HODDING CARTER LECTURE ON CIVIL RIGHTS & THE PRESS
Jerry Mitchell
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Professor Charlotte Grimes: I'm Professor Charlotte Grimes, and I'm the Knight Chair in Political Reporting here at the Newhouse School. It's my special pleasure and privilege to organize our Hodding Carter Lecture on civil right in the press, and it's my delight to welcome all of you tonight to what I'm sure will be a memorable evening, and thank you all for coming. I'd also like to take a moment to thank Dean David Rubin for hosting this event and for introducing our lecturer, Jerry Mitchell, in a moment. And I owe a special thanks, as always, to MyLinda Smith, who organizes everything for us and makes sure everything works. Thank you very much, MyLinda. And we have some special guests with us tonight because our speaker has some serious Syracuse connections. His wife, Karen, is from here, and she and Jerry were married in Syracuse. And we've learned earlier tonight that she once worked at the Newhouse School. Karen, and her family, would you please stand up and let us welcome you? Her mother, and her mother's husband, Jerry Feldman.

This lecture series is the legacy of a symposium that we had here at the Newhouse School in 2004. That symposium commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the Brown vs. The Board of Education ruling that desegregated public schools and the fortieth anniversary of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. It commemorated the death of Jim Crow. At that symposium one of the journalists here was Hodding Carter III and he reminded us that the story of civil rights is never yesterday's news. It is a never-ending story and, in its own way, it is the quintessential American story of who we are and who we will be. Hodding Carter III and his father, Hodding Carter, Jr., were themselves strong voices in telling that story through the violent and dangerous years of Jim Crow. They practiced a journalism of conscience and courage, as does our speaker tonight. On the back of your program that I hope you got you will find out more about the career of the Hodding Carter family and their family newspaper in Mississippi and I hope you will take a moment to reflect on that and to be inspired by their work.

Here at the Newhouse School we take great pride in teaching our journalism students the skills of their craft: the AP Style Book, the white balance in BJ – all of those things that you really have to know to get a story out there. But I think that we also take a greater pride, and even a joy, in teaching our students the reasons to bother with journalism, the reasons we have and need a free press in a democracy. Two of those reasons are summed up in the wonderful old mandates about journalists. We are to be a voice for the voiceless and to speak truth to power. Our speaker tonight has certainly lived up to those obligations, and it is a pleasure to have him with us to speak and to answer after his speech some questions from all of you. And now I'll ask Dean Rubin to introduce our speaker tonight, Jerry Mitchell. Thank you, Dean Rubin.

Dean David Rubin: Thanks, Charlotte. I think, when the history of journalism is written, or as continues to be written, since it's been written up till now, that the post-9/11 period is not going to be viewed as a high-water mark for American journalism. I think that

there are a lot of reasons for this. I think part of it is the shock that the entire country felt at the act. I think a sense of patriotism that journalists and all Americans felt, and the need to rally around government. A fear that journalism did not want to trample on national security issues and a willingness to agree with the government about what those national security issues were. The fact that journalism has largely fallen under large corporate ownership, and that corporate ownership often leads to timidity in coverage. And maybe the increasing entertainment focus of the media so that news itself has become less important in the mix.

As a result, I think it's fair to say that government over the last five or six years has gotten away with a lot and I echo what Charlotte just said that the press' highest priority is to talk truth to power and to hold government, and centers of power, to account. The good news is I think that the media are beginning to regain their footing. I think if you looked at some of the coverage of Hurricane Katrina, and of FEMA, you would see that. If you looked at the coverage of the wiretapping story from Washington, and whether or not the government has been illegally wiretapping Americans you would see it. If you look at the work of Seymour Hersh and others about whether we do or do not have plans to attack Iran, you would see it.

There is, however, at least one journalist during this period and also well before this period who has shown remarkable courage in the face of power. And that journalist, who's been working for the Jackson, Mississippi, Clarion-Ledger, decided to investigate, among other things, some long-ago unsolved murders in the civil rights struggle with the goal of bringing perpetrators who were still alive to justice, or when not alive, at least making clear to everyone who the guilty were. And that person is our guest, Jerry Mitchell. He was moved to do this first by seeing the film in 1989 "Mississippi Burning," which is about the unsolved killing – then-unsolved killing – of three civil rights workers – Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman – who had gone down to Neshoba County to help integrate the state. He was only 30 years old in 1989 when he began this work, and I say that to you because a lot of you in this room are not all that much younger than 30 years old, and it should show you that you can embark on these kinds of great crusades at any age.

He managed to get access to the secret archives of the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, which was a really amazing sort of state-run FBI. Individual states are not supposed to have FBIs in this country, but Mississippi had one, and it was a force for maintaining segregation and otherwise spreading lawlessness, terror, and harassment throughout the state. Through his reporting, he managed to bring to justice, amongst others, Byron De La Beckwith, for the murder of Medgar Evers; Sam Bowers, who had been an imperial wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, for the murder of NAACP official Vernon Dahmer; Bobby Cherry, for the infamous Birmingham church bombing in 1963 that killed four young girls; and Edgar Ray Killen, who was in part responsible for the Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman murders.

This is an extraordinary accomplishment. It would be if only one of these people had been brought to justice, and he is responsible, Jerry is, for this and much more. One can

only imagine the animosity he must have faced in his community in doing this, and the barriers that he had to cross to accomplish it. He exemplifies what we hope journalists will do, and that is to effect change in the way centers of power go about their business, and to bring justice. It took, in some cases, 35 to 40 years to bring these people to the bar of justice, but they are now in jail.

For this work he has rightly won many awards. He was a finalist for this year's Pulitzer Prize. He won the John Chancellor Award for Excellence in Journalism, a George Polk Award for justice reporting. He won the National Association of Black Journalists Award for enterprise reporting. And the newspaper for which he works in Jackson is part of the Gannett Newspaper chain and he has been named by Gannett one of its top ten journalists at all of its newspapers over the past 25 years. He's a Texan by birth. He got a B.A. from a small college in Arkansas called Harding College and a master's degree from Ohio State. Please welcome Jerry Mitchell.

Jerry Mitchell: Thank you, Dean. It's great to be in Syracuse again, although I still say "y'all." Is that okay? I'm not very good at that "you guys" thing anyway. But, I can't tell you how much it means to be here at Syracuse to deliver the Hodding Carter lecture on Civil Rights and the Press, which really, as Charlotte mentioned earlier, celebrates the conscience and courage of Hodding Carter, Jr., and Hodding Carter III. They've long been heroes of mine in Mississippi. As you probably know, Hodding Carter, Jr. won the Pulitzer in 1946. What you may not realize is that the Mississippi legislature censured him for his work for some of what he wrote. So the next day he responded. He told them he appreciated the lawmakers and told them they could collectively and individually go to hell.

Years before he even came to Mississippi he was working for the Associated Press which, by the way, fired him for insubordination. Now that's my kinda reporter. I don't know about y'all, but that's my kinda reporter. You know, the past 17 years have been an amazing journey, but I've learned that God has ways of keeping us humble. It's nice to get all these awards and stuff. But I remember several years back, my son Sam, who's younger, his friend came over and wanted to know what I did, and I told him I write for the newspaper. I saw Sam pull his friend over, and he goes, "He doesn't write. He types." So, I'm really nothing more than a glorified typist. I just thought I'd just make that clear right now.

I have to tell you it's really a thrill to be here. He was talking about when I was 30; it doesn't even seem that long ago that I was like you, sitting in an audience, listening to someone who was a young newspaper reporter talking about newspapers on career day when I was in high school. And I was thinking, "It might be fun to work for a newspaper." So I decided to do it, and here I am.

Not that long ago I visited the National Civil Rights Memorial, which is in Montgomery, Alabama. And it stands, really, as a reminder of 40 martyrs – there were many more than that – but 40 martyrs whose lives were stolen by hate. One late summer morning in 1963, young girls – Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, and Carol Robertson

– had ribbons in their hair and their Sunday best dresses when a bomb planted next to their church ripped them apart. Three years later Vernon Dahmer, who fought his entire life for the right for all Mississippians to be able to vote, was sleeping with his family when the Klan heaved firebombs which crashed through the windows. Flames from the fire seared his lungs as he tried to defend his family, and he died later that day, just months before he would have cast his first ballot. In the steamy summer of ’64, domestic terrorists slinked through the night and kidnapped three civil rights workers – James Chaney, Andy Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner – two of whom, of course, were from New York. Klansmen shot these three young men before digging a deep pit out of Mississippi red clay and burying their bodies, determined their bodies would never be found again. In each of these cases their killers walked free, even though everyone knew they were guilty. Recently I stopped by James Chaney’s grave in Meridian, Mississippi, and the words there on the tombstone struck me. “There are those who are alive yet will never live, those who are dead yet will live forever. Great deeds inspire and encourage the living.”

In 1989 I became interested in the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, which you’ve heard a little bit about. It was a state segregationist spy agency, which, by the way, was headed by the governor himself, the governor of Mississippi. But as I mentioned to some of the journalism students earlier, when someone tells me I can’t have something, I want it a million times worse, right? Are you like that? I’m like a kid. And so I was told I couldn’t have these Sovereignty Commission records, and so I began to develop sources which began to leak me these documents. And what they showed was at the same time that Byron De La Beckwith was being prosecuted for the killing of Medgar Evers, this other arm of the state, this Sovereignty Commission, was secretly assisting the defense, trying to get him acquitted.
A quarter century had passed at that point since Medgar Evers had been assassinated, but his widow, Myrlie Evers Williams, did all she could to pursue that case and keep his story alive. And after my article appeared she asked authorities to reopen that case. At the time that this happened – this is October 1989 – the odds were at least a million to one this case could never be reopened. There was really nothing in the court file other than a few pages of paper of no value. There was no evidence; all the evidence was missing. There was no murder weapon. There was no transcript. But Myrlie Evers believed, and she prayed, and some amazing things happened. A couple of months after this, Jackson police are cleaning out a closet and happen to find a box containing the crime scene photographs of the killing of Medgar Evers, including the fingerprint of Byron De La Beckwith lifted from the murder weapon. A few months after that Myrlie Evers shared with me her copy of the court transcript that she had saved. And a few months after that, Bobby DeLaughter, who was a prosecutor in the case, found the murder weapon in his father-in-law’s closet.

In short, all these things that had to happen did happen. That’s why I always tell young journalists, “Don’t even think about writing a novel, ‘cause you can’t make this stuff up. You can’t, it’s almost impossible. You can’t make it up.” So all these things happened, and so began my journey into these cases that went unpunished. And what’s happened since has really been amazing. We’ve talked about some of this before.

In 1998 Imperial Wizard Sam Bowers went to prison for life for ordering the killing of Vernon Dahmer. In 1999 James Caston, Charles Caston, Hal Corrine, and Joe Oliver Watson all went to prison for killing a one-armed sharecropper named Rainie Poole. In 2001 and 2002 Thomas Blanton and Bobby Cherry went to prison for life for planting the bomb in a Birmingham church that killed Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carol Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley. In 2003 Ernest A. Vance went to prison for life for killing Ben Chester White. And last summer Edgar Ray Killen went to prison for 60 years for helping to orchestrate the killing of three civil rights workers, Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andy Goodman.

These Klansmen were not the only ones who went behind bars. Since 1989 authorities in seven states have reexamined 29 killings from the civil rights era. They've made 27 arrests and so far there have been 22 convictions. Like Hodding Carter, I've been inspired by the strength, courage, and nobility of those whose names don't appear in college history textbooks – people who toiled in the civil rights movement like C.C. Bryant from Mississippi, who had his barbershop, his home, and his church blown up, and yet continued. And people like Clyde Kennard, who was sentenced to prison for seven years on trumped-up charges of stealing chicken feet, all because he dared to try and enroll in an all-white university. Other than the work by the Carters and a few other journalists in Mississippi, heroes like Hazel Brannon Smith, Ira Harkey, Oliver Emmerich, and Bill Minor, there wasn't much room for real journalism in Mississippi in the 1960s. That's kind of an understatement, especially at the Clarion Ledger, where I work now, I have to tell you, which Bill Minor once referred to my newspaper back in those days as the most morally bankrupt newspaper in America.

Our paper, back in those days, campaigned to preserve segregation no matter what the cost. They referred to civil rights activists as Communists, and worse, chimpanzees, if you can believe that, actually in print. Prompting some in the African-American community to refer to our newspaper as the Klan-Ledger.

A day after Martin Luther King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963, the headline in the Clarion-Ledger the next day read "Trash Taken out in Washington." When violence aided by such rabble-rousing took place in Mississippi, the paper sought to blame somewhere else. When Byron De La Beckwith was arrested (it was the most famous headline in the Clarion-Ledger history) for the killing of Medgar Evers, the headline in the Clarion-Ledger newspaper read, "Californian Arrested for Evers Murder." Byron De La Beckwith was born in California, but had lived ever since in Mississippi. But it didn't stop the Clarion-Ledger from trying to blame it on California, obviously. Ray Hederman, who took over the paper later as editor, Gannett and others, have helped to see many positive changes in the newspaper by the time I arrived there in 1986. A lot of these changes had taken place. Unfortunately, one of the newspaper's top people did oppose my reporting into these brutal unpunished crimes that brought shame to Mississippi's name. I kept expecting to come in one morning and find my computer gone and my cubicle disassembled and me heading back to my hometown, begging for my old job at the Texarkana Gazette, typing obits. But some people, including friends of mine,

wanted me to stop. A recent letter to the editor said I should be tarred, feather, and run out of the state of Mississippi. It's always nice to know when you have someone who would help you pack, y'know?

The term's fallen out of favor, but I really think of myself as a muckraker. In the early twentieth century muckrakers helped bring voting rights to women, exposed unsanitary conditions in slaughterhouses and helped end child labor. So when someone calls me a muckraker, I just say, "Why, thank you." You know, my entire family, and especially my wife Karen, who is with me tonight, has been supportive the whole time. But when she was eight months pregnant, and this was in April of 1990, I have to say she did question my sanity when I went to interview Klansman Byron De La Beckwith, the man who shot NAACP leader Medgar Evers and watched him crawl across the carport to die in front of his wife and children there in Jackson. Beckwith had never kinda put two and two together that I was the reporter who got the case reopened. You know, we're not dealing with geniuses when we're talking about the Klan, now, I understand that, right? But my wife was concerned because she was thinking, he probably knows, but he's setting you up for the kill. So I went up to interview him anyway. I spent about six hours with this evil guy. He lived in Signal Mountain, Tennessee, which is right outside of Chattanooga, if you know where that is. And it was starting to get dark. I always tell people, Signal Mountain's a beautiful place when it's getting dark, but not if you happen to be with Byron De La Beckwith. So he insisted on walking me out to the car, and I'm like, "Really, that's okay. I think can find my way." So he walks me out to the car anyway and goes, "If you write positive things about white Caucasian Christians, God will bless you. If you write negative things about white Caucasian Christians, God will punish you. If God does not punish you directly, several individuals will do it for him." His wife had made me a sandwich. I think you can guess what I did with the sandwich. Another time he saw me across the courtroom. He said, "You see that boy over there? When he dies, he's going to Africa." I turned to my friend Ed and I said, "You know, I've always wanted to go!"

One time, later, when I called Beckwith and he had put two and two together that I was the one that was responsible for the reopening of the case, he told me, "I'm going to live to be 120. I don't know how much longer you've got. I'd hate for you to be in a wreck or have someone molest you. Do you know someone who would do that?" And I said, "Do you?" I always tell people that.

People sometimes ask me about Beckwith in the movie. James Woods plays him in "The Ghosts of Mississippi." Have any of y'all seen "Ghosts of Mississippi"? Maybe a few of you, a handful of you, yeah, it's that good of a movie. I know. But anyway, James Woods plays Byron De La Beckwith in the movie, and he does a terrific job. But a lot of times people ask me, "Was Beckwith really that racist?" I'm like, he's worse. He's so racist they couldn't even portray it completely.

This part's not accurate in the film – Beckwith's wife's name is Thelma. She's absolutely just as racist as he was. She also claimed to be a psychic, I might add. She was nuts. She would talk to me about things like how the blacks – she didn't use the word "black," you

know that – who had lived on Signal Mountain had all been burned out. She was awful. But I'll never forget—I came back from vacation one time. I had just gotten voice mail; it was kind of a new thing. I get back to the office and I have a message from her. She had tried to call me person to person. Back in those days—people don't hardly do that anymore, but she was still obviously old school about this. So I could hear on the voice mail her conversation with the operator. She was trying to reach me and the operator was talking to her and the operator was finally like. "Well, ma'am, he's not in. Would you like to leave him a message?" She says, "Why, yes I would. You just tell him to go to hell." So, it's been an adventure. Believe me.

Two days after Beckwith was convicted—he was convicted in 1994, in the exact same courtroom almost 30 years to the day from when he was tried the first time in Mississippi; the symmetry of the dates and everything has been amazing to me—but two days after he was convicted—he was convicted on a Saturday—on that Monday I got call from a sheriff. He was telling me, "you know, when we took Beckwith away he kept saying two words." And I was like, "Really?" He said, "Yep, two words." "What two words?" "Jerry Mitchell." So for a minute I'm just kinda like basking in the glow of what I consider this really great compliment and then the sheriff keeps going and says, "Now when you drive home, Jerry, you know, you might not want to go the same way." And I'm like, "Well, gee, thanks, Sheriff, for sharing that."

While I was pursuing the case against Sam Bowers, I had this white supremacist call me, and he was like, "Are you the one that helped put Beckwith away?" And I'm just thinking, "Should I really answer this question?" So I'm really sheepishly going, "Well, yeah." He goes, "Did you think we were gonna let you go unscathed?" And he tells me about how he has pictures of me and my family, he knows my wife's name and my children's name. And of course, I'm like, "What are they?" And he's like, "Well, we'll tell you that when we meet you in person." I did call the FBI at my wife's urging, or insistence, I guess I should say. I called the FBI and they investigated it. I come to find out the guy lived in South Carolina, so I thought, well at least he's got a ways to drive. That's the way I looked at it.

These Klansmen, obviously, and others wanted to get me to stop, but the truth was I wasn't going to stop. And the best advice I guess I can offer you as students and those of you who are journalists is the same advice that Winston Churchill once gave, which is, "Never give in. Never, never, never, never. In nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in." Which is great advice.

You know, justice has come in some of these cases, not because of my work, but because the cause is great, and because there are many others greater than me who have taken up that cause. Too often we as Americans—I think our movies indoctrinate us on this—we as Americans think of change as something accomplished only by rugged individualists. The truth is change comes when many unite in a common cause to change a people and a place. Such was the case when Hodding Carter and others began to stand up for what was right in Mississippi. Such was the case when thousands of students, including many from New York, came to the South in the 1960s to make a difference.

I don't need to tell you this, but as alluded to earlier, these are dark days for journalism, I'm afraid. Days when celebrity trivia passes for major news. Days when public support for the press has sunk to an all-time low. Days when people refuse to believe what they read in their own newspaper but will believe any babble they hear on talk radio or anything they hear from a network that calls itself fair and balanced, but is neither. Hodding Carter Jr. never lived to see these days, but I think he commented on it in a comment that he made about some television news in those days. He described it as a lightning flash. It makes a loud noise, lights up everything around it, leaves everything else in darkness, and then is suddenly gone. Despite all this bad news, I have to tell you there is a lot of good news. The good news is, good journalism doesn't wait on public opinion to make a difference. John Peter Zinger did not wait for libel laws to be changed before he printed the truth. Ida M. Tarbell didn't wait for monopoly laws to be changed before exposing fraud by John D. Rockefeller and the Standard Oil Company. Edward R. Murrow—if you haven't seen the movie, "Good Night and Good Luck," please watch it; it's a terrific movie—Edward R. Murrow didn't wait for the Senate to police its own before challenging Senator Joseph McCarthy.

As journalists we must never let the public's fascination with celebrity overwhelm our dedication to what's really important. We must never test the public's pulse to determine what stories we should print or broadcast. And we must never give in to those trying to thwart our attempts to tell the truth. I feel very strongly about that. My hope is that all of us can restore to journalism its rightful place as a fierce watchdog against oppressive government, a bright and clear beacon for truth, and most importantly, an unyielding, energized, relentless advocate for justice for all Americans. My prayer is no matter where we find ourselves, we can all take solace, strength, and courage from the martyrs of the civil rights movement. And like James Chaney's tombstone inscription says, that our deeds will live forever. That our deeds will live forever. May God bless you. Thanks, guys.

(applause)

Grimes: Thank you very much, Jerry. And folks, we have a couple of microphones down here, and we'll spend a little while in conversation and questions. So, who's got the first question? That'll be one of my students. This is one of my students.

Question: Mr. Mitchell, first off, thank you very much for coming here and speaking to us. You're just an inspiration as a journalist we can all look up to. I think we learn all this, you know, principles and ethics, general rules, but to see someone practice it on a day-to-day basis, and to do it for such a long time, is an inspiration. One question I had is, with Katrina, you had the Times-Picayune crusading on behalf of the city. Your personal mission is to bring justice for these unresolved murders, for this injustice that happened so many decades ago. When it comes to journalism, that's advocacy journalism, when you're pushing something, where do you draw the line between that, and—I hate to say this, but—some kind of bias, because it depends on the issue, and on the cultural time-place, and the values, and if you could address that, I would appreciate it. Thank you.

Mitchell: Absolutely. That's a great question. I talked to one of the classes earlier about this. The concept of objectivity really is a relatively new concept. It came about in the 1920s or so with John Dewey and those people. Before that, you had the muckrakers. You had people who were crusading journalists. And then the concept of objectivity came along. I think that's fine, but how do you get your arms around that? It's a very difficult thing when someone says, be objective. What's objective to me may not be objective to you because you maybe have a different opinion than I have. So therefore, I think a lot better terms for these things are to be even handed, to be fair. When I was doing all these stories on Byron De La Beckwith, I called him every time for a comment. I never did a story without talking to him or these other Klansmen. I tried. At certain points sometimes they would quit talking to me, but it was never for lack of trying. I always would repeatedly try to give them an opportunity to comment if they wanted to comment. But I think at a certain point we have to be kind of honest about these things. Which is, there is such a thing as truth. There is such a thing as justice, and for us to sit around and act like we have to, well you know, I'm gonna just let this Klansman talk ad nauseam about his racism. I mean, come on. I think you have to recognize there is such a thing as truth, there is such a thing as justice, and we should print it. Let's be honest about it. I'm a believer in absolute truth. I just am. It's the way I believe. I believe there is such a thing as truth. I believe that if somebody's murdered, somebody did it. So, this idea of different people having different versions of the truth, I just don't buy into that. I'm not a believer in that. And I think you can't get truth... I'll tell one of my stories I usually tell.

Bobby Cherry, as mentioned before, was one of the last living suspects in the Birmingham church bombing case. His wife actually contacted me by e-mail and said he wanted to talk to me, would I come talk to him, he wanted to talk. And I'm thinking to myself, if I were a Klansman, and I were wanted for one of these old crimes, would I call me? Hmmmm. Probably not. But he wanted to talk, so I drove over. He lived in Tyler, Texas. I drove over to Tyler, which is not—I grew up in Texarkana, so I knew the area—so I drove over there. I took him and his wife out for barbecue because, well, I guess that's what you take Klansmen out for, I'm not really sure. We went out, we spent about six hours talking, and he told me, "I didn't have anything to do with that church bombing. I left that sign shop at a quarter to ten cause I had to get home and watch 'rassling." You know what wrestling is? In the south, they call it "rassling." He even had a sworn statement from this woman, "Yes, I remember that night well. We were all sitting around watching wrestling." So I got back to the newspaper, talked to our librarian, Susan Garcia, and I said, "Susan, just check in the Birmingham news, you know, back in the old days, when I was a kid, they actually ran the entire TV schedule in the newspaper. So I said, you know, just check with the Birmingham news, see what's on TV that night. So the next morning I had an electronic message from Susan all in capital letters: "THERE WAS NO WRESTLING." In fact, there hadn't been wrestling on for years. And it's always struck me as so stupid. It seems to me if you're a criminal, and you've got your to-do list, it seems like the first thing, number one on the list, would be "One: Check alibi." Eh, we're not dealing with people with really high IQs.

But anyway. When I did that story, as just an example, I really try to be fair to these guys. So the truth was there was no wrestling on TV that night. So I called him back and told him that the TV schedules showed there was no wrestling on TV. And so his response to me—and as a reporter, these are the quotes you dream of people giving you, and this is why you call people back. You don't just get their original quotes. You call them back for more quotes. So I called him back and I told him about this, and he was like, "Son of a bitch! Something's wrong! Wrestling was on!" He swore wrestling was on, in spite of all of the evidence. So I printed the truth. There was no wrestling for him to watch and no one had ever challenged him on that. So in my mind, that's absolute truth. I could have let him debate about it, but I printed it factually because it was true. There wasn't any wrestling for him to watch on TV! So I don't know if that answers that question. But it's a fun story to tell.

Question: Hi. You've sort of made light of the intelligence of some of the people you've gone up against and their "yee-haw" Southern mentality and all, but did you ever have a time where you felt unsafe or threatened, and if so, what did you do about it?

Mitchell: Yeah, I've mentioned, I think, almost all of the main ones, with the exception of one, which I really don't talk about much, I will talk about it briefly. It's kinda complicated, and I always hesitate to talk about it because I don't want to get somebody in trouble or whatever. Actually, the tip that we got, or that I got... Got a tip that this guy called claiming... the DA's offices in the De La Beckwith case said they didn't know where the gun was, okay? They repeatedly said that to us. And later ABC came in and did a story, and they told them the same thing. This guy, the very next day after the ABC show, "Prime Time Live," aired, calls me and says he knows where the gun is. But he'll only tell me in person. And guess where he happened to live: Signal Mountain, Tennessee. Hm, kinda coincidental, huh? This is one where my wife definitely went crazy about this one. She can tell ya.

So this guy wanted to meet with me, and my wife is just going crazy. I understood. I went up there with another reporter. So we had no clue if this is a setup, if we're going to get ambushed. It was the closest that I was scared in all these things because we had to follow this guy, and we went down a remote road. And then, we were in –the other reporter's name is Michael Jagen—and we were both in his vehicle, because I didn't want to be in my car, cause I knew Beckwith recognized my car, so we went in a different car. I will never forget, the guy pulled around, and the way he pulled around it blocked us from backing out. So I was like, oh my gosh. And then the guy came over and patted us down, and I'm thinking oh my gosh. I didn't know what was going to happen. But as it turned out, what he told was that Ed Peters, who was the district attorney, had the gun. He lied. You just have... sometimes as a reporter... that's why I always say, check things out. You can get the wildest tips on god's earth sometimes, and you'll swear the person who tells you is absolutely nuts, and crazy, and has absolutely zero credibility, which this guy had none in my mind. But you still check it out. And I'll be, he was right! I could not believe it to save my life! The DA's office already had the gun. And he was telling us right. The way he knew about it—and really now you'll go crazy, cause now you'll hear the rest of some of the story and you'll think oh my gosh, like I did—he told

us the way he knew about was he was watching “Prime Time Live” with Beckwith. And at one point, the DA was talking about they didn’t know where the gun was, and Beckwith says to him, “Why hell, Ed Peters has that gun.” You know, the district attorney. So, Mississippi is a very small world, I have to say that.

Question: You had mentioned earlier that at times you were scared that you weren’t going to have your job still. Were there times when your editor said they didn’t want to run a story that you had worked so hard on? And, how did you approach that?

Mitchell: Yes, that is true. I had a couple stories that I wrote that got killed early on. But you know what I did? I’m very sneaky. My wife can confirm this to you. I’m very sneaky. They kill these stories. I just held onto them. So when that editor was gone, I just resurrected the story and ran it. It’s weird sometimes. Just because an editor kills a story, that doesn’t mean it’s dead for good. That’s the way I feel about it. I always try to get it in the paper later.

Rubin: Jerry, you’ve talked about the value of putting these guys behind bars. Can you discuss how the citizens of Mississippi were reacting to your reporting and the overall impact of closure on Mississippi on some of this at this point?

Mitchell: Sure. Well, it’s been an evolution. It’s not overnight at all. It’s been an evolution. When I first started writing about this there were a lot of unhappy people. They thought I was digging up the past, what was I doing that for. And people at the paper, as I mentioned, one person at the paper who felt that way. But as time went on, as there were arrests and there were convictions and those kinds of things, attitudes began to kinda change. And I’ll give you an example of how this, of how much attitudes changed. In Neshoba County, Mississippi, I never thought I’d see this in my life. Neshoba County when this happened in 1964 they circled the wagons. By gosh, they didn’t talk to the FBI, they didn’t talk to anybody, they wanted this to go away. In 2004 the people in Neshoba County formed an organization, a citizen’s group, made up of white, African American, and Native American called the Philadelphia Coalition, which actually formed, had a press conference, called for prosecution of this case, and it was basically made up of many of the important citizens, and common citizens in town. And I never thought I’d see that day that Neshoba County would have that. And I think that is an indication of the change of attitude—as well as what I’ve experienced from talking to people—that’s kind of a concrete proof of how it’s changed.

You know, in 1964, there were hardly any African Americans registered to vote in Mississippi. Today in Mississippi there are more African elected officials than any other state. So you can see, Mississippi has really come a long way. That’s not to say it doesn’t still have a long ways to go, but it’s certainly come a long way.

Question: I just wanted to ask, can you tell us a little bit about your childhood and growing up, and what sort of things helped to shape who you are today?

Mitchell: Sure. I don't know that I grew up... in some ways, I probably grew up very much the same as a lot of young white southerners, with I'd say one important exception. My mother, who happened to be from Springfield, Missouri—that's where she grew up—I remember I came home, I was about eight of nine years old, and I said the N-word. I learned it from a friend. She treated me as if it were a capital offense. And I thank God for that. Because she taught me, and my father taught me, about race, and the right ways to treat one another. And I don't know if that totally explains it, that's kind of a simple example, but they taught me the right things about race, and that was kind of the beginning of my understanding that we have to be sensitive to others.

Question: I have a kind of quick two-part question. Besides watching that film "Mississippi Burning," which I think is a great film, too, what were some of your other inspirations for digging into research about these terrible killings and making it your crusade? And then the second part of my question is, this is many years of reporting. How difficult was it for you to get little pieces at a time and then maybe something you did a few years ago finally panned out? Was it difficult for your editors and things like that?

Mitchell: I'll try to remember to answer all these. If I forget part of it, you'll let me know. Lemme point out a little bit more about the movie, "Mississippi Burning," we were talking about at dinner as well. It's a totally fictional film. And it makes the FBI out to be heroes when they really weren't. The activists are kind of portrayed as a bunch of cowards, I think, in the film. And in fact, a bunch of the activists were very upset about it, and people like Bob Moses, who's one of my heroes, and some of the others came together and he actually started the Algebra Project because of this film. Which is kind of interesting what's come out of this film. I mean, people can have negative reactions and still end up doing positive things out of this. So this film's very powerful, there's no question about that, and that's what affected me.

The other thing that inspired me very early on in my journalism career was I read "All the President's Men." If you're a journalism student and you haven't read that book—if you've seen the movie, that's great—but I'm telling you, the book is you need to read. And one of the best pieces of advice I ever got in journalism was from a newspaper editor in Texas, a small little town in Texas. He asked me if I'd read the book, and I said, "well, no. I've seen the movie." He says, "Read the book and study how they used attribution in that book." And he's absolutely right. It is a primer on investigative reporting if you just study exactly how they approached the subjects, exactly how they recorded it, how they attributed stories. It's a wonderful primer on investigative reporting. Very inspiring to me. After I read that book, I wanted to be Woodward and Bernstein. And what was the second question?

Question: Just quickly, because I know other people... What was it like, piece by piece, year by year, how difficult was it for you to finally get a story?

Mitchell: That's what you have to do, at least with these cases, and I'm just speaking specifically on these cases. It is like putting a puzzle together. And you do, you collect

pieces. Sometimes you have pieces and you don't know how they match up. And then years later, you get some more information and suddenly it all makes sense and it all fits together. I'm very much programmed that way. I very much work like a detective almost, in terms of trying to piece the case together: "Okay, what are some potential witnesses? Who can I talk to? What documents can I get?" I love documents. I try to get my hands on as many documents as I can.

Question: Hi. I'm right here. Could you tell me what kind of personality traits make a good investigative reporter, or else, what skills can help people be good investigative reporters? Thank you.

Mitchell: That's a good question. It's not necessarily what you think. 'Cause the way we as investigative reporters... I think you probably have already sensed this from me. I'm probably not telling you anything you don't already know. I'm kind of like the opposite of Mike Wallace. And I don't know that you have to have Mike Wallace's personality to be an investigative reporter. In fact, if you want to get people to talk to you, you're probably better off being like me. I mean, you just... you want to put people at ease. You don't want to come in there with guns blazing. You know what I mean? And as an investigative reporter, you want people to talk. You don't want them to shut up. You want them to converse with you and gain the trust of other people and those kinds of things. So I think you need to be able to make connections with people, you need to be able to sit down with people, put people at ease. Which doesn't sound like that belongs in a category with investigative reporting, but I'm telling you, it's important. The other thing is, you were talking about being very analytical, I think if you're very analytical, I think that helps. I've always been that way. I was always a weird kid. And the other thing is I'm very obsessive, so I don't know. That actually probably does help as an investigative reporter, being very obsessed. And my wife can testify to that as well. I've put her through a lot. And then on top of that, I think personality-wise, this is probably the most important. Because there's not just one personality, let's be honest. But the one thing that is most important, and this is something anybody can do, is don't give up. Just keep going. Bob Woodward once said, and there's a certain amount of truth in this. It's a little bit hyperbole, but on the other hand, he is dead on. He said, "All great reporting is done in defiance of management." There's some truth in that. If you're just seeking to satisfy management, if that's your entire goal, you're not going to be a good reporter, and you're certainly not going to be a great investigative reporter. As an investigative reporter, your absolute allegiance is to the story. When I reported about Bobby DeLaughter and them having the gun, he hated my guts. You're not going to win friends with this thing. You don't do investigative reporting and expect people to hug you. You know what I mean? You're not gonna get it. So the other part of it, I guess that goes with it too, and I've always been this way, is I don't care what other people think of me. They can hate me, they can spit—like the guy that wrote the letter about that I should be tarred and feathered and run out of the state of Mississippi, I'm thinking about hanging that up on my wall. I really like that letter. I guess I kinda take up a reverse reaction to it. I kinda considered that a compliment.

Question: Will Holmes, with the Newspaper School. I'm curious, you talked about this motive, in which you're gonna find the truth. But to me, the reason which I got into journalism is to present—and you poked fun at Fox News earlier, and I know that that's the thing to do these days, but—the reason why I got into journalism is to give perspectives. And it seems as though with your journalism, you have a goal which you want to reach. I got into journalism because I was gonna give presentable sides and make the audience decide where they needed to go. And so I'm curious where journalism falls in terms of an ulterior motive in which you get so impassioned. Granted, there's plenty of things within this campus—the Chancellor as particular, and we talked about that earlier today—I get so impassioned in which I want to separate myself from the situation because I know that I'm gonna get so involved. If you get so involved with the civil rights movement and then you want to seek truth, where do you dismiss yourself to say, I have my opinion, I want this opinion to be reached, but to me, I have no motives in which to manipulate to present in the argument?

Mitchell: Right. I understand what you're saying. I agree with you about how one of the roles of journalism is to present sides. The reason I said something about Fox earlier is just because they present themselves as fair and balanced. I just have a problem with anybody—I'm not talking about left or right, I'm not trying to make an assessment of that in one way or the other—but I just as a cynical journalist, anytime someone claims to be, as part of their slogan, that they are fair and balanced, if CNN did that I'd have the same problem, you know what I mean. I just don't like that. As a journalist, I don't like that. And I think you do as a journalist. You present all sides. When I'm talking to Beckwith, I'm letting him present his sides. When I did the very first story on Beckwith, I did little mini-profiles on all the people. He loved it. Because I just quoted him. I just quoted him, Let him say what he wanted to say. And that's part of what your job is. But see you're assuming that I'm... you said, my "opinion." Opinion doesn't have anything to do with it. It has to do with what you're doing is you're seeking at all times I think you're trying to drive toward what's the truth. What can we find out? What is there to be known? It's like we were talking about that puzzle before. You try to piece these things together. You put it together piece by piece.

I believe that as journalists – I said this one time and it sounds like another one of my nutty sayings, so forgive me for saying it before I say it – I almost think of journalism, you know how growing up you read comic books about superheroes and they have special powers? I believe we as journalists we have special powers and we should use them responsibly. I'm all for that. When I was writing about Beckwith, I'm treating him fair too, because I'm going to him every time, "What do you think about this? What do you think about this?" But I don't think that because you do that, that you have to act like he has a legitimate claim when he claimed Lee Harvey Oswald killed Medgar Evers. You know what I mean? You don't give credence to nuttiness, either. That's the other part of that. There's some responsibility involved with that, too. That's all. You're entitled to your opinion like everybody else.

Question: You just answered my question.

Question: Hi. I'm just wondering, are there any other cases in Mississippi that haven't been opened yet that you would like to investigate or are trying to currently, I guess?

Mitchell: Well, we're probably getting to the end of the road, just from the standpoint of... There are several cases that are being looked at right now. The Emmett Till case is probably the best known of those cases. The FBI has just finished its investigation, has delivered its report to the district attorney in Greenville, Mississippi and at some point, my guess is it will be presented to a grand jury. And the grand jury will go either up or down on whether charges will be brought in that case. From what I know about it at this point, it's gonna be very, very difficult to bring charges in that case. That doesn't mean they can't be brought, but it's just gonna be very difficult. Now, perhaps the FBI has found some additional new witnesses that I don't know anything about, but unless they have, it's going to be very, very difficult.

Question: I was actually about to ask that last question, but since you say that most everything is coming to a close, what are your future plans? What are you looking into now?

Mitchell: Well, y'all can keep a secret, right? I'm looking through some FBI documents right now in connection with the "Mississippi Burning" case. I do this; it's the way I operate. I don't necessarily have a preconception of where I'm going to ride. And that's why I'm saying I don't feel like I try to manipulate anything to make something fit into my predetermined set of facts. I've got all these FBI documents I'm going to try to dig through, see if there's anything in there. I don't know if there will be or not. It has to do with the three civil rights workers' case. There are still seven guys alive in that case. So I have no idea if I'll find anything in there or not. But I'm gonna look. I just go down rabbit trails. That's what I call them. That's probably not a good term for them. But I just kinda run down rabbit trails and if I find something, then I can print it. And if I don't find anything, I move on.

Eventually, I'll be writing about other things other than these cases, and I have been all along. I'm working on a series now that has nothing to do with these cases. It has to do with some alleged corruption in the state government in Mississippi. I do other stuff, too.

Question: Hello. We talked earlier.

Mitchell: Yeah, we did.

Question: I'm relatively new to the whole journalism world, but what's interesting, I always think, is getting to talk to people. What I'm curious about is when you're talking to the grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, what are you like? You know, are you sitting down having a beer, just being all chummy with him, trying to get what you can out of him? Are you straight up with him? These interviews that you have, do people leave the interview with you thinking that the story's coming out favorable toward them?

Mitchell: Here's the thing. I don't have a preconception about what they're gonna tell me. Perhaps there's some repentant Klansman. I've interviewed them before and they're sorry about what they did. That's a different story. That's like when I interviewed Killen the first time. I had no idea what he was gonna tell me. But that's now what he told me. I really – and I mentioned this to the some of the classes earlier – in interviewing style, I really let them do the talking. That's really my mode of operation. Have any of you seen Charlie Rose on PBS? Drives me nuts. That's the worst interviewing style. Not to beat up on him personally, because I think he's a nice guy and all that. He's like a negative example of how to do it. Because he'll ask a question and if there's any pause at all, he jumps right in to answer it before they've had a shot. The thing to remember when you're out there interviewing people, is silence is your friend. The best thing you can do a lot of times, there's a real need in each one of us to want to fill that silence. You don't want there to be that pregnant pause. So people rush to fill that. You just don't want to be the one to rush to fill it. You want them to be the ones to fill it. And you'll be surprised what they tell you. In fact, -- I mentioned this in class earlier – when I've interviewed people, at the end of interviews sometimes, I've had people tell me, "You know, I've never even told my family about this." That's not a unique experience. Other reporters have told me the same thing, that they have told reporters things they haven't even told their family. Why is that? Because people don't take the time to listen. And when somebody does, whether they're a Klansmen or whether it's somebody else, everybody wants to tell their story. Everybody wants to tell their story. When I sat down with Bobby Cherry, he was anxious to tell his story of innocence. I had no idea going in that the guy was lying about watching wrestling, you know? I had no idea. I was going to do a story, as far as I knew, that Bobby Cherry says he's innocent of this bombing. That's all I knew at that point. But it didn't turn out that way. So I don't go in with preconceived motives about what I'm going to get or not get. And you know, you let them talk. That's what you do. You're a journalist.

Grimes: Any other last question before I take the privilege and ask a last question?

Mitchell: They're not gonna take it away from you.

Grimes: They're not gonna have it. I'll be the dean of the press corps of the school here. Jerry, for this generation of young journalists, what's the next great civil rights kind of story? What should they be looking for that might make a difference?

Mitchell: That's a great question. I think sometimes we think so broadly and so big sometimes. I really believe this firmly. When you're young especially, I know I thought this way. I thought I had to work for The New York Times or The Washington Post or one of these other big papers to really make a difference. But you can make a difference right where you are. You can make a difference writing for the school newspaper. As minor as it sounds, when I was in high school we got the lunch changed, the lunch schedule changed. It's extremely minor, but you can change the place where you are and make it a better place. I really believe that. How do you build the Great Wall of China? One brick at a time. I really believe that. I think it's just one step at a time that we take. That we move toward this.

I think, in terms of the next great story: I think the next great story may be the next story you're working on for the school newspaper. And maybe the next story you're working on for the weekly or for the local newspaper or wherever you're working. And I really believe that. Wherever you go, overfill your place. I'm a real believer in that. You just overfill wherever you are, you go beyond what you're asked to do, and you try to really be of service to the community. And I just have always believed that and I think it's one of the great things about journalism. And I hope that all of you go into it and pursue it. I think that journalism, despite all the criticism, is in my opinion the world's most noble profession. Because we're essentially public servants, serving the public. We're watchdogs. We're a fourth estate, really, to make sure that government operates as it should. So I think it's extremely valuable. Thanks a lot for having me. I appreciate it.

(applause)

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