### Daughter of a Sharecropper Interview: Frankye Adams-Johnson 2012

[Frankye Adams-Johnson was born in Pocahontas, Mississippi, a small town outside of Jackson, Mississippi. She was born to a sharecropper's family, and she is the fourth of seven children.]

**When and where were you born?**

I was born in Pocahontas, Mississippi. It's a small town outside of Jackson, Mississippi.

**Could you tell us about your family and childhood?**

I was born to a sharecropper's family. I was the daughter of a sharecropper. A sharecropper is when you live on the farm that belongs to someone else, and you rent part of the land out and help farm the land, that's what a sharecropper is. It's like living in a tenement apartment. It doesn't belong to you; you just rent your little space. So, as a sharecropper you rent the space and work that land. So, I was born to a sharecropper, I am the daughter of a sharecropper family. And I am the fourth child of seven.

**Next, we would like you to tell us the story of what you experienced during the civil rights movement.**

When I was growing up, I was the daughter of a sharecropper, it was not an easy life, it was very difficult life. And so sometimes children, like me, were not privileged to go to school every day, because we had to stay out and work the farm, pick the cotton, and that prevented us from going to school. That began to have a profound effect on me because I wanted to get on the school bus to go to school like most children.

We also grew up in very separate environments, so blacks lived in one part of town and whites in the other part of town. Black folks were not treated very nicely, and so as a child I observed those things and hearing my parents talking about the bad things that happened to black folks caused me to wonder about why things were, why there was black and white and whites were treated seemingly better and why God allowed these things to happen. If God loves everybody, why he did not love black people and that caused me to wonder if God was a white God like the people who were the bad people that treated the black people badly and poorly.

I grew with all those things wondering around in my head, with all the bad things that I heard of what all happened to black people because of the color of their skin. I began to wonder about those things, when I was seventeen years old, I had moved away from the farm life and my parents, moved into the city, Jackson, Mississippi. And during that time, the time I moved into the city, there was a movement going on in Jackson. The movement that was going on in Jackson was the civil rights movement, which I was not familiar with but there were a lot of movements going on in Jackson. People were fighting for their rights, for the right to be equal, for the right to sit wherever they wanted, for the right to vote and all those things.

I became conscious of those things going on and so when I was seventeen years old, there were students at the nearest college that were protesting and they were doing boycotts and in the city and they were sitting at the lunch counter. One of those students happened to be a member of my church. So I began to get involved with the NAACP youth council and I began to understand things that were going on and wanted to be a part of them.

In 1963, I was one of the students that organized a walk out of my high school in support of the students that were sitting in from the nearby college. During that march in 1963, the students that marched from the high school, we had three black high schools, and I was a student out of Salman Brinkley High School. There were three black high schools. We went to segregated schools in those days, so black folks went to black high schools and white folks went to white schools.

So to support the students that were demonstrating and the students that were sitting in at lunch counters, the students that had gone to jail, we were going to march down to support those students. But we didn't get very far because we were arrested and then put into jail, then put into garbage trucks, there were not enough paddy wagons. A paddy wagon is where you put people when you take them off to jail. They were called paddy wagons. There were not enough paddy wagons to put the students in, so they brought up garbage trucks and the students were hauled off to the fairgrounds and the students were placed in compounds where they kept livestock. So we became the human livestock. They put us in the compound where they kept the livestock.

**What was the scariest thing that happened to you during the civil rights movement?**

I got hit across my back. Before I got hit across my back, I had told the officer, the guard that got us after our arrest. We got in the paddy wagon and I was sitting in there and it was a hot day in the summer, a very hot day in July. And we sat waiting to get booked. That means you have to wait and go through a process where they get your name and fingerprint you and lock you up. And so we were waiting in the paddy wagon to get processed for jail. I got down from the truck to pick up something that I had dropped, to get my writing pad. As I got back up into the truck the police officer hit me across the back and pulled his rifle on me. His rifle, he cocked his rifle and I guess he was going to shoot my back but the other demonstrators pulled me inside. The other demonstrators pulled me very quickly into the paddy wagon. But that was pretty scary and it also made me very, very angry.

And then I think one time, I was driving around Jackson for a couple hours and some officers threatened that they were going to do terrible things to me. They were going to stop me somewhere and no one would ever know, so that was pretty scary. Before they took me off to the city jail, they drove me around for a couple hours and threatened to leave me some place and do terrible things to me and no one would ever know. So that was pretty scary and there were other incidence that were kind of scary. When we went to the March on Washington, we stayed in this town called Meridian, and when we came back we were attacked by gang members. They came out and they were throwing stuff at us. That was pretty scary. There was a mob of people attacking us when we had just got back from the March on Washington. So, there have been a few scary incidents.

**Did you ever feel like giving up?**

No, I don't think there was ever a time when I felt like giving up. I always felt that we were fighting for something. We were fighting for our freedom, we were fighting for justice, we were fighting for human rights, we were fighting for civil rights, and that became so important that the thought of giving up never really occurred. We had a song that we used to sing, We will never turn back until we are all been free, until we have equality.' It's that kind of thing, like a song, that gives you courage and keeps you going. So no, I don't know that there was ever a time I thought about giving up. It mostly inspired me to keep fighting on. Even today I don't feel like things are different and even today, I don't feel like giving up. I suspect I get discouraged sometimes but I never say, oh let me throw my hands up and just nothing is ever going to change.' I've always believed that things change if we help make them change.

**How much different do you think your life would be if you weren't involved in the Civil Rights Movement?**

Now there is a profound question! I think that my life would be very shallow. I think that I would be like some people, unconscious of what's going on today. I think that I would be selfish. Look at people who are selfish today and some are not from that experience. They should feel secure with their own needs and essentials. I would be probably one of those people you know, satisfied with my domain, content with that I have a nice home, that I have a nice car to drive, content that I have a job. I'm hearing that right around the corner from me are people who suffer. There are people who still don't have the right to the treat of life. There still don't have decent houses for their shelter, people who are not getting a quality education. They are still people who are getting charged with crimes that perhaps they didn't commit, and so had I not gone through the Civil Rights Movement, knowing what it means to have equality, what injustice means, I would now not be able to process the injustices that I still see exist today. I wouldn't have the desire to encourage young people to be concerned about injustices. I think that it was an educational process for me; it gave me an opportunity to become caring about what happened to my fellow man.

**What life lessons did you learn during that time period?**

The most important thing that I learned is that if you don't stand for something, then you will fall for anything. That if you don't fight for your freedom, that if you don't fight for your rights and you don't know where it is that you came from, that is certainly about to repeat, that you could end up being a slave. That the life lessons that I learned is that you must stand and you must fight for the things that you believe in, you must stand on those no matter what is up against you. You must stand for what it is that you believe in.

[Frankye Adams Johnson currently is an English teacher at Jackson State University. She is a poet, speaker, and fiction writer. She is now writing a novel/memoir about her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.]

Interviewed and Transcribed: Karl Bauman, Amanda Brown, Emily Bauman

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1. Summarize who Frakye Adams-Johnson is.

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1. This interview showed elements of both past *and* future. How does the speaker use their past experiences to compliment their hopes and expectations for the future? Use at least one example of the past and at least one example of the future to answer.

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