

Interview with **Robin Gregory**

Date: October 12, 1988

Interviewer: Terry Rockefeller

Camera Rolls: 3001-3003

Sound Rolls: 301-302

Team: C

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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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 #3001]

[sound roll #301]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take one, scene one. Mark.

[slate]

00:00:17:00

Interviewer:

I just wanted you to start by describing what Howard was like when you first got there. What did you find? What was the climate like on campus?

00:00:26:00

Robin Gregory:

When I first went to Howard it was in 1962. I didn't really know what to expect when I got there, but, but when I did get there I found that there was a lot of stuff I had a lot of resistance to. It was a very social kind of scene. There was the, the freshman sort of atmosphere. You know, they wanted to include you in these activities that I wasn't really interested in being in. There was a party atmosphere, I remember that. I felt like an outsider, essentially, when I first went there. [sighs] Let me think about that a little bit.

00:01:08:00

Interviewer:

Were there things that, that, began happening after you arrived at Harvard, at Howard that maybe...

00:01:12:00

Robin Gregory:

The first year, the first year at Howard was pretty uneventful. I was just studying. Well, one thing I do remember was that the sort of provincial mindset that was there. Like, one of the things that first happened when we went there was that all the women had a special assembly and we were brought in, and Patricia Harris was the Dean of Women at that time, and we had this lecture on etiquette, you know, and how we were supposed to dress and [laughs] how we were supposed to behave. And, you know, we were supposed to be ladies, and, you know, [laughs] I di-I didn't quite, you know, accept that for myself, and, and I didn't feel like I had to conform to that sort of thing either because I didn't live on the campus. I, I lived in, in Washington D.C., so—

00:01:52:00

Interviewer:

So, what was the attitude of most of the students that you were meeting, though?

00:01:56:00

Robin Gregory:

They were middle class students and they wanted to be good, you know, and they wanted to succeed and they wanted to have a good time. And a lot of them were looking for husbands, I remember that. I didn't find that there was a lot of thinking. I felt that there wasn't a lot of deep thinking going on among the students that were there, when I first went there.

00:02:16:00

Interviewer:

What kinda impact did you begin to experience from the movement on the campus? How did you begin to make contact?

Robin Gregory:

There, there was a gradual sort of falling into it, in a sense. The first year I was there, well, I had a lotta history from my family, but the first year that I was there I had a—

Interviewer:

Can you start again and say, "The first year I was at Howard?"

Robin Gregory:

Yes. Mm-hmm. OK.

Interviewer:

That would be great.

Robin Gregory:

The fir—OK. [laughs] The first year that I was at Howard I had a work study job.

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. OK. Just—

00:02:45:00

Robin Gregory:

Start all over again?

00:02:47:00

Interviewer:

We're just getting our act together, so.

Robin Gregory:

It's OK. Just start from that point?

Interviewer:

Sure.

00:02:51:00

Robin Gregory:

Yeah. The first year at Howard was in '62. I was, I had obtained a work-study position. It was in a part of the library that, that a lot of the students didn't know existed. In fact, the students that came there were the African students and graduate students from other universities like American University. It was called the Moorland Foundation, and it had everything that had ever been written essentially by Black people in the world. It had publications, periodicals, and so I got introduced to a lot of the literature. And it was there in that particular room that I first met Stokely, as a matter of fact. Only I didn't know who he was at the time. He came in there a lot and worked on papers.

00:03:35:00

Interviewer:

So, what kind of events were going on, and, and, and how were you beginning to interact with...

00:03:39:00

Robin Gregory:

There was nothing going on in terms of, [laughs] in ter—well, I didn't like the social thing. I wasn't interested in the sorority-fraternity scene at all. I was, I was just there to study, you know? I had a few friends that came there with me, who, who went to high school with me. And, well, essentially I'm sort of a loner anyway. So, nothing really happened for me politically until the next year, as a matter of fact. That summer, the summer between '62 and '63 I was working in a government office for the summer, and I heard about the March on Washington that next summer. And that was really my first introduction. I worked on the March on Washington Committee, is what, is what it was, and I met a lotta people through that. I was in the strategic offices setting the whole thing up, before, during, and after. So it was my first introduction.

00:04:35:00

Interviewer:

Now, when did you first make a personal decision to start wearing an afro? How did that come about?

00:04:42:00

Robin Gregory:

That was in 1964.

00:04:47:00

Interviewer:

What, what was going on?

00:04:48:00

Robin Gregory:

I was working in the SNCC office. I was a liaison in the, in the Washington DC SNCC office, between the voter registration project in the South, Missi-Mississippi specifically, and the liaison part was that people would call me from Mississippi in the office to chronicle some of the incidents that would happen so that I could contact Nich-Nicholas Katzenbach's office and the Attorney General's office and report. And so they would send people down to the polls or wherever these incidents were happening. Marshals they would send down to, to either prevent them from happening or to protect people while they were trying to register to vote. And that summer was the 1964 Democratic Convention, and I went there and some women from Mississippi came up and they were wearing their hair natural. And, so, I was real turned on by that statement, you know. And as a matter of fact, in the '50s I had an aunt who was wearing her hair in a natural. It was a real radical thing to do, and everybody in the family always talked about her, you know. [laughs] So, so it wasn't, you know, it wasn't something that was completely foreign, the image itself, but it, it was exciting for me to see that somebody was doing it, and so I decided to do it too.

00:05:59:00

Interviewer:

And what happens? What, what was the response?

00:06:00:00

Robin Gregory:

[laughs] Pretty negative. [laughs] You know, I came back home and I was wearing my hair like that and my, my family was pretty horrified. And I got a lotta comments from people on the street. You know, they, people got angry about it. You know, it was like I was exposing a secret. That was the first reaction. That, that reaction went on a long time because I didn't have a lotta company. You know, there weren't, there weren't other people doing it. Maybe one or two other people were doing it. Well, there was one person in particular who had, who

had worn her hair like that for a year prior to that, or maybe even two, and that was Mary Lovelace, who was, who was Stokely Carmichael's girlfriend at the time. So, you know, there was, there was a precedent, you know, before that, so...but the response was pretty negative.

00:06:46:00

Interviewer:

OK, I need to break for a while.

Robin Gregory:

OK.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

So, now the, the homecoming queen would've been spring of, I'm sorry, fall.

Robin Gregory:

Fall of '66.

Interviewer:

'66. OK.

[cut]

00:07:00:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark two.

[slate]

00:07:03:00

Interviewer:

Now how did it come about that your campaign for homecoming queen was, was put together? Where'd the idea come from, and what kind of things were you, were you trying to do with the campaign?

00:07:14:00

Robin Gregory:

A lotta things were happening in 1966, in terms of the movement, where the movement was going. It was just beginning to be the, the dawn of the whole Black Power movement, getting away from the more conservative approach to, to change, through the, the way the civil rights movement had been, had been going, into a Black Power consciousness. And it was like right on the edge of that. And there were a few students at Howard who were very politically involved in things and I was one of 'em. But someone came up with an idea that we should make a statement around the homecoming, because it was such a superficial kinda thing that kept affirming old values that we were trying to resist or trying to overthrow. So, I was approached by some men from the law school, actually and they asked me if I would do it, because they wanted to, to make a statement about, about the Black aesthetic, and they wanted to resist the whole image. This whole homecoming queen thing was, [laughs] it's kinda hard to describe the atmosphere of, of the way that it went, but it, it was a lotta fraternities, you know, who, the fraternities would nominate a candidate who would run for the, for the position. And it was a popular election, by the way. But you had to be nominated by some on-campus organization, and usually they picked someone who was as close to White as they could possibly get. I mean, it didn't have to be skin color. It was just the, the whole image of the person. And so, they said, Well, will you do this? We want to run somebody that has a natural hair style. We know that you're politically active. You know, like, let, let's take this particular context and, and use it to make a statement. And so I was willing to do that. That's how it happened.

00:09:00:00

Interviewer:

Now, who got, who got together and organized your campaign? What, what, what kind of things did you do?

00:09:04:00

Robin Gregory:

I got support from, well, first of all, the, the school didn't wanna let us do it at first because, you know, they said, Well, you can't just put an independent person in there, you know. And so, but we found we could. So I had the gentlemen from the law school. I had the few radical active students on the campus. I was a student in the College of Fine Arts, so I had a lotta support from them. They were real, sorta non-conformist types, [laughs] so they gave me a lotta support. And we did it on a shoestring. I mean, everybody was sort of shocked, you know, I think, that, that it was happening, and resentful. Yeah.

00:09:39:00

Interviewer:

Can you remember your coronation? Can you describe sort of what happened at the moment that your victory was announced? How, how did, how did the, that unfold? How did the students learn that, that you had won?

00:09:52:00

Robin Gregory:

Well, there were a series of events that you had to do this series of things in order to campaign. And our approach to it was to put as many Black images out as possible. You know, Black men and women who were wearing natural hair styles, who were accepting that image for themselves. And I think that most of the—my, my co-candidates didn't believe that, you know, they couldn't take, they didn't take me seriously. You know, they just, they were real irritated by the fact that I was making it a political campaign. So, the night of the coronation, actually, we were all standing back stage and no-one really had any idea who was going to win. I mean, sometimes, I think in these things somebody knows. But when they announced my name, all the other women were really shocked. They just were flabbergasted. You know, they, they couldn't acc— [laughs] they couldn't accept, you know, the fact that someone looking like I was looking, right? I mean, the way you're looking at me now, I mean, you can't perceive it. But, you know, the, the style then was, it was a short, natural—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Robin Gregory:

—ha-hair style that was, you know, it was an African looking hairstyle.

00:10:54:00

Interviewer:

We're out?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

OK, we're just, this is going great.

Robin Gregory:

OK.

Interviewer:

We're just, yeah.

[cut]

[camera roll #3002]

00:11:00:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark three.

[slate]

00:11:03:00

Interviewer:

All right, now, your coronation ceremony. What, what happened as you were actually crowned?

Robin Gregory:

The actual moment of crowning—

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Robin Gregory:

—was, well, the pandemonium actually began before that because when they made the announcement and I came out—

Interviewer:

Can you start with "The announcement that I won" or something?

00:11:22:00

Robin Gregory:

OK. We were backstage waiting for the announcement as to who had won. To me it was important because it was a popular election. It wasn't, you know, it wasn't a committee election or anything like that. It was the, the general body of the student population. And, you know, my thing was that I, I wanted people to start looking at themselves and accepting themselves. I mean, that, that was the aim of the campaign in the larger political context. So, when it was announced that I won, all the other candidates were shocked because, I mean, this was, you know, they, they couldn't, it was, it was a concept they couldn't grasp. And, and they were just stunned. So, when I went out there was pandemonium in the auditorium. I mean, it was people were screaming and jumping up and down and just sorta going nuts, you know. And there is a photograph, you know, I, I think I had my mouth wide open, you know? Sorta, [laughs] sort of a, a, a high moment, you know? And it was very important, you know, in terms of, of self-acceptance because, I mean, it seems superficial in a sense because it's, it's an appearance thing, but for anybody who lived through that, there were, there were year, years of self-denial and abnegation, you know, and non-acceptance of the way that Black people looked, you know, to them, to themselves because of media images, and there was a lotta shame. You know, the, the reason why people were so angry with me was because I was coming out in public in a way that I shouldn't have been revealing myself, you know? [lawnmower] It, it, it was like this secret, you know? You're not supposed to show that you have nappy hair or something. So, it, it was a really dramatic moment, yeah.

00:13:02:00

Interviewer:

That last part was noisy.

Robin Gregory:

OK, yeah, there was a truck, huh? What, what did we say there?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Robin Gregory:

[laughs]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Nappy.

Interviewer:

What was the secret?

Robin Gregory:

Nappy hair. [laughs]

Interviewer:

[laughs]

00:13:13:00

Robin Gregory:

Wha—should I start at?

00:13:15:00

Interviewer:

Yeah, can you start about what you were bringing to other people, the kind of self-acceptance that—

Robin Gregory:

OK.

Interviewer:

—that you were trying to—

Robin Gregory:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

—that you got for yourself and that you, and that you were bringing to other people.

00:13:29:00

Robin Gregory:

Yeah. *I felt it was really important at that time, you know, because the Black Power movement was new, that, that we as a people begin to accept ourselves, you know, just as who, who we were. Because the—over the years, I mean, there was a tremendous amount of shame, you know. We were, we were made to feel ugly, essentially, by media images and things that people told us. And we did everything that we could so that we wouldn't look like who we are, which was, you know, descendants of African people.* So, that, that moment was, I think was real important for a lotta people.

00:14:03:00

Interviewer:

What was the response to your victory? How, how were you officially accepted by students and by faculty, and, and even by the, the nation? What kind of, what kind of reception?

00:14:15:00

Robin Gregory:

The reception was very interesting. Officially I wasn't accepted at all. I mean, the university administration did not like it. And the general population, you know, the, the, the people who had been doing this stuff for years didn't like it. I mean, I'd, I'd like to sort of bring up that film, the Spike Lee film, *School Days* is a, is a really good illustration of the atmosphere that was going on in terms of, of how people felt about themselves. So, the administration, a lot of things that they did for homecoming queens they didn't do for me. I mean, essentially, I was unaware of a lot of it because I had never been involved in it anyway. But, you know, they would give a reception to the homecoming queen, and I didn't get one. You know, the Dean of, of Students would do something, he didn't do that. There was supposed to be a float that the, that the, that the students put together for the homecoming queen, and they didn't wanna do it. I had to get some other people to do it for me. So, there was a lotta snubbing going on. In the media, though, when, when the media began to report this stuff, people were really turned on by it. A lotta men wrote to me from prison. They, you know, they, they were really excited about what I was doing. You know, they were saying things like, you know, like, This is—I've been waiting for something like this, you know, for a sister to come out and, and just be her natural self and to say, you know, that we are beautiful as a people. So, I got a lot of positive feedback from prisoners, male prisoners. I got some marriage proposals.

[laughs] You know, but it was interesting, you know, because, be-because then people began to focus on other things, you know, the things we really wanted them to focus on. And you sort of have to do a, a thing like this to get people to look at other issues on the campus.

00:16:01:00

Interviewer:

Did you have a sense that people were really energized?

Robin Gregory:

People were very energized by it.

Interviewer:

How?

00:16:06:00

Robin Gregory:

You know, well, because they, they began to focus on the other things that I was doing politically on the campus and what the people around me were doing, and it was a very small percentage of the population that was politically conscious, you know, even then. And so they began to, we bega-began to be very visible and they started noticing, and there was a lotta dialogue going on, you know, just out on, on the campus itself, in the newspaper, back and forth.

00:16:34:00

Interviewer:

I'd like to cut just for a second. Great.

[cut]

00:16:37:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

And marker.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark four.

[slate]

00:16:40:00

Interviewer:

I was wondering how your coronation and, and the reaction, the energy that grew out of it connected to other political things that, that started going on at Howard, the antiwar movement especially. How were you aware of the—that?

00:16:54:00

Robin Gregory:

Well, I was aware that, I was aware that my coronation and the whole, you know, thing that I was the queen was, became a pivotal point for other activities that were to follow. People that had been wanting to get involved and wanting to get information about a lot of the political stuff that was happening around there were, were beginning to come outta the woodwork, so to speak. One of the things that followed that was, was a demonstration against General Hershey, who was the head of the draft board at the time. And in order to see the larger perspective, I think it has to be realized that Howard University was run like a plantation. Washington D.C. could not vote. The people of, of Washington D.C. could not vote. It was run by a southern committee of, of, of southern senators called the District Committee. And as well, the university was controlled by those funds. And so, there were these White southern senators who were essentially very racist, who were telling us what we could and could not do on the campus, and General Hershey, you know, was a, kind of a part and parcel of that whole thing. And I can't remember who invited him to the campus to speak, but it was a very touchy time. People were just beginning to wake up to the fact that a war was going on in Vietnam and that people were getting drafted and sent over there, and we were trying to focus on that, too. So, when General Hershey came to the campus, we decided to mount a protest. You know, we were outraged that he was coming. It was a sensitive subject for, you know, a lotta young men who didn't want to be drafted. And then there was the racial issue, too. You know, a lotta Black people were being drafted and sent over to Vietnam. So—

00:18:32:00

Interviewer:

So, what did you do?

00:18:34:00

Robin Gregory:

I, with a number of other students, put together a demonstration. He was supposed to speak in the auditorium, and we weren't gonna let him speak. I mean, that was the plan. So, there were some people that had placards, and, and a whole bunch of us were spread out in the audience so that as soon as he would try to speak, we would just jump up and start shouting things. And, you know, one of them was "beast," and people sorta loved that word and so they were shouting that. And every time he would try to speak, someone would say that. And then at one point, some people rushed the stage, and that had a big aftermath because I don't think that he was able to speak at all, which was what we were trying to do. On the heels of that, he was hung in effigy on the campus. So we were tryin' to focus on things that we thought were important issues that, that the sleeping middle class students of Howard University should wake up to. [laughs]

00:19:26:00

Interviewer:

Great.

Robin Gregory:

K.

Interviewer:

Great. OK.

[cut]

00:19:29:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, marker.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark five.

[slate]

00:19:33:00

Interviewer:

So, how did the coronation lead to other, other political activity?

00:19:37:00

Robin Gregory:

Well, the coronation itself was, was a pivotal point and, and it energized a lotta people, causing them to begin to question a lotta the issues that we were bringing forward. And one of the things that happened, that was a big incident on the campus, was the spring after the coronation, the spring of 1967, someone had invited General Hershey to the campus. And General Hershey was the head of the draft board, and people were just becoming aware of the Vietnamese War and the fact that people were being drafted and sent to Vietnam, and that a large number of those people were Black people. So, when we found out that he was being invited to speak, we decided that we didn't want that to happen, and we staged a demonstration. And, yeah, in essence we didn't allow him to speak. There was a lotta shouting from the audience. There was a number of people, there were a number of people who had placards that stormed the stage and just booed him, essentially, outta the auditorium. And after that there were some incidents where he was hung in effigy on the campus, and there were some statements being made to the university newspaper about Hershey being there. That, that was also used by the administration seized on this and tried to expel me. There were, there were trials, there were hearings on the campus of the people who had been identified as being a part of the demonstration. And there was a lot of reporting in the media about it. So, it, it was, that was an energizing event as well.

00:21:06:00

Interviewer:

I gotta go back to something we talked about earlier.

Robin Gregory:

OK.

Interviewer:

Just 'cause you're warmed up and I'd love to have you talk—

Robin Gregory:

OK.

Interviewer:

—more about how you decided to wear your hair natural.

00:21:13:00

Robin Gregory:

OK. OK.

00:21:15:00

Interviewer:

What was it that made you feel that you could do that? How did that come about?

Robin Gregory:

Well, essentially I just saw, I saw it as an affirmation of who I was.

Interviewer:

OK, if you could just start—

Robin Gregory:

Just start from?

Interviewer:

You saw what as an affirmation?

Robin Gregory:

Oh, oh, you want me to, OK.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Robin Gregory:

I didn't know whether you were gonna pick it up and put in there.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

00:21:33:00

Robin Gregory:

The decision to wear my hair natural happened in the summer of 1964. I was at the Democratic National Convention. It was the summer that the three civil rights workers had been killed in Mississippi, and their bodies had been found when we were at the convention.—

[rollout on camera]

[wild sound]

Robin Gregory:

—There was the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party who came up to be in the convention, and there were a number of women who were working on that project—

00:21:57:00

Interviewer:

OK, we just...

Robin Gregory:

OK, you had to stop.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sorry.

Interviewer:

[laughs] But that's OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #3003]

[sound roll #302]

00:22:01:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

And marker.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark six.

[slate]

00:22:05:00

Interviewer:

So, how did you make the decision to change your hair, your hairstyle and your way of thinking about it?

00:22:10:00

Robin Gregory:

OK. When I was at the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, that was the year that, well, it was the end of the, the Freedom Summer. It was when they found the bodies [car passes] of the three civil rights workers that were slain. And we were at the convention at that time, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party had come to speak at the convention and try to run a delegate, Fannie Lou Hamer. And some of the women that came from the South were wearing their hair in a natural, and I was really turned on by that image, you know, that, I felt it was an affirmation of, of being who we were. There was, the energy was very high, emotion was very high. Getting a sense of who we were and what we were doing in the context of history was really acute at the time. And I just decided that I was going to, to wear my hair that way and make a statement that way.

00:23:07:00

Interviewer:

I just wanna ask you one more question, which is, is there any other recollections of, of Howard being transformed that, that just speaking about these years has brought to your mind? And if there's anything else you wanna share about how people were awakening to a, to a new identity and to a new cultural and political struggle.

00:23:27:00

Robin Gregory:

Well, there was a lot, there were so many things going on in that period of time. Like I said, the Black Power movement was just coming into being, there was a lot happening internationally in terms of how it was gonna impact on Black people's lives. And I think that

being at Howard, you know, the students were the ones that were, that were getting a lot of the, the energy moving there. That they had to begin to be aware of things, I mean, you can't sleep for so long, you know, when, when a lot is happening around you. And I just think that those of us who were on the campus wo—we did wake up a lotta people, you know. It's like forced them to look at things, whether they wanted to or not, you know. It's hard to focus on anything specific 'cause when I think about it, I mean, so, so many events were happening both there and in larger community, you know.

00:24:17:00

Interviewer:

That's great.

Robin Gregory:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

OK. Cut. Are you comfortable?

Robin Gregory:

Was that OK?

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:24:25:00

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