

Interview with **Joseph Gardner**

Date: April 14, 1989

Interviewer: James A. DeVinney

Camera Rolls: 1091-1092

Sound Rolls: 141-142

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 Joseph Gardner, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on April 14, 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 #1091]

[sound roll #141]

[slate]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark one.

[slate]

Interviewer:

[clears throat]

Camera crew member #1:

OK, Michael.

Camera crew member #2:

Yes.

00:00:20:00

Interviewer:

OK, tell me what was involved in boycotting ChicagoFest?

00:00:23:00

Joseph Gardner:

Well, I received a call on Sunday after Reverend Jackson had been on a radio show at home, and he asked me to start trying to mobilize leaders in the Black and Hispanic community, primarily to see if, in fact, we could pull off this boycott. And, he asked me, what did I think? I said, I think we can do it. I said, I think it certainly is an issue that is worthy of our attention, and it may, may be one of those kind of, I call, cross-cutting issues that cut across racial, and ethnic, and, and class lines, and it would be the kind of thing that people could come together out of their outrage over the actions of Mayor Byrne in terms of her appointees of the Chicago Housing Authority and the Board of Education. And so, I never will forget. We call a meeting that Wednesday, at PUSH, and we really didn't know how many people would come, because our community had been somewhat factionalized for some time. And, there was just this outpouring of people, that meeting started out, we had about fifty people at the time the meeting was to start. In another half an hour, there were one hundred fifty. By the time we got into the meeting, there were three or four hundred people. And, I remember remarking to Reverend Willie Barrow, who was also on the staff of Operation PUSH, the national director of Operation PUSH at the time, I said, I think we've got a movement, because just that kind of outpouring of people from all backgrounds and walks of life, some of whom historically have not worked together, to come together at PUSH for that purpose was a good sign.

00:01:49:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. OK, I'd like to move forward just a little bit, now. I mean, over the coming months, there was a great deal of interest, then, in developing the concept of having a Black mayor in Chicago, and that led to Harold Washington. It seems like there was some sort of a grandmaster plan. Talk to that.

00:02:02:00

Joseph Gardner:

Well, there are some people who would claim that there was a grandmaster plan, but I'm not aware of it, and then I was pretty much involved in most of the both public and private

meetings and strategy sessions. The election of Harold Washington evolved out of the ChicagoFest boycott and was one important high water mark after the, the successful boycott. And, I remember our efforts to convince Stevie Wonder not to come, and Stevie Wonder said, I'll honor the boycott, and he didn't come to the boycott, and there were picket lines down there around that site, day, day in and day out. The next step in that kind of evolution was the voter registration drive. And, many of us had made a decision that we were going to work very hard, very feverishly, to increase the numbers of Blacks and Hispanics on the, on the registration rolls, because that was part of developing the predicate, the political predicate for a successful campaign. At the time, we didn't know who the candidate was going to be. I mean, there were rumors, and there were discussions about possibly Harold Washington, but we didn't know. But, we knew we had a movement, and we knew that in order for that movement to have credibility, and strength, and power, that we had to register people to vote. So, that was the next step in the process. And of course, the third step in the process was the actual coming together of a broad cross-section of leaders who agreed to support Harold Washington as a candidate.

00:03:27:00

Interviewer:

So, there was no master plan.

00:03:28:00

Joseph Gardner:

There was no master plan. Certainly, if there was one, I was not aware of it.

00:03:32:00

Interviewer:

All right. Let's stop down for just a moment.

[cut]

00:03:36:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark two.

[slate]

00:03:39:00

Interviewer:

OK, you talked about trying to bring together the Blacks, Hispanics. I know many Whites were involved in the campaign. Talk to me about the relationships between those various groups. Were they always harmonious?

00:03:48:00

Joseph Gardner:

Well, there was both inter-group tension and intra-group tension within the Black community. There was no, the Black community has never been monolithic, and in, marching to one drum beat so to speak in terms of politics. So, there was tension within the Black community between, shall we say, the professional politicians, or many of the professional politicians, and the so-called independents, or progressives, or activists, whatever, I dunno, handle you wanna put on them. Between Blacks and Hispanics, there was tension in the campaign, between Blacks and, and, and Whites. So, there was tension among all of the groups, but what united the, the various groupings and, and, and led to a successful campaign was two things. One, it was the, the candidate, the personality and the style of the candidate. Harold Washington was the kind of person who was all-encompassing. He reached out to everyone. He made people feel comfortable with him and around him. And, secondly and equally as important, if not more important, was the fact that there was a broad-based progressive agenda of concerns, issues, problems, whatever you want to call them, that united all of these various diverse groups, not around personality so much but about substantive issues in terms of how these people individually and collectively saw the future of the city of Chicago.

00:05:04:00

Interviewer:

You mentioned on the phone that there was sometimes some competition as to where Harold was going to go speak, and that different neighborhoods wanted him and got upset if they didn't—

00:05:10:00

Joseph Gardner:

Well, a lot of the tension got played out over the schedule when I was on the, the staff of the campaign, in the general election. We would oftentimes get complaints from our leaders and supporters in the Hispanic community that Harold has gotta spend more time in the Hispanic

community. He's not spending enough time with Hispanics. They're not hearing his message. The same thing on the lakefront. You know, if Harold Washington wants to get votes of progressive Whites on the lakefront, he's gotta come up here. He's gotta go to the coffee clothes [sic], and he's gotta spend some time. The Black community, people were saying, Well, Harold is spending too much time in the Hispanic community and White community. He's gotta come home sometime. And while some people may have saw that as a liability, I, I saw it as an asset, because it meant that you, we had a cross-section of people who represented a microcosm of the city of Chicago, who are actively working for their candidate, and they were trying their best to ensure victory, by making sure their candidate spent as much time within their respective communities as possible.

00:06:05:00

Interviewer:

I wanna hear about some of those people who worked for Harold Washington, and this is story about the tax [unintelligible] ads—

Camera crew member #2:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

Hold on.

Camera crew member #2:

I'm sorry, we're gonna have to cut, my battery—

00:06:13:00

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

Camera crew member #1:

Mark three.

[slate]

00:06:21:00

Interviewer:

OK, tell me about the people who worked for [car horn] Harold.

00:06:23:00

Joseph Gardner:

Well, one of the most unique things about this campaign was, *it was truly a grassroots campaign in the strict sense of the word. In all of my years of being involved in politics in the city of Chicago, I had never seen such an outpouring of some port, of support from people, many of whom had never really been involved in political campaigns. There were teachers for Harold, there were barbers for Harold, beauticians for Harold, taxi cab drivers for Harold, nurses for Harold.* Every possible group that represented the broadest possible spectrum of professional associations, business people, grassroots civic organizations, and so forth, participated in some form or fashion in this campaign. One of the things that I came to realize very early in the campaign was the fact that Operation PUSH, in essence, turned over its Saturday Morning Forum, which is an hour on the, one of the Black-oriented, orientated radio stations, to the campaign in the sense that, Reverend Jackson and the rest of us at PUSH talked about the campaign every Saturday for about eight to ten successive Saturdays. And, what would happen is that the, since the show is broadcast from ten o'clock in the morning till 11:00. At that time of day, people are in the shopping centers. They're in the beauty shops. They're in the barber shops. They're in the pool halls, and so forth. And, a lot of those groups got formed out of the urgings of Reverend Jackson that, you know, we gotta have a total effort from the, the community, whether you're a barber, a beautician, or you own a bar or a restaurant, everybody can play a role in this campaign. And, that was a theme that went forward, and the people responded. They started forming little associations. Young artists started putting together raps. I must have, still now, fifteen or twenty tapes of young artists who put together rap songs for Harold around the notion of his ballot number, and I think in the primary it was punch eight, and things like, I can't wait to punch eight. It's our time to punch nine, when it became punch nine in the, in the general election. All these kinds of things were a genuine evidence of a real outpouring of, of the community in support of this man who would be mayor of the city of Chicago.

00:08:33:00

Interviewer:

All right. Let's just step down for a moment. I wanna check and see where we are on that roll.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Camera crew member #1:

[unintelligible]

Camera crew member #3:

[laughs]

[cut]

[sound roll #142]

00:08:40:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark four.

[slate]

00:08:45:00

Interviewer:

OK. I'd like you to tell me what happened the day after Saint Pascal's Church, the aftermath of the—

Joseph Gardner:

Well, the day after Saint Pascal's, the situation rather at Saint Pascal's, with the boeing.

Interviewer:

Let's just start it again, so you get a little fresher.

00:08:57:00

Joseph Gardner:

OK. The, the events that took place at Saint Pascal's, Sunday, when Vice President Mondale and Harold Washington attempted to attend service there, the aftermath of that was a very strong reaction, a very positive reaction for the campaign. What we saw in the aftermath was a definitely upsurge in the number of contributions from Whites, people of Jewish faith, and so forth. As a matter of fact, [clears throat] I remember reading a couple of letters where

individuals who, from their name and seemed to be of White ethnic background, said that, I don't particularly support your candidate, but I'm embarrassed by what happened at a Catholic church. I'm a Catholic, and I feel very embarrassed that, that happened in the city of Chicago in 1983. So I think that, that reaction was kind of typical. There was an increase in contributions, I think, from Whites, individuals who had not been supporters of the campaign, and maybe didn't even vote for Harold. The national reaction was obviously very embarrassing to the city of Chicago, and many of the reporters harkened back to 1968 and other situations of, that were negative to Chicago, because it brought racism out in its most ugly form, at a Catholic church, on a Sunday. So, I think that, in the long run though, the campaign benefitted from that, because it made people start looking within themselves, and saying, Why am I opposed to this man? Is it, is it because he's Black, or is it just that I feel that an otherwise unknown individual, Bernard Epton, is more qualified to be mayor than Harold Washington?

00:10:37:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's step down there and see where we are in this roll. [inaudible]

[cut]

[camera roll #1092]

00:10:42:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark five.

[slate]

00:10:47:00

Interviewer:

Before you go into the, the general election, I would just like to ask you to respond to the question of how did the campaign change before the primary, to what it was like after the primary? Was there a change of tone or anything?

00:10:59:00

Joseph Gardner:

Well, there was a definitely change in tone from the general election campaign moving from the, from the primary rather, to the general election campaign. By winning the democratic primary, Harold Washington had substantially enhanced his believability among all of Chicagoans as a viable candidate, up until the last weekend, maybe, before the primary election, many people still did not believe that Harold Washington had a chance. Once, of course, he won the primary, many of the Black as well as some of the White elected officials, ward committeemen, and so forth, came forward and endorsed Harold. So, all of the sudden, we had to move from what had been primarily a single focus, grassroots movement, into a fairly sophisticated, fairly broad-based, reaching out into all 50 wards, general election campaign, and the transition. You don't have a lot of transition time. It's like playing basketball in the NBA. If you're slow off the rebound, you know, you get two points scored against you at the other end, and so we had to move very quickly to expand our operation, and get prepared for a general election fight, and that's when I came aboard as the field director, and at the point of, you know, beginning the general election campaign.

00:12:10:00

Interviewer:

OK. The day of the general election, tell me what were some of the things you did to make sure that there was plenty of [unintelligible].

00:12:15:00

Joseph Gardner:

Well, it was fantastic, because we had response from people from all walks of life. People donated their cars. Again, Operation PUSH, CBUC, where Lu Palmer did very just a splendid job in terms of mobilizing people. Nancy Jefferson, Slim Coleman, many of the other organizations around town had turned their, their whole operations into a get out to vote effort for Harold Washington. And, we recruited people with cars. We told people who were, who had cars to report to various places, so they could transport people to the polls. We didn't want to lose a vote. We had taxi cab drivers for Washington. Those taxi cab drivers, and we must've had at least sixty or seventy cabs from around the city, those people volunteered all day long. All we had, the campaign had to do was put gas in their cabs. Bus drivers, individuals who owned bus companies, private bus companies, made their buses available. We even had full-length school buses to transport workers from one area of the city to another. We had buses at the L stops, because I remember very clearly that, there was some sort of a delay in the, in the rapid transit elevated trains that were running from the loop to south sides and west sides. We always felt that this was by design, not by accident. But, be that as it may, we had buses at the key drop-off points along the L line prepared to take people to their neighborhood polling places, so that we did not lose a vote. It was the most effective grassroots field operations that I think, that we'd ever had in any campaign in Chicago.

00:13:45:00

Interviewer:

It was so effective that you got Harold Washington elected, and the day after the general election, what happened?

00:13:51:00

Joseph Gardner:

Well, I was amazed at the reaction—

Interviewer:

Sorry, start again [unintelligible]

00:13:55:00

Joseph Gardner:

I was amazed at the reaction from people around the country and around the world. On the day after the election, I went back to Operation PUSH to get some papers and things that I had left. I'd been on leave for about six-eight weeks, and I knew that we'd, we'd done something incredibly fantastic in terms of the city of Chicago and the nation, but I had no idea that, to a great extent, the world was watching. I never will forget, I received a call from a woman down South who had a heavy South African accent. And, she said she was calling on behalf of a relative of her, of hers in South Africa who was afraid to call, couldn't make a call, and he just wanted to express his congratulations to Jesse Jackson and Harold Washington, and to say to both of them God bless them. And, that was a very moving experience, that this woman would call on behalf of a relative who obviously was not able, because of the apartheid situation in South Africa, to be able to make that call. And, we got calls from other parts of Eastern and Western Africa, from Jamaica, from the Bahamas, from France, from, from, from England. From around the world, people called PUSH to congratulate Harold Washington and congratulate Jesse Jackson.

00:15:01:00

Interviewer:

All right. Let's stop down, Michael.

[cut]

00:15:04:00

Camera crew member #1:

One more.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark six.

[slate]

00:15:11:00

Interviewer:

OK, Mr. Gardner, whatever you'd like to say.

00:15:14:00

Joseph Gardner:

Well, I think that, what this election meant for the city and to a certain extent the nation is that people who have been historically locked out, or perceived that they are locked out of the decision-making processes that take place in government, those who are economically disadvantaged, those who want to see a true, open government that, where people can participate, the dreamers if you will, as well as the political pragmatists, found that by coming together and organizing themselves, and identifying a candidate of credibility, that they could win an election in the second or third largest city in the nation. That has to have a tremendously positive ripple effect among progressive-minded people, organizers, and activists around the country. In the aftermath of that election and the events that have taken place since then in Chicago, I think that it really says that, that same kind of effort can be put together again. It means *that many of us have to remember how we were able to elect Harold Washington. We didn't get a popular candidate first. We started talking about issues that were of concern to people throughout the city of Chicago. We built a coalition. We registered people to vote. We had a movement, if you will, that got transformed into a fairly sophisticated political organization, and then we had a candidate who could drive it forward. I think that formula worked in Chicago in '83. It'll work in Chicago in 1991 and beyond. It'll work in other major cities around this country if it's followed, because I think it's a, a blue, blueprint for victory.*

00:16:49:00

Interviewer:

Thank you very much. That's cut?

00:16:52:00

Tech:

That's a cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:16:55:00

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