

Interview with **Jane Byrne**

Date: June 2, 1989

Interviewer: Jim DeVinney

Camera Rolls: 1001-1005

Sound Rolls: 146-147

Team: A

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.

Preferred Citation

Interview with Jane Byrne, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on June 2, 1989 for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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 #1100]

[sound roll #114]

00:00:11:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:00:16:00

Interviewer:

All, all set?

Jane Byrne:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

OK, Ms. Byrne. If you could just start with putting yourself in the Daley Administration, some stories there.

00:00:24:00

Jane Byrne:

The first time that I ever met with Mayor Daley was back in 1963-64, and I had been in an event, that, and had seen him and been introduced to him, and he invited me to come down to his office. And the reason that he did invite me to come down to his office is that I had been very active as a paid staff member in the John Kennedy campaign of 1960. And I really was not getting involved in politics or anything, I just liked John Kennedy and what he stood for. And I believed very strongly in this walk across the New Frontier. So this was after he was dead, and he died, as you know, unexpectedly, and this was an event that took place at our parish very shortly after John Kennedy had died. And after I was introduced to the Mayor, it was at his request that I came down to see him. So I went there and I sat in his office, and I, I felt very flattered. You know, here I am, sitting in Mayor Daley's office. And the very first thing that he said to me is, Why did you go to them? And I didn't even know who he meant. And I said, To whom? What? And he said, Why did you go to them? Why'd you go to the Kennedys and not us? And I was not from the machine, I hadn't been schooled in it. And I didn't know that "us" meant "them." And so I said, Well, who do you mean? He said, Why, the Democratic Party of Cook County. And I looked at him, you know, I was really surprised, because I thought this was going to be a rather nice meeting, and he said to me, What can they do for you? What did they do for you? And I looked at him again, and I said, Well, I wasn't really looking for anything, I said, I just believed in the man. And he looked at me and he said, We have a Speakers Bureau. We could have promoted you all over the, all over the city, all over the county. I said, I wasn't looking to be promoted. He then said to me, Did they offer you a job? And I said back, No, but I said, They wrote a letter of recommendation to you over a year ago that I have, if I wanted to do this, I, I didn't know what I wanted to do. And he said, I said, They offered me a job in Washington with Sarge Shriver. But I said, you know, my daughter's only three and I didn't wanna move her. Well, that took him back a little bit. And then he looked at me again, and he said, Do, are you interested in government, politics? And I said, I might be, yes, I said, I might be, and I said, But I don't know yet. I really, and he went on again to talk about the powers of this Democratic organization. And then the next thing he said is, People call it a machine, you know, and it's no more a machine than General Motors is a machine. He said, General Motors, he said, why, they have a structure and an organization and that's what we have. They sell a product, so do we. We sell candidates. And I said, so then I thought, Oh, he's a little defensive here. He thinks that the words that used to go around that the Kennedys had opened this office because they looked down on the Machine, he bought it. He believed it. I'm, I'm at least thinking that. And so, and there was a lot of talk about that. In fact, it took Joe Kennedy to come in here personally and intervene to get a Kennedy headquarters in Chicago. And there was a lot of friction between the two organizations throughout Kennedy's campaign. But it was always over control and power. And so I finally, you know, I'm Irish

myself, and I looked at him and I said, you know, Do you have anything else you want to talk about now? and he said, No, he said, I just wondered, and if you wanted me to, to sort of look after you or something, I, I would be very happy to. And he said, But you gotta make up your mind, he said, I can put you on anything. I can put you on committees, I can appoint you, and he said, but he said, you know, Are you against the machine? and I said, I don't even know it. Then he said to me, Are you adverse to ringing doorbells and, and I said, Well, I've never done that. And he looked at me again and he said, Do you know how to do it? and I said, Well, no. He said, Well, it's all people. It's your neighbors. You just go to your neighbors, you ring the bell, and you say, Hello. Can I come in and talk to you about some of the candidates? and he went on to tell me how you do it. He said, Would you dislike doing that? Now you have to understand, I was not prepared for this conversation. And I said, No, I, I don't have any grudges against this organization. And he said to me, What ward do you live in? and honest to God, I didn't know. I, I sort of was like, I said, I live in Sauganash, and he said, That's the 39th Ward, and I said, Well, that's where I live. And so then he looked at me and he said, Well, you'll go over and you introduce to the ward committeemen, and he said, You can tell them I suggested you go. I said, Well, all right. I'll, I'll do that. And so then I did, and he said, Be a volunteer, so I went and became a volunteer. And, you know, it was, I wasn't really in like the rest were. I wasn't a job holder, I wasn't, I was a volunteer. But I went to some of their events, and I went to the big convention in Springfield, Democrat Day, and I sort of liked it. I mean, I sort of liked, I knew where I fit, which was nowhere, but I sort of liked it anyway. And, but before that day ended, you know, as I'm getting ahead of myself, he turned back and he went on to tell me that if he did appoint me, and I didn't go to that organization, they'd get me. I said, Who'd get me? He said, They'll get you. And of course, Daley is famous for not, you have to almost think what he means. And he said, They've been in it a long time. They've been ahead of you a long, long time. I said, Who? He said, The precinct captains. He said, That's why I'm telling you. If you'd come to us, we could have gotten you known. And he said, So I can't appoint you. He said, I have the power but they'll get you. You go on out and ring those doorbells. Then he went right back to this Kennedy scene, about they didn't take care of their people, but the machine did, and that if I did these things, he was, it was all this difference between the two. And finally, he bugged me, you know. And I took a good look at him, and I said, You know, I wanted to come here, but, you know, I think I'm sorry I came here. I said, you know, I real, I think I am sorry I came here. I said, You and I have nothing at all in common. I said, I do not want you to think for a minute that I did not know that there was an antipathy between the Kennedy headquarters and the Democratic machine. I said, I don't want you to think for a second that I wasn't aware when you would change everything that we did overnight. When the Kenne—when Kennedy's plane would be changed, where it was gonna land, because you hadn't decided. I said, I knew those things. I said, I didn't think much of those things. And I said, But now, you're bringing it up now, and it means it's still on your mind. And I said, I find that hard to believe, and I said, But I have come to the wrong place. And he's looked at me, and he said, What does that mean? I said, It means he's dead, and I said, This conversation has made me think. Why did I go and work for him? and I said, I went to work for him because I believed in him, and I said, I'll tell you it was a very close election, and everybody says you did it, and everybody said you produced. But I'll tell you, if we got one vote, two votes, or three votes, then I got out of it exactly what I wanted to get out of it. I saw John Kennedy become the President of the United States. That's what I wanted. That's what I got. I wasn't looking for anything else.

With that, his chair went back. Now, I mean, I can really be angry when I'm angry. His chair went back, and it hit the wall.—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Jane Byrne:

—It was pretty close to the wall. And he—

00:08:03:00

Interviewer:

We just had a rollout here on the first roll, so we'll change rolls here.

[cut]

[camera roll #1101]

00:08:07:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:08:10:00

Interviewer:

OK. The chair has gone back.

00:08:12:00

Jane Byrne:

His chair went back against the wall, as I said, and all of a sudden he put his head down under the desk. And he said from down below, Excuse me. I'm tying my shoelace. And I thought, Boy, have I blown this. I have come in here, I have insulted the Mayor of Chicago.

He's down tying his shoelace. I'm standing, wanting to leave. He comes up and he keeps his head this way, away from me for a minute. And then he turns back and the tears are running down his face. And I said, Oh, you did like the man. And with that, after the argument and this understanding, I think that was probably the day that whatever it was that we were going to do was decided. Because I don't think a lot of people would have gone in there. And I suppose if I were, had been older or more mature, or something, I would never have dared do it, but it's how I truly felt. And I think people didn't do that for him. And I think he was used to yes ma'am, no man, I'm sorry, etc. And perhaps a respect was there, and at least I had the understanding, OK, there's a lot of defense, defensiveness here. There's a lot of feeling, somehow, that the machine is a terrible thing. And so he's gonna defend it, but he knows it, and he understands it. But basically, he was a decent man. That's how I viewed it.

00:09:36:00

Interviewer:

I would like to move forward now after Daley has died, 1979. Bilandic is Mayor. You decide to run against Bilandic. What made you think you could beat him?

00:09:46:00

Jane Byrne:

Well, before Mayor Daley died—Mayor Bilandic was an interim Mayor after he died, but before he died, he had had several strokes. And I was the co-chairman of the Democratic Party, and I shared an office with him at Democratic headquarters. And I knew things weren't going the way they had gone prior to the stroke. I knew that the—whether people call them the Gray Wolves, or the committeemen, or whatever they wanted, cliques were forming. And they were banding together and they were, they were really disregarding him quite a bit. He knew it. Those that were very close knew it. And it was a sad thing to watch and it was also the beginning of major splits that would be there for good. I then, as the Commissioner of Consumer Affairs, with a new Mayor, got involved in something that I thought was wrong. And again, I decided, This is not for me. And so it blew into a big fracas in Chicago. And I, I don't know whether you'd say I was fired or quit. I'd gone public with a memo and it stated certain things that had taken place regarding a taxi increase that I thought were illegal and I wouldn't participate. And I didn't like the clique that was surrounding Mayor Bilandic. At the same time, I thought Mayor Bilandic was being used. And he hadn't been in the game the way it was really played, he had been an alderman, not for very long. And he came from Bridgeport, the home of the mayors, and they had the Office of Mayor at that time for maybe sixty years. And so it was sort of like, he gets it. And those around him ran it far more than he did. And so it was a coming together of all of these things. I wasn't gonna stay and be part of it. I didn't think that he had all that it took to run it. I thought there was a lot of breaking down of what had been there. And I felt that this was the tip of the iceberg. The taxi rate increase to me was just a sign of all the rest of it, and I just felt, I'll leave. And I had no intention of running for Mayor. I thought, I'll go do something else. But after it happened and I had become this instant celebrity — and I had had a lot of press. I mean, I had been the

commissioner at that time for nine years, co-chairman of the Democratic Party, National Committee Member, Chairman of Resolutions of the National Committee. If, I'd had a lot of press. But this was a different kind of press. And after it's over, once you turn on that machine, forget it. Forget what they're gonna do to you, forget what your family will have, forget all of it. It's not nice. And it was sad because I'd been in it now for 14 years. And I, all of a sudden, went to go Christmas shopping. And I wasn't feeling really gung-ho about the holidays, this happened at Thanksgiving. And wherever I went, people would be going, this way, or, go get him. You know, and I'd be thinking to myself, Go get 'em? Go who? And crowds would form. I left Marshall Field's because I had to get outta there. Because I was down low getting candles, and I came up and this crowd was around me. And they were all cheering me on. And it was like, I don't know what these people think I can possibly do, you know. I am out. I am out, out, out. People would not speak to me that I, that had worked for me. They were afraid. And then a couple of very fine organizations, neighborhood organizations, invited me to come and tell my side. Well, I didn't have much else to do. It was not going to be easy to get a job in Chicago. When you, when you take them on, you're taking on the whole establishment. And so I went. I was very surprised. At one down here on the Gold Coast, after I had been invited and this group really wanted me, I was called in the afternoon and was, was told that this very social, fancy club on the Gold Coast had asked them to please cancel. They did not want me to come. And you begin to feel very, Oh, my God. I'm like the scourge. And it was meant to be that way. And you were meant to be punished. But they fought that club and I got to speak. Well, what they were doing, really, by these mistakes, is letting the people see what they were. And the press would come and cover it because here was the big issue. Can she speak or can she not? And pretty soon, it was growing. And finally, I thought in the dark, coming into this building, which is in a very heavily trafficked neighborhood, I, I'd pull up my car, and they'd say, Go get 'em, Jane. So finally, I took a poll. And it was very fragile, but you could see, between the Northwest side, the Black community, and much of the Lakefront, who didn't like to see a person treated like this, they were sympathetic. Didn't show I was gonna win, but it showed my numbers were solid. So I thought about it, and I decided I would go for it.

00:14:55:00

Interviewer:

OK. I'm just gonna stop down for just a moment here.

[cut]

00:14:58:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:15:01:00

Interviewer:

OK. Tell us what you intended to accomplish.

00:15:03:00

Jane Byrne:

My, well, the main thing that I wanted to accomplish is that I wanted to open the city up. I wanted to open it, let it breathe, and what I said that night is, the city ventilated. And I wanted to see that happen. And I didn't want to see this oppression, I didn't want to see this closed, captive city, as somebody had once written, because I believed that it was. I believed it from my toes to my head, and I believe it to this day. To me, that meant fixing the things that needed to be fixed in an open way. Maybe too open. But I had seen housing on 63rd Street that was, you know, it should have been ripped down ten years before. I wanted to see it come down. I wanted to see children playing on a sidewalk, which I saw, without balconies hanging off buildings over their heads. I wanted to see people in public housing have a more decent lot. And I didn't want them ever again to be afraid that if some candidate like Jane Byrne stood up to the machine, that they'd be told, If you vote for that woman, you're gonna lose your apartment. I wanted to see those things end. If you call that reform, I accept reform. The practical side of government, however, is having the votes to get those buildings torn down. And to have the issuance of the money by working with a council to get your 26. You need your 26. If you don't get your 26, nothing happens. Harold Washington went through the first two and a half years of his term in a battle with the council and very little was accomplished. Followi—excepting for what he fought for, and that was that the way he wanted it, and the representation that he wanted for that Black community was going to be done. That, he accomplished.

00:16:43:00

Interviewer:

You're getting just a little bit ahead of the story, but I think we must be almost out on this camera roll. I think maybe I wanna do a—

[wild sound]

00:16:49:00

Camera crew member #1:

Actually no, we're [beep] locked up. Two, two in this now.

Interviewer:

Oh, we still have two? I must've misread it before. All right, so the, you know, if, I want to know what you needed to do, reach out to get a broad base support since maybe you didn't quite have it.

Jane Byrne:

It wouldn't have been, I wouldn't have done that. That was not my decision to do.

Interviewer:

OK.

Jane Byrne:

One of the most—

Interviewer:

Hold the answer till we get rolling here.

Jane Byrne:

Oh, OK.

[cut]

00:17:12:00

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:17:12:00

Interviewer:

And again, good, nice, tight answer. That last one was great. Just work work in that kind of thing again, that's great. OK. Michael, is it framed?

00:17:18:00

Camera crew member #1:

You're good.

00:17:19:00

Interviewer:

All right. Tell us what you did to get the support you needed.

00:17:21:00

Jane Byrne:

I would not have changed at all from the way I planned to be, throughout that campaign, going into the Mayor's office, excepting the timing for that became impossible for everyone. As an example, people think of the machine, I'm afraid, and especially [phone rings] outsiders, as just this Democratic Party.

00:17:39:00

Interviewer:

One moment here. Sorry.

00:17:40:00

Camera crew member #2:

Can we take this over?

00:17:43:00

Interviewer:

Start over again. OK.

[cut]

00:17:41:00

[slate]

00:17:44:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK, Jim.

00:17:45:00

Interviewer:

And?

00:17:47:00

Jane Byrne:

I think that most people think that the machine is just those fifty alderman and the fifty committeemen. It is not, OK? The machine in Chicago was, for all practical purposes, the Establishment of Chicago. With its law firms, with its construction people, with its contractors, with bond council, with everything. They control it. And they really control it. It's decided right there on the fifth floor who this major corporation will use for their attorneys. It's all done that way. It was established that way for years. When all of a sudden this person comes along and whacks into that, and rips it apart, for all practical purposes, they all felt they were on the wrong side, and they all got real scared, because they all thought, Oh, the Mayor knows how to retaliate, because that's the way it had always been. So within twenty-four hours of my victory, my consultant, whose name is Don Rose, considered very, very liberal, considered by the machine radical, called me and said, There is the beginnings of an aura of instability because nobody has ever done this before, and they're all shaking out there—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Jane Byrne:

—the City is, because this cuts so deep into what had been established for sixty years. He said, You're gonna have to get back out and, and pull it together. It was not my thought to do that at all. And I was, don't forget, Daley-trained.

00:19:17:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let me just stop you. Hold right, right at that point. We're gonna do a quick change of the roll here and then finish that up.

[cut]

00:19:24:00

[camera roll #1102]

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

00:19:24:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:19:28:00

Interviewer:

OK, feeling—

00:19:31:00

Jane Byrne:

Well, that all of a sudden became the password.

00:19:32:00

Camera crew member #2:

Hold a second.

00:19:33:00

Jane Byrne:

Oh. I'll repeat "the feeling of instability."

00:19:36:00

Interviewer:

OK.

00:19:37:00

Jane Byrne:

The feeling of instability immediately became the password. Now you must remember, I'm not the Mayor, I didn't do anything to anybody, I just won. And all of a sudden, this most liberal consultant, the, the, the hatred of the Democratic Party, Don Rose, my consultant, is saying to me, You've got to pull it together. You've got to bring stability. You've got to meet with the chairman of the party. Well, to me, I, you know, this is a man that wouldn't have given me the time of day the day before, and every inch of me wanted to say, Look, I'm going on a vacation. I'm tired. Let them go, some—you know, let them go. So I went to the meeting, for the good of Chicago, as I was being told, and pull it together. And the first breakfast meeting went fine, the second breakfast meeting, consisting of ten more committeemen, one was, everybody was eating, and all of a sudden the door opened, and Matt Bierstadt [?], a committeeman, came in. Very ethnic, very old-fashioned, very old school. I'm sitting there, I expect him to be courteous. He jumps up and down on the floor with his hands and his fists, I will not break bread with this damn woman! shouts he. He said, She plans to give the City employees a union contract that's further gonna break the machine! I won't talk to her! I won't sit here! Walked out and slammed the door. Well, everybody was a little embarrassed, and around the table, some of them laughed. At which time, Congressman Daniel Rostenkowski leaned forward in, in a very condescending manner and stated, I don't know about that. He said, I was at a prayer breakfast yesterday morning with the President in the White House. And he said to me, Oh, Dan. What's gonna happen to Chicago now? He said, My, God. You have a lot of work to do. And that was probably intimidation. But to me, I sat there and it was like, Holy fright. All I did was win, and now even the President's concerned about the new Mayor of Chicago. That's how it is.

00:21:26:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's just stop down. And that was wonderful. Very visual story.

[cut]

00:21:31:00

Camera crew member #1:

Right. Go.

[slate]

Interviewer:

You all set Michael?

Camera crew member #1:

Yeah.

00:21:39:00

Interviewer:

OK. Talk about public housing, your approach.

00:21:41:00

Jane Byrne:

My approach to public housing was, it wasn't all to be the projects as you know them. My approach was to make, fulfill the commitments that I had made on bad housing, yank it down, and build new housing. And if you were to drive out to 63rd and, and Ashland, you would see block, after block, after block of what went up under me. It, it's quite beautiful. It was federally funded and city funded with churches. And it's single-family housing and it is my real belief in, for the poor, that they not be in these high rises. The issue of moving into Cabrini–Green, there were two issues, basically, as I recall it. One, during the campaign of '79 when I was on Division Street, close to Christmas, before I won, right before I won, two young Black women came up to me and they had babies in their arms, and they said, Aren't you Jane Byrne? and I said, Yes, and they said, We're gonna vote for you, and I looked at them. Now, they lived at Cabrini. And one of the little babies was, you know, cold looking and so I sort of pulled the baby's foot. And I said, Is Santa gonna bring you, What's Santa gonna bring you? And the one looked at me caustically and she said, We live in Cabrini–Green and Santa doesn't come there. And that made a very big impression on me. Now, granted, I knew what it was like to be an outer myself at the time and it made a tremendous impression on me. And so after I won, and was, it was amazing. We had to borrow the money, 75,000, to win the campaign, to put commercials on. That's all we spent. And Bilandic spent 2 million. And the day after, everybody's coming to see you. The old way, you know. Well, they weren't coming to me, but they were now going to the committee and making contributions for the general election. And I got within, I bet you, two weeks, I think I was told \$700,000 without talking to anybody. And I thought of those two women a long time. And so when I became the Mayor, I made up my mind that every apartment would have a Christmas tree. And seeing that, you know, the money was there, that's what I did. And we went from public housing project, every one of them, and every senior citizens center. And I think I expended about \$400,000. But I located the two girls at Cabrini and they remembered. And they remembered that I had said that if I won, the children would not grow up without a Christmas tree. So they all had them. And I rather enjoyed it. And I rather enjoyed taking all this money that was pouring in and doing something that I thought—now, this is just me, OK? Me, personally. I knew what it was like to be on the outs. And I knew you're saying, You kids, straighten up your lives when you're ten or twelve. But don't ever get or enjoy the things that other babies are enjoying, or the myth, or the lore, of the Santa or the tree. You know, you stay there and you, you make it on your own. And that was just me. Now, maybe it's because I was a woman, I don't know. But I enjoyed doing that and they

enjoyed getting 'em. By the time of the campaign, that was turned into, She's buying votes in the projects. Because after the first year, you couldn't stop, because then you would look bad. So we changed it to food, which was more, had more substance. And without even thinking that people would think it, because it had come so much from the heart, every family instead then got a turkey for Christmas. Well, that was used against me in the heat of the campaign. If you said to me, Am I glad I gave them the turkey? Yeah, I'm glad I did. If you said to me, Am I happy and am I happy to this day, when I go by those projects and I see little Christmas trees in the window, am I happy that those children had one? Yes, I am. If people didn't like it, I'm sorry. But those that received it, liked it and wanted it. Those that didn't like it and thought it was a put-down, I understand their position. But would I have done it the same way? Yes, I would have.

00:25:56:00

Interviewer:

While we're talking about—

00:25:56:00

Jane Byrne:

When you talk about projects and condos, and was that ever gonna go condo, nothing like that ever crossed my desk. When I moved to the projects, it's because for six weeks, eighteen people, in six weeks, eighteen people had been shot, killed, knifed, and I thought those were lousy statistics. And I also thought that if it was a town the size of twenty-five thousand people, that if eighteen people had been shot, killed, or knifed, the Mayor should be kicked out of office, who didn't do something like that. And I pushed on the police department at the top, and there were no changes. It's not far from here. And I would drive through there and I wouldn't see police. And it was going on, and going on, and going on. And finally, through such a scene in my office, and taking the superintendent and the chairman of public housing personally to the project and saying, Show me the police. Let's go in and talk to these people, did everything start to change. And after it began to change, and I'm still driving through there—I'm there on a Saturday—and I see a sergeant that I met going very quickly down the street in a car and a foot chase going on all around. And I said, He slowed the car and he said, What hap-? I said, What happened? He pointed. There was a fourteen-year-old little girl on the back seat of this unmarked squad car being taken to Henrotin who had been gang raped by three. But there was a difference, because this time, the police were there. And the policeman shouted, Don't worry, Mayor! We got 'em! and I thought, If I hadn't been kicking what they call butts, whoever did this would be free. And it made me think how much more I could do, and how much I could establish if I made this the prototype of what was gonna take place in the projects.

00:27:47:00

Interviewer:

Let me argue with you just a moment if I may—

Jane Byrne:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

—because eight-four percent of the people who lived in public housing were Black.

Jane Byrne:

Yes.

00:27:53:00

Interviewer:

And you were criticized because you appointed quite a few White people to the CHA board. Why did you do that?

Jane Byrne:

Well, now, that's a different issue than what you asked me about the condo.

Interviewer:

Well, let's take that issue.

00:28:02:00

Jane Byrne:

It was done two ways. There was a Black director appointed, all right? No, there were, the, there were—I inherited a board with terms. All right? With, with terms, each one of them. And there was one Black on it, as I recall, two Whites, and a community member who was Black. And that was like officio, ex-officio. And the projects were not being run very well. ***And I didn't make the switch to put those two White women on that you will always hear about until after I lived there. And after I saw that it was a very, very woman-dominated society.*** And that by virtue of the structure, very few husbands or fathers lived in the projects. And I wanted to put women on the board, and one was Black, who could relate to the women and the sufferings that were going on in there. And I didn't, I, I didn't think that was wrong. I felt, but that became an issue that I was putting down Black men because I made the statement. And it didn't change the facts to me that it's true. And the way that women would empathize and one had been a su-, an acting superintendent of schools, education was

horrible in the projects, recreation or a place to study was horrible, and I saw those things. And quite frankly, I didn't think that the men had done that great a job. Black or White. They'd been there. And I thought, this woman, you know, this, this superintendent, former su-, superinten-, acting superintendent, she cared about kids. And I've gotta tell you very candidly, I knew that a lot of the older kids that were in the gangs, the high school ones, and, and beyond, nobody was gonna be able to help them very much. But if you could save this next generation, and turn things around, such as we did by going in there and creating the ba-, basketball teams, and the baseball teams, and competition, and paint-outs, and all the different things that took place, and stop the drugs, which is what the killings were all about. If you could do that and you could do that throughout the projects, you're starting at base because nothing else worked. And if by putting women who were educators on could bring about an interest to those children to go—

[rollout on sound roll]

[cut]

00:30:28:00

[camera roll #1103]

[sound roll #147]

00:30:29:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

00:30:29:00

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:30:30:00

Interviewer:

OK. You did put Renault Robinson on the then Chicago Housing Authority board and—

Jane Byrne:

I appointed Renault Robinson to the Chicago Housing, Housing board.

00:30:37:00

Interviewer:

Start, start again because I was still talking.

00:30:39:00

Jane Byrne:

I appointed Renault Robinson, who had been the Black Afro Policemen's president which was a, a group within the Chicago Police Department. And I appointed him to the CHA in '79, one of my first appointments. And Renault, in my opinion, and it was borne out later, but in my opinion, he was not ready to be the chairman. He was also not ready in many ways, because he had never been in an administrative position before, he'd been a policeman, which I understood, and I figured grow in the job. He, I don't think he did a good job. I let him stay there, but I did not think that the things he was doing were anything more than getting his name in the paper. He was making crusades about the elevators. And of course they didn't work. [coughs] But there was nothing anybody could do to make them work consistently, due to the heavy loads of traffic on these poorly constructed elevators that are no bigger than the smallest closet in your house. They were gonna break. There was a lot of vandalism in the projects. Well, he marched to the grand jury. The grand jury investigated, they found nothing wrong. But he was forever saying that that was something wrong. I guess the proof of the pudding is that after I lost, Harold Washington made him the chairman of public housing.

00:31:59:00

Interviewer:

OK. Before we get up to Harold Washington, I just want to follow up a little bit—

Jane Byrne:

Oh, OK.

Interviewer:

—on Renault because he said that there was a point where he, you called him into his office and you said, Renault, we had a deal. You're, you're screwing that up by coming against my man, Swibel. And I would like to understand a little bit more about the deal and how he crossed you on that if you could just talk about it.

00:32:18:00

Interviewer:

I had no deal about Swibel. I didn't appoint Swibel. Swibel was one of the holdover commissioners and chairmen, and had been for 15 years under Mayor Daley. I would grant this to Swibel, he knew what he was doing. He was not a, a humanist in any way, shape, or form. But he knew how to bring the federal dollars in to keep it working and he knew how to go to Washington and get it done, because he had been doing it for 15 years. There was no conversation between me and Renault Robinson at any given time about, You're going against my man, Swibel. Nothing. He was embarrassing me as my own appointment to be going to the grand jury with all these charges, and becoming this crusader, and then always to have them go up in smoke. It was embarrassing. On the other hand, he then went very strongly out front for Harold Washington, which was fine. And I don't blame him in the least for that and he had every right in the world to do it. But two weeks before the election, with every poll in the City of Chicago, every poll, two, five, seven, nine, Tribune, Sun-Times, showing me twenty-two to twenty-six points ahead of both of the men, he asked the commissioner of my human resources if he could come and meet with me and make amends. When the surprise happened and Mayor Washington won, he was the first one to go back. So I don't, you know, I don't like to tell these stories.

00:33:42:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

00:33:42:00

Jane Byrne:

They're part of politics, maybe. But the charges were made, there's no doubt about it. But they weren't true. And the charges that he took twice, I believe, before the grand jury were also not true. And the US Attorney refused to even investigate one, because it is impossible to think, let me tell you, that those elevators are going to function. They aren't. And the buildings should come down. And children shouldn't be on the 15th floor. And gangs shouldn't have the use of them, to break them when they wish, so that the police can't get to them. But it had nothing to do with the corporations that put them in. They're a sick place structurally, emotionally, in every way. And you can ride on it if you wish, and you can make political points if you wish, because the people basically are unhappy. And you can use that to further an end.

00:34:43:00

Interviewer:

So the solution's—

Jane Byrne:

But it doesn't make it right.

Interviewer:

—tear them down and start over again?

00:34:46:00

Jane Byrne:

My goal would have been to take a lot of the abandoned housing, and I discussed this with the President, President Reagan, at a meeting of the US Conference of Mayors' small group, and we all felt the same. That they're a, they're a disservice to the poor. That you would put so much money into trying to keep them up, some of them have been up for forty years. And if you could take that money and put it into rehabbing three flats, two flats, single-family, you know, they would, children would not have, the mothers wouldn't be fifteen floors away from a kid on the street with a gang-banger. And they're s-, laying all over the city. South Side, West Side, there's abandoned housing all over. Structurally sound. And I would like to, if I had stayed, I can guarantee that's what I would have done.

00:35:36:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's—

00:35:36:00

Jane Byrne:

I don't know that you would need to tear them all down but you could surely put seniors in them and they would be safe. But you can't put a family of eight children in about 1100 square feet and in any way think they're gonna be happy.

00:35:52:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's change the subject to something that may be a little bit lighter. The ChicagoFest.

00:35:56:00

Jane Byrne:

No, let's go a little bit further.

00:35:57:00

Interviewer:

OK. Sure.

00:35:59:00

Jane Byrne:

Mayor Washington did appoint Renault Robinson chairman and he had to remove him, the job was so bad. Now, I don't fault Renault. Renault was a—if he'd gotten in there, in my opinion, and learned, and was placed in a position to become a great spokesman, but he didn't ever do that before, any more than he was prepared to be the chairman. And you could have predicted that what happened under Mayor Washington was gonna happen. All the plumbing broke on the coldest day of the winter. It froze because none of the boilers had been serviced. People had to be moved out to hotels, people were freezing for ten days before. It was a mess. And finally, the mayor that put him there had, had no better luck with him than I did.

00:36:46:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, can we go on to ChicagoFest?

Jane Byrne:

Sure.

00:36:50:00

Interviewer:

ChicagoFest was regarded as your brainstorm, your brainchild?

00:36:54:00

Jane Byrne:

No. Nope.

00:36:54:00

Interviewer:

I thought that you originated that.

00:36:55:00

Jane Byrne:

Nope. Mayor Bilandic originated ChicagoFest.

00:36:57:00

Interviewer:

Is that right?

00:36:58:00

Jane Byrne:

I, as a matter of fact, wanted to cancel it when I walked in the door. And I wanted to cancel it because I thought it's not enough in the neighborhoods, it's all downtown, and I'm on record for this, check the *Tribune*, and that we were expending a lot of money but we weren't getting out there into the communities. And a wave of protest hit me. And editorials from the *Chicago Tribune* hit me. That it was mean, it was petty, and it was probably that I was jealous that Bilandic had established it. So I said, Fine, let it go on. But no, I didn't, I was not the inventor of ChicagoFest. As it went on, I came to see that it was very good and it did bring people together. But I didn't allow it to go on alone. I established sixteen neighborhood festivals to go with ChicagoFest so that the neighborhoods were taken care of as much as the out-of-towners, the suburbanites who really went to the Fest. And we brought in top talent to perform at every neighborhood festival, people that are still stars today.

00:38:02:00

Interviewer:

OK. You know I'm going to ask you then about the boycott of the ChicagoFest—

Jane Byrne:

Yes.

Interviewer:

—for sure.

Jane Byrne:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

How did you feel when, when Jesse Jackson and others decided they wanted to boycott because they were sort of upset with you.

00:38:12:00

Jane Byrne:

I didn't believe it, number one. And I didn't think that it was Jesse's original intention in any way, shape, or form. He was on a talk show, I think, in Indiana. And he was not involved in it at all, as a matter of fact. But in one of those call-in shows, somebody called in and said to him on this radio show, We ought to boycott ChicagoFest, Reverend Jackson, over, I forget if it was, no, it was definitely CHA. We ought to boycott it over Mayor Byrne's actions. And he replied, That might be a good idea. From that, vavoom! It was off and running, there was going to be this huge boycott. And that's exactly how it happened. And at first I thought there were no more than, than twenty people in the boycott. Now, that was it. And we said, Fine, you can boycott it, or my people did. And they were given an area. And Jesse was really only there maybe five, six times for the whole two weeks of ChicagoFest. His people were there and Operation Push was there. But again, the numbers were never bigger than twenty or thirty. And I did not see this, quite frankly, as an outpouring against me of the Black community when I'd see twenty people. But what was taking place is it was being picked up on all the Black radio stations as an issue, a major, major issue. The superficiality to me of what took place there was absolutely nothing as to what was taking place in the community. Nothing. It was an effective boycott in that it stopped all Black talent from coming. The day the tickets went on sale, all the Blacks were in line to buy them. And the boycott had been announced. And they were all in line, you know, to get their tickets. Almost as if, We love the Fest. And it grew. So it is, People say that it, it was the turning point. And I know that it's, it can be said if people want to say it. To me, it, it was not the turning point. To me, it was an unfortunate situation. It was a situation that I felt bad about because it was polarizing the city in that many Whites were saying, This is going to be the best Fest we ever went to, we won't have Blacks. Which I hated. And we had the Blacks responding and reacting. And it wasn't good for Chicago.

00:40:44:00

Interviewer:

If ChicagoFest wasn't the turning point, what was the turning point?

00:40:48:00

Jane Byrne:

The turning point began before 1979 when I was first elected and proceeded in the feelings of the people right up until 1983. And in cold, analytical numbers, two weeks before the election, I was twenty-six points ahead of Washington and Daley. The weekend before, I was carried by all the newspapers and television stations as twenty-two points ahead. There was a rally held twelve days before Harold Washington's election. It was held at Circle Campus. And it was from the heart, and it was with great emotion. The Black community poured out to the tune of fifteen thousand people and it—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Jane Byrne:

—was huge. And it was the spark—

00:41:38:00

Interviewer:

[unintelligible] to stop you because we just had a roll out.

Camera crew member #1:

Just from that [inaudible]

Interviewer:

I just wanna go back and get that.

Jane Byrne:

It was the spark. The rally, the rally was—

[cut]

[camera roll #1104]

00:41:46:00

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:41:50:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, you told us that at the Circle Campus rally, that was really sort of a turning point—

00:41:53:00

Jane Byrne:

That was the turning point. That was the spark and it became a religion from that day on. And the words were, Don't vote with your head. Vote with your heart. We might make it. This is our chance. The Black women who had been my 48 percent, I, I, you know, I understand. They looked at their sons. They said, Maybe. Maybe one day. Is that different than the American Dream? No. That's the way it should be.

00:42:19:00

Interviewer:

How did you feel when Harold Washington first announced? Did you really believe there was any serious challenge?

00:42:23:00

Jane Byrne:

No. There was no serious challenge there when he first announced, and he was a reluctant candidate. And he put up as many road blocks to being the candidate as he could possibly find. He liked it in Congress and he told them you go out and register, what, 50,000, or fi-, I don't know how many. And he kept giving them more and more to do. And I believe a statement that he made to the press, when the press conference was called for the next morning, the statement that he made was, they asked him, Are you gonna be the candidate? He said, Unless you see another big Black man standing here tomorrow, I'm it. And that was sort of the way he took it and I think that was, however, somewhat disarming, and I don't think he really thought he was going to win it at all himself in the very beginning. And he didn't campaign hard, he didn't do a lot of things. And that's why I tell you, timing and, and the emotions, and a three-way race. But I think, he, he was asked by the press, How can you possibly win? He said, they said, You have no money, you have no organization, you, you've got nothing going on out there. And he put his hand up, giving him full due for this, and said, You don't understand the Black community. You can't keep them revved up any longer than two weeks. And I tell you, two weeks before, boom! It began.

00:43:54:00

Interviewer:

Was there a moment when you sat down with your own advisors, the people who'd been taking the polls for you and they just looked at you and they said, You're in serious trouble?

00:44:01:00

Jane Byrne:

No. No, there was never, I tell you that if you were to look at the record, there wasn't a pollster polling Chicago that didn't have me twenty points ahead.

00:44:10:00

Interviewer:

After the rally.

00:44:11:00

Jane Byrne:

But my, still, it held. But we polled every night. So we saw a point and a half slippage in the Black community every night. We knew. But when you're twenty-two points, and you're into your last week, you don't think you're gonna lose t—by twenty-two points. You think, And it was readjusted the Saturday before, to me, that it would be anywhere from six to seven points and get out there. OK? Well, and that was still calculating a point and a half. The day came, and that went to minus three, still holding 16 percent of the Black community.

00:44:53:00

Interviewer:

Did you change your campaigning those last few days?

Jane Byrne:

Yes.

Interviewer:

How?

00:44:56:00

Jane Byrne:

I'm not sure it was even smart, and it wasn't my decision. It was the, the thought of most of the advisors. There were two things happening with the media. One, they did not take Harold Washington serious, at all. Two, things were happening to me and I assume Daley, when we would go into the White, the Black community. Jesse Jackson had been, made a statement at Operation Push the Saturday before the rally, two weeks before, that woe be to any Black minister that allowed the White candidates into their churches, which put them in a bind because a lot of the Black churches were city-funded. Second of all, just by my own conversations with the managers of television stations, when they'd say to me, When's the fight gonna start? And I'd say, There isn't gonna be a fight. This is at Christmas. They'd say, Why not? I'd say, It's a three-way race, I'm caught in the middle. They'd say, Harold Washington? And I'd say, Look. See who do you have on right now? Prime time. Three stations. Harold Washington down at the prisons. OK? Working hard. Sending a message, a strong message. He went to the prisons. And they, the, the, the, the general manager thought I was crazy. And I said, I'm telling you I am not the least bit afraid of Daley. Harold is the candidate to beat. No one believed it. No one. And everybody was in shock that night when it happened. Now along those lines, while we polled the Thursday before, we asked the entire City of Chicago, Do you think you can get a Black Mayor? Eighty percent said never. So the change that took place the Saturday before—which I think might even have been the three points if we—I'd done it my way, but these were pros, was that ***we had to get on TV the emotion that was really taking place in the Black community, so that people began to say, Harold is a real challenge here.*** It's not Daley. Because the old machine and that part of it that belonged to Daley was pumping up that he could still win, and he'd been out of the race since December 7th. So they wanted to get this message out. ***So my press secretary made an announcement that I was canceling—to this day I think it was stupid, that I was canceling all my stops in the White community. All of them. And I was going strictly to the Black community to shore up my vote, with the thought if I went nowhere else under equal time, they would have to put on what was really happening out there to Jane Byrne when she went into the Black community.*** And it was violent what happened. To go to Cabrini–Green, I mean, everything from human excrement was thrown out the window at me. And to try to walk across the lawns where the kids were that I had loved, and see the basketball courts and the baseball courts that I'd put in—***I mean, forget it, you know, forget it. Harold! Harold! Harold!*** White bitch! Everything. You name it, I had it. ***And they wanted that on the tube. And that way they r-, thought people would, would know, OK? That, that we've got a real race here.*** Forget this Daley business. And so we went with that. When I say I think it was stupid is there were people lined up all over the North Side, my base, OK? Rallies that were planned for the last weekend. I didn't show. And that was because the two things with the media: A, they didn't take Harold seriously; and B, they did not want to be perceived as showing race, racial things. So while they were happening, they would not get on. And therefore, that was the feeling of the consultants. I felt I insulted too many North Side people by not showing up. Coffee parties, rallies, church rallies. You don't go. So that was that. The following morning, Sunday, I get up early, I look at the headline in the *Tribune*, and Chairman Vrdolyak has made a statement. Now, we're holding our own well Sunday, real well. We're not gonna be twenty-two, but we're going to win it. He has made a statement at a, what he thought was a closed meeting of precinct captains on the North Side, Don't kid yourself. This election is about race, said he. And it's the headline and it's now the news all

day Sunday. The Black support that I had at that time was still in the projects and independents on the Lakefront. And when he challenged them, This election is about race, Sunday, the numbers that night dropped another—whatever we were—sixteen to eight in the Black community. That's what did it.

00:50:21:00

Interviewer:

I want to stop down right there.

[cut]

00:50:24:00

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:50:28:00

Interviewer:

OK. Did Jane Byrne make a deal?

00:50:31:00

Jane Byrne:

There was no deal made. Surprisingly enough, they didn't even ask for a deal. You have to understand, they were scared. Basically, deep down inside, they were scared. They had never taken, they had never done to a person what they had done to me. Who could ever have forgiven them? Because I'm telling you, that campaign was hell. What they wanted was the right to walk in, and in the back of their minds I'm sure, what they wanted was to have the good old days the way they always were. And they weren't gonna have them. And it didn't make any difference to me if they came to my office or if they weren't, didn't come to my office. The Mayor has great power insofar as the Mayor can say, No. And so it was fine with me if they wanted to come. It was fine with me if they wanted to put their projects before me. They had the right to, they represented 50,000 people in every ward. They had the right to be recognized, but they didn't have the right to get me to turn inwardly on the things that I still believed had to be done.

00:51:34:00

Interviewer:

And why did you continue to support Swibel even after HUD demanded his resignation?

00:51:38:00

Jane Byrne:

Because that is a very big—

00:51:40:00

Interviewer:

No, start with—

00:51:40:00

Jane Byrne:

I continued, I didn't continue to support Swibel after HUD demanded his resignation because HUD did not demand his resignation. HUD asked for the resignations of the entire board, not Swibel. They asked it of Renault Robinson, Swibel, Nash, Letitia, they wanted all of it out. And they wanted to send in a consulting board from New York, made up of the man that had made the study and his people, to run it until a formal board could be appointed. Every board member knew it. All right? They all knew, they all had the letter. And they, he had asked, they had asked for every one of them to go. They all said no. And they all said, That's HUD's way of really getting Swibel. Now, Swibel had been around, as I say, twenty years under Mayor Daley. He had been around, what? I was there three years. I'm sure that there was no massive difference in the three years that I was there and the twenty that Mayor Daley was there. But he was in a position now to be a target. You get by, baggage and mileage. And God knows you can make an issue of the projects any day you want, because they're hell.—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Jane Byrne:

—And it seemed to me all of you go and he can go with you. But don't pull this on me, that all of a sudden he's Mr. Dirty and we're all innocent victims here. HUD demanded all of them to resign.

00:53:08:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's stop it down right there.

00:53:10:00

Camera crew member #1:

It ran off. Oh, because they're hell.

00:53:12:00

Interviewer:

OK. I think we had the essence of that but—

[cut]

[camera roll #1105]

00:53:15:00

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:53:17:00

Interviewer:

And when we've shown it to people it really gets a chuckle, I mean [inaudible] they want to see you campaign. So I would like you to talk about the whole thing around the snowstorm and how you went out and campaigned on elevated platforms then.

00:53:30:00

Jane Byrne:

I went to the people. I mean, it was the people that kept saying to me in the beginning, Go get 'em. And I didn't go to the structure, it was impossible to go to them anyway. ***So I went to the people. And where do you see the most people? You see them going to work in the morning. You see them going into the factories. So yeah, I was up on the El platforms.*** And in the middle of all that, they, someone made a decision not to have the train stop at every stop. And here were these people, I mean, my toes, I had ice within my shoes by the time this blizzard ended. I mean, they got in there with boots on. And here these people were

standing, freezing, late for work, getting yelled at when they got there. You'd hear them. You'd hear them, what they were saying. And boom! Right past them would go the train. And again, that was taken, even though I never thought this was intended to be an insult to the Black community, but apparently, when they decided to do this, they only decided to do it in the Black community. You see, to me, being a little more reasonable in my thinking, I just assumed there were so many people that couldn't get their cars out that the trains literally could not stop, you know, they were packed. But when I heard they only did it on the South Side of Chicago, I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't believe it.

00:54:35:00

Interviewer:

We heard that you ended up with some nicknames because you won as a result of the, the snow problem and—

00:54:40:00

Jane Byrne:

Oh, yeah. I was Snow Queen. I was, well, I gu—some people used to call me Mount Saint Helena. I don't know how that related to the snow. But I had, you know, I had, let me tell you. From Ayatollah, to Mount Saint Helena, to Snow Queen. For the first woman, one expects it. OK? But I had 'em all. There wasn't a name that anybody ever skipped. From "Good Jane," "Bad Jane" to the worst.

00:55:11:00

Interviewer:

This is your chance, Jane Byrne. Make up your own question, provide your own answer. Anything that we haven't talked about that you think should go on the record. What would you put there?

00:55:19:00

Jane Byrne:

I would just like to say that Chicago's a very, very wonderful city. And I don't think that anything happened here shouldn't have happened here. Whether it was the first woman or whether it was the first Black. And I think every city goes through stages of growth. And I think every ethnic group in America has come to the major cities as the melting pots and fought for their own place in the sun. And I think that's all you see happening in Chicago. And I think sometimes it was painful. Always was, whether it was the Irish and the WASPs or the, the whatever group it was. They fought for where they had to be. And I think that's what makes Chicago great and I hope that forever Chicago remains that way. Great city of

neighborhoods, great city of family, great city of belief in their own ethnicity. Because if it stays strong like that, so does America.

00:56:23:00

Interviewer:

I thank you very much for your energy and for your honesty. Thank you.

Jane Byrne:

You're very, very welcome.

Camera crew member #1:

That's a cut.

Camera crew member #2:

That's a cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:56:29:00

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