

Interview with **Ben Chavis**

Date: April 18, 1989

Interviewers: Judy Richardson (Interviewer #1) Sam Pollard (Interviewer #2)

Camera Rolls: 2115-2119

Sound Rolls: 253-255

Team: B

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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 #2115]

[sound roll #253]

00:00:16:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Time code, mark it.

[slate]

00:00:19:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Give me a sense of what you'd been doing locally in the Wilmington, North Carolina community, in terms of grounding you before you come into Gary.

00:00:27:00

Ben Chavis:

Well, in early 1972, I was a community organizer for the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ. And basically, I went around throughout North Carolina, Wilmington, I spent more time in Wilmington than other cities, challenging racism. Racism in the school system, racism in employment. You know, racism in the South in the early '70s was very similar to the racism in the South in the, in the '60s. The only difference is that in

the wake of King's assassination, it was more repressive to go out and try to do grassroots organizin', to go out and try to do mobilizin' around local issues. But that's where the struggle was in the early '70s at many local levels, around issues that were very crucial to the survival of the Black community, of the African American community. And school desegregation, racism in the schools was a primary issue at, at that time. And so I went to Wilmington. In fact, the church sent me to Wilmington to respond to the racial crisis in Wilmington revolving around the school desegregation. As you know, wha—well...

00:01:36:00

Interviewer #1:

That's all right. Start over.

00:01:37:00

Ben Chavis:

As you know, well, one of the things I, you know, as I, I answer your question as I think about this, the context, in the early 1970s, I was a field organizer for the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ. And prior to that, you know, I worked with the SCLC, Dr. King's organization. I was the SCLC coordinator for North Carolina in '67 and '68. And after King's assassination, I joined the staff of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. So anyway, Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ sent me to Wilmington, North Carolina, because there was a, an emerging crisis developing over the racism in the schools, over school desegregation. And what was happenin' was that the Black community, particularly Black students: elementary school, junior high and high school students in particular were being victimized, were being...violence was committed on Black students solely because they were trying to go to school. I mean, that was—

00:02:34:00

Interviewer #1:

Can you do this a little bit tighter and just mention—

Ben Chavis:

Sure.

Interviewer #1:

—your whole thing about, you know. Could you stop a second?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sure.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Stoppin' down.

[cut]

00:02:42:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:02:44:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. So, you're, you're an SCLC organizer and you're now with the church, the United Church of Christ. Can you give a sense of that and going into the Wilmington community and what you're organizing around?

00:02:54:00

Ben Chavis:

Yes. It was in early 1972 that I was first sent to Wilmington, North Carolina, by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. I was a grassroots field organizer for the church having formerly been a organizer for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Dr. King's organization, up to 1968 and then I joined the church staff. And the reason why I was sent to Wilmington by the church was to respond to racial violence that had been perpetrated on Black students attemptin' to go to school in a desegregated situation and as a result of that violence being perpetrated on these schoolchildren, a, a, a little race riot occurred. And of course, the National Guard was sent in, two people were killed, millions of dollars in property was lost. But one of the things we decided to do in Wilmington in 1971...when the incident first happened, I just, I better stop, because I just thought of something.

00:03:46:00

Interviewer #1:

OK.

Ben Chavis:

The incident happened in '71, Judy, and the arrest was in '72. And so the backdrop to the situation actually, when I was sent to Wilmington in 1971 to respond to the racial crisis with high school students in Wilmington, a riot occurred.

Interviewer #2:

Let's cut a second.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah [unintelligible]

[cut]

00:04:09:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:04:11:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. So, give me the sense of what you'd been doing in going into Wilmington.

00:04:16:00

Ben Chavis:

Well, I was first sent to Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1971 by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. I had been a field organizer for the church. Prior to that, I was an SCLC staff member, Dr. King's organization, working in the late '60s, primarily in North Carolina. [truck passes] The church sent me to Wilmington in '71 to respond to the racial violence that had been committed on Black students attempting to go to school. And as a result, I began to organize in that community. And a riot occurred in February of '71 which the National Guard had to come in to quell the riot. And as a result of that situation, the church decided to let me stay in Wilmington for a whole year to organize around voter registration, around organizin' the students who had been expelled to school and making a challenge to the local forces of racism. Because one of the things that happens in the early '70s is that a lot of the repression that ended up the struggle in the late '60s be-began to really

be felt at many local levels. And people were fighting back at local levels and grassroots organizing. And Wilmington was the place up from 1971 through 1972 that we were making this grassroots challenge to the local forces that were aided and abetted by the national forces of racism in this country.

00:05:32:00

Interviewer #1:

Now talk about some specific incidents. How did you see that repression coming against you locally?

00:05:37:00

Ben Chavis:

Well, first of all, the repression as evidenced around the Nixon, keep in mind that Nixon was President and Spiro Agnew was Vice President during this time period. And we all knew about the COINTELPRO that was to put in check the movement of the 1960s and make sure that it would not go—flower in the 1970s. And for example, *I was put in jail one night because my signal light didn't work. Another time, I was put in jail because the registration of my car was not in my glove compartment but in the trunk in my briefcase and they wouldn't allow me to get my briefcase out the trunk. But what it prevented me from doin' was having a rally that night, it prevented me from organizing.* And the whole strategy of the local repression was to prevent organizers from organizing, was to prevent mobilizers from mobilizing people to fight against the new forms of racism. Which really weren't really new. They were old forms emerging again in the early 1970s.

00:06:34:00

Interviewer #1:

And how did you specifically re-relate to, to the country? I mean, what is the country doing at this point? You had mentioned King's assassination, Nixon. For people who don't know Nixon law [car horn] and order, what, what is that whole thing of King's assassination, the law and order, what does that mean?

00:06:49:00

Ben Chavis:

Well, [clears throat] for me, the early 1970s is a backdrop, it's in the wake of King's assassination. King's assassination in 1968 was devastating to the movement particularly in the South. And people were really wonderin' whether or not it would be worth to take the risk in the early '70s to struggle again. But because of the impending crisis like school desegregation, overt racism being committed on, on, on Black people, we had no other

choice, we had to take the risk at the local level to struggle again. And as a result, we felt the brunt of the Nixonian repression. For example, when, when people talk about COINTELPRO, it wasn't just somethin' happenin' in Washington, D.C. It happened in Wilmington, North Carolina. It happened in Charlotte, North Carolina. It happened in Raleigh, North Carolina. Where police were setting people up, were following people. I mean, I, I was followed so much, I knew all of the different sedans that followed me. Some of 'em were federal agents, state agents, and local agents. And one of the things that COINTELPRO allowed, it allowed for cooperation between federal, state, and local authorities to circumvent, to divert, and to disrupt the movement. And that's, and that's what they became experts at. And so those of us who were in the movement in the early '70s, we, we became very knowledgeable and also very conscious of these disruptive tactics. We would not let that succeed. For example, [car horn] the times I mentioned when I was put in jail for not having my registration card to present or 'cause my signal light didn't work, I went right back the next night and organized a rally anyway. Because one of the things you learn is that when you are a victim of that kind of localized repression, you can't let, you can't let the repressor win the victory. You gotta get up and go and try to mobilize the people anyway. And that's the real reason why the struggle in Wilmington, despite the violence, really grew because we intended to not let that kind of intimidation put fear in us. And it's very important for the organizers and for the mobilizers and the leaders not to have fear. Because if people who want to follow you recognize that you are afraid of the man, as it was called, if you are afraid of Hoover, if you are afraid of Nixon, if you're afraid of the local authorities, then they're gonna be less will, have less will to struggle. So, it's very important for local leadership to exemplify some determination to fight the repression.

00:09:16:00

Interviewer #1:

So, now why is it important to have a National Black Political Convention in the context of this national repression?

00:09:22:00

Ben Chavis:

Well, first of all, the whole idea African Americans and Black people coming together in 1972 was a, a unique idea. It was a idea that was welcomed, particularly by those of us at the local levels who were strugglin' against racism and repression. Keep in mind there had not been a real national meeting of African Americans since the '60s. And, and I'm gonna tell you the truth. It was good notion to go to Gary, Indiana, when, when, when we all knew it wasn't, we're, we're, we're not goin' to a funeral. You know, for so many thing, you know, I had got tired of goin' to funerals. And not that we should not go to funerals but so much of the movement had been tragic. You know, and I, I have to emphasize King's assassination was a tragic blow to the movement. And so four years later, March of '72, for us to be gathering up our wherewithal to go to Gary, Indiana, hey, that was a good shot in the arm for the movement because it meant that somehow the various forces, all these local struggles

survived that repression. Somehow, we survived the grief that we all had from Dr. King's loss, and somehow we were makin' a statement that we were going to pick up that baton and run with it again in the 1970s. And Gary became a place for us to gather, to talk about how we were gonna wage struggle in the 1970s. Talking about how we were gonna wage struggle against Nixon. We knew '72 was a election year. We knew that we had to mobilize our people because there'd been a lot of disillusionment again when Nixon first got elected in 1968. And the whole, keep in mind the backdrop also of this was the Vietnam War, this was the height of the Vietnam War. A lot of my friends got killed—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Ben Chavis:

—in the Vietnam War and, and so people wanted a venue to express the struggle.

00:11:18:00

Interviewer #2:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

Cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK. That's a rollout.

[cut]

[camera roll #2116]

00:11:20:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:11:23:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Give a sense of driving up from North Carolina with a carload of local organizers and comin' into Gary. You had mentioned a red, black and green flags and stuff, so—if can you talk about that drive.

00:11:33:00

Ben Chavis:

Well, our preparation to go to Gary, Indiana, for the convention was enormous. First of all, you know, we had a statewide convention ourselves in North Carolina, thousands of people attended and, of course, we sent hundreds of delegates from across the state of North Carolina to Gary. Some went by bus, some went by car, some went by plane. We drove up and all the way up we were, you know, thinking about what, what we were going to see when we arrived in Gary. I had never been to Gary, Indiana, before although I had heard about Mayor Hatcher being the mayor. *And I remember when we first saw the sign saying, "Welcome to Gary," and we got downtown Gary. I mean, we thought we were in a different country. I mean, it, to see a city in the United States given the backdrop now of all this Nixon repression going on, all the sense of disillusionment in some quarters of the nation, to drive into Gary, Indiana, and see streamers red, black and green and "Welcome National Black Political Convention."* And then we found our way to the City Hall and the City Hall was all decorated with red, black, and green banners. *I mean, it, it was a fulfillment of what a lot of our dreams were.* And we know that the Gary Convention was time-limited but it was important to have that time to come into that city and that place. It made us feel good, it made us see visibly with our eyes that the struggle had not been in vain. That at least in one municipality, there had been some control to the extent to which a national Black convention could be welcomed. But not only just welcomed, but graciously welcomed and affirmed the cause of the struggle in the welcome. I think that was very important.

00:13:14:00

Interviewer #1:

And give me a sense of the police. You had mentioned the police were so different from what you'd come from.

00:13:18:00

Ben Chavis:

Right. I, I recall when we first got into Gary, we didn't know our way around so we stopped and asked a local policeman for some help. And the police officer smiled and said, Follow me. He not only showed us, he led us to where we needed to go to register for the convention. I mean, and keep in mind, I had just come from Wilmington, North Carolina, where the police were pointin' guns at us, tryin' to intimidate us, keep us from having

meetings and it was a different situation with at least the law enforcement in Gary, Indiana. They had been transformed also with this convention being in Gary.

00:13:49:00

Interviewer #1:

And you had mentioned that you were staying in Chicago and the sense, the different sense that you got from Chicago with Daley and Gary with Hatcher. Can you talk about that?

00:13:57:00

Ben Chavis:

Right. During the convention in 1972, we were staying in Chicago because all the ho—one of the things about Gary, all the hotels got filled up quick. There wasn't enough housing for the thousands of people that came from around the United States. So, a lot of the delegates to the Gary Convention stayed in Chicago and we drove back and forth by car and, you know, it was a stark difference between Gary, Indiana, and Chicago, Illinois, in 1972. Because those of us who were stayin' in a hotel in Chicago, we knew that Daley, Mayor Daley was in charge and we knew what, the role Daley played in the '68 convention, you know, in beatin' up all the heads and police brutality and, and there was a stillness about Chicago in 1972.

00:14:40:00

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry.

Ben Chavis:

But Gary was alive.

Interviewer #1:

Can you talk about that again and just mention '60, 1968 Democratic Convention?

Ben Chavis:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

If you can, you wanna pick it up from—

00:14:50:00

Interviewer #2:

Yeah. Pick it up from how it felt when you were in Chicago.

Camera Crew Member #2:

[sneezes]

Ben Chavis:

OK.

00:14:52:00

Interviewer #1:

How you felt, yeah, be, the difference in Chicago.

00:14:54:00

Ben Chavis:

Yeah. There was a stark difference between being in Chicago in 1972 and in Gary, Indiana. We were staying in Chicago in a hotel and driving to Gary every day. But, you know, first of all, being in Chicago, we knew, I at least, I had a remembrance—

00:15:09:00

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry. Back up and just mention again that there wasn't enough room, that, you know, there were so many thousands—

00:15:11:00

Ben Chavis:

Oh, you want me to tell the whole scenario.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah.

00:15:14:00

Interviewer #1:

Yeah. That part. Yes, please.

00:15:15:00

Ben Chavis:

OK. For many of the delegates who came to Gary, there was not room to stay in some of the local hotels because there were thousands of people from around the country. So a lot of the delegates, includin' from the North Carolina delegation, stayed in a hotel in Chicago. I remember it was the Howard Johnson in Chicago. And one, it was a real stark difference between the environment of Chicago and the environment of Gary. Number one, most of us remembered while we were in Chicago the days of Daley and Daley was still the mayor then. And we had, at least I had a remembrance of the role Daley played at the National Democratic Convention in 1968 when all those people got their heads beat just for protesting against racism and protesting against the Vietnam War. So, a lotta us were very kind of even nervous about bein' in a hotel in Chicago, going to a Black convention in Gary, Indiana. Also there was a stillness of the environment. When we got to Gary, it was alive, there was a lot of electricity in the air. I mean, it was truly a time in Gary, Indiana, when African Americans were self-determined, when there was no intimidation. In fact, there was affirmation all over the place and I would say there was a sense of pride just to be there. To know that we'd made it out of those local struggles from around the country to come into this convention to express the aspirations of the people we left back home. Because all of us were delegates and I really felt I was goin' to represent Wilmington, North Carolina, and the struggle and, and, and the pains and aspirations of the people there. And the thing about it, that was welcomed, that was not resented. Because I heard from other sisters and brothers around the country who were also organizing, who were also struggling around some of the same issues but who all had that sense of, of self-determination. And Gary at least allowed a venue, a place for that to be expressed without the kind of Nixonian repression that had been goin' on around all around the rest of the country.

00:17:12:00

Interviewer #1:

Stop.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Ben Chavis:

Because I had just talked about the self-determination.

Interviewer #1:

Yes [unintelligible]

Ben Chavis:

And Diggs was gonna try to deny that, he's crazy.

Interviewer #1:

Exactly. OK.

[cut]

00:17:26:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:17:28:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Talk about what you see as Diggs tries to gavel down ending the, you know, trying to close the nominations for presiding.

00:17:36:00

Ben Chavis:

Well, after thousands of people got into the gymnasium there at the local high school, it was held at the local high school in Gary, Indiana. It was big. I never been in a, a high school gymnasium that big. I think almost ten thousand people were in there. And it was at the beginning of the convention and the first order of business was to determine who was gonna preside. And here's Congressman Diggs, well-respected. But Diggs made a mistake. He, he tried to cut off the nominations with only a few from the floor. And of course, people had come there, again, out of a sense of self-determination, self-affirmation. And people were not looking for some *_Robert's Rule [sic] of Order_* to rule the day because this was an African American Con-Convention, this was a Black convention, therefore we're supposed to have

other values that control how we're gonna be about the pol-politics of that day, of that convention. And so Diggs called for the vote and it was clear from the voice vote that the people wanted the nominations to stay open. The people wanted to debate this and make some other nominations. *And unfortunately, Diggs misread the crowd because when he said, The chair rules that the nominations are closed, hey, pandemonium broke out.* Not against him personally, but people were insulted because they, they didn't want the convention to start off on a point which they had just left in all the repression. *We wanted a open convention, not a repressed convention. And so Diggs, you know, got himself in some hot water and it took Amiri Baraka, Imamu Baraka, to come with his version of African consensus. I remember Baraka's statement, he said, Now, sisters and brothers, we must use some scientific process to bring this gathering together so that we can achieve our objectives. But it was the way that Baraka said it. He didn't say it arrogantly, he said it caringly.* And for all of the delegates in that room, he was shown respect because Baraka showed respect to them. Diggs made a mistake by not showing respect to this convention, particularly at the beginning.

00:19:40:00

Interviewer #1:

Cut.

[cut]

00:19:42:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:19:44:00

Interviewer #1:

So, describe your reaction and what you're thinking may be happening when Diggs tries to, to gavel down.

Ben Chavis:

Well, I, you know, my first thought that came to my mind, I said, Uh-huh. Somethin' is goin' on to prevent us from havin' this—

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry. If you can mention, "My first thought when I saw Diggs..."

00:19:59:00

Ben Chavis:

OK. My first thought when I saw Diggs gaveling down the convention. No. My first thought when I saw Diggs gaveling down the motion, when it was clear that the will of the body was to continue the nominations, I said, Now, I hope this is not COINTELPRO operative here to keep us from having this convention. Because the delegates were sayin', We're gonna have us a convention come hell or high water. And I think Diggs needed to be more aware of what was in the minds of the delegates, what kind of environments we all came out of, the kind of sense of repression that we came out of and we wanted to at least be in Gary, Indiana, where we could have a open convention. And the convention needs to begin on an open point, not on a closed point.

00:20:43:00

Interviewer #1:

And can you talk about it again, a little bit more in terms of that COINTELPRO, what you were thinking. Again, give me that answer but more into the COINTELPRO, what you thought.

00:20:51:00

Ben Chavis:

OK. I think the best way to say it is this one of the things I had in my mind on the way up to Gary was that, you know, the government may not allow us to have this convention. I mean, here are representatives from every Black organization in the country, from all walks of life, elected officials, nationalists, pan-Africanists, the whole diaspora of the domestic African American community in one place at one time in 1972. Hey, that's a threat to the powers that be. And I had in my mind, I said, I know they're gonna try to do something to stop this convention. And so when I first saw Diggs at the opening of the convention tryin' to gavel down the sentiment of the, of the, of the body against the will of the body, I said, Oh, oh. Here it comes. But it was clear that the body was not gonna be deterred. The will of the people was gonna be expressed at that convention. If nowhere else in America at that time, the will of Black people was gonna have this convention and we were gonna have an open convention, not a closed convention and that's why Diggs had to step back. And Amiri Baraka came forward, Imamu Baraka came and with his African consensus brought the body back to some order so that we could proceed. But it was not law and order. It was an order to proceed so that we can engage in the struggle of the convention.

00:22:07:00

Interviewer #2:

Excellent, excellent.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah. Stop.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Stop down.

[cut]

[camera roll #2117]

00:22:10:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:22:13:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Give me a sense of your reaction as you're, as you're watching Jesse's speech.

00:22:18:00

Ben Chavis:

Well, first of all, you know, the convention was a lively convention, it was not a dull convention. I mean, there were very seldom moments where there was silence in the convention. And I remember when Jesse Jackson was introduced, Reverend Jesse Jackson was introduced. He received, of course, a long round of applause and people were very interested to hear what Jesse was gonna say. But I think the most surprising thing about Jesse's speech was the end. No one would imagine that the Reverend Jesse Jackson would affirm the nationalist call and that was, "It's Nation time. It's Nation Time." And I remember everybody raised their fists and stood up, literally, and repeated over and over again, "It's Nation Time. It's Nation Time." And in, as you looked around that auditorium, it felt like it was Nation Time. At least it sounded like it was Nation Time. And everybody expected Baraka to lead that chant but keep in mind Baraka was playing the role of the facilitator with African consensus. And so Jesse Jackson became the keynoter in terms of the lifting the

emotional level of the crowd to an all-time high with the call for Nation Time. But it was just not a hollow call, it was just not a rhetorical call. When people were repeating after Jesse, ***"It's Nation Time. It's Nation Time. It's Nation Time. Let the Black nation rise." I mean, you could hear it in the, in, in reverberating Marcus Garvey. You could hear reverberating all those prize struggles from the '40s and the '30s and the '50s and the '60s. And it came to be fulfilled in that moment of crying that it's Nation Time now. Not next year, not next century, but now in 1972 at Gary, Indiana.***

00:24:04:00

Interviewer #1:

And what did it mean to be Nation Time?

00:24:06:00

Ben Chavis:

Well, what, what, what it meant to be Nation Time...one, that we all had to work together more. That we had to hook up all these local struggles that were represented at that convention, so we had some work to do. Because keep in mind, Jesse said, "It was Nation Time. It's Nation Time," at the beginning of the convention. So, that put a lot of responsibility on those of us that delegates to make this a Nation Time convention. That it just won't be the politics and all. This is just no, no social gathering. This is a working gathering. I remember the theme of the convention was, Kaze is that Black is of the all. Swahili for work. Work is that Black is our all. We have to work at this convention, work around our difficulties because we were all not the same. There was a diversity in this, in this audience, even in the state delegations. You know, I want to keep emphasizing there was not a monolithic crowd because we are a diverse people and certainly we have been divided by the plows that have imposed on our community. And so, "It's Nation Time. It's Nation Time," meant that we had to have the energy and the will to override some of the divisions in our community, to come together and with new sense of unity, a new sense of a purpose, and to leave Gary with an agenda that we all will be committed to around the nation.

00:25:17:00

Interviewer #1:

So what happens [siren] when you see Coleman Young walk out? What do you, what do you think?

00:25:21:00

Ben Chavis:

Well, first of all, again, when I saw Coleman Young attempt to lead the Michigan delegation for the convention, I had the same thought when I saw Diggs trying to gavel down the conven—at, at the beginning of the convention, at the beginning of the convention. Who also, incidentally, was from Michigan. I mean, I think that the role of the Michigan delegation at the convention was questionable even from the very beginning. But we were so glad that there were a lot of sisters and brothers, first of all, the whole delegation did not walk—

00:25:49:00

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry. Could you begin it again and just mention when you said, "I had the same thing," what that was, what that thought was.

00:25:55:00

Ben Chavis:

OK. Well, first of all, when Coleman Young began to lead part of the Michigan delegation out of the hall, Coleman was upset about something that was being voted on. And rather than stay there and to argue his position, he just arrogantly said, I'm leaving, and some of the Michigan delegates began to leave with him. But I'm grateful that the whole delegation did not leave. But what I thought when I first saw Coleman Young get up to lead the delegation out was very similar to what I thought when I saw Diggs try to gavel down the convention at the beginning of the convention. And that was something may be imposed on us now to make sure this convention doesn't really happen and from the outside. You know, COINTELPRO does not operate directly, in, it operates indirectly. Seeds of dissension are planted from within, that's how COINTELPRO worked. And when I saw this happen, I said, OK. Here, here comes another seed of dissension trying to flower in this convention. But we knew that the majority of delegates in that convention were not gonna be deterred by a partial Michigan delegation walkout. We observed it, certainly we did not like it. We felt some way, if there's any way to keep them in, we wanted to keep that uni-unity.

00:27:10:00

Interviewer #1:

Personally. What are you, what are you feeling personally when you see this happen?

00:27:13:00

Ben Chavis:

Well, when I, my personal feeling when I saw this happening, I felt that, well, I feel sorry not only for Coleman Young, but for the delegates he's leading out because they're walkin' out on

history, they're walkin' out on a chaotic [phonetic] moment for our movement. At a moment we should be walking together and goin' forward, here's Mr. Young, walking backwards in time.

00:27:36:00

Interviewer #1:

And did you ever feel that it, it threatened the convention?

Ben Chavis:

Oh, no. At no time. See, one of the things about the Gary convention, the tremendous will that was expressed by us just being there, if somebody had, I don't wanna say that. [laughs]

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm. No, you don't wanna say that.

00:27:54:00

Ben Chavis:

There would have been very little that could have really deterred this convention from going forward. The walkouts had a impact but it did not have the kind of impact that would have substantially thwarted the thrust of the convention.

00:28:10:00

Interviewer #1:

Stop.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

[cut]

00:28:13:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:28:14:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Give me a sense of that energy at the convention that people are writing all the time.

00:28:19:00

Ben Chavis:

Yes, well again, it was a very serious convention. I mean, it wasn't a convention where, where it was just a spectator event, where all the delegates were just spectators watchin' the speeches. No. All the delegates were engaged into every item that went on. Everybody had out writing pads, some people had stacks of pads takin' copious notes on everything that happened. And I remember the last day in particular. The convention ended on a very serious note because we were drafting, literally, in convention, the committee of the whole, the National Black Agenda. And the leadership had said, Well, you're gonna get this agenda, agenda several weeks after the convention, but a lotta the state delegates wanted to take the agenda home with them and so a lot of us were making sure we had our notes. I was double-checking my notes with John Mendes who was a student leader, president of the student body at Shaw University at that time, making sure that my copy matched his and we making sure that we had all the resolutions. Because some of the resolutions were about North Carolina. Part of the National Black Agenda convention resolution was a resolution on Wilmington. And you know I wanted to go back home and hurry up and tell the people. So, I decided not to drive but to fly. I couldn't wait, I wanted to fly home. And so I went to the airport, O'Hare, and flew home so that I could give the word to Wilmington right away. But it was a great day. And so the convention in Gary ended on a, on a just as serious note as it began. It ended on the theme of unity, it ended on a theme of the necessity to work together on a common agenda, and it ended on a sense of spirit that we must have renewed spirit as we go back to our local struggles.

00:30:00:00

Interviewer #1:

How were you feeling personally?

00:30:02:00

Ben Chavis:

My, my personal feeling at the end of the Gary convention was I felt like I had been to a revival. Keep in mind, you know, I'm a minister, and I felt like I had been to a revival. But not just a revival on the spiritual plane although that's significant. But it was a revival on the political plane, it was a revival on the psychological plane, it was a revival on the cultural

plane. I mean, keep in mind this was African Americans being proud of who they were, Blackness was everywhere. The red, black, and green was everywhere on the last day of the convention as it was on the first day and everybody was trying to get more—

[rollout on sound roll]

[cut]

[sound roll #254]

[wild sound]

00:30:45:00

Interviewer #1:

You're real animated, it's great.

[cut]

00:30:48:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

00:30:51:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Give me a sense of what you personally felt had been accomplished. It's the last day of the convention, what are you feeling?

Ben Chavis:

Well I, there were several feelings that I had personally about the accomplishments of the convention. I think that the convention—

Interviewer #1:

Sorry. Could you just go back and just say, "On the last day..."?

Ben Chavis:

OK. You want me to do it? [clears throat]

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

It was good when you said, "It felt like a revival."

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

00:31:11:00

Ben Chavis:

OK. On the last day of the convention, I mean, I was feeling like I had been at a revival. I mean, all I was waitin' for was the benediction so we can go home and tell all the people about the good news of, of what, what the convention decided in terms of deciding the items on the National Black Agenda. For the first time, we will all have an agenda that we will take throughout the nation to work on together and I was excited about that. And personally, I think it was a, it was a moment of, of, of remembrance and also fulfillment. I mean, I remembered all the sisters and brothers who would have liked to come to Gary, but who, who were no longer with us. You know, I, I, I, in a sense, I, I had a good, great feeling that day on the last day of the convention. But also I had a feeling of, of hoping that some of the sisters and brothers who had been lost in the struggle, that we had at least showing that they didn't die in vain. We were at least showing that their suffering was not in vain and that the struggle has a sense of continuity to it. I mean, the Gary convention gave us all the step forward that was needed to prop us up and give us the renewed energy that we needed to go back home and to continue those struggles that we were all involved in.

00:32:27:00

Interviewer #1:

And personally?

00:32:28:00

Ben Chavis:

And, and personally, you know, I, I was fired up. I mean, I wasn't gonna let, as the song says, "Let nobody turn me around now," I mean, that's how I felt and I was even hummin' that in my mind as, on the way to the airport. Because I wasn't gonna drive back, I wanted to hurry up and get home and I took a plane back to North Carolina because I wanted to go straight to

the church in Wilmington to let everybody know of, of the great things that the Gary convention had achieved.

00:32:54:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. And now you get—

Camera Crew Member #3:

We have to change rolls—

Interviewer #1:

Oh.

[cut]

[camera roll #2118]

00:32:57:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

00:32:59:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. So on the day you come back from the convention and you arrive back at the airport, what happened?

00:33:05:00

Ben Chavis:

OK. [clears throat] I left Gary on the last day of the convention and took a plane back to North Carolina. And when I arrived at the airport, I noticed that...at my car, I was being followed by some police, you know, plainclothes. We, we get used to them and I knew they were following. Actually were two carloads of them followed me back to my church in Wilmington. But I wasn't really worried, I saw 'em in the rear view mirror, I wasn't worried about 'em because I had some good news for the people. I had some good news about the success of the Gary convention. That was really what was on my mind even though I knew that the police were followin' me under surveillance. So, when I go back to the church on

Castle Street there in, in the Black community in Wilmington, I noticed that the whole block was being surrounded by, by cops, like they're gettin' ready for a raid. And my church had been raided several times before by local authorities for no reason just to intimidate the congregation. So, I didn't want them to raid the church again because there were a lot of young people in the church. So I went outside and, and I remember asking the police saying, I said, What's the problem? I mean, is, what is happening? What is, why, what is all this display of law enforcement about? And he said, Reverend Chavis, did you have a good time in Gary? And I said, Oh. You knew I was in Gary? He said, Oh, yes. We knew you were in Gary. We knew, we know about the convention. We followed you all while you were there. I said, You followed me? He said, Oh, no, we have partners that helped us out in Chicago, in Illinois. And I said, OK. Well, you know, so what? I went to the convention. I, please, I need to get back, I want to tell the people the good news about the church, about the convention. I want to tell the people in the church the good news. Anyway, this guy, me and this police—

00:34:45:00

Interviewer #1:

Back up just a second and tell me again, in terms of the cop, because I remember you mentioned he had been to your hotel room.

Ben Chavis:

Right.

Interviewer #1:

Would you back up and just say that, that piece again.

Ben Chavis:

OK.

Interviewer #2:

Let's stop a second. We really—

Camera Crew Member #3:

Stopping down.

[cut]

00:34:56:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:34:57:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. So, you've just arrived back from Gary. If you could mention that and what happens as you come into Wilmington to your church.

00:35:03:00

Ben Chavis:

Right. Well, on the day the convention ended, I took a plane back to Gary because I didn't want to wait. I wanted to hurry up and give the good news about what had happened. And as soon as I got back to Wilmington at the church, I noticed that all these police had surrounded the church. As soon as I got to the church, the police all of a sudden were surrounding the whole block. So, I went outside and asked the policemen what was wrong. And he said, Reverend Chavis, how was your trip to Gary? And I said, How'd you know I was in Gary? He said, Well, we followed you. We even know what hotel room you were staying in. And I said, Well, there's no problem, is there? And he said, Yes. You're under arrest. You're under arrest for the—

00:35:37:00

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry. Stop just a second.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Stopping down.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Rolling. And speed.

Interviewer #1:

That's [unintelligible].

Ben Chavis:

[laughs] Oh, no—

Interviewer #1:

[laughs]

Ben Chavis:

—just want to sorta—

Interviewer #2:

It'll be all right.

Ben Chavis:

—naturally say it.

[cut]

00:35:50:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:35:52:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. So, it's the last hour. You've just come from Gary and give me a sense of that coming into, into Wilmington. You've just come from Gary.

00:36:01:00

Ben Chavis:

Well, on the last day of the convention, I flew straight home to North Carolina because I was excited about giving the good news about what had happened in Gary. And as soon as I arrived at the church, I noticed the whole block was being surrounded by policemen. So I went outside the church and said, What's the problem? And I remember the police sergeant said, Reverend Chavis, how was your trip to Gary? And I said, How do you know I was in Gary? He said, Oh, we have friends in Gary and in Chicago, we even know the hotel room

you were staying in Chicago. And at that moment, before I could ask what the problem, he said, You're under arrest. You want me go into it now?

00:36:33:00

Interviewer #1:

Oh, I'm sorry. Yes. OK. And then say what—

00:36:36:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Coming in closer.

00:36:38:00

Interviewer #1:

OK.

00:36:41:00

Ben Chavis:

At that moment, the police sergeant said, You're under arrest. And they, and I said, What for? He said, We'll tell you when you get down, down to the police station. And they put me in the back of this car with two White policemen and there was one, two White policemen in the front. And one of the White policemen had a shotgun, a double barrel shotgun, I'd never forget the sight of that shotgun. 'Cause after—I was sitting on the left and they were to my right and as soon as the car proceeded down the street, the officer, the police officer, allowed the shotgun to lean over right to my face and I was looking down the barrel of the shotgun. And for that moment I, I said, You know, my God. Does Gary threaten them this much? Does what, does Black people threaten them this much? Because I had just come from this big convention and now I'm back in Wilmington, North Carolina, and this police officer is pointing a shotgun in my face. I'm under arrest, they haven't even told me what I'm arrested for. You know, and, and, and I just thought to myself, you know, the price of African people, the price of Black people's struggling for freedom in this country, you know, is a life-and-death struggle. And there are penalties sometimes you have to pay just for gathering in convention, just for trying to mobilize, just for tryin' to organize, you know. Sometimes, this society doesn't even want you to have the right to protest or have the right to struggle.

00:38:03:00

Interviewer #1:

And what do you think that they were saying to you? What were they trying to say to you? You had just come back from Gary. What are they trying to say to you with this?

00:38:09:00

Ben Chavis:

Oh, the police were trying to say clearly, Even though you may have been to Gary and had a good convention and even though you may be excited about your National Black Agenda, we're still in control. This is our society and we ain't about to let you Black folks out the box.

00:38:23:00

Interviewer #2:

Mmm.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Stop down?

Interviewer #1:

Cut please.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Mm-hmm.

[cut]

00:38:27:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:38:29:00

Interviewer #1:

So, give me a sense, give me that event again and then what you think the police are saying to you with that.

00:38:35:00

Ben Chavis:

Well, they have, they arrested me and they put me in this back of this police car with two White police officers in the back seat with me and there were two other White officers in the front. And as the car proceeded down the street, a shotgun all of a sudden from one of the officers was pointed right at my head and I looked down the barrel of this double barrel shotgun and for a moment I thought, you know, what they are trying to say to me is that, You may have been to this national Black convention. You may have got your agenda but we're still in, in charge and we ain't about to let Black folks out the box. And of course my response was...I got to struggle against this, I can't let this cave me in. There were many sisters and brothers looking, lined up the street as the police car was taking us off when this happened. And so I took my eye off the barrel of the shotgun and looked straight ahead and kept my mind on what the struggle was about and what the next move would be. Because I knew that the next move would have to be up to us, those of us who had just been arrested.

00:39:50:00

Interviewer #1:

Cut.

Ben Chavis:

Is that gonna be enough?

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

[cut]

00:39:57:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:39:59:00

Interviewer #1:

So, give me a sense of that event again, and what the police are trying to say to you.

00:40:04:00

Ben Chavis:

So, I was immediately arrested and placed in the back seat of this police car with four other police officers, two in the front and two in the back. And before the car proceeded, this officer pointed a shotgun right in my face and I remember looking down this double barrel shotgun and I had to think quickly, you know, because one of the things they try to do is put fear in you and intimidate you. And I decided that I was not gonna let anything turn me around at that moment. Although I knew what the police were trying to say was, OK. You've been to Gary, Indiana. You've been to this convention and you've got your National Black Agenda now but we are still in charge and we ain't about to let Black folks out the box. I knew that's what they were trying to say but it was my responsibility not only to see the shotgun, but to see another responsibility. And that is to let these policemen know that my, my commitment is lifelong. That you can't let any form of intimidation deter you. A shotgun, a false arrest, no form of intimidation can hold this movement back and your commitment has to be lifelong.

00:41:08:00

Interviewer #1:

Cut.

Interviewer #2:

That's it.

Interviewer #1:

That's it.

[cut]

00:41:11:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

00:41:12:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Give me a sense of why you felt the need to join a, a Black Nationalist church and then how it evolved.

00:41:18:00

Ben Chavis:

OK. Although now I'm an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, I was first ordained actually as a Black Christian Nationalist minister. And this was something that I decided to do, that I needed. I needed to connect my faith with the movement and there wasn't one place to do it in the early 1970s, that was the Black Christian Nationalist Movement headed by Albert Cleage. And because it was a place where we began to take down all of the White theology, where we refused to see Jesus as some White man with blond hair and blue eyes and we began to talk about a Black Christ. We began to see God having done something with Black people special and that we had responsibility to struggle against all forms of evil and oppression. But out of the Black Christian Nationalist movement emerged the Black Christian Pan-Africanist Movement which I later became a Pan-Africanist because I wanted to have a more broader world view to connect the diaspora of African people. And again, one's ideology needs to be connected to one's theology and that's why we eventually emerged to a Black Christian Pan-Africanist Movement.

00:42:22:00

Interviewer #1:

And so your church then is what?

00:42:25:00

Ben Chavis:

The church that I founded in Wilmington in early 1970s was a Black Christian Pan-Africanist Church, the First African Congregational Church, that was the name of the church.

00:42:36:00

Interviewer #1:

Cut.

[cut]

00:42:39:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:42:41:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Give me a sense that you were uniquely aware of the Hampton-Clark assassination when you were in Gary, staying in Gary—in Chicago.

00:42:48:00

Ben Chavis:

When I was staying at the hotel in Chicago during the Gary convention, I was acutely aware of the murders of Clark and Hampton, leaders of the Black Panther Party of Chicago which was a COINTELPRO assassination. And so I was acutely aware of that and very uneasy about, about even being in Chicago, getting ready to go to an all-Black convention.

00:43:13:00

Interviewer #1:

Cut.

[cut]

[camera roll #2119]

00:43:16:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:43:17:00

Interviewer #1:

Tell me what you personally feel when you see the Michigan, part of the Michigan delegation walk out with Coleman Young.

00:43:24:00

Ben Chavis:

Well, first of all, I thought that when I first saw Coleman Young attempting to lead members of the Michigan delegation out of the convention, you know, I said, Well, why are they doing that? I mean, this is where the action is. There's nothing goin' on outside of the convention. And, and, and I felt that it was the incorrect move by Coleman Young. He disagreed with something that was goin' on in the convention but what should have happened was to stay there and debate what you disagree about. And if any, if Gary meant anything, this must be a time when we all hang in there and struggle over our differences, you know, over the divisions in our community. And there were some significant divisions, you know, it was not monolithic, we were diverse. But the point of Gary was to hang in one place at a time and to resolve some of those issues, resolve some of those things. So, I was very personally hurt to see part of the Michigan delegation get out, go up and leave the convention. I'm glad that some remained.

00:44:17:00

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry. Could you then also then say, "And what I was thinking..."

Ben Chavis:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

Start again and then just go right into, "What I thought was the..."

Ben Chavis:

OK. And not repeat what I just said.

Interviewer #2:

No, no. You repeat it. Repeat what you said.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, you go ahead and repeat it.

00:44:29:00

Ben Chavis:

Oh, OK. [laughs] OK. You know, when I first saw Coleman Young get up and attempt to lead part of the Michigan delegation out of the convention, I, I said, Why is this happening? You know, the action is in here, not to leave the convention. And my first thought was that I remembered when Hat—when, no.

00:44:51:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Start again.

00:44:53:00

Ben Chavis:

When I first saw Coleman Young get up and try to lead part of the Michigan delegation out of the convention, I was very concerned. I didn't know what was happening because everybody should have hung in there and resolved some of their differences. And, you know, the image of Coleman Young leading [sic] the convention...[sighs]

00:45:12:00

Interviewer #2:

Let's cut.

Interviewer #1:

OK. It's all right. [laughs]

Ben Chavis:

It's like—

[cut]

00:45:16:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:45:17:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Give me a sense of your personal reaction when Coleman Young brings some of the Michigan delegation out and how it reflected on what you were thinking what Diggs did.

00:45:25:00

Ben Chavis:

You know, when I first saw Coleman Young get up and attempt to lead part of the Michigan delegation out of the convention, I, I first thought, Wow, this is very similar to what Diggs tried to do. Diggs was also from Michigan and I thought that Coleman Young, you know, may be allowing outside influences attempt to disrupt the convention. Because it was clear Coleman Young had another agenda that wasn't the agenda for the, for that particular convention. And I really felt concern for some of the delegates that were, who were leaving, following him out of the convention because they were like walking out on history. They were like walking out on an opportunity that we had to move forward as a people and I wanted all as, as, as, as possible African Americans to be in there and particularly the Michigan delegation. And so, you know, I, I felt very personally hurt by it. Any time there is unnecessary division, there's already a lot of natural divisions in our community, but that was an unnecessary division that was propelled by some other interest.

00:46:34:00

Interviewer #1:

And talk about, when you say divisions, what was the mishmash of all the different groups that were there? I mean, wasn't there a sense that, you know, there were so many different groups. How did you all stay together? Give a sense of that.

00:46:45:00

Ben Chavis:

The, there were a lot of different groups at the Gary Convention from extreme left to extreme right wing. From nationalists to, to Pan-Africanists to integrationists to, Marxist-Leninists, you name it. Some folk came without any ideology, they was just there out of local struggles. And, but it was important for all those ingredients to be there because that was representative of who we were in 1972. And the important thing was for us to hang in there and struggle over some of the divisions, over some of those things that have kept us from coming together. And at least if we could do this in 1972, it, it, it, it gives us another chance to carve

out a more positive and more productive future for us in light of all the repression that we were going through at the time.

00:47:32:00

Interviewer #1:

Cut.

Interviewer #2:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

Perfect.

Interviewer #2:

That's it.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:47:38:00

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