

Interview with **Lu Palmer**

Date: April 14, 1989

Interviewer: Madison Davis Lacy, Jr.

Camera Rolls: 1088-1090

Sound Rolls: 140-141

Team: A

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in *bold italics* was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #1088]

[sound roll #140]

00:00:12:00

Cameraman:

Mark.

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark one.

[slate]

00:00:16:00

Interviewer:

Your organization, Chicago Black United Communities, first got kicked off by thwarting Byrne's effort to support, to appoint Tom Ayers president of the school board. Tell me what happened around those school board appointments. How'd that go down?

00:00:29:00

Lu Palmer:

Well, Chicago, the Chicago school system collapsed financially. And Jane Byrne, who was then the mayor, was mandated by the state legislature to appoint a whole new school board which was unprecedented. We got word that she was only getting input from the Chicago Urban League and from something called Chicago United. Both of those agencies did not represent grassroots Black Chicago, so we just said we weren't gonna stand for it. Make a very long story short, we became involved in, in, in the process of getting Black members on the school board. Out of that fight, and it was a long, tough fight, we put together what came to be known as Chicago Black United Communities, CBUC. We call it C-BUC. And it led to the first Black president of the school board. We not only kicked out Tom Ayers, who was a suburbanite who was head of Commonwealth Edison and other. He had a suburban establishment record. So, we were able through court, through the courts to knock him off the board so he could not become president, which is what Jane Byrne wanted. And as a result, we got elected the first Black school board president.

00:02:16:00

Interviewer:

Now, moving ahead in time, talk to me a bit about the, the political education clinics that you conducted here. Why were they important? What did you do?

Lu Palmer:

Well, I guess I'd have to back up some—

Interviewer:

OK.

00:02:29:00

Lu Palmer:

—to put the clinics in context. We decided in 1981—me—we meaning CBUC that the time had come to have a Black mayor in Chicago. *We were up here in this very room talking one night in our regular meeting, and we had a, a, a list of Black mayors on, on the wall. There were more than 200 Black mayors. And somebody said, Well, why can't we have a Black mayor in Chicago?* And the feeling was that was impossible. Just utterly impossible. But if 203 or 4 cities across this nation, some large cities could have a Black mayor, we just

felt that, you know, Chicago could. So, we began planning. This was in '81, 1981, and on August 15th, 1981 we sponsored a citywide political conference, and the theme was toward a Black mayor. Now, you know, startin' something in '81 with a goal in '83, that's unusual for us. I mean, we usually start two weeks beforehand, but the next election was '83. So, outta that conference, let me tell you a little story about that conference. It was so successful, it was just enormously successful, and as chairman I was giving the, the summary at the end of the day. And as I was talking, thanking the people for the kind of input they had given, all of a sudden I broke down and started crying. And Jesse was there, Jesse Jackson rushed up to put his arms around me and closed out the session for us. And I thought, you know, why in the world did I break down like that? That was not characteristic of me. I came to the conclusion that I had—we had witnessed something that day that was just utterly unusual, and I was convinced, totally convinced that we were gonna pull this thing off because of the way that conference went off. At the conference, we did two things, we set two strategies. I had developed a slogan. I never realized how extraordinary effective slogans are, but I introduced at that conference a slogan, "We shall see in '83," and that became the, the watch word for the next two years. And over the period of time, We shall see in '83 became internalized in the hearts and the minds and souls of our people, to the point that two years later when Harold actually announced he was gonna run, the first thing out of his mouth was, "We shall see in '83." Now to your question about the political education clinics. The second strategy was to begin a process of educating our people about politics. Until then there had been sporadic political education processes, but they were never sustained, so we said we have got to teach our people first what is politics, secondly how can we make politics work for us and not for them. So, my wife, Georgia, organized these political education clinics, and they were set up as four consecutive Saturdays, and on the fifth Saturday then we would have a graduation. It was really extraordinary. Most of the people in those political education classes had never been involved in politics before. They, they were just people, grassroots people. And to get a po—what we call it? A political education degree that they could put on their walls. It was just a, an extraordinary experience for them. I'll tell you another story about those clinics. Incidentally, we ended up graduating better than 2,000 people over the period of when we started them in late '81 until the election in '83, but the first class we held up in here in this room. You see, we, we were such a poor group, we didn't have any heat. We had no heat. We—and, and we would not have had a place to, to meet. We had put outta three or four different churches and other halls. My wife and I are buying this building, and we just came up here and, and, and made it usable, and we met up here. But we didn't have any heat. Didn't have a stove. Didn't have a, didn't have a furn—the first graduation exercise that we held was held on a day that was a record cold day in Chicago. It was a day when the, the, what do you call it? The wind chill factor went to 80 below zero, and we were up here, maybe a hundred or more of us. See, the people came, they brought their spouses, they brought their family. It was like a regular graduation, it was a prideful day. And there was no heat in this building. Do you know that not one person left? We were up here easily a hour, hour fifteen, hour twenty minutes, and we went through our ceremony with overcoats, scarves, glove. I mean, it was cold. And that was another signal to me, you know, we don't like cold weather. And I said if, if our people will sit through this kind of a ceremony as long as they did in this much cold, we're headed somewhere. And that was a second signal to me that we were going to elect a Black mayor in '83. Incidentally, the po, the political conference, after the political conference we, we said we must be sure that just nobody pops

up and runs, just not anybody. We got to have us a serious candidate. So, we did a survey and we came up with ninety-two names. We, we put out 35,000 survey sheets and 17,000 were returned. Unbelievable. Utterly unbelievable. Outta that we got ninety-two names, and we took those ninety-two names, boiled them down to ten, the highest ten, top ten. The person at the very top, I mean way out above number two, was Harold Washington who was a congressman then, a South Side congressman. So, we said OK, now we got ten. How are we gonna handle it now? I called each one of those ten people and I said, Would you run? Is there any circumstances under which you would not run? Four of them said under no condition, so we had six. So, we called a Black mayoral plebiscite. That word plebiscite really kicked some people off and ticked some off 'cause they didn't know what it meant. So, this was kind of a, among other things a teaching process. And people heard this word pleb... What? What in the world is a plebiscite? And we began to teach them that, you know, when, when, [coughs] when a people comes together, a people, when people come together around an important issue and vote to decide which way they should move, that's a plebiscite. Well, make another long story short, we held a plebiscite, Bethel AME Church, and this was in 1982—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Lu Palmer:

—and—

00:11:13:00

Camera crew member #2:

Rollout. Gonna stop you.

Camera crew member #1:

Shuttin' off?

Camera crew member #2:

We got a [inaudible]?

Interviewer:

Good.

Camera crew member #1:

We got a problem with [inaudible]

Camera crew member #2:

No, not [inaudible]

Camera crew member #3:

No.

[cut]

[camera roll #1089]

00:11:21:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark two.

[slate]

00:11:23:00

Interviewer:

All right, continue talking about '82 and the plebiscite.

00:11:27:00

Lu Palmer:

Well, we, we had to decide. See, we, we, we wanted this to be a, a classic example of people selecting candidates. This was a genuine draft. At the plebiscite we had six names left, and we held a plebiscite at Bethel AME Church. It was jammed, just utterly jammed. ***So, in essence what we did was to present those six names. We did not have the people, those six people there, we just presented their names and the people voted. Once again, Harold Washington was far and away the number-one choice,*** so it became clear that African Americans in Chicago wanted Harold Washington as the major, as the only, really, Black candidate in 1983 for mayor. Well, Harold was reluctant. He was really reluctant. And I said, Harold, look, you, you won the survey, you know, you won the plebiscite. Now what you want? So, Harold said, Well, you guys are gonna have to register some more Black people. In those days we just had few, relatively few registered voters. No way in the world we could've done much of anything with the number of Black registered voters on the rolls. And Harold was an astute politician. He said, You're gonna have to get me some more Black registered voters, so we said, How many? He said, At least 50,000. Well, that seemed like a Herculean task, but some things were happening which made it so much easier for us. The mayor then

was Jane Byrne, and our people had literally elected Jane Byrne because she passed herself off as a reformer, and we thought we'd much rather have a reformer and we'd take a chance on a woman 'cause the men had been blowing it, so we put Jane Byrne in, but Jane Byrne quickly turned her back on those who believed in political reform. But she made a couple of extraordinary errors so far as Black people were concerned. And on one, in one instance she appointed two White women to the board, having dumped two Black men to the school board, and these were two strong Black men, which is I presume why [laughs] she dumped them. And the White women that she put on the board were racist. One of them was an avowed racist. She was a, a, a member of what was called the Bogan Broads. They named themselves the Bogan Broads. Section of Chicago is known as Bogan, and it's a very racist section of town. There was a permissive transfer plan going on where our kids were bused into White schools, and the Bogan Broads would meet out little two and three second and third graders and throw eggs at them and, and yell at them and scream and just harass them terribly. Well, one of these woman, one of these women was a Bogan Broad, named to the school board. The other woman who was named was not quite as overt a racist, but we certainly considered her a racist. At any rate, she just, Jane Byrne just energized the Black community with these two appointments. She also did re—much the same thing in naming members to the board of Chicago Housing Authority, public housing. She changed literally the complexion of the board. The board was majority Black. She switched it around so it became majority White, and of course Black people just, just hit the ceilings. So, what this did was to politicize, help us politicize Black people. So, when Harold said that, you know, we had to get 50,000 registered voters, we said OK, we'll, we'll, we'll, we'll go after it.

00:16:23:00

Camera crew member #2:

OK. Excuse me. I, I missed that last part. I was on a move there. Could—so, what this did was politicize—?

00:16:31:00

Interviewer:

Yeah, so what Harold did was—

00:16:32

Lu Palmer:

What, what Harold, what, what Jane Byrne did was to help us politicize Black people. So, when Harold asked for 50,000 new registered voters, she helped us, she being Jane Byrne, helped us register 150,000. You may remember the ChicagoFest boycott, the boycott. Jane Byrne loved the ChicagoFest. It was her baby. It was a big thing. Big summer festival, so, and so, one morning on a talk show, radio talk show a woman called Derek Hill, who was the host, and said, Derek, we oughta boycott the ChicagoFest. Jane Byrne loves that ChicagoFest

so much. Let's show her and let's boycott the fest. And Derek said it sounded like a good idea. His next guest was Jesse Jackson, and Derek said, said, Jess—Reverend Jackson, this lady just called and said that we oughta boycott the fest to show Jane Byrne something. So, Jesse say, That sounds like it's doable. So, he called me and eight or ten other people and we met over at Push, and didn't have but eleven days. We put together the most amazing boycott you will ever want to see. We picketed around Navy Pier where it was held, and any time a Black person approached the ticket booth to buy a ticket, we'd have a, a, a, a team there talking them out of going in there. And I'll bet you 99.9% of our efforts were successful. We were so successful at the boycott that one of our marshals told us that a White woman came up to him and she say, You know, I feel so sorry for you people. And he said, Well, why? He said, Because they won't let y'all in the boycott, in the, in the ChicagoFest. And he said, Well, they'll let us in. Well, I didn't see any of you in there. And there was hardly no Black people inside the fest. But that was not what was significant. The significant thing was that we used the boycott to politicize our people around voter registration. We just kept laying on voter registration as we talked about ChicagoFest and the boycott. So, when we hit the streets to register people, this is the truth, we didn't have to go get them and buttonhole them. We didn't have to pull them. All we had to was set up a table on the street, and it said, "Register to vote." Man, people came from outta the woodwork. We ended up with more than a 150,000. This was coalition. This was not just CBUC, this was a coalition of groups that really put on a boycott and a political—I mean a voter registration drive. It was, it was just unbelievable.

00:19:56:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop down now.

[wild sound]

00:19:59:00

Interviewer:

Good. You're blowing through [inaudible]. Good, very good.

[cut]

00:20:03:00

Camera crew member #1:

Board.

00:20:04:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark three.

[slate]

00:20:05:00

Interviewer:

Tell me a little bit more about Harold's reluctance to be drafted for this, this mission to be mayor of Chicago. Did he, did he think you were trying to, to shoehorn him into that?

00:20:17:00

Lu Palmer:

Well, [laughs] he probably did. Shortly after he said we had to get these 50,00 registered voters, we called another meeting at Bethel AME Church, and it was a voter registration meeting, and we formed what was called the People's Movement for Voter Registration. Our speaker was Harold Washington. See, we were, we were constantly pushing Harold in front on everything. *At that meeting Harold made a strange speech. It was really a strange speech. And he started talking about it's not the man, it's the plan. And when he finished speaking, I walked over to Harold and said, What are you talking about? I said, What's this man and the plan business, and when are you gonna give us kind of a concrete timeframe?* Because, see, by now things were picking up, things were really picking up in terms of a Black mayor. *Harold said to me on the platform of Bethel while the program was still going on, Harold said, I, I'm not gonna run. And I looked at Harold thunderstruck.* Renault Robinson was sitting on, I beckoned for, I said, Come here, Renault. I said, Harold said he's not gonna run. So, Renault said, We gotta deal with this. And for a couple days we started talking among ourselves, why is Harold so reluctant. We generally felt that as a congressman, Harold was in his milieu. He is, he was a legislator. He was a state rep, he was a state senator, then he was a congressman. That was his thing. Now we were asking Harold to come out of the legislative into the executive, and I am convinced—

[rollout on camera roll]

Lu Palmer:

—that he was totally comfortable being a congressman and did not want to get into the legis, I mean, into the executive branch.

00:22:36:00

Camera crew member #2:

We got rollout. We got rollout. We're gonna have to go back and pick that up again. Maybe about—

[cut]

[camera roll #1090]

[slate]

00:22:42:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark. Ooh, I guess second sticks. Do it again.

00:22:45:00

Camera crew member #2:

Second sticks, mark four.

[slate]

00:22:49:00

Interviewer:

Tell me now, why were these political education classes so important?

00:22:52:00

Lu Palmer:

Well, you've got to remember that in '80, '81, our people had been through decades of machine politics in Chicago, and they had been forced out of any real involvement, and they really knew little about the political process. So, we took 2,000 people who knew, they didn't even know the difference between a, a ward committeeman and alderman, and that's about as elementary as you can get. They knew nothing about what a state rep was to do, what a, what a state senator was. They just did not know anything about the political system. So, it became absolutely essential that we develop a cadre of people, number one, who were informed, and number two, who had been trained on what to do out there in the streets insofar as campaigning was concerned, and that's what it, that's what developed over this year-and-a-half period of political education.

00:24:05:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's go back to, or forward to the, Harold's reluctance again. There was a meeting in your basement after the plebiscite. Describe that to me.

00:24:14:00

Lu Palmer:

Well, [laughs] after the meeting in which—after the public meeting in which Harold started talking about it's not the man, it's the plan, we got greatly concerned because we thought Harold was kinda pulling out on us, and we had by that time begun pushing him as the candidate because he was the choice of the people. After that meeting, I called a meeting, a smallish, eight or ten people who had been involved in the process, in my basement. And I remember we, we were eating watermelon. [laughs] Typical. And I told Harold, I, you know, asked Harold to come to the meeting, I said, Harold, you tell me what you told—I mean, you tell these people what you told me at Bethel Church. And Harold said, Well, I'm just not gonna run. And I never intended to run. And man, the place almost went up for grabs, and we had quite a time down there with Harold Washington. In one or two instances it was almost necessary to keep, keep him separated from some other people 'cause they was gonna go to blows. Well, we were able to, to, to [laughs] get over that period, but I am convinced Harold did not want to be a mayor. Harold wanted to remain a congressman, but he never said that to us. He never gave us that signal that he really wanted to remain a legislator. So, he got so far out on a limb he couldn't pull back. We're glad he did not pull back because his election in 1983 was a major victory for the Black empowerment movement. And by the time of election day, in this city it was dangerous to even suggest that you might not vote for Harold Washington, in our community. So, it was a beautiful, beautiful period in our life. And let me tell you this. Harold's election gave hope such as I have never seen before. Young kids, I mean, three, four, five years old, school children with the Harold button, Harold Washington buttons and saying to people, I can be the mayor, too. You see, they saw this man as a role model such as we've—

00:27:01:00

Cameraman:

Let's stop down.

[cut]

[sound roll #141]

00:27:05:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

00:27:06:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark five.

[slate]

00:27:08:00

Interviewer:

Harold Washington, hope, young people—give it to me—

00:27:11:00

Lu Palmer:

You see, to really understand the importance of Harold's election you have to understand what both the campaign and the victory did to people, to Black people. Young, I mean three, four, five, six-year-old kids so proudly displaying the Harold Washington button. And, you know, during that period of time hardly nobody called him Harold Washington. It was Harold. It was just Harold.

And, and I'll tell you a story about them buttons which became button mania. The campaign was so bogged down in what color the button's gonna be, what are they gonna say, it took, took them weeks and weeks and weeks and weeks to get any buttons on the street. So, two or three of the campaign workers designed a button, paid for the button, and all of a sudden there were maybe a thousand or more with sunburst, blue with a sunburst, and everybody was struggling to get a button. So, while the campaign was tryin' to figure out what the button oughta be, these three or four campaign workers designed the button which came, became the major official button of the Harold Washington campaign. Man, you, you could not walk in the Loop or in, in neighborhoods without seeing thousands of Harold Washington buttons. And people just became energized. *On election day, I'm in my office and a old man walked in on those walkers and said, Could I just rest for a minute? I said, Certainly. He said, I said, Are you on your way to vote? He said, Yes. I said, We'll take you to the polls. You know what that man said? He said, No. I want to go on my own and vote for that boy.* You know, that touched me so. So, you know, we had people going to the, to the polls in, in wheelchairs, we had people get outta their sick beds because the mood had hit. What's the thing about a time, an idea whose time had come? Clearly, it had come. And when Harold Washington announced on November the 10th, 1982 that he was going to run, a whole city was transformed. And I remember so clearly the date because that's the same day that my sponsor of my radio show fired me because I had been too, too, pushing too hard for a Black mayor. So, it, it, it was a, it was an experience that cannot adequately be described. It gave so many of us hope, and Lord knows we need hope.

00:30:16:00

Cameraman:

Stop down.

[cut]

00:30:18:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

00:30:18:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark six.

[slate]

00:30:20:00

Interviewer:

OK. Describe the battle of CHA, Chicago Housing Authority appointments and the story of your arrest.

00:30:26:00

Lu Palmer:

Well, when you realize that the Chicago Housing Authority tenants are easily ninety to ninety-five percent Black, it was just outrageous that, that Jane Byrne, the mayor then, would shift the complexion of the CHA board. A group of us went to the first meeting of these new board members, and we created a little confusion down there. And at the time that I was arrested I wasn't doing anything [laughs]. I was just sitting against the wall with my hands crossed and all of a sudden, I was grabbed, handcuffed, along with, oh, six or seven women. I was the only man in this. And they threw us in jail for, I guess, disorderly conduct. The trial was—never had a trial, the charges were later dropped, but what they would do in those period, in those days was to remove leaders from the scene, you see. And, you know, that really is an example of how the city was transformed when Harold Washington became mayor. For example, what they used to do when we would protest what's happening in city hall, they would put up barriers to keep us out of the city hall chambers. After Harold was

elected, city hall opened up. You know, you could walk through city hall like a citizen. You know, you could go to a department and, and get what you needed because in that department were, were employees who, number one, they felt proud of wanting to help you, and the whole complexion literally changed in city hall, and the city just opened up.

00:32:25:00

Interviewer:

Now tell me about what, what has all this meant now? What, what, what's been wrought? What's the price we've had to pay?

00:32:33:00

Lu Palmer:

Well, the Harold Washington election—I, I, I've said this before, but I'll say it again, more than anything else it gave the Black community hope. A nun once told me that a people without hope is lost. What it also did was to provide an example of what Black people could do if they came together. I used to say in speeches after Harold was elected that this has proved anything we decide to do, we can do it. If we simply come together, make the necessary sacrifices, work toward a single goal, we could do anything because you'd have to have lived in Chicago to understand what it meant to elect an African American mayor of this city after all the years of what we call plantation politics. So, the election of Harold Washington opened up—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Lu Palmer:

—really a new life.

00:33:43:00

Camera crew member #1:

We got rollout.

00:33:46:00

Camera crew member #2:

Plantation politics.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:33:51:00

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