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FCA shares video interview with Congressman John Lewis

McLEAN, Va., July 20, 2020 — Congressman John Lewis of Georgia passed away on Friday, July 17, at the age of 80. In honor of his memory, the Farm Credit Administration shares a 15-minute video interview with Congressman Lewis conducted by FCA's late chairman Kenneth A. Spearman, the first African American to head a U.S. federal bank regulator.

The video, titled "The Sharecroppers' Son," was made in March 2016, not long before Chairman Spearman's death. In the interview, the two men discussed a range of topics, from the congressman's childhood in rural Alabama, to the future of civil rights.

Congressman Lewis described the segregation and racial discrimination he had seen as a child. "When we visited the little town of Troy, I saw the signs that said white and colored," he said. "And the schools were all segregated. Our school bus was old, ragged, broken down. We'd pass the white school and we'd see the little white children get on the new buses and enter the beautiful, well-painted schools. And I kept on asking my mother and my father, my grandparents, and my great-grandparents, 'Why? Why?'

"And they would say, 'That's the way it is! That's the way it is! Don't get in the way. Don't get in trouble.'

"But in 1955, 15 years old, in the 10th grade, I heard of Rosa Parks. I heard the words of Martin Luther King Jr. on the old radio. The action of Rosa Parks and the words of Martin Luther King Jr. inspired me to find a way to get in the way."

As a student at the American Baptist Theological Seminary and later at Fisk University in Nashville, he said that he and other students "started studying the way of peace, the way of love, the way of nonviolence."

He described participating in the sit-ins at segregated lunch counters and restaurants in the fall of 1959. "Black and white college students and some high school students would be sitting there on a stool and someone would come up and spit on us or put a lighted cigarette out in our hair or down our backs." And when John Lewis was arrested one day during a sit-in, he described feeling free. "I felt liberated," he said. "I felt like I had crossed over."

In 1961, John Lewis became one of the 13 original Freedom Riders. The purpose of the bus journey through the South was to pressure the federal government to enforce a Supreme Court decision banning segregated interstate bus travel. He described an incident that occurred in South Carolina, when a group of Ku Klux Klan attacked the riders. "We were beaten and left bloody," he said, "and the local police officials came up wanting to know whether we wanted to press charges. We said no. 'We believe in the way of peace, the way of love, the way of nonviolence.'

"Several years later one of the Klan members who beat us came to my office. He was in his 70s. ... And he said, 'Mr. Lewis, I'm one of the people that beat you during the Freedom Ride. I want to apologize. Will you forgive me?' And he started crying. ... I said, 'I forgive you. I accept your apology.' He hugged me. I hugged him back, and I cried."

The congressman said that more than 400 people who participated in the Freedom Rides were arrested and jailed during the spring and summer of 1961. They were also repeatedly attacked; John Lewis himself received a serious head injury during an attack in Alabama.

"But because of what we did and the actions of President Kennedy and his brother Attorney General Robert Kennedy, those signs that said, 'white waiting, colored waiting,' 'white men, colored men,' 'white women, colored women,' those signs came tumbling down," he said.

One of the chairman's final questions for Congressman Lewis was what message he would like to convey to kids today about what it was like then and the current state of civil rights.

"My message to young people today would be simple: Study the lessons of the Civil Rights Movement. Read the literature. Watch the films. And be inspired to never give up, never give in. And when you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have a moral obligation to speak up, to speak out, and find a way to get in the way and to do something about it.

"And be hopeful!" he emphasized. "Be optimistic. And never become bitter. And never hate, for hate is too heavy a burden to bear, as Dr King stated. I would tell young people today that we are one people — that we are one family."

To watch this inspiring interview in full, go to [The Sharecroppers' Son](#).

The Farm Credit Administration would like to express its condolences to Congressman Lewis' family and to recognize the congressman for his leadership in the fight for equal rights for African Americans and his many years of service to our country.

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The Farm Credit Administration is the safety and soundness regulator of the Farm Credit System. The System consists of two government-sponsored enterprises — a nationwide network of cooperative banks and associations established in 1916, and a secondary market entity known as the Federal Agricultural Mortgage Corporation (Farmer Mac) that was established in 1988. The System's borrower-owned banks and associations provide credit to farmers, ranchers, residents of rural communities, agricultural and rural utility cooperatives, and other eligible and creditworthy borrowers. Farmer Mac provides a secondary market for agricultural real estate loans, rural housing mortgage loans, and certain rural utility loans. FCA news releases are available on the web at www.fca.gov.