

March On Milwaukee: More Than One Struggle, Oral History Interviews
Conducted at Wisconsin Black Historical Society
April 12, 2008
Mrs. Mary Arms

Interviewer : I guess if you just wanted to start by introducing yourself.

Arms : My name is Mary Chiles Arms [pause]and I am a former member of the NAACP Youth Council. I am currently a grandmother, a mother of five, [laughter]and what else?

Interviewer : When did you first get involved with the Youth Council?

Arms : Um, I believe it was in 19 [pause] I'm trying to think back and that's a lot. During the boycott of the Milwaukee Public Schools, during that time, the first time we did that with Lloyd Barbee and Father Groppi. My mother was involved with Lloyd Barbee. He would come to our church which was Friendship Baptist Church at that time. And he was speaking in the afternoons and the evenings. She became involved and she took us out of the public schools and we went to Freedom Schools during the boycotts. And that's when I first met Father Groppi. We were at St. Mark's. I think it's a Methodist Church on Ninth

group, we all participated. And Father Groppi would throw out ideas out or if we had ideas, he would let us know if it was legal, if we were able to do it, if it was a good idea. We were kids after all, [laughter] so we did need him in a lot of things. Like to sign different legal documents and such but otherwise, he pretty much let us run it.

Interviewer : You just said that the Commandos had their separate meetings to plan the march and all that.

Arms : Strategies and all.

Interviewer : So you weren't a part of that?

Arms : No.

Interviewer : Do you know how that process happened? Like what guided their decisions to where they were marching?

Arms : No. They wouldn't let everyone in just because of the possibility of the police. They would try and stop things. They would interfere. The police, that was our enemy at that time, besides the crowds under Chief Brier [laughter] and Mayor Maier.

Interviewer : Did you participate in the march itself?

Arms : Yes.

Interviewer : Can you tell us a little about that? What was that experience like for you?

Arms : It was, well, being a young person like 14, 15, I didn't realize the danger we were in so. And my mother would let my little brother, his name was Davey Junior, go with me because he had to go everywhere with me anyway and I had to hold his hand. He was only six, I believe six. But just to show

their pointed hats, all that stuff on. And you know that was my first time seeing the Ku Klux Klan and they were actually allowed to march. They were across the street so it was like another awakening.

Interviewer : So the purposes of the marches were not to be violent, were not to be intimidating. What did you feel that you were, what were the point of the marches? How did you see their purpose?

Arms : We were, what would you call it, antagonize the people. We wanted to disrupt everybody's daily routines. We wanted to just make them aware of how we felt about being centered in one area, not being allowed to legally move outside our area. It was just a way to just really get on everybody's nerve. And we marched every night just to show the determination and we [pause] we were supporting Vel Phillips. And each time she, we would let up while she introduced a bill again and when they all voted against it, we'd start right back. We wanted to bring the city to its knees. We wanted to make them spend money just so the people, you know the taxpayers, would start [pause] protesting and get something done. But it took us over 200 days to do that. But, I guess it's like who's the last one standing. That was the purpose.

Interviewer : You mentioned Vel

were faced against the police. We were only kids with our t-shirts and that's it. And they had on full riot gear. Oh did they beat us that night. That was the first time I was ever knocked unconscious. Umm, I woke up. At that time there was a little strip, like a little triangle, on Walnut and Thirteenth between Thirteenth and Twelfth. It's no longer there now. At that time it was a strip, a little park area. And they just had a field day with us. When I woke up, it was a Commando had pulled me under a park bench. And umm that's when it hit the news. We saw that picture of us in Jet Magazine. Someone else witnessed

Interviewer :

Arms : The conditions here, the racism. Just overall [indecipherable] like we were all concentrated in one area, the schools were. That was the pits, public schools. We even had to fight for black history during that time. We didn't know anything about all of our black inventors or leaders, or famous people from back in the day. All we knew was Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, things like that. We didn't have any

police custody. That was common in the community and then when Lacy came up killed, the people protested. And after that after that that's when they were made to answer for a lot of the beatings. Because it was nothing for a police just to see you walking along the street and stop and "What are you doin'?" And just beat you. We were kids going to school, they would trail us going to school and take pictures. Now I don't know if they were the police or FBI but they would trail us and just in unmarked cars but you would know it's them. They were white guys in suits. When I got arrested on the 100 NETBT1 0 0 1 50.8 617

