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Jean Wiley—SNCC coordinator, Civil Rights Activist, Educator

Sandra: I get the pleasure of introducing our guest today...who is Jean Wiley. And it says SNCC, 1960 to 1967 Maryland, Alabama...Jean was a student at Morgan State College...now Morgan University...in Baltimore, when the sit-ins broke out in the 1960. She participated in picketing the Five N' Dimes, the department stores, and the theaters. She was finishing up her masters in literature and language at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor when the Mississippi Freedom Summer started being planned. Jean got offered a position at Tuskegee. She started organizing students in Macon County where Tuskegee is. Sammy Young was one of her students. Jean's house became a way station for organizers traveling to and from. You know...you need to spend the night at Jean's house then keep going eastward. That's how. She did this while teaching at a Black school that wasn't very progressive. She had to constantly battle administrators and heads of departments to teach novels like the Invisible Man...and that's our introduction of Jean Wiley...

(Applause...)

Jean: Thank you, folks. I'm very happy to be here. I don't—everything you said is true but I can't figure out where you found it—

Sandra: Kathy's our sleuth.

(Laughter...)

Kathy: It's—it's on the civil rights web site...Bruce—blame Bruce for it...

Jean: Oh, uh...okay. (laughs)...Um...well, um...I'd like to welcome you first. Um...I think this is uh, a wonderful program. Um...you're going to learn a lot. We're all going to learn a lot. And um...I'm glad you're here. And I hope you'll bring somebody else with you next time. Um...I've got a pretty daunting task.

(Laughter...)

Jean: Uh—

Audience: Yeah, but you're up to it...

Jean: I'm up to it. I didn't drive. I came on BART, so I'm a little more relaxed than I would've been...But let me tell you what my task is though, as I understand it. One is to talk about the history, and the history particularly as it relates to what laid the foundation for the 1960s. The other is to talk about myself...as I'm interpreting and also making part of that history. And the third is...to set the tone because this is your first time together. And you'll be meeting some of my colleagues in the um...the Bay Area veterans of the civil rights movement. You'll be meeting several of them in the weeks ahead...So I'm, uh, I hope I'm going to be setting a good tone. I'd like to leave some time for questioning so I'm gonna need somebody's help to signal me because I'm told I can talk forever...Uh... Therefore, thanks...because I do want some discussion—

Audience: Do you want 10 minutes or 15 minutes?

Jean: Uh, give me the signal at 15 and I'll know that—

Audience: Okay.

Jean: Thank you.

Audience: Uh hm...

Jean: Um...Looking at your timeline and hearing the—the...a little of the conversation just now...I'm taking you back even further. Um...I'm taking you to Africa. I'm taking you to European colonialism—um...of Africa. I'm taking you to the ex—the exploitation of Africa...both its human resources and its natural resources because it really does begin there. And too often the textbooks don't have it beginning there, you know. Somehow we got here...and yeah there was slavery and you know...whatever... you know...we know all that. You know what I mean? Um, it begins with systematic exploitation while in the continent of Africa. Um...and it...And Africa becomes key—See, for the other reason I'm going to mention Africa is not because—not only because of where it's beginning...but Africa becomes key as you see the movement and activities progress. It's certainly key in my mind as I'm seeing as I'm coming into adulthood...I'm seeing, um...uh...country after country in the Caribbean as well as um...throughout the African continent gaining their independence. Um, it's on my mind and it's on the minds of everybody I know. And it has an incredible part to play in the psyche and the spirit of the movement. Um, the 1960s didn't happen by accident. People were watching what was happening outside the country as well as inside the country. And unfortunately we don't do that anymore. We don't pay attention to what's happening outside the country. We don't have a clue. Um...so...so...we're starting there. We're starting with the divvying up of the continent of Africa and the beginning of the exploitation. There are some names that I know off the top of my hand but I can't grasp them when I am talking to you. It's called ageism...so...

Audience: (Laughter)

Jean: Bear with me. You'll look them up or...the instructors...they will—will help you. So free people walked toward a ship, many, many ships, suddenly in chains. [For a year] you're walking on a ship, crossing an ocean that your—your forefathers haven't crossed. You've no clue—many people lived inland...Um...And they're going on a voyage that will be called infamously the Middle Passage...Um, where many of them will die at their own hands...just jump overboard...when they can...or toss the children overboard rather than go to this unknown land. So resistance and...the whole theme is resistance...Um, you're looking at a movement, you'll be looking at other movements during the course of this that um...um gained strength and used some of the tactics of the civil rights movement. But what they have in common is—both personal resistance and collective resistance and the various tactics that are used at different...um...at different stages of that—that have a lot to do again with history and location. Um...so people in chains then get to this country and are suddenly no longer Africans or no longer [...] or no longer um...uh...their ethnic tribes but they're slaves. Um, they're not people anymore. Slavery takes away the “peoplehood” of the people. Um, you really do need to keep that in mind—um, that in mind. And maybe we can talk about it a little more but at least you'll have it in mind because teaching...um, teaching the movement without teaching Africa and what's happening around skews everything. It's hard to get. Just like it's hard to get slavery. Really...I mean, “What were they thinking?” you know? What—it's...it's hard to grasp...um, the rationale, the brutality of it. The um...um...inhumanness about it at a time when people were writing the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. You know—how do you hold these two things—how do you balance them? Um...but those very documents also become key to what happens at a later period in the 60s that we'll dwell on more. Um...And, and I certainly hope we'll get to that. In my timeline so—we begin with Africa and—and people. Um...we go through the Middle Passage. Um...Um...we look at people who are

now slaves, which means the dehumanization—they're no longer people. Um, we look at slavery and we look at rebellion—again both personal rebellion as well as—um...resistance as well as collective. So you've heard about the slave rebellions both in this country as well as in the Caribbean and I'm told in parts of South America. Uh, yes there are black people in South America, all over uh...South America...uh...South and Central. Um...uh...[this the Civil War] resistance in which Black men because—one, we weren't allowed but I assure you had they been allowed they would have volunteered for the Union side massively. Now, how do I know that? I know that because of what I saw in the South in the 60s where women rose up. Um, sometimes in a much more...um...not compelling but activist role than you would've expected or even I would've expected had I not—you know, witnessed this myself. So you have the Civil War and you have um...Reconstruction. Reconstruction to many of us has another term and it's called the Great Betrayal. Um...there are a lot of betrayals in—in U.S. history of course. Um...beginning with the Native Americans and the treaties that were never respected. That's the other thing—keep in mind because throughout this history as somebody was saying there all sorts of elements coming into play. Um...and you can't dismiss or forget or put aside what's also happening to the Native Americans at the same time that slavery is happening to Black people. It's a network. It's a web of dehumanization of people.

Um...so...um...um...the betrayal...Um...some of you know about that betrayal but—but let me just say it's when the South, which lost the battles of the civil rights movement, *won* the war. How do you do that? You lose the battles. Um, the whole country is devastated, but in fact, you *won* the war—except, you know, that's not as clear as it might be—except to the people who...uh—have...at first are exuberant and it—because they think they're free. They're told that they're free, but in no way are they feeling free. It's now called indentured servitude. And um...so many of the fine things...um...that came out of—out of Reconstruction with such hope and

such energy...um...uh...were all betrayed. Um, some of you may know, some of you may not that it was Black legislators—because see now they can—right after the war now they can become governing officials—instituted for the first time in this country the notion of universal education. Education for women. Education for Black people. Education for the very white people who had fought to um...maintain slavery. Um...so there—there, there um...um...very advanced ideas about what this new country—having come out of such a horrible war with such loss of life can become, tremendous hope. Um...um...the South comes back little by little, and it really isn't the South...Um...Those of you who have the chance to see the exhibit in New York...um...I fortunately—fortunately was there and saw it—it's the best exhibit I've ever seen of um...African—early African history in this country because it's the only time that I've ever seen money—money, profit so directly tied to slavery. It was profitable. It was probably the first global commodity, you know, selling people. Cotton would come later. Tobacco would come later. The first—sugar would come later. The first is people. Um...so it's the—it's the—the betrayal of the—of the...uh...Reconstruction...that um nevertheless creates some wonderful things which again will affect the movement and which again will affect me in the movement. Um, one was just mentioned—the churches. One of the first institutions created during Reconstruction

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