

**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 and Locust. We went to school there for a few days I remember that. So that had to be like in '65 or something like that.

Interviewer : What kind of things did you do as a member of the Youth Council?

Arms : Well I was treasurer at one point. We were called like Commandoettes. And they gave us that, the Commandos, gave us that title just to keep us out of their hair while they plotted or planned for each march. You know, they would have meetings and we felt like we were all part of the marches so why can't we. But they had, there was um an element of secrecy because the police would be waiting for us [laughter]. So we had to keep a secret which route we would take. So that's why they limited the meetings to the Planning Committees. But we led the rallies um [pause]and fed , helped the ladies in the church feed the marchers after we got back from marching. It was just to keep the morale up as we marched. And try to keep the younger ones in the center. Trying to help protect the marchers, as well.

Interviewer : Would you have been in high school at this time?

Arms : Yes.

Interviewer : You said you knew Father Groppi and he was an advisor for a couple of years there. And he was very like adamant in the footage that we've seen that he was just the advisor.

Arms : Yes.

Interviewer : And not, he wasn't running the show. Was that your experience?

Arms : Yes. He would at the general meetings, he included everyone. Everybody had their say, what we would do next. You know, so. The Commandos did have their own separate meeting as far as planning the route of the marches and what they're gonna do. But as far as the general planning of the whole

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 you how no one thought we were in so much danger, the little children did come. On certain nights when the Commandos felt that we would have problems, they would have the little children stay, stay in the church even though they came to the rally they would not be allowed to march. And it was a lot of those times umm... [pause] What was the other part of the question?

Interviewer : I was just wondering how was that experience for you, you said it was a little more dangerous than you thought.

Arms : Yes it was. The police did not protect us. They were there to protect the hecklers it seemed. That walk across the bridge was the most frightening experience. I believe I am still traumatized. I watched the play on it and when it got to that part of the play, the students they evidently felt that fear because they projected it to us in the audience. And I actually had tears remembering that, after 40 years of going across that bridge. Uh [pause] It was [pause] to run across, I'm from the South, I've never seen the Ku Klux Klansmen until I got to here in Milwaukee across the street from the Eagles Club. And the first time I saw them it was stark fear. You know, it's like Ku Klux Klan, they were in full *regalia*. They had

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 Phillips was she involved in the Youth Council as well?

Arms : Yes.

Interviewer : What was her role?

Arms : Well, she would speak at the rallies and get the people up and she would um report the, she would report the status of her bill, it was always the same. Then she marched with us. That was Vel [laughter].

Interviewer : You talked a little bit about the Ku Klux Klan what was their involvement? What did you see? Were they present at your marches and protests?

Arms : I remember seeing them in full dress once when we were protesting the judges and the police chiefs and the city officials belonging to a racist club, the Eagles Club, on Wisconsin Avenue. That's the first and only time I saw them. When they had a counter protest and the police kept them across the street. We were on the side of the Eagles Club. But that was the only time I saw them. I'm not saying how many times they been around. That was a shocker.

Interviewer : Did you experience other white resistance as powerful as the KKK?

Arms : Yes, on the bridge and on the Southside when they. At Crazy Jim's Auto that's the most memorable part, when they, he allowed them unscrew. Back in those days the car lots had light bulbs, you know, that highlighted their merchandise. They were on top of those cars throwing light bulbs at us besides the bricks, and bottles, and sticks, and anything, and spitting. Little kids with t-shirts on saying "Go home nigger". Things like that. These were just flashes I can remember as we marched. And the Commandos would close us in tighter and tighter because despite the so-called police protection, they were our only protection. I remember the night on Walnut, Thirteenth and Walnut. That was another hairy incident. That actually made the front page, picture of the week in the Jet Magazine. When we

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 that from outside of Milwaukee or Wisconsin, you know, cuz that was rather Chicago. Umm. Yeah, that was another. It's been a lot of scary incidents umm that we had. On the 100 Day March, that was my first time being arrested. And that was our badge of courage when we were arrested [laughter]. And we actually had younger sisters and brothers that went to jail before we did and they were down. They captured them all and put them in a safety building and you can hear them singing out of the windows, you know, around the [pause] [telephone ringing] (that's my phone) you can actually hear them singing outside the safety when we were outside waiting on Father Groppi to get them out. And they were all in there and I was just totally upset that all the little kids went to jail. We don't know what happened. I think we had two different protests going at that time and the police rounded the younger kids up and we got left out [laughter].

Interviewer : You mentioned that the Commandos were there to protect you guys and they were involved. You personally, they moved you aside. How many, like how big was the Commando group? Like how many people are we talking about here?

Arms : The major was [pause] I would say maybe 20 in the beginning. In the very beginning it was really less than that. But I would say 20 at the most. Umm [pause] the major was, the Major Commandos it had to be like 10. Later on as the movement grew, it expanded when the older men came in to help out. We got a lot of help after we went across the bridge. That's when the public figures and famous people came out like Dick Gregory. They would come out to help. [pause] That's another thing. We were exposed to so much. Father would take us to different places. Like we participated with Jesse Jackson and Operation Bread Basket to help him get that off the ground. And, you know, we were just involved in a lot of things. It wasn't like every day, we did march every day, but we had things like on the weekends, we went out of town to Chicago to help with the Bread Basket affair.

Interviewer : Do you feel, this was the Sixteenth Street Viaduct March that we're talking about--

Arms : Yes.

Interviewer : Do you feel that was a turning point as far as the attention you were getting? Was that a real--

Arms : The first, the second night. Well the first night, that was the turning point when um they had to. When we first went across it was so bad that we had to just stay in a certain area I think it was Kosciuszko Park until the police could escort us out of there. And then the second night, oh, it was awesome. Parents came. I mean everybody came out that night and walked across with us. That was a turning point.

Interviewer : We were just wondering if you had any memories of the summer of 1967. That was obviously a very tense time nationally. Umm at the time of the Detroit riots and Newark riots.

Arms : Oh during the riots?

Interviewer : Yes, if you have any memories of that time period here in Milwaukee? Being involved in the Youth Council, reactions?

Arms : I remember I was on campus and we weren't allowed off campus. No buses were running. And um I did talk with the Youth Council over the phone. And Father Groppi did instruct everybody, you know like just 'do not participate.' We weren't into that kind of thing anyway, but he said just, you know like if the reporters want to speak to you, just stay low. Don't participate in any way. The first thing we heard was we started the riot. We didn't even march during the riot. We had to, I was on campus. I couldn't even get home. I had to stay in the dorm. Umm. So I don't. All I know is what the news said that's hearsay. I know my mother and my father they did, they were involved. I had a younger brother, he was a baby, he needed milk. They would not let them out of the house to go get milk. As a matter of fact, one of the guards had to escort my uncle around to the store to get milk and bring him back in, make sure he goes inside the house during curfew. So you know. And my uncle he was just recently home from the military, he felt very. You know I didn't see anything wrong with it, but he was upset about it. He was just like just like, "Why [indecipherable] making us all, you know, like they're taking over". He felt bad about that part but what we were what they call a Marshall state or some state of Marshall. I don't know but I was not there for the riots.

Interviewer : What was the, um, you mentioned how your uncle was upset about the rioting. Was it the white response to the rioting or was it the rioting in general?

Arms : He was upset by not being allowed to go out of his home during that time. You know like the marshal state where they told you to not go anywhere, you had to get their permission to go. That's what he was upset about. He said it didn't take all of that. Just in the black community he said there's just another way of. And that's when the rumors were coming out like 'they can put us all in one area and do mass genocide'. That was a real fear in the black community because we wouldn't, we wouldn't put anything past the people, the power of the people. The white supremacy we called it. We were still in that mindset also.

Interviewer : Was there sympathy for the people who participated in the riots? What was the general reaction to amongst the community [indecipherable] interaction with involvement?

Arms : Well, as far as myself, I don't feel like it was. I didn't like the idea of burning our own community or destroying or own community. That never set right with me...[pause]. But I don't know how, the general sympathy was burn baby burn, you know, just tear it all down, it belongs to whities, you know just destroy it. It's like but I like that storeowner, he's a nice man, him and his wife. I didn't see it like that but... [pause] I marched to a beat of a different drum a lot of times [laughter].

Interviewer : What do you feel were the underlying conditions that caused the rioting?

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 information on black leaders, um, famous black people. There was no history for us. We felt like we needed to um shine the light on famous people for our children. Have a role model for them to look up to. We wanted to instill into the children that black was beautiful and that uh [pause] you don't imitate other races or anything, you're fine yourself, like you are. I don't know. It was a combination of everything. The schools, jobs, and housing. It was the main reason for the eruption of violence in Milwaukee.

Interviewer : Do you think these conditions have changed in Milwaukee today? Was there any resolution?

Arms : Not with the rioting. Just time helped it out. Time. It's a little better. I don't believe the rioting solved anything. It gave a lot of pacifiers. Gave a few people jobs in the state department and those jobs or those programs they started, you know, all of that is no longer with us. I don't think. As a matter of fact, I think people are a lot worse off today in some ways. They have more opportunity. But it's a mind thing that's going on. People have to come out of their mindset that has been instilled in the black community for too long and once we all get out of that then I think it will be better. Some things may be better but [pause] being black in America today, I don't think, is any different than yesterday.

Interviewer : When we were doing research in the newspaper at this time. Chief Brier and Mayor Maier were either heralded or they were criticized for their reactions. What was the black community's impression of their leadership?

Arms : Oh [sigh], it's part of the Ku Klux Klan. The Good Ole Boys. Aryan Nation. You name it, that's what they were. And they didn't make uh a secret of it, you know. They said things that the papers would not say they said. They got away with a lot of racism. Brier, Maier, Sarafin all of them. Judge Cannon. Mmhmm.

Interviewer : So do you feel that in response to the rioting, I mean before and after the rioting, was the police response any different to the just the non, the youth that didn't participate in the rioting, the NAACP Youth Council. Was the police presence harsher anytime after the rioting [indecipherable]?

Arms : As far as general people, the general public, you're speaking of?

Interviewer : Yeah.

Arms : And their response? [pause] Well, yeah they were bitter about it, I believe. As long as they were under Brier. I saw the difference in the police mannerism after Brier left. I did see a major difference. And when the League of Martin came along, um, there was some. They had a lot to answer for after that. They, you know, the public was aware that they can get them to answer for different things like when the Lacy case came up. That was a real turning point with the police. When Lacy was killed in

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 Night, the police threw me up in the paddy wagon and my glasses, you know they handcuffed me, and my glasses came off. And I told them, me in my youth, "You can go to, I can press charges if you break my glasses". So they finally picked them up and put them on. Oh first thing they said was, "The nigger's face is so greasy she can't keep her glasses on". And you know, I'm just trembling mad. And they took the glasses and put them on upside down, crooked. So that's their attitude. That was general attitude of the police.

Interviewer : Did you notice any, the white response to the rioting, after the fact? I mean reaction to the violence?

Arms : [pause] No, I was not really um interested in their reaction. Not at that time. Just full of anger. The way it was squashed. And how they concentrated the whole entire community, the black community. How they just enclosed us in that one area. It's almost like claustrophobia, when you're put in an area even despite it's a big community, you know you can't get out of that area. I was locked on campus and they said it was for our protection but then I felt that entrapment. You know, just being on campus like that. Not even allowed out of the dorms. Just stay in. Riots were only concentrated on Third Street. Which I don't know that may be what happened, I don't know if it even took place all downtown because I was not there. But the only thing I heard was that it was only on Third Street. I don't believe it was really a riot, I believe it was a civil, what do you call it, disturbance. You know, because, only a few things happened during that time. Right away the National Guard was there. But they couldn't call them out for us when the white people were beating and stoning us on the, you know [laughter]. They couldn't call them then but during that time when their businesses were being threatened that's when they called out the National Guard. That's the feeling we had during those times. It was a lot of anger, um, I didn't, I never agreed with burning our own community or destroying our own community. But like they said, it was not ours, it was theirs. But that's where we had to live in that community.

Interviewer : Well thank you for talking to us. I guess just in closing. If there was one thing that you would want people of today to know or to learn from, you know the work that you did or that time period, what would that be?

Arms : I would ask the youth [pause] to [pause] not be so, what would you, apathetic. It's like, don't just let it happen. You have laws now, utilize the laws. People worked hard to get those passed. And we made a way. Use it. Just, just don't let it pass. It's still going on, the racism, the practices of racism and segregation, all of that is still going on today. And people are turning a blind eye to it like we have it better, we can do this. And it is true, we can do, we can use the laws that we passed. But people don't utilize it. They just let it happen and say that's the way of it. So. That's the only thing I can say. Get

together and quit killing each other and put all of that energy you had to something constructive. You know bettering the lives of those that got to come.

Interviewer : Thank you so much.

Arms : You are welcome. Did I do alright?