

**“My Witness” Podcast Transcript
Metro Arts and One Voice Nashville
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Doneisha Wells, Maplewood High School
Frankie Henry, Civil Rights veteran who participated in the Nashville sit-ins
Mary Margaret Randall, One Voice Nashville

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

FH: If you don’t know your history, you will really repeat it. So, I am very, very caught up with our trends of today and with children understanding where they came from and how we got to where we are today.

DW: My name is Doneisha Wells. I am in the 10th grade and I go to Maplewood Comprehensive High School. I’m interviewing Ms. Frankie Henry. My first question is: living the life that you were living, and the fact that you weren’t even thinking about civil rights, what made you actually stay through all of it?

FH: Well, after I talked with Diane Nash, and really, when you are in a segregated society, you may not really be aware of all of the rights that you have been deprived of. She brought that to the forefront of my mind.

DW: Diane Nash came to Nashville to attend Fisk University. As a student leader and strategist, she co-founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, often referred to as SNCC (“snick”). On April 19, 1960, she led some 3,000 protestors to Nashville’s City Hall and prompted Mayor Ben West to disavow segregation of Nashville’s lunch counters. That famous exchange occurred just steps away from the site of *Witness Walls*.

FH: When I started this journey, it was merely by accident. All of the adversities that children are confronted with today...I want them to be aware of all of the sacrifices that their fore-parents have really gone through for them to get to where they are today.

And I would have to catch a bus if I didn’t drive one of my father’s cars downtown and transfer and get on a Jefferson Street bus and take it to Tennessee State and vice versa. When I took that Jefferson Street bus on in and got off this one, I met Diane Nash. And I thought she was Caucasian. And she stopped me and asked me, “Are you a college student?” And I said, “Yes.” She said, “Well what college do you attend?” I said, “Tennessee State.” She said, “Will you walk with me?” I said, “Why?” She said, “This is our first day of the sit-in and I don’t have anyone to go with me to Cain Sloan’s.” They had already been seated at McLellan, Woolworth, Kress. And she was one of the leaders, so she would check in to see how they were doing and tried to get somebody to go with her. And I said, “OK,” and while we were walking, she talked about the sit-ins, “Do you know anything about civil rights?” I said “No,” because I grew up in a predominantly black neighborhood. All black teachers. And at that time, I really was not aware of the changes

in society that they were, you know, I wasn't involved in the students that were aware of the changes that was going to take place and that was taking place. And I don't know whether it was because we were comfortable, but I wasn't aware of really the negative implications of society on the black race at that time. For one thing, my father was in business for himself and he had cars and he had restaurants and so really it wasn't a big thing and we hardly ever went downtown. So Diane opened up my eyes as we were walking from downtown. You stop at a shelter and you get your transfer, so when you pay at Tennessee State you get a transfer and you kept that to give to the other driver of your other bus, you didn't have to pay anything else. It was just for one way. When I got off that bus, I walked past Woolworth's and all of these black students, and a few whites because we had sympathizers from Peabody, from Vanderbilt, and of course Tennessee State, Fisk, and American Baptist Theological Seminary. And I'm doing this, "They gonna get in trouble. We can't do that!" So we passed Woolworth's and she said, "This is what I'm seeing. Your father...you said that you are not hurting for money. Can you go in there and eat?" I said, "No." She said, "You have to stay in or go down below 4th Avenue, right?" I said, "Yes." She said, "But who do you think spends most of the money downtown?" And you know how we love to shop. And she said, "But after you finish shopping, can you sit down?" I said, "No" and she said "Do you think that's fair?" I said, "No." We passed a fountain, white ladies only, and then—I think about it now. Colored. Just colored...I hadn't paid that any attention, you know, and it was so filthy. And the whites was so clean. And also they had theatres—the Loews Theatre, the Paramount, and the Tennessean. And we had an alley...blacks had to go down an alley. And go up in the balcony to sit. And I had two girlfriends that I sang with, and they were mulattoes. Their mom was the mulatto, but their dad was pure white, and they looked white, like Diane. The only reason I was in the sit-ins is because I said, "If this white girl can put her life on the line for me, the least I can do is to go and help her." I didn't find out she was black until we was sitting at Cain-Sloan's and they had FBI, I know now...they had plain clothes people watching her because they knew that she was really from the Southern Christian Leadership Council. And we sat there and the waitress came and she didn't even pay me any attention. I don't think she saw that I was there but she just went directly to Diane and said "Ma'am, what would you like to have? A cup of coffee?" So she said, "Okay, that's all I want for right now." So when she left, Diane turned to me and said, "You have on-the-job training. Because we have been meeting for weeks, and if anybody shows any signs of violence or just can't handle it, you can't be in the sit-ins. And they had all the white students to come and spit in their face...that's why you didn't have football players and basketball players. You had mild-mannered guys like Congressman John Lewis, you know. Athletes have a tendency to fight back and she told me about Dr. Kelly Miller Smith—they met at First Baptist, Capitol Hill. And they trained there. She said, "But you're having on-the-job training. This is your first day." So the waitress, one of the waitresses saw me there and said "Oh! Everybody get up, this counter is closed! Look, look ma'am, you can't sit here!" And Diane said, "Don't say anything, just keep talking to me." And so she came to Diane and said, "Why are you talking to her?" And Diane said, "She's a friend of mine." ... "No! No, you can't do that! She's not a friend!" "What do you mean?" She said, "That's a nigger." That's what the waitress said. "That's a nigger that you're talking to!" And Diane said, "No"—at the time, we were not using Black American, African-American...we were using Negro. She said, "No, she's not that what you called her. She's a Negro." "No, and if you are going to sit with her then you've got to leave too." And Diane said, "No. I want you to serve her like you served me." She said, "We don't serve niggers in here." Diane said, "But you served me." "I know I served you." But Diane said, "I'm a Negro." I was just as shocked as the waitress. Diane said, "I'm a Negro." So the two of us closed Cain-Sloan, and she said, "Thank you, Frankie." And she took me into McLellan's and set me beside Paul LaPrad. He was an exchange student, a

white student at Fisk University. And she said, "Frankie has on-the-job training. Stay here and help her and make sure you tell her all of the important facts she needs to know about being nonviolent." So we sat there and talked, she said, "Because the students are getting ready to get out of school now, the white students, and they're gonna come through here and this is our first day. They're going to come through and there's going to be trouble in the camp. And I'm going to see about Woolworth, Kress, Cross Keys, I'm going to check on the rest of them." He said, "Ok, Diane." So I'm sitting there at the table, and he asks about my family and I asked him, and while we were talking a lady was putting her cigarette out on my arm. So my first thing was to slap her—not just slap her, because we didn't slap. We fought—at that time, I'm 19. And this lady...I thought she was old, she was probably in her 30s or 40s, my being 19. And she had her cigarette...just there. This was on-the-job training, this was my first day, so I guess I'll be the one to end the sit-in movement because I'm not going to allow her to just burn me with a cigarette and play like it's nothing. Right behind her stood Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, and he said, "Please, don't do it." So she took it off and, it was burning so [blowing] and as I was doing that, she had a book of matches. And I had on a turtleneck dress with a black poncho, and she pulled that poncho back but she thought she was pulling everything, and she dropped her lit matches. Paul grabbed my poncho, it was on fire. So when I went to jail, that poncho had a big hole in it. She thought she was going to get my skin, I guess. As he was doing that, the policeman came with the Black Maria. I hid my tap-dancing shoes, tied them in a knot over my shoulders as they put us in, as we called it, the Black Maria. And the camera was going and my parents saw me on the 6 o'clock, they played the 6 o'clock news. My father said "That's Frankie, right there! I thought she was in a library? I thought she said she was practicing?" But they came down to the jail to get me out and I said, "No, I'm not leaving until the rest of them leave." Because I knew that we had not done anything wrong. So I said, "Well, we'll get out in about three or four hours." And I think we stayed in there about two or three weeks...it was about three weeks, I guess. And it was 22 degrees, it didn't get above 22 degrees. We slept on steel cots, however, they didn't give us any mattresses. They didn't give us any covers. They didn't give us any pillows. They didn't give us any pillowcases. Cold steel bed. 18-22 degrees. We had to eat in a little trough—white beans and two slices of light bread. I think they gave it to us about twice a day. At nighttime, we would put on programs...Barbara Cosby, Angela Butler, all these girls was from Fisk. One of them was in the Jubilee Singers. So we would sing and I would tap dance and they finally came and took my tap shoes, which I never did get back.

DW: How do you think your life would have looked if you hadn't of met Diane?

FH: Well, I think that, really, it would probably be pretty much like it is now because you had a lot of people that are my age, black Americans, that had a lot to do with the sit-ins. They were in the background. They, even my parents, our parents were donating food and donating cars for us to be transported from one part to the next. And when I heard about all of the marches, it really made me aware of how blessed I was to run into Diane at that early age. But, I still would have, even looking on the sidelines, I could see that I would have been a part of...I am an active person, and I taught for Metro 36 years in physical education, but every year I have organized and I was in the forefront of doing our black history program. And this was a part of our black history program. And I really concentrated on inner-city children. Like I told you, my expertise was tap, jazz, ballet, and multicultural dances. And not only did I teach the skills, but they would have to know the history of the people. So, it's teaching the whole child.

DW: Are you proud of the person you've become?

FH: Yes. I don't like to say that I'm proud of the person that I've become, but I'm proud of the lives that I've helped to transform them from not knowing into knowing about where they came from and how their lives should continue to just build on what their foreparents had to suffer through. Don't forget those people that sacrificed and why you're here and what contributions you can make and how beautiful that you are and how special that you are. And when God made you, remember, he didn't make any junk. And I put that, I just like to encourage my children and give them a lot of self-confidence. That's one thing about being—and I call myself a strict disciplinarian—but always after I discipline a child, I say, "Come give me a hug. I love you. You're beautiful. You're smart." I give them positive things to look forward to, instead of...I don't build on the negative. I call myself building on the positive. I push the negative part in the back so they can grab on to really the positive things in their life, the positive things that they can do.

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

Transcribed by Allison Summers, Metro Arts Commission, 2016