleming: Yes.

Rogers: So what happened then? Did you immediately join up with the--

Fleming: Yes, I sure did. I realized that was just right down my alley, what I wanted to do. [Laughter]

Rogers: Who did you work with in the community?

Fleming: Here in Indianola?

Rogers: Yes.

Fleming: Ms. Giles, Mr. Giles, Thelma Mack, Lillian Hampton, Ms. Bertha Pryson [phonetic]. She's deceased now. Also Mr. Giles is deceased. Reverend Porter.

Brooks: Is he dead?

Fleming: Yes. He's dead now, but he was our main source of strength in those days.

Rogers: Was he Baptist?

Fleming: Yes.

Rogers: Did he y'all meet at his church?
Fleming: He didn't have a church here.

Brooks: He didn't pastor in Indianola?

Fleming: No. I can't recall him pastoring here in Indianola. He had a church out there--I think he had a church out there on Wisconsin, but it was too far from town for the people from town to get out there, to walk. You know, they had to walk to the meetings. There were a lot of other preachers--Reverend Collins and his wife. I can't think of a lot of people. Juanita Scott, Hershel Pace, Miss Mattie Pace. That's her mother and father.

Brooks: Are her folks deceased, Juanita? She's on our list.

Fleming: Her father's deceased, stepfather's deceased. There was a lot of folks, Reverend Fleming, they didn't participate in this but they worked in the Head Start program that started here. She began to work in the area, at my house then.

Brooks: Who was that?


Brooks: Were you asked to go register and vote?

Fleming: Yes.
Brooks: What did you do?

Fleming: I went. [Laughter]

Brooks: Tell us what happened.

Fleming: Nothing happened bad. I just went down and registered the first day and took that test.

Brooks: You took a test?

Fleming: Yes. I had to recite some parts of the Constitution and explain it. I passed the first day I went.

Brooks: Who was the circuit clerk?

Fleming: No, I don't. I don't remember.

Brooks: The same guy that just quit here?

Fleming: No, no. I can't remember what his name was at that time. Anyway, a lot of teachers went the same day I went to register, and they flunked. I passed the first day I went. That part of the Constitution, I just sat there and thought about it, you know.

Brooks: Was that during the summer of ’64?

Fleming: Yes. And I gave them the right answer, interpretation of it.
Rogers: Did you know any of the white kids that came down, some of the Freedom Summer kids?

Fleming: Yes. Martha. I can't remember what her last name was. She's still in Sunflower, I believe. She's a lawyer now.

Brooks: You don't mean Margaret Kibbe?

Fleming: Yes.

Brooks: Oh, she's in Greenville.

Fleming: Greenville now?

Brooks: Yes. She works for North Mississippi Legal Center.

Fleming: Oh, does she?

Brooks: Yes. Was she over here in Sunflower then?

Fleming: Yes. Yes. She did a lot of work here. She did a lot of work in Sunflower. There were a lot of them. I can't remember their names. He's been down here, too, just this year. Scattergood. Charles Scattergood. I remember Fred. I can't remember Fred's last name. I remember Fred. Ed Brown came down. A lot of those COFO [Council of Federated Organizations] and SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] workers came down. I can't remember all those people. I wasn't as involved that time. I know they was here.
Rogers: What was the group that you worked with like in Sunflower? Did it become a close group of people?

Fleming: Yes, for a long time. And I remember when I first got started working with the federal program, the poverty program, I didn't know many people at that particular time. I didn't know how they lived.

Brooks: Tell us how you got involved in that.

Fleming: Through John Harrison. What was that other boy's name?

Brooks: [Charles] McLaurin?

Fleming: No. He was here, but he wasn't involved at that particular time. He was involved in the Civil Rights Movement, not the poverty program. That came up later, in '65. He got involved in '65, I believe, the poverty program.

Rogers: So when did you start working for the poverty program? Was that '65 or '66?

Fleming: '65, I think.

Rogers: Was that with Head Start?

Fleming: Yes, Head Start. Yes. On the CDGM.

Rogers: So were you also involved with MFDP, with the [Mississippi] Freedom Democratic Party?
Fleming: Yes.

Rogers: So how did that happen?

Fleming: Head Start, the poverty program?

Rogers: Yes. How did you become involved in that?

Fleming: I became involved through John Harris and Jimmy Dan and some others that were down in this area, many others.

Brooks: Including people locally?

Fleming: Yes. So they came to me and told me that the poverty program was coming through and we needed to get involved in it, try to get it organized and try to get a program in here. So we did that. I got Ms. Giles here, Ms. Hood from Inverness, Ms. Cane from Sunflower, Ms. Ura Bowie from Morehead. There were five communities involved. And Mrs. Rennie Williams from Rulesville.

Rogers: Did y'all just know each other through the Movement, or did you recruit them specially?

Fleming: Through the Movement.

Rogers: So y'all often acted together?

Rogers: She's from Sunflower?


Brooks: Didn't Clover die recently?

Fleming: Yes. Jimmy Harem from Inverness. He was involved. Bernice White. She was involved.

Brooks: Where was Bernice from?

Fleming: She's from here.

Brooks: That's DeSoto White's wife.

Fleming: Yes.

Brooks: She's going to [unclear].

Fleming: And Doris White. Her husband [unclear]. A lot of names I haven't called. I'd hate to miss anybody's name. That's important, you know.
Brooks: We'll get them along the line. [Laughter]

Rogers: Is there anything that makes these people alike?

Fleming: Yes. Yes. At first there were five of us that were the committee, you know, the chairman and that kind of stuff, to get the thing organized. So I was elected for the chairman. Then we got everybody together, called the community together, had community meetings, and from that the Associated Communities of Sunflower County was formed. But even before that time we had gotten funded through the Field Foundation. And when that money ran out, we had to try to get money through the federal government.

Brooks: Who did you have in Rulesville and Drew?

Fleming: At that time Charles Medlow had gotten involved. We didn't have anybody from Drew.

Brooks: You didn't have Miss Carter?

Fleming: Miss Carter?

Brooks: May Bertha?

Fleming: May Bertha Carter, was she from Drew?

Brooks: Yes.

Fleming: She held a position?
Brooks: Well, she wound up working in Bolivar County.

Fleming: Then we had Ruby Dorsey, all those people, you know, Ora Doss, those young folks. You've got Rennie Williams, don't you? Ruby Davis. I can't think of other folks' names. And Fannie Lou Hamer was from that area, too, but she came in later to the poverty program.

Rogers: So these are all people who've been involved in MFDP and COFO?

Fleming: Yes. Ms. Hamer was involved in all that stuff way before I was involved in that. She helped to organize everything that was taking place here. She got it started off, I think.

Rogers: Did you have a lot of opposition from local white folks at that time?

Fleming: Yes.

Rogers: A lot from the police?

Fleming: Yes, and from black folks, too. They was afraid. One thing I found out, there's a difference in the hill people and the Delta people. A whole lot different. Much different.

Rogers: How are they different?

Fleming: In the hills, we had to be independent, and down here they're dependant on people, on the white folks. See, we had to work for our own up there. We had our own land, everything our own. And we didn't have
a whole lot, but what we had was ours. So we went on the plantations. We weren't dependent on the white
man to give us our rations, you know? That's one thing I had to help build them on, this kind of stuff, and it
worked to a certain extent. And they're still afraid. A lot of them are still afraid.

Brooks: Those feelings of dependency.

Fleming: Yes. "If I lose my job, I can't make it." You've got to take a stand for yourself.

Brooks: When did you meet Amsey [Moore]?

Fleming: Amsey Moore?

Brooks: Yes.

Fleming: In about '66 I met Amsey.

Brooks: Had you already put the organization together?

Fleming: Yes. I worked in Bolivar County, helped organize it. I met you during that time. I met you during
that time in our lives. [Laughter]

Rogers: So tell us about organizing Bolivar County.

Fleming: It was quite easy, because we had people there that didn't mind speaking out. To me, it was quite
easy. The only problem, got chased home one night. [Laughter]
Rogers: By who, the [Ku Klux] Klan?

Fleming: By a big old truck, 18-wheeler. That man made me run. I drove that car on empty. The Lord brought me home. Come from Bolivar County, to Cleveland. And I stopped through Cleveland, I stopped at this girl's house, Emma. She works in Mound Bayou now. Something made me ask her to come home. I was afraid to come home by myself that night. The first time I had a fear. Well, she came home with me that night, and I was driving home. I intended to stop in Shaw and get some gas, but that truck was so hot behind, I couldn't stop, so I kept on driving. The car was on empty, about. I drove that car home. I'm telling you the truth. Oh, my Lord, I don't know how I made it here. I don't know how I made it. That curve, you know, coming from Cleveland, I was driving 95 and 100 on those curves. I didn't do that.

Brooks: You came up 448?

Fleming: Yes. I had to get up from around there. It chased me over to Indianola to Highway 49 out here, 82. Got home and [unclear]. [Laughter]

Rogers: It was all out. Was that the only time you were ever afraid? I mean, Sunflower has this reputation.

Fleming: No. They made me walk the chalk line one night up there.

Rogers: Walk the chalk line?

Fleming: Yes, like I was drunk or something.
Brooks: The police at the police station?

Fleming: We were having a civil rights meeting down here one night. It was about something, trying to get some streets and things paved down here. [Unclear] paying tax in this town. I said, "Look how long you've been here, and you're still on dirt roads. You can't even open the door at your house. There's dust everywhere." And they chased me home that night. They made me walk, like I was drunk.

Brooks: They took you down to the station?

Fleming: I was already down there. I looked around, and all the folks were gone. They had left me there with the police by myself. [Laughter]

Brooks: Is that right? Everybody was gone? Oh, my Lord.

Rogers: That wasn't very friendly of them.

Fleming: No, it wasn't. [Unclear] Mount Carmel Baptist Church. Wallace Dabbs followed us down there. He was then the editor of the paper down here [unclear]. Got down and walked the chalk line. I didn't get scared [unclear]. My knees was shaking. I had to walk on that line and walk back down. All of them had those white helmets [unclear]. They had drugged some people--[unclear] had drugged some folks down there already. A lot of folks have gotten beat up down there, in City Hall. They didn't bother me that night, though. I got done with that meeting in a hurry. I was mad. I got there mad then.

Brooks: Do you remember what year that was?
Fleming: I believe it was '65, '65 or '66. We got to the meeting down there. As I got there, Wallace Dabbs was there, and they had everybody hold hands and sing "We Shall Overcome," and he caught my hand. I got so mad at that man, I could have killed him. [Laughter] Then he said, "Cora."

I said, "Don't you address me as no Cora." I said, "To you I'm Mrs. Fleming." And that's when the white folks started calling black folks "Mister" and "Mrs." I said, "Don't you address me as Cora Fleming. You address me as Mrs. Fleming."

Brooks: He had come to the meeting?

Fleming: Yes.

Rogers: Who was this?

Brooks: This was the publisher of the white newspaper.

Rogers: Mr. Wallace you're saying.

Brooks: What was his name?

Fleming: Wallace Dabbs.

Brooks: The *Indianola* T____.
Fleming: *Indianola T****. "Don't you address me as no Cora Fleming. You address me as Mrs. Fleming. I've been calling y'all Mrs. all my life. Now it's time for you to change your ways, start calling us Mr. and Mrs."

Rogers: Was he surprised when you said that?

Fleming: Yes, he was surprised. He was shocked. [Laughter] What did Wallace Dabbs say? It was time to sing "We Shall Overcome." He joined hands with us, and we sang right along with them. [Unclear] right down the street, leave that place, [unclear].

Brooks: Where was the meeting at?

Fleming: Down at the Mount Carmel Baptist Church. That Reverend Cooks was living then. That was his church.

Rogers: Were you surprised that Wallace Dabbs was down there doing that?

Fleming: No, not really, because he wanted to get some stuff to take back, what we were saying down there.

Rogers: Oh, he was just reporting.

Fleming: Right. So he reported that to the paper about I said, "Call me Mrs. Fleming. I'm not no kin to you, not related, and no friend of yours. Address me as Mrs. Fleming." When I got home, I thought about that. I got nervous again. [Laughter] I don't know whether they shot at my house that weekend or what.
Rogers: Did they shoot in your house?

Fleming: Yes. Twice. Three times.

Rogers: Do you know who did that?

Fleming: No, I don't. They had burned the Baptist school then. They had burned MaGruder's house, and they had burned Mr.--what was that man's name? He's dead now.

Brooks: They bombed the Giles' store.

Fleming: The Giles' store, yes. It's on the end of my tongue. I can't call his name. Dudley Wilder. They burned his house, too. And they shot a man--

Brooks: He's dead?

Fleming: Yes, he's dead.

Brooks: His wife's alive.

Fleming: His wife's alive, yes.

Rogers: What did all this do to you? Being this active person with MFDP and COFO and SNCC, what did this do for you?
Fleming: Well, it took its toll on me in later years. A lot of the personal fear, I guess, kind of balled up in me. In the long run, it kind of got the best of me.

Rogers: I was just wondering how does living in that kind of fear--

Fleming: It does a lot to you, because you can't sleep at night, try to be on watch for your life at night, for your family, and then when you do this kind of stuff, it affects other people in your family. Because when I was doing this kind of work, my brother and all of them were here. Their family was here. My father lived right there at the time. I was doing the work, but I had to fear for them, too, what they might do to them, also.

Rogers: Did you ever get to the point where you really resented and disliked all white people?

Fleming: Yes. I hated white folk. Yes, ma'am. With a passion. But I learned later on that everybody wasn't the same, and I learned that you can't get anywhere by hating people anyway. You've got to meet on common ground somewhere. I can dislike your ways but love you the same.

Brooks: Tell the story about getting Head Start funding and how we helped you write the proposal.

Fleming: Yes. I didn't know how to do it. That's the time Frank Glover [phonetic] was up there, wasn't it, Frank Glover and a lot of other people: Polly Greenberg and all those and Amsey Moore, Owen Brooks, Charles McLaurin. At that time he had come here then. Y'all had to write the form--and they took our proposal and used it to get their program started because they didn't know how to write one either.

Brooks: So you got the independent Head Start funded, right?
Fleming: Right. You tell it. You know all about me, too. It's so long, my mind gets dull. [Laughter]

Brooks: All minds get dull.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Brooks: Community Action Programs were organized at the county level.

Fleming: To take over.

Brooks: And the establishment people represented and other sectors of the community, and here we were building an independent Head Start agencies hanging out and not really relating to those kind of people and not trusting them. See, they wanted to put Head Start in the public schools, and, of course, our concept of Head Start was different. We felt that Head Start ought to be operated and controlled by community people, and community people were more fit to see about their own children. We used those folks who had been politically involved in their communities. They had a better frame of reference in terms of what needed to happen in the individual communities where we were able to organize.

It wasn't by accident that she went through these various communities in Sunflower and she picked the activist people to be the nucleus of the organization of the Head Start program. Of course, those other folks didn't like that. They wanted to control it, and their rap was these community people didn't know what was best for their children, couldn't handle administratively the organization of the program, blah, blah, blah. But, of course, it was the political imperative that they were concerned about, right? To control the dollars, put their people in place, and control the program. So it was inevitable that they would clash, and they did, in fact, clash, and they did, in fact, push us out.
Fleming: Right. And they used the police force, Brice Alexander, the chief of police, as the head of the program in order to frighten us away.

Rogers: You mean to intimidate you as head of a child care program?

Fleming: Yes.

Brooks: And their surrogates at that time were some of the professionals.

Rogers: Professional blacks.

Brooks: They felt that would do their bidding.

Fleming: Walter Gregory, for one. I'll never forget that man.

Rogers: That's what John Ditmer [phonetic] said, the old NAA just came right in.

Brooks: [Unclear], who were not involved in the Movement by and large, were not involved in the Movement, had no history of activism, and were acknowledged by the leaders in the white community as the leaders of the black community. In fact, they weren't, but they were anointed by whites.

Rogers: The old game of picking black folks' leaders.

Fleming: Right. And we couldn't even have Head Start in the community at first. We had to go to Leland to have Head Start. We couldn't get a building or a church or anything else here to have Head Start in.
Brooks: And bear in mind, now, these people weren't interested in Head Start. They weren't interested in the poverty program. Paul Johnson swore the poverty program wasn't even going to come into Mississippi.

Fleming: That's right.

Brooks: And it was through the guile and determination of the Movement people--I know we helped out in getting Mary Holmes College as the grantee for CDGM to skirt the governor's veto. They swore that they weren't able to avoid this and their move had to be to control, had to be to control. But the crisis came when it was all or nothing at all.

Fleming: That's right. Yes.

Brooks: They really came at us, "If you don't come this way, there won't be no Head Start at all." So the decision had to be made by the community folk. If we continue this fight, they're going to close down Head Start entirely, and we won't have anything. So they had to give in to the Walter Gregories and the Community Action Agency people and gave over control. They took control of not just Sunflower County, but other counties.

Fleming: Other counties, too.

Rogers: What was working in Head Start like those years when you were doing it?
Fleming: It was educating for all of us because we all began to be trained. We trained through Mary Holmes Junior College and different sources. [unclear] the federal government just wasted money when they trained us to do the job. They just threw away money, didn't they?

Brooks: They did.

Fleming: Wasted a lot of money training a bunch, a whole lot of people for the power structure and the so-called educated blacks to take over. Why did they that use that money to train us for if they weren't going to need us later on, millions of dollars?

Brooks: Then they changed the rules, right?

Fleming: That's right.

Brooks: They changed the criteria for being able to work in the programs, started making demands of the workers, and finally they came to the fact that they had to have a certain level of education before they could even work in the program. That moved to push out a lot of the activists.

Fleming: That's right. It was nothing but a bunch of crap, because a lot of them got in there with their education right now, been there for years.

Rogers: From your years in Head Start, what were the best things that you saw come out of it?
Fleming: The best thing I saw come out of it, people began to live better. And another thing, we were able to teach our children what they needed to know from us as a black people. Instead of being taught by the power structure all their values and background, it let them be taught by our own.

Rogers: Tell me what were some of the things they were able to do for black children in terms of their values and background. How would you describe that?

Fleming: We learned that we had a lot of talented children in the program. We have artists, we have brought through artists and lawyers and everything else through this part of the program.

Brooks: Some kids didn't know what breakfast was until they went to Head Start.

Fleming: That's right.

Brooks: Some kids didn't know what drinking milk was until they went to Head Start.

Rogers: What kind of cultural stuff did you give them? What kind of stuff did you stress that was part of, say, black culture?

Fleming: Taught them that they were somebody. No one would tell them that they weren't anybody, they were somebody, I don't care how black or how ugly they were or how nappy their hair was. It wasn't important whether you had straight or curly hair. You were somebody, no matter what. I taught some here, that boy right there, that boy I raised here on the wall there.

Rogers: That young man in the Marines?
Fleming: Yes. I raised four of those children. One's in the Army. He's in the Marines.

Rogers: Were they in your Head Start program?

Fleming: Yes. They started through Head Start, but they were brought up on welfare, didn't have anything. I got them back in 1985, put them through school from, I think, third or fifth grade. They finished high school. I always did tell them, "No what happens, don't forget, you're somebody and you can be what you want to be. Because you came up on welfare, that doesn't mean you've got to be a welfare recipient the rest of your life. Be somebody." He's smart. He's a very smart young man. All of they are kind of smart.

Rogers: So you're giving the kids a sense of who they are and ambition.

Fleming: Yes, who they can be.

Rogers: And this is real different from the kind of messages you got in the white schools and white teachers.

Brooks: Plus it actually gave them a head start. It actually prepared them.

Fleming: In every way.

Brooks: Educationally, socially.

Fleming: Mentally, yes, everything.
Rogers: What did this do for the teachers? Head Start employed a lot of local folk as teachers.

Fleming: Yes. When they first got started, we employed Bernice White. She was one of our teachers, and Ms. Kirkland. They were down-to-earth people. They did a lot to encourage the program and to make it operate well, because--like Robert Buck, Attorney Buck, he worked in the program with us.

Brooks: He's a practicing attorney now in Greenville.

Fleming: And like Jimmie Douglas, he's doing this job on this road out here.

Brooks: He became a contractor, heavy equipment operator.

Fleming: He said Ms. Hamer lent him his first $2,000 to get started on.

Brooks: Jimmie is quite a guy.

Fleming: He's got a good job going now.

Rogers: Could you see changes in the folks who worked for Head Start?

Fleming: Yes, a lot of changes. They were different. They became stronger. They became leaders in the community.

Brooks: They themselves became more knowledgeable about the needs in the community and how to put together the--
Fleming: And survive.

Brooks: Yes. They knew how to survive. That they knew. [Laughter]

Fleming: They could put their little money thing together and tried to do a better job for their families, you know.

Brooks: Exactly. [Unclear] community organization.

Fleming: It instilled self-worth in them.

Brooks: That's right. A lot of us became activists in the community and struggled for community development in many areas. Took on the welfare department.

Fleming: Everything. Food stamps.

Rogers: Were you one of these people that took on all of these agencies?

Fleming: Yes. [Unclear]. We had somebody here. We had folks trained here to take over. Mr. Brooks and Ed Brown, a lot of people worked in the area to make sure people got the training they needed to take over things when others were out of town. I would call him anytime. I would call him anytime. If I needed some advice or help thinking about something to do, I would call him.

Rogers: What did it do for you?
Fleming: One time the preacher asked me, told me, said, "You ain't got no business fooling with these little folks no more. You're somebody. You're making money."

I said, "Well, I'll tell you like this, Rev." I said, "I'm no more now than when I first got started." I said, "Don't forget who I make my money off of, the little folks. I cannot even think about me being more than they are. I'm just like they are. I'm nobody, just like you're not anybody." [Unclear] who was that making money off the poor folks and getting high, high on the hog, can't look back at people?

Brooks: And they particularly hated the political activism.

Rogers: Who was that?

Brooks: The power structure, the establishment.

Rogers: Even the black community?

Brooks: The so-called leaders.

Fleming: All the community.

Brooks: After a point, then they stepped to the fore, and after little folks had struggled to open up certain kinds of avenues and certain kinds of [unclear]--

Fleming: And they took over.
Brooks: Then here they came.

Fleming: And took over.

Brooks: [Unclear] and took advantage.

Fleming: It makes me vexed right now sometimes to think about how they sit back and enjoy the fruits of our labor.

Rogers: Oh, yes. I've heard that from so many places. I mean, people from New Orleans tell me that story. So did you feel like this Head Start experience for you was a real valuable experience?

Fleming: Yes, it was. Until today I think it's valuable. But the children, they may not get the same kind of teaching we had in those days, but it still helped with the children, health-wise.

Brooks: It split the black community. It really did. Those are some of the negative results of the poverty program days.

Fleming: And some of the most influenced the black people and destroy them, tear them down, where they're doing something wrong by helping their own people. But that was just all in the game. That was their way of doing things, destroying you.

Rogers: The War on Poverty is under a lot of attack these days from people on the right, people in Congress who want to get rid of food stamps, welfare, everything. Did the poverty program do some good in this area? You said the Head Start program did some good for the kids. What about some of those other programs?
Fleming: They all helped, the food stamp program, in housing.

Brooks: Actually, [U.S. President Richard M.] Nixon killed the War on Poverty, you know, in the seventies. From ’68 on, there was the down slide and the removal of, the closing up of OEO and funneling of certain funds into the established organizations like HEW [U.S. Department of Housing, Education and Welfare]. But you look around, and you try to see what's left, and there's a little bit of health program here--

Fleming: A little bitty some.

Brooks: --they're about to kill these off altogether. They're coming after them, tooth and nail. But they had already corrupted. I mean, they had already put so many restrictions on these services that it almost became immobile as far as its value to the total uplift of the communities, because when they organized the Legal Service Corporation to actually run the facilities, then there was the down slide, and the program changed drastically in many ways.

Fleming: And it helped a lot in the health programs like Mound Bayou. It's been a great help.

Brooks: Yes, the health center. That survives. But you know it was doing much more good because it had outreach in the old days. They would go to people's homes in the country and deal with environmental kinds of issues that were related to preventative medicine kinds of [unclear]. So when they pulled in the horns of those programs and they restricted them just to primary care, then that had a negative impact on health. It began to slide in the other direction.

Fleming: That's right.
Brooks: So there are remnants, just remnants left, really. We were able to sit-in the [Greenville] Air Base, and that was in '66, and that resulted in food stamps coming. That was the direct result, food stamps.

Rogers: Is that the occupation of the air base near Greenville?

Brooks: Yes. See, we had threatened to take over, with the Department of Agriculture's permission, take over the distribution of commodities to certain counties. It was optional, whether the counties were going to allow commodities to be distributed. So we were bold enough to say, "Well, we will handle the distribution." Obviously we didn't have the means to do it, but the threat of it had some impact, and some counties relented, and the stance of [unclear] changed somewhat as related to hunger and the need for food programs to come into the state of Mississippi. So then we got free food stamps. We said Mississippians aren't able to--

Fleming: Pay for food stamps, right.

Brooks: In other areas, right, people had to pay, buy their stamps. Then finally they did away with paying for stamps altogether, but we were the ones that said [unclear] poor people can't pay, can't buy food stamps.

Fleming: Right. Then we had an opportunity to help make the law on the aging, write the legislation on the aging. I was invited to the White House that year.

Brooks: But you know, I think in those days people began to see their own ability to do for themselves, and you moved them to the welfare department. Some people had been denied ADC, and, of course, welfare in the state of Mississippi was the lowest of any state in the United States.
Fleming: And it still is.

Rogers: Ms. Fleming, are you still active right now?

Fleming: Not too much. I help people on the telephone. I can't get out too much, do too much work on the outside. Like I said, this work in the past has kind of left a toll on me, you know.

Brooks: On all of us.

Fleming: And my nerves. I had a spell of sickness back in '85, and I haven't recuperated from that completely yet. I couldn't even walk. I had to learn to walk again and talk and everything. I can't think too well sometimes. My mind goes to sleep on me.

Brooks: You've come back very well, though, Cora.

Fleming: Think so?

Brooks: Yes.

Rogers: Did you have a stroke?

Fleming: Something like a stroke.

Brooks: Yes. She was really very sick in those days. I hadn't heard from her in a long time.
Rogers: And are you still raising some kids?

Fleming: Yes. [Laughter]

Rogers: Oh, Lord. That's a job. That's a full-time job.

Fleming: It sure enough is. Some of the ones I raised, they have babies, children now. They're all working somewhere.

Rogers: Ms. Fleming, in the last thirty or forty years, according to the census, the Delta's lost a lot of population, particularly a lot of black people. Have you noticed this?

Fleming: Yes. A lot of them are moving back now, though, and a lot of them are just dead. So many people have died these last few years, it's something.

Rogers: Did you see this in your own family? Did you see your sisters and brothers go off and kids go off?

Fleming: Yes. All my nieces and nephews that were here--but they weren't born here either. They migrated to other states. So that made them, all those kids, about thirty-some of them in my family were not around, and their children.

Brooks: Do you remember every Sunday at the Greyhound terminal I used to remark on that. When school let out.

Rogers: All these kids came down from the North?
Brooks: All those kids were at the bus station going North.

Fleming: Oh, yes. They left here.

Brooks: And I remember we used to think that, well, it was just black folks leaving, but that wasn't so. That was the out-migration.

Fleming: Yes, white people, too.

Brooks: From the state, not just the Delta, from the state. That was a brain drain. We lost a lot of talent.

Rogers: According to the census, all these Delta counties have lost like forty percent of their black population in the last thirty or forty years. But black or white kids, unless you had something to inherit, what was there?

Brooks: There were no jobs for them in the summertime, right? And the educational opportunities weren't here, black or white. The extended family was in Chicago and St. Louis and Minneapolis and all those points north. I remember they used to say to us, "Send our kids to Chicago for the summertime," and then a lot of kids never came back.

Fleming: That's true.

Brooks: Just never came back.

Rogers: Did that happen with your family, Ms. Fleming?
Fleming: Yes. Yes. Most of my people, they had gotten grown, though, when they left, married. My sisters and brothers, the younger ones, the boys, they wanted to do something to better themselves, and one of them did. He did real well.

Brooks: You know, we always used to say that the Delta was habited by the very young and the very old. That whole middle age group, or a significant part of the middle age group, had to leave here in order to do better economically.

Rogers: Have any of your family come back to the Delta?

Fleming: To live? No.

Rogers: Why do they stay away?

Fleming: They've got established there, and [unclear]. To mention how things work for some people, my second oldest brother, he has a fourth-grade education, and he's about a millionaire now.

Rogers: What did he make his money in?

Fleming: He worked from the time he was at home in the field, a little boy, fourteen years old, but he had a dollar.

Brooks: Where'd he go?
Fleming: Chicago. But he had a dollar, and went back there and just saved. Didn't waste anything, just saved.

Brooks: What kind of work did he do in Chicago when he got there?

Fleming: Steel mill, and went into the service. That's where he got his start, in the service. Then he married a kind of well-off lady, and they pooled their little money, financed again. They're doing real well.

Brooks: Is he retired now?

Fleming: Yes.

Rogers: Have race relations changed here in Indianola since the sixties, since you were an activist?

Fleming: Yes, they've changed some. They've changed a little bit, not too much. When you look right down to the real nitty-gritty part of the thing, it hasn't changed that much.

Brooks: Control is still control.

Fleming: Right. You're controlled. Still controlled. On the surface, you can come in and look, you'd think everything is fine. On top of the surface, you'd think it was just cool. You see two or three people that work in the bank, you see four or five working somewhere else, but that doesn't mean anything. What's it going to profit me, me doing good and you doing bad? I've got my good job, my good pay coming, but all the rest of the people is doing bad. It doesn't profit you too much, one to survive or two to survive.
Brooks: Y'all struggled so hard to get black people elected to public office.

Fleming: Sure did.

Brooks: What has that done?

Fleming: It hasn't done nothing.

Brooks: Come on, Cora, tell the truth. Have they delivered?

Fleming: No.

Brooks: Because you're still struggling.

Fleming: Still struggling.

Brooks: All throughout all these counties.

Fleming: That's true. They haven't done anything for us.

Brooks: Carver, do you remember Carver? Beamer?

Fleming: That's the truth.

Brooks: They don't control nothing.
Fleming: Sure don't.

Brooks: And they still have to go to the same trough, more or less, to drink from the same [unclear].

Fleming: Isn't that the truth? I don't see that, though. I just don't see that, work all my life just to be under somebody.

Brooks: But they as individuals prosper.

Fleming: Individuals. That's right.

Brooks: They didn't help anybody, didn't help the group.

Fleming: Helped themselves. They helped themselves.

Brooks: They didn't build the community.

Fleming: Sure didn't.

Brooks: And bring people out of the [unclear].

Fleming: They tore it down. It took the people on the outside to come in and do what they did do. [Unclear] the outside people gave it to us.
Rogers: You mean those outside CORE [Congress on Racial Equality] people?

Fleming: Like Owen Brooks, Ed Brown, Frank Glover, and Wally Greenberg, Tom Levy, and all those people.

Brooks: So they don't beat you on the head anymore, right? And they don't carry you off to jail whenever they feel like. They don't need to. [Laughter]

Rogers: You said they don't need to?

Fleming: They've got black folks beating the heads now. [Laughter]

Brooks: Yes, surrogates.

Rogers: Have things gotten better, do you think, for younger people? Is schooling better than it was, education better?

Fleming: Schooling is better than it was.

Brooks: There's more opportunities.

Fleming: More opportunities for them, but then they've missed out on some of the other things. Where they've gained in one way, they've lost in other ways.

Rogers: What have young folks lost?
Fleming: They've lost the will to try to survive without getting in trouble. A lot of stuff going on now, drugs and stuff, which is not their fault. They put it on us, but it's not us, because they can't bring anything in here. We don't have no planes, boats, to bring drugs up in this area. They bring it in, and folks get hold of it, but one thing about it, they intended for it to be the black folks, but it's getting the white folks, too. They aren't [unclear], but we know who it's getting, it's getting all of them the same way, and that's a bad thing, too.

Rogers: So the black kids and white kids are both getting drugs.

Fleming: Yes, they're getting drugs. Grown folks are selling it to them.

Brooks: They don't go to jail at the same rate.

Rogers: No, they sure don't. Believe me, I know.

Fleming: [Unclear].

Brooks: They'd rather spend $25,000 to incarcerate a black person for ten to fifteen years. It's amazing. It really is amazing.

Rogers: You could send that kid to Harvard.

Brooks: What you could do!

Rogers: What you could do with that.
Fleming: That's the truth.

Brooks: But all [unclear] more prisons, containment, right?

Fleming: Right.

Brooks: And the deterioration of the life's blood of the black community.

Fleming: You know, I told them back in '63, when this Green Amendment passed--

Rogers: What was that?

Fleming: That's when they tried to stop people from whipping their children and chastise them and discipline them like they should. I told them back then, "They're getting ready to put all of you in jail now. You'd better take a look at what's going on around you, because if you can't whip your child, he's going to get in trouble then. It's your [unclear] to chastise them. Now, they say everything you do now is child abuse. It's child abuse all right, so they can put them in jail later on. The jails are full right now.

Rogers: How have the children that you raised turned out? What are their lives like, do you think?

Fleming: They turned out pretty good. The girls, they're about the worst ones. You know how girls are. [Unclear], he's in trouble right now.

Brooks: He is? Is he still in the service?
Fleming: Yes. They picked him up yesterday.

Rogers: Nice-looking young man.

Brooks: Where was he?

Fleming: He was here.

Brooks: He was here in Indianola?

Fleming: Yes, at my house.

Brooks: On leave?

Fleming: He went running. No, he had left. He had a few days off, and he didn't go back yesterday. He should have gone back. He's out for AWOL. I hate that for that boy, too, because he's a smart young man, messed his life up.

Rogers: How are the girls doing?

Fleming: They're doing pretty good. All of them have got babies.

Rogers: What are relationships between the older folks and the younger folks in the black community like? Do you think there's much communication between them?
Fleming: No. Because all these young folks won't listen to anybody. They've got their own minds now. You can't tell them anything. They're in your house, but they want you to take a back seat to them now. It's not easy. It's not easy at all. And they look at them and say, "Well, put them out," but where are they going? Back on the street, looking back at you, and you're feeling guilty that you done what you done, put them out. It's not an easy job to raise children these days.

Rogers: It's harder these days than when you were coming up?

Fleming: Yes, although we didn't have all the luxuries they have today. These children have got it made and don't know it. If they only knew what we had to come through, a portion of it, I believe there'd be a different group of people coming into the world. But something's wrong with them.

Brooks: Well, you know, there's two sides to every story. What, really, did we leave for them?

Fleming: What did we leave?

Brooks: What did we teach them? What did we pass on to them? How did we follow them communication-wise? When the white folks took everything out of the public schools and left the public schools to the black people--

Fleming: And matter of fact, they had it from generation to generation, passed down to them generation to generation.
Brooks: It's a different time, and somehow or other we're going to have to put the brakes on and say, now this--

Fleming: It's time to put a stop to it.

Brooks: We're going to save ourselves. We can't be afraid of our own young people. No, they're afraid. They won't deal with it. A lot of the black leadership in these communities, the preachers, they don't want to get near the children.

Fleming: Sure don't.

Brooks: They're scared of them. And there really is not the kind of communication--right--between that generation and the older generation.

Fleming: That's true.

Brooks: Therefore, there's nothing being passed on.

Fleming: Sure isn't.

Brooks: And the kids really don't have any frame of reference. You know, they don't know what happened thirty years ago.

Fleming: That's the truth. It's where the lapse comes in at. Something happened.
Rogers: What do you think it was, Ms. Fleming? What was it that happened between the two generations?

Fleming: I think it's a breakdown, for one thing, in how you raise your children, I think. It's a breakdown in that, little things my mother wouldn't dare let us see her do, wouldn't dare let us hear her say. And my oldest sister, there are things she wouldn't dare let her children hear her say or see her do. The rest of them just get weaker and weaker. The chain of command has gotten weaker.

Rogers: What have been the most important events in your community that you've seen, the most important changes?

Fleming: I guess the most important--I don't know. The most important thing, I guess, you no longer have to go around here hollering "Yes, sir," or "No, sir."

Rogers: Yes. Well, that's big, important.

Fleming: Yes, being able to do for yourself.

Brooks: Without the fear.

Fleming: That's right, without the fear.

Brooks: The oppressive fear isn't as evident anymore, but we still don't have the resources and the capability to do it yourself. You've got to be very strong to lift yourself out of this situation here.

Fleming: That's true.
Brooks: You really have to be strong, and you have to be helped by folks that care.

Fleming: That's right.

Brooks: And a lot of these kids don't have that kind of help, folks that care.

Rogers: What have been some of the important changes in your own life?

Fleming: I'm free to do things I want to do. I don't have to take the lowest [unclear]. I can be a woman on my own and be independent and not have to bow to anybody I don't want to bow to. It's at my own pace that I bow. If I say no, I mean no. I mean that, you know. If I say I'm not going to do a thing--you've got to have some self-worth about yourself, and you can't be weak. If it causes you to be hungry a few days a year, do what you believe in. Your own belief is going to save you, not what I believe in is going to save you. But if I say I'm not going to take a stoop, I say I don't believe what you're doing, if I'm hungry for a year, two years, three years, five years, I'd rather be hungry. I'm not going to bow and stoop because you say bow and stoop. You're not going to take my belief from me. I have my own beliefs and my own standards, and my standards are going to save me and my beliefs are going to save me.

Like this CAP program, I don't believe in stooping. If I believe in elevating people, I'm not going to bow back down because of a dollar. I'm not going to do that. If I make a stand for what I think is right, I'm going to stand on that, and that's the way I am, and I hope I die that way. I don't want to see anybody suffer. I want everybody to live happy.

Rogers: You're a really strong person. Where did you get that? Is that from your family, or is that just from coming up?
Fleming: My mother, I think. I believe, my mother. My daddy was strong, too, but my mother was more stronger than he was.

Rogers: What did she used to tell you when you were coming up? What kind of advice did she give you?

Fleming: "Whatever you be, be the best." That's what my daddy always told us, too. When I got ready to leave home one time, he said, "Whatever you be in life, be the best." I never forget that either. My mother said the same thing, "Be a woman. Don't be no pushover for anybody." [Laughter] Values.

Rogers: When you were coming up, and you said there was this fear that black people lived with, were there any stories that were told in your family about race or particular white people or what you had to do to survive?

Fleming: Yes. It was told by my great grandmother. How my grandmother was conceived, back in slavery times, a white man raped her in the wintertime on the ground. It was so cold, ice [unclear] ground. And he raped her. My grandmother, my father's mother, was conceived, and from that rape she developed consumption, tuberculosis. She only had that one child, and she died, and I never got--back in those days they didn't talk too much about that kind of stuff to the children, but by me being nosy, I always tried to listen to that kind of stuff, you know. And that's what happened to her. And then I was [unclear] of me, too, thinking how that man raped her in the woods, cold wintertime. It was cold. My grandmother had eleven children, though. So I guess we got that from my mother's side, really, our strength, our--

Rogers: So was it a white man raped her, too?
Fleming: Yes. White. So at that time, [unclear] took what he wanted. And you couldn't say nothing. And my granddaddy couldn't say anything. That's the only thing--there's one thing, I'm still hoping and praying that the Lord will let me see the day that our men will be able to stand up and speak their belief and not be killed for what they believe in.

Rogers: Are they still being killed for that?

Fleming: Right. Yes. Many of them. Take O.J. [Simpson]. O.J. ain't done nothing to them folks down in California. That's the mess that's going on right today, still going on. And many of them done died for that same--O.J.'s got money to fight the case with, bring all the stuff to light. I thank God for that. If he'd killed her, I'd say do what you're supposed to do to him, but he didn't do that. We've been blamed for stuff all our lives that we didn't do.

Brooks: Let me ask you a question, Cora. Thirty years ago, we were able to put together in this community--no matter how small the organization was, we had an organization or organizations that were struggling to make the place better and make people's lives better, make the quality of life better. We don't have that anymore, do we?

Fleming: No.

Brooks: So there isn't much unity of purpose in terms--

Fleming: Everybody is out for himself these days.

Rogers: What caused that? What made that change, the lack of unity of purpose.
Fleming: Oh, I guess that it's just that they got a little bit of freedom and thought they had enough. That's all I can say. They thought they had it made.

Rogers: In your opinion, who else in the community do you think we should talk to? You gave us a whole bunch of names, but is there anybody else that you can think of that we should--

Fleming: Hampton. You have her name?

Brooks: Lillian Hampton?

Fleming: Yes, Lillian Hampton. Do you have Thelma Mack?

Brooks: Yes, we have Thelma Mack.

Fleming: Do you have Ertha Ellis?

Brooks: Now, Ertha Ellis, that's a new name. Ertha? Is she from Indianola?


Brooks: She lives in Indianola?

Fleming: Yes, at the end of the street.
Rogers: If you'd say who are the best leaders in the black community now, who would that be? Who do you think is doing good work?

Fleming: Now, there's a question. I'd say Bishop Knight in Morehead. He's over the NAACP.

Rogers: Ollie Knight?

Fleming: Who else? [unclear] ain't doing anything at all.

Rogers: Do you still see some of your old friends from the Movement days?

Fleming: Yes, every now and then, when they come by. Yes, they come by [unclear]. I'm trying to think of somebody else that's in a leadership position in this area. I don't know anybody, to tell you the truth.

Brooks: You're hard-pressed to call any names, aren't you?

Fleming: Yes. Can't call any. I know one lady. She's active in a political role. Maggie Barnes.

Brooks: Do I know Maggie Barnes?

Fleming: You might.

Rogers: It's not Selma Barnes, is it?
Fleming: No. She lives in town here. Her number's 1212.

Brooks: Who was that Barnes that used to be with Lillian Hampton back in those--that's not the same person?

Fleming: No.

Brooks: Do you know who that was?

Fleming: Barnes?

Brooks: Was that guy named Barnes?

Fleming: Allen Barnes.

Brooks: Any relation?

Fleming: No, no relation. You know, I can't think of another soul at this time.

Brooks: That's bad, isn't it? Isn't that bad?

Fleming: It sure is rough.

Brooks: How do you find Ertha Harrington? Do you have a phone number for her?

Fleming: I've got a phone number. She's probably at home.
Brooks: You think she [unclear]?

Fleming: I don't think so.

Brooks: What street does she live on?

Fleming: On this street, on Lincoln Street, at the end of the street. You run into a house--there's two houses right there, painted almost alike. It's the one on the left.

Brooks: We'll find it. I'll find it.

Rogers: Owen, I think you can find anybody.

Brooks: No, I can't, but, you know, where there's a will, there's a way.

Fleming: Mr. White, he wouldn't be a leader.

Brooks: Which White?

Fleming: Dorsey White.

Brooks: Oh, Lord. He's old. Dorsey's been out of it so long--

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]
Fleming: You got old Dorsey [unclear]?  

Brooks: Who?  

Fleming: Ruby Dorsey. [Unclear]. Ms. Hamer—not Ms. Hamer. Lord have mercy. Ms. Hamer is nowhere around, not that I see. She might be hanging around you.  

Rogers: Well, there's some people that come back in odd ways.  

Fleming: That's true.  

Brooks: Is there a preacher in town?  

Fleming: A preacher? To do what?  

Brooks: Who says anything important?  

Fleming: They tell me David Matthews is talking real good stuff now.  

Brooks: Oh, he was nowhere to be found.  

Fleming: He's totally against the drugs and that kind of stuff now.
Brooks: That's not hard. It doesn't cost him anything. I know the Reverend Matthews, know him very well. You know how that goes.

Fleming: Yes, limited.

Brooks: State president of the Baptist Association, lives right here in Indianola.

Rogers: Was he an older activist?

Brooks: No, not really. I put his name on the list because of who he is, only because of who he is and because I guess he may have the ability to talk about some things in a detached [unclear] from what he observed.


Brooks: Not what he was involved in.

Fleming: That's right.

Brooks: So we need some of that, I guess. I guess we need some of that.

Fleming: Somebody gave me Will Fountain's [phonetic].

Brooks: Will Fountain? He goes to the Methodist church.

Fleming: He lives down this way.
Brooks: Yes. I'm just trying to think. Where was he during that time? Making money.

Fleming: Yes.

Brooks: Gambling.

Fleming: I don't know about him doing any Civil Rights Movement, nothing. [Unclear].

Brooks: We didn't give [unclear], right? We know a little better than that. He's an upstanding man in church now, but you know how that goes.

Rogers: If you had some advice to give to young people now, what would it be?

Fleming: Stay in school and use your head to become somebody. Before you get a baby, get something in your head first. Take care of your own. Before you think about the other parts of your body, think about your brain first, get that developed. So if you bring a baby, you can take care of that child, if you must have one. Because now they're not going anywhere. And stay off the drugs. Set a goal for yourself.

Rogers: Did you always set goals for yourself?

Fleming: Yes.

Rogers: From the time that you were a little girl?
Fleming: I tried to. Lived up to them, too.

Rogers: You worked for Head Start in '65 and '66? How long did you work there?

Fleming: Till '70.

Rogers: And then what did you do after that?

Fleming: I worked at the compress here in Indianola until about '75, I think.

Brooks: What year was it that Jimmy Strong and McLaurin wanted to throw me through the window when we were struggling to keep the independent [unclear]?

Fleming: In '70.

Brooks: Was that '70? Was it really? They got so mad at me, and even Ms. Hamer came [unclear].

Fleming: Yes, me, too.

Brooks: And what they told us, "Owen Brooks, you can't employ these people when they don't have jobs."

Fleming: You were right about that part of it, but--

Brooks: What could I say?
Fleming: You don't sell your people out for that almighty dollar. You don't do that.

Brooks: That was a turning point, though, wasn't it?

Fleming: That was a turning point, sure enough was.

Brooks: That was a critical turning point in many of our communities, right?

Fleming: Went back, turned back.

Rogers: When they put those new regulations in?

Brooks: No, when they made you choose.

Fleming: Choose between the haves and the have-nots.

Brooks: Between the integrity of the program and the independence of it or to go under, give over to the establishment.

Fleming: That's right, your self-will. Right. Or you go under. Right.

Rogers: So you say between the haves and the have-nots, and the haves are the--

Fleming: The ones with the power.
Rogers: The CAP.

Fleming: Right. We didn't have it. We were just trying to get a little power, learn how to hold ourselves together, but they came right in. They knew the right time to hit it, too, because they knew what to do. They had that [unclear].

Rogers: Was this also during the time when they were trying to put together this loyalist Democrat party with people like Mr. [Aaron] Henry and Hodding Carter in the Delta and all those people who became--

Fleming: All that was during the same time.

Brooks: But it also was the time when white people, in droves, left public education.

Rogers: Did that happen here?


Fleming: That's right.

Rogers: I saw a couple of signs for academies coming up here.

Brooks: In many of these schools we only have a token presence of white children. We have white teachers, because they'll take the jobs to make the money, but they won't send their children to public schools.
Fleming: That was my main thing with the Head Start program. All the children were black, but then when the white [unclear] and the white folks controlled them. I didn't think that was fair.

Brooks: That was an important turning point, too, you know, because we lost that elementary [unclear].

Rogers: Because once you had the white teachers, they were teaching kids different things.

Fleming: Different things, right. They had an opportunity then to do anything, to amount to anything. They had all the say-so over everything.

Rogers: Do you feel like the children got less of a good cultural education from those white teachers?

Fleming: That's right.

Brooks: Then the state reneging on its promise to move on upgrading the quality of education.

Fleming: That's right.

Brooks: Then the 146 school districts, far too many poor school districts that can't do anything meaningful, and the whole philosophy about what kids ought to be taught, who should do the teaching.

Rogers: Did you see this happen with your own kids, with the kids that you were raising?

Fleming: Yes. I had to keep working with them, you know, to try to instill the values in them, but then the peer pressure out there, you have so much other stuff going on. You see, you teach at home what you think
is right. Then they go to the school, then they go to church, then they go to playmates around the community, all of them doing bad things. Then you've got the whole world to fight against out there, because it's hard. That oldest girl I raised, the difference between her and these other children is night and day.

Rogers: In what ways? How would you describe that?

Fleming: She's a better person. She minded more. She didn't mind doing anything you'd tell her to do. I didn't have to tell her but one time. She's grown. The other kids, you'd have to tell them four or five times to do one thing. They don't believe in minding. Her children are the same way. Those children are just the same as these other children, a little bit worse. They're younger. They just don't mind. There's a breakdown I've seen in the parents. It's the breakdown where my daughters are concerned.

Brooks: It's a breakdown in the values in the community. I mean the total community, not just the black community.

Fleming: That's right, the total.

Brooks: The total community is where that materialism emanates from.

Fleming: Right. I see the worst stuff on that TV, these talk programs about these white and black kids, it's pathetic. It's pitiful.

Rogers: What advice would you give to the churches now if you could be the lady to fix everything?
Fleming: You've got to come back to--you want to go all the way back to the old landmark, try to meet it halfway. You can go back halfway to the old landmark and teach these kids the true values, not that false stuff. Don't teach them one thing and you do another. You've got to be an example for your children. You can't tell the child, "Don't go out there and get drunk," and you stay drunk yourself. You can't tell the child don't go out there and be a prostitute and prostitute yourself. You have to be able to live life for that child. If you don't live it, just hang it up, because you can't get something out of a child that you haven't put there.

Rogers: So you think parents should sacrifice for their children?

Fleming: Sure they should. They brought them into the world. They're responsible for their being here. They brought them here.

Brooks: Cora, is the church where the people are?

Fleming: No.

Rogers: Where are the people these days?

Fleming: [Unclear] and the church is, too, because of the church.

Brooks: Is in the church.

Fleming: That's right.

Brooks: In the brick and mortar.
Fleming: That's right.

Rogers: Is there anything else that you'd like to tell us or the world or the young people who'll be listening to this at Tougaloo in the library?

Fleming: I'd tell young people to stand up and be counted as a change, be a change in their lifetime. What has happened to us in the past make a difference, make it better now, for all races. It's going to only come through the new generation. That's where it's at. Other than that, we're doomed.

Rogers: Thank you, Ms. Fleming.

[End of interview]
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