

## *Joanne Bland Transcript*

**Amy Chatelaine:** Welcome to Selma, Alabama, located high on the banks of the Alabama River. Across this river stretches the historic Edmund Pettus Bridge. It was on this bridge that law enforcement officers brutally attacked nonviolent civil rights marchers who were beginning their journey to the state capitol in Montgomery in pursuit of voting rights. The date was March 7, 1965, a day infamously remembered as Bloody Sunday.

Our next teacher, Joanne Bland, was among the marchers that day, along with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Joanne was just 11 years old at the time. John interviewed Joanne in August 2015, just 12 days after Michael Brown, an 18-year-old unarmed Black man, was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri. Joanne spoke of the pain of watching televised scenes from Ferguson, which echoed what she witnessed in Selma 50 years prior.

Here's Joanne, with her American story.

**Joanne Bland:** My name is Joanne Blackman Bland, and I live in historic Selma, Alabama.

I think as a nation we've come a long way, but we have a long way to go. And as elders get weary, the children are going to have to be the ones to take us where we need to go. And they need to be equipped. So I think I found my niche in life, teaching the lessons of the past to facilitate a better future.

In the early 60s, Selma became a hotbed for voting rights. Dr. King chose this area for the battleground for voting rights in these United States. Some of the reasons that he chose this area was because of the work that had already been done toward obtaining voting rights for all people by the residents of Selma, namely Amelia Boynton and her husband, Samuel Boynton, who formed an organization in the early 1930s called the Dallas County Voters League.

The way our history is written, our children and adults come away with the picture that Dr. King came in 1965, and by August of 1965 we had the Voting Rights Act. No, that's not how it happened. It was a progression of 30-some odd years before he even came that caused it.

So, we're noted for the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where one of the biggest confrontations of that voting rights struggle happened, where we attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery peacefully, and were attacked by law enforcement officers on the bridge. On Bloody Sunday, I didn't realize that there would be violence. Otherwise, I don't think I would have been there.

I was 11 years old in 1965. I had been participating in the activities since I was around eight. My earliest memory is going to a meeting of the Dallas County Voters League with my grandmother, Sylvia Johnson, and not understanding why they talked about getting freedom. My teacher had already told me that Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. I just thought they were dumb old people, that they didn't understand, they didn't know that we had our freedom.

And we were downtown on Broad Street. We live in a small town, so downtown *is* Broad Street, okay? There's a drugstore still there today called Carter's Drugstore. Carter's had a lunch counter. And I wanted to sit at the lunch counter, as any child would. But my grandmother said I couldn't, because colored children could not sit at the counter. It didn't stop me from wanting to sit at that counter.

Every time I passed by there, I'd be peeping in that window. And one day, my grandmother was talking to one of her friends in front of the store, and she noticed me looking in the window. And she leaned over my shoulder, and she pointed in the window and said, "When we get our freedom, you can do that, too." I became a freedom fighter that day.

In Ferguson, I understand the pain that's there. I don't know how to describe it to you. I can understand why the people are angry. Every week, it's another murder from policemen. So I don't know how a white person — I know they can empathize, and they can feel the pain of injustice just as I can. But they can never feel the pain of injustice that I feel. It's not just isolated incidents. It's all the time. There's always something to remind you that we're not where we need to be as a nation, and particularly with race. If it's not African Americans, it's someone else that's nonwhite.

Here in Selma, in the year 2000, when we elected our first African-American mayor in a town that's always been at least 65% Black, a statue of the founder of the Ku Klux Klan was erected on the grounds of one of our museums. And we were angry. It really upset me.

It said, *You may have a Negro mayor, but we're still here.* Protests shut Selma down. Our poor mayor, the first year, it was not a good time.

Things like that, it's like one-upmanship. If you got a Negro mayor, then I'm putting this statue up. And this one little old lady told me, "Y'all better let us have something." Do you really feel like we're taking something away from you? Because to me, her fear was that if we were empowered, we would treat them the same way they treated us. I don't think that's in our DNA. Although I question being fair at a time when you're already behind. If you start being fair now when the race is over, I'm still behind. Catch me up and then start being fair.

I used to have that argument with our first Black mayor. He'd say, "People don't want politicians to be fair. They want them to show favoritism. Duh! Go on that side of town and then come back over here and see what you take as fair."

You — when you continually get hurt by people who don't look like you, the moment you encounter one, you're especially suspicious of them. Then you come smiling, but you're a wolf in sheep's clothing. You're still white, and you're still going to eventually show your true colors: that you don't like me, period.

And I tried to teach my children, my child, my grandchildren that it's not like that. We try to take people at face value, but it's very, very hard for me to explain how racism is expected when you're Black. That discrimination is expected when you're Black. The problem with that is that we don't question it as often as we should.

If I was a child, we could have a fistfight this morning and be playing by noon, you know, and still buddy-buddy. But when we're adults, we hold on to craziness. As we grow, we hold on to stupidity, and it becomes us. You have a wall that you can throw up. I have a wall that I can throw up that wasn't there when we were kids.

We share what children share, that sense of peace and freedom to play, to love, to just be happy. What happens to us when we grow up is life. And sometimes it makes us better, but more often than not, it makes us worse.

One day, we'll be alright. I'm just tired of waiting for "one day." I want it to be now.

I want it to be in my lifetime.

**Amy Chatelaine:** We're grateful to Joanne for sharing her story. Before you go, here are two prompts toward deeper listening.

First:

*Was there a cause you were passionate about as a youth? How did that interest begin?*

And second:

*Think of someone in your life that's been hard to have an honest conversation with. What gets in the way, and what might help you move past that?*

Thanks for practicing with us today. We'll see you next time.