

Transcribed Excerpt from the Oral History Interview with African-American Activist Charles Siler about Life in Louisiana, May 10, 2013

Charles “Chuck” Siler: In 1962, when I was doing the voter registration project, there was a lady who lived in an area that they called The Park. I remember her name as Mrs. Williams. I could be wrong after all this time. But she reminded me when she went to register to vote, she got flunked twice, okay, over b.s. But she was determined —she was eighty-four years old in 1962 — that she was going to vote before she died. She was going to be a registered voter. She was going to have the card.

And the third time she went in, I went with her. Now, I was young and stupid and not unlike a lot of folk. I was nineteen years old. I had my gun stashed under my jacket in the back, and if anybody had done anything, it could have been a real bad scene that day, and I would have been remembered for something else. Okay, but she was going to go in there. When she walked through, it was like Lolis Eli walking through those same guys about seven or eight months before, when we got out of jail that January. For whatever reason, they wanted to intimidate one old lady, and they failed horribly, because she walked through — she reminded me of Mary McLeod Bethune. I always think of her when I remember — this lady dressed well, put on her nice suit, and, “Charles, we’re going.” And someone drove us down. I forget who it was now.

But we walked in, and like I said, I was prepared to shoot somebody if they had decided to go that far. They didn’t, because when she walked in, she was in charge. They moved aside. She walked — and when she walked into the Registrar of Voters office, I was told, “You can’t go in there.” I said, “No problem.” I stood back against the wall, you know, and I got a corner, okay, a vantage point, advantage point, as Rita’s always looked for. Okay? And I was waiting. And I was standing there like this and I was pressing that little Beretta because I wanted — when she came out she had this smile on her face. Okay? That made all of it worth it. It was, you know, as good as it could get at that moment, because she got what she wanted and she got to vote before she died. And, you know, you think about being eighty-four in 1962. Her parents had been slaves. Okay, to her, it was important.

You know, I’m a person who gets upset when somebody tells me they can’t go — they’re not going to vote. I don’t care if you — you know, vote for the person who’s going to do you the least harm, if nothing else. But try to understand what and why you’re doing it.