

**“My Witness” Podcast Transcript  
Metro Arts and One Voice Nashville  
2016**

Gabby Depalo, Hume-Fogg Academic Magnet School  
Vencen Horsley, Civil Rights veteran  
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.

VH: I was put in jail seven times. And I’ve had a couple of severe concussions. And I can think of some incidents when it really became brutal.

GD: My name is Gabby Depalo, I’m in 12<sup>th</sup> grade, I’m a senior at Hume-Fogg High School, and I am going to be interviewing Mr. Vencen Horsley today. So Mr. Horsley, the first thing I would like to ask you is: can you describe for me when you first became aware of race or racism?

VH: Growing up in the rural part of Davidson County...it was in a community called the Stateland community. It was part Davidson County, which is now Metro Davidson County. It was like all of Nashville...really, like most of the nation. We lived in close proximity to white people, yet we were a community divided. Black, white, separate and unequal. Although that was a reality—not only was it a reality, it was also legal. Yet that was still confusing to me—I didn’t understand why there was a separation of races. Some of the terms that we use now...I’d never heard the term “racism” before. “Segregation”...those were not words in our vocabulary. We just knew that there was a difference in the races. Black people had a way of life and white people had a way of life. And the white people’s way of life, in our judgment, was better than black people’s way of life. And that was confusing.

GD: So what prompted you, specifically, to join the student protestors?

VH: In 1962, I graduated from high school. And I was aware of the Civil Rights Movement—the young people that were involved in 1961, there was the Freedom Rides, but I didn’t know how, when, or if. But I recall in 1962, I had become acquainted with a lot of the students that were involved in the sit-ins in 1960 and 1961. In 1961...we used to describe it as kind of a quiet period, because the students that were involved in the Freedom Rides—they were either not involved any longer, or they had moved out of town. So there really wasn’t a lot of participation in late 1961. But there was an organization that was established, and it was called the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC. The SNCC was a part of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council. The Nashville Christian Leadership Council was a local branch of the Southern Christian Leadership Council that was headed by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. The Nashville Christian Leadership Council was headed by Rev. Kelley Miller Smith, who was the pastor at First Baptist Capitol Hill. I became aware that there was gonna be a march—that’s all I knew, there was gonna be a march Thanksgiving weekend. This was in 1962. The weekend before Thanksgiving weekend, I went downtown to Nashville and made my way to First Baptist, Capitol Hill. And I met some individuals preparing for the following weekend, which they were

going to have the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Conference, I believe. And so that was my first opportunity to be able to participate, you know. I was just in one activity after another.

GD: One of the other things I wanted to ask you: a lot of the people who participated in these demonstrations were college students, and you're one of the only high school students that I've heard of. Did you know other high school students that were participating, or were you one of the few, do you think?

VH: I was one of the few. The others were students at Tennessee State, Fisk, American Baptist College...and later on, there were some students from Scarritt and Vanderbilt.

GD: Why do you think that there were more college students than high school students involved?

VH: There was a concern by leadership for the safety involving young people in the protests at that particular time.

GD: I just like to ask because, you know, I'm in high school and it's interesting to get perspective of what separates the two groups of people. Would you be able to describe for me some of the demonstrations that you were involved in?

VH: We would identify businesses in the community. Most would be in the same vicinity: the Cross Keys, the B & W, some of the smaller places, Candyland, Tic Toc, the Hermitage Café, so it was on Church Street. We nicknamed Church Street "Bloody Street", because that's where all the activity was taking place and all the bumps and bruises that we experienced was on Church Street.

GD: What did your parents think about your involvement at the time?

VH: It was concerning, they were concerned with my safety of course. You know, prior to 1962, there were people who were being killed in the deep south, in Mississippi, in Alabama, in Louisiana....and so it was risky. They didn't know just what could happen. Neither did I know. All I knew was it was something I wanted to be a part of. And my faith was greater than my fear.

GD: Are there any common thoughts that went through your head, you know, in the preparation during or afterward, that still stand out to you today?

CH: In 1963 or '64, a lot of the college students—did what we called was "dropouts". Then we went to some of the younger people...high school, even elementary students...and I was considered a leader. I never called myself a leader but I let other people consider myself a leader. We had—there was the same concerns that adults had for me and others, I had that for the younger people at that time. Although I would see them being abused, you know—I was abused in so many different instances. One time, we were in the Hermitage Hotel café. The chief of police at that time came in to arrest us and I don't know what happened. Somebody said something. But he took it out on me. Next thing I knew, I was in the floor where he just almost tried to knock my head off of my shoulders. Then I remember another incident—this was either in Candyland or Tic Toc—there were some young people and there were several white students. And what we would do—we would ask the white participants to stand on the inside because a

lot of time, they would be abused more than the black protestors. And I noticed there was a group—they were laughing and one person had a cup in his hand. So I told the lady, a white lady, so I said, “You get on inside, I want you to get real close to me, because I think this person’s gonna throw something at us.” And so I became distracted, and all of a sudden I saw...and you know, I don’t recall whether it was a man or a woman throw...and I thought it was gonna be coffee. But it wasn’t coffee, it wasn’t hot, it wasn’t cold—it was urine. And so not only did it make me angry, but it also embarrassed me. And so I said to the lady, “Did it get on you?” She said, “No, what was that?” I said, “Wait a minute, that was pee that was thrown on me.” So those were incidents, and you know, I didn’t allow all of that to become a distraction. Even though you would go to jail, you would get beaten...if you’d allow that to become a distraction, then you’d allow that to possibly discourage you. You would just shake it off and just go on to the next day, or later on in the day.

GD: You know those moments where someone throws urine on you or you’re being beaten—how do you keep yourself from fighting back? How do you remind yourself that this is nonviolent protest and it needs to remain that way?

VH: I’ve heard people say, “If that’d been me, I would’ve done this.” And I said, “Well, you would have made a bad situation worse. If we had rolled up our sleeves to fight back, we really would have gotten seriously hurt. Because there were some people that had blood in their eyes, there would have been some people who’d gotten killed. And it would have been said that, ‘Well, they brought that on themselves.’” So that was a commitment to nonviolence. If it wasn’t something that you really wanted to do, it was something that you had to do. ‘Cause either you’re going to be nonviolent or you were gonna become violent and you would accomplish very little. If anything.

GD: I think that, you know, I’ve heard people being asked that question before. And I’ve always tried to come up with what would my answer be if that a question that was ever asked of me. And I always thought that that was pretty much what I would say, what I would think in a situation like that. But I can’t think of anything more difficult...

VH: You know, it’s something to be slapped. Or to be spit on. All of those things that you experienced, you know...that was degrading. That was embarrassing for a person that...you know, if you were not in the protests, if I had been on the other side of town, if I had been at home with my friends, if a person would have done those things to me, it would have been a fight. So that would have just been natural, you know. I was never...I never had sense enough to be afraid of anybody. So it would have been on if somebody had done those things. But there was a purpose why I exempted that type of humiliation, that type of treatment. And who we’re talking about are young people—I was leading about 50 or 60 young folk, they were probably mostly elementary, some junior high. And there was a group of white men, primarily, that said they were gonna block us from getting to Church Street. I think we were coming down probably 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue. And I’d been arrested, I think, the day or two before. So the policeman told me, “I’m gonna take you to jail, I’m gonna take you to jail again.” And these guys, they were just rolling their sleeves up like they used to like to do, indicating just how bad they were. And the kids were looking at me, you know, like “what are we gonna do?” And so, there was a little song that I used to like to sing. “Turn me around, turn me around...ain’t gonna let nobody turn me around.” And I looked at them and said, “We’re gonna march.” And so we made our way through this group. I was the last one, and one person slapped me in the back of the head. Another person kicked me in the butt. And I knew then, I said, “This is gonna be a long day.” And

we got down to the Hermitage Hotel, to the café. This same group was there. There was another group of grown folk...the media then talked about it, they knew about it, it was called the White Citizens Council. They were just the people with the same thinking of the Ku Klux Klan without the hoods. SOo they would agitate and exploit other young white individuals. And I had these young people, and this guy, he just kept on and I said, "Look, don't put your hand on one of these young girls." And so one word led to another. Then it wasn't but a few minutes, both of us were at it. We went in one window, inside the hotel, without the other. We both were arrested. The next day or two, we went to court and they found the white boy guilty and fined him \$25 and that he was ready to instigate. And you know, I could think of a lot of instances, but I never tried to just dwell on that. As I said, if you would, you'll become discouraged. You'd say, "I'm not going back." Knowing and really just believing that you really wouldn't make a difference...you know, I was excited in 1964, when some of the Civil Rights bills were passed. I could see...it was almost like seeing the fruit.

GD: You know, there will always be people who want to stand up for causes that they believe to be important. And I think that the way that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was done by many people is something that we should model after. I think it was done with great integrity and great purpose. So as someone who was involved in that, what do you most want students of today to know about what happened here in Nashville and in the 1960s?

VH: I would like for students to become motivated to whatever's of their concerns. I would suggest, first of all—know what the purpose is. What's the purpose? And then, what is the strategy? When you become involved in something, know exactly why you're involved in it. When I was leading young people during the '60s, I would tell them before we'd go. I'd ask them one thing, 'If someone asks you why you're marching, if you can't tell them why, get out of the line.'

GD: We see apathy in people of my generation, when it comes to the things in the world around them. And I think a lot of that is because we have been told by some people, many people, that we really don't have control over the world. We don't have influence. So, do you have words for people who are my age who believe that they don't have influence in the world that they live in?

VH: I believe any person can make a difference. Maybe you're not the leader, but you can make...your support can make a big difference. What is it—you look around the nation, even in your community—what is it that you see that's not right? That you feel like is unfair? Then you have to determine—how can I make a difference in that?

[singing] " You can beat on me, if you please, if you please...if you please, you can beat on me, if you please, I'm gonna keep on marchin'...keep on a marchin', marchin' for my rights..."

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](http://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*