

Program Title: John Lewis: Get in the Way
Program Subject(s): African Americans; Biography; Civil Rights; Government; Nonviolence; Race Relations
Year Produced: 2015
Directed by Kathleen Dowdey
Produced by Kathleen Dowdey
Distributed by Tugg Edu, <http://eduhome.tugg.com>
Reviewed by Timothy Hackman, University of Maryland
Running Time: 54 minutes
Color or B&W: Color and B&W
Awards Received: Best Documentary, International Family Film Festival, 2016
Audience Level: General Adult
Review

“Tell the story. Tell the story. Tell it over and over again.” – Representative John Lewis

The weekend of the most recent Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Congressman John Lewis, who has represented Georgia’s 5th Congressional District since 1986, was flying from Atlanta to Washington, D.C. when another passenger shouted the name of the 45th president at him. The taunt was likely in response to Mr. Lewis’s recent remarks on the president’s vulgar comments on immigrants. The President, said Mr. Lewis on ABC’s *This Week*, “is a racist,” and Lewis intended to skip the January 30 State of the Union address in protest.¹ The taunt didn’t bother Congressman Lewis, who, at 77 years old, has faced discrimination and racial violence that few could comprehend. “I’ve been called many, many things,” he told Cory Booker on the podcast *Lift Every Voice*. “But I’m not going to let anything get me down. I’m going to keep walking, keep moving.”²

John Lewis: Get in the Way profiles the civil rights leader and fifteen-term Representative from his childhood in rural Alabama, to his participation in some of the most momentous events of the Civil Rights era, to his work on voter education and his distinguished career in the United States House of Representatives. The film provides a concise overview of his life and work, and along the way offers a valuable primer on the Civil Rights movement. *Get in the Way* begins with conditions in segregated Alabama, which led to some of the earliest protest actions including bus boycotts and lunch counter sit-ins. Those early actions “had a profound impact” on Lewis. “It gave me a way out,” he remembers. “I got in trouble. Good trouble. Necessary trouble.”

From there the film follows Lewis as he became more deeply involved in the student movement, learning non-violent protest methods from the Reverend James Lawson and Bernard Lafayette, suffering beatings and being jailed after joining the first Freedom Rides in 1961, being elected as the third Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1963, and helping to plan the 1963 March on Washington. The youngest of the “Big Six” leaders of the movement (along with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., James Farmer, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young), Mr. Lewis earned a reputation for direct action and courage in the line of fire, although others were considered better speakers. The emotional center of the film is “Bloody Sunday,” the 1965 march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, in

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2018/01/14/politis/john-lewis-trump-daca-comments-cnntv/>

² <https://www.buzzfeed.com/darrensands/john-lewis-said-he-gets-taunted-by-people-who-yell-trump-at>

which peaceful demonstrators were attacked and beaten by Alabama state police. That event, or more accurately the horrifying images of it carried on television and in mainstream magazines such as *Life*, is often credited with turning the tide of public opinion, leading to passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965

Get in the Way effectively tells its story through archival photographs, documentary footage, and interviews with Mr. Lewis and others. The sheer historical weight of his experiences, combined with his highly polished way of recounting them, makes for gripping viewing. "I believe in non-violence as a way of life," he says. "I didn't ask to be beaten. I don't like pain. But if that's the price you have to pay to make things better for others..." This program is Highly Recommended for teaching about the Civil Rights era, and would be valuable paired with Mr. Lewis's recent trilogy of graphic novels, *March*.

Reviewer Rating: Highly Recommended