Interview with **Tracy Amalfitano**
Date: March 9, 1989
Interviewer: Jacqueline Shearer
Camera Rolls: 4106-4108
Sound Rolls: 445-446
Team: D

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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 #4106]
[sound roll #445]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

00:00:19:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, let's begin, Tracy, with you're telling me, describe for me what the mood in South Boston was in the summer leading up to the opening of school in 1974?

00:00:31:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

I would say that the mood was [pause] of anticipation by a lot of people that the buses would never roll. There were a lot of people at that point in time that were holding many meetings in all different parts of the community. Some political leaders were trying to discourage parents from sending their children to school. I was not particularly, at that point in time, involved in, in any of that and my first reaction to the phrase, The buses are never gonna roll, I fully intended to send my children to school. And [clears throat] there was one particular time that I remember outside the Tuckerman School where my younger son was going, I used to meet him after school and there were a lot of women that were selling but-buttons and the buttons would say "Never," or, "The Buses are Not Going to Roll," and all different kind of sayings. And I was asked to buy some of those buttons and I refused—not…I just didn't want to be involved in that and other people that really noted who I was and that I did not do that and it's kind of vivid in my mind that I, I remember that. Actually in the, in the spring of '74, the John W. McCormack School held an open house and I went over there and met a lot of people that were involved at Columbia Point, whether it was in community agencies or the local church. And I guess I didn't really understand why there would be a problem in sending a child to school there. I think I lost it.

00:02:55:00

Interviewer:

No, that was great, that was good. I'd like you to now…school begins and many, many parents in South Boston are boycotting, they're not sending their kids to school. Did you support the buy—the boycott?

00:03:11:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

No, I did not support the boycott at all. And if you don't mind, I'd just like to backtrack about a, a, a short minute. After I had visited the McCormack School, some of the, the teachers there and there was some people from the University of Massachusetts and some of the parents from Columbia Point invited me back again. And all through the summer of '74, I went over to the McCormack School and, and met with the people that were living there and the agency people and, and we discussed the possibility of maybe that there would be a potential problem in the fall but at, at no point I don't think any of us dreamt how, how it would get later on.

00:04:07:00

Interviewer:

So, did you support the boycott?

00:04:09:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

No. ***I did not support the boycott and I sent my, my son to school from the very first day.*** And after Judge Garrity, the geocodes came out, my son was assigned to the John W. McCormack School ***and for a long period of time rode the bus by himself*** to the school.

00:04:37:00

Interviewer:

Now, why didn't you support the boycott?

00:04:40:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

Because I believed that kids should be in school and I personally…I had no problem with my kids going with minority children to school. As a matter of fact, I fully believed that children get a much better int—education in a integrated setting and I personally had no problem with the students being racially mixed.

00:05:15:00

Interviewer:

So, describe for me how your neighbors reacted to the fact that you didn't support the boycott?

00:05:23:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

Well, at that point in time, I, I guess I didn't think about what my neighbors thought until they started staring at me in the morning when I walked my young son, who was then twelve and basically as tall as I was at the time and I guess maybe a little old to be walking to the bus, but some people had started to be a little violent and I wanted to assure his safety so I walked with him to the bus each morning. And I suppose at first they, they were not happy that I was not supporting the boycott, even though I was one person, because then someone would say that, you know, it wasn't a hundred percent boycott.

00:06:20:00

Interviewer:

Now, you told us a story about one of your neighbors, a Chinese woman, and you told in a wonderful way about how she looked through a window every day—

Tracy Amalfitano:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

—and then finally came up to you.

Tracy Amalfitano:

Right.

Interviewer:

Could you tell that story?

00:06:33:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

Yes, there was one particular episode that I vividly remember. I used to walk to K Street and, and the Beach Road with my son in the morning and, and, and wait for the bus. And unbeknownst to me in the beginning, there was a Chinese family that evidently was watching me every morning. And after about a month and a half, the woman came down to the bus and she said, I've been watching you and your son seems to come home in one piece every day and I very much want my child to go to school, and I suggested to her at that time, I said, Well, if you'd like, tomorrow I'll get the car and I'll drive you over to Columbia Point and you can meet the principal and I will show you the school and I think you'd be happy with it and I'll introduce you to people and then you make your own decision. I never suggested to anyone at any point in time that they not boycott. I, I believed then and I believe now that that was a decision that an individual parent had to make and if they wanted to boycott and keep their kids out of school that that was something that they were going to have to live with if they wanted to keep the kids out for a period of time and the kids lost school that would be their choice. But I could only say what I did and that I would help support them if they needed support and basically that is what happened with this particular woman. The next day she brought her child down and the child went to school with my son and then we stood on the corner. And that happened, began to happen over and over again and other parents who wanted to send their kids came down to the corner. Evidently, more people were watching me than I realized whether they agreed with me or disagreed with me. And there was a period of time that people would call me on the phone and say, Is it safe today? Is it OK? So, I…in a way I guess I became a street corner counselor without trying to do that.

00:09:04:00

Interviewer:

How were the anti-bussers able to maintain unity in, in their position?

00:09:11:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

Well, I think they used a lot of methods of, say, the old civil rights movement of telephone trees and they had a very strong organization and I believe used telephone trees and basically formed their own organizations.

00:09:37:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

[inaudible]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:09:44:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

00:09:46:00

Interviewer:

Did your son boycott when school opened?

00:09:49:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

No, no. The first day of, of school, I took my son to the bus and he went every single day of school the whole year and we did not believe in the boycott and we did not boycott. I have two boys and the son that was geocoded to Columbia Point went every single day. And I might add that my youngest son who was going to kindergarten at the time also went to school every day and I mention that even though that was not a school tagged to be boycotted, people were boycotting it, and that child went to school every day as well.

00:10:36:00

Interviewer:

And you said something about--

Camera Crew Member #1:

We're rollout.

Interviewer:

Whoops, OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK. That's a rollout.

Interviewer:

Good, thank you.

[cut]

[camera roll #4107]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:10:49:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Anytime, Jackie.

00:10:51:00

Interviewer:

OK. Did your son have company on the bus?

00:10:54:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

No. My son was riding the bus alone to Columbia Point for quite a long time.

00:11:03:00

Interviewer:

So, it must have been hard for you during this period.

00:11:07:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

It was quite hard. I was basically back in school. I had decided to go back to college after a number of years and finish up my degree and my entire life turned around at that point in time because my whole schedule I…revolved around walking both my children to school but especially the older one to catch the bus every morning for Columbia Point and I also met him every afternoon. It was very difficult for us. Our whole lives basically became topsy-turvy and everything revolved around making sure that the children were in school because we believed that they should be in school but also making sure that their safety was assured. I was concerned in my own community if, if my kids would be safe. The community basically was talking about kids not being safe going into the minority communities but because I went in and out every day myself, I knew that they were safe there and my concern was that they were safe when they got, when my oldest son got off the bus in his own community. ***It was very difficult for us.*** It was difficult for other members in the family who didn't understand what I was doing, became very difficult. ***It was almost like getting up every morning and going to war.*** There were, at that point in time, many police in the community, there were police lines, there were a lot of groups congregating on street corners, and every day we walked through all of that to the bus stop. It was not easy for us but on the other hand, I felt that as people had a right to boycott, that's a person's right, it also was my right to send my, my children to school. And I think I got mad as much as anything, as, as much as maybe being afraid. I said, Why would anyone interfere with my right to send my kids to school? And I guess basically, that anger also sustained me. It was a lot of isolation for a while though for us ***and many days I would come home and I would think about all the liberals that got on the buses and went South when…for sit-ins and, and boycotts in the South. I, I really would come home and wonder, you know, Where were they now?*** And there were, there were people out there but for a long, long time I felt very isolated and alone in, in the decision but I felt that my decision was right. My, my kids also became more

isolated because people that were boycotting would not allow their children to play with my children anymore and, and that was real. But somehow we instilled some strength in, in our kids so that they were sustained, but they also were very isolated for a long time. They did meet new friends in, in…at Columbia Point, my son met new people. But for a long period of time it was very iso-isolating. We did not get support from political leaders although I know political leaders were meeting quite routinely with those that, that boycott. But for those of us around the city that decided to support the desegregation order, it was very much a, a lonely place for a long time.

00:15:48:00

Interviewer:

Great. Thank you.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK. Cut?

Interviewer:

Cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Am I hitting that too loud behind you?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yeah.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

00:15:56:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Oh, yes, yeah, I'm so slow, I'm sorry. OK.

00:16:00:00

Interviewer:

So, paint us a picture of what the relationship of South Boston as a community to public schools was. What, what, what function did public schools serve and who went to the public schools?

00:16:12:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

I think a lot of people from South Boston long before desegregation sent their children to the parochial schools, whether in South Boston or, or outside South Boston, Boston College High School, John Bosco, man-many other schools so that historically there've been many students who have attended parochial schools. I think many of the students who attended, for example, South Boston High School was…became a very important part of their lives whether they played football, played in the band, attended proms. It, it was a focal point and it was, it was for many, not all but many, the high point of their educational career. And I think, I think maybe we, we tend to forget that, so that when desegregation began there was no more, say, neighborhood school, if you will. And where would the focus be at that point if it was, you know, say, scattered around the city? And I think a lot of people reacted to that.

00:17:42:00

Interviewer:

So, if a parent was interested in quality education for his kid, would they send him to Southie?

00:17:49:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

I would say that there were many good teachers at South Boston High School and there were programs that were adequate. I think that many people who were thinking solely of quality education would opt to send their children to a private school, especially the parochial schools.

00:18:14:00

Interviewer:

I get the feeling that kids were bused outside Southie then to school, just to parochial schools, not to public schools.

00:18:22:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

That's correct and also there had been students, of course, who had gone to, to a Latin school prior to desegregation.

00:18:30:00

Interviewer:

So, what does that say about neighborhood schools?

Tracy Amalfitano:

Well, [laughs] that becomes a, a complex issue to me certainly, at that point, I, I, it's difficult for me to answer that, I [pause]—

Interviewer:

When people talked about the sanctity of the neighborhood schools in South Boston, what did you think?

00:18:57:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

I thought that maybe some people were talking out of two sides of their mouth, if you will. That, in fact, it had been all right for years to send their, their children to parochial schools but all of a sudden now, they were fighting for neighborhood schools. It was a, an issue that I had difficulty dealing with and still do.

00:19:23:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Cut.

[cut]

00:19:26:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:19:30:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:19:32:00

Interviewer:

So, you told us a semi-humorous story about how your neighbors understood why you were doing what you were doing.

00:19:40:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

There were two or three humorous stories if, if you can talk about humor at a point in time and I guess that's saving to all of us at some point but there were many people that did not understand, number one, why I was sending my sons to school. They could not understand it and there were stories in the community that, that got back to me one way or another. One was that the only reason that I would do something like this was that Judge Garrity was paying me to do this. That had humor in it for us because I never saw any money of any kind and it's just a preposterous—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Tracy Amalfitano:

—kind of a story.

00:20:35:00

Interviewer:

OK, great. [unintelligible]

Camera Crew Member #2:

That's a rollout.

[cut]

[camera roll #4108]

[sound roll #446]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:20:45:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

00:20:47:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, we were talking about your transformation. Could you talk about how you started out not being involved then got involved and what fire that drew?

00:21:03:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

I—in the, in 1973, '74, I was basically concentrating on going back to college myself. I had started school years before but had not finished and had decided to go back to school. I was not involved in any organizations of, of any kind at that point in time. I was concentrating on, on my kids going to school, on helping my husband, on getting my kids to school and also furthering my own education. As far as organizations, I didn't have time and I had not been one to become involved in many organizations. Everything changed once 1974 came and I really felt that it was important to see where my child was going to school and that was at the McCormack School. We formed a parent advisory council that was a very active multi-racial council, not only multi-racial, it was composed of agency people from Columbia Point. We had people from the University of Massachusetts. We had priests and nuns who were involved and it was a, a wonderful group. I became the first chairperson of that

advisory committee. Shortly thereafter, I was invited to Family Service Association of Greater Boston. Somehow, someone had heard that there was a White woman from South Boston who was complying with the desegregation order and they wanted to meet me. I spoke to their social advocacy committee, became involved with that group. Shortly thereafter, the US Commission on Civil Rights Massachusetts State Advisory Committee invited me to come. They had heard about that White woman from South Boston. And this was a great change in my life because I had not been involved in organizations. When it became a little violent in the streets and then later on it became even more violent in the streets, a group from the Library Center right in South Boston invited me to come and speak with them and that was just a small group of some nuns and some priests and people from the D Street Project and some mothers who really, truly wanted to send their kids to school and they really, truly were afraid. My husband also attended that first meeting with me and he and I and, and other people there decided that if there was anything that we could do right in South Boston to prevent some of this violence in the street and it was just unheard of how, how small children were being, being affected because they heard horrible, horrendous racial epithets in the street. And, you know, "Kill the niggers," and, and all these things and, and you just wondered what it would do to, to small kids. And so we decided to form what we called the Task Force for Positive Action. It was not a pro-busing group, it was nothing basically to do with the schools at all. We were trying to figure out what could we, this small group, do to, to prevent some of this violence in the street and we basically were just trying to understand what was triggering it, what was, what was just making life so horrible there. Because South Boston really had the same needs that Roxbury had. We had…they were poor communities and they were two communities that I don't wanna say they were pitted against each other but this is basically how it looked to people and this is what was, what was happening and, and we just were trying to see what we could do to, to prevent that violence. That was one group that I just became very, very much involved with and—

00:26:19:00

Interviewer:

And could you talk about the incident of violence that, that happened soon after a little bit of media exposure?

00:26:28:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

[sighs] Basically, I did experience quite a few situations that, that were very difficult for me personally, for my kids, and made us very fearful for our lives for, for a long period of time. Eleanor Roberts of the *Boston Herald* asked the Task Force, somehow she had heard about it, I don't, I don't know how this happened either but she heard about the group and she wanted to meet with us. We had a lot of discussion about that to decide if that would be positive or negative and, and we really didn't know. This was prior to the second phase of, of school desegregation and we said, Well, if there's anything that we can do that maybe will give a message that, number one, not all of us in South Boston are out there throwing rocks, not

all of us are out there screaming racial epithets, and that if there was anything we could do to prevent any further violence in the street for any of our kids, whether they were in South Boston or in Roxbury then we would be willing to do it. And Eleanor Roberts did a lengthy article, I guess none of us realized how long it would be but it ended up being on the front page, I believe, of the Focus Section in the *Boston Herald* in August of 1975 and that came out on a Sunday. That week, one rather warm night, I just happened to look out the window and there were about fifty people coming down the street, ranging in age, mostly male, ranging in age from probably fourteen years old to twenty-five, with beer bottles and rocks and belted my, my house and gave us one good scare. And that was over in a short, short period of time but later on, as there was more media exposure, I received threatening letters in the mail. I received many harassing telephone calls threatening my life, threatening my husband. I drove around a maroon station wagon which is now long gone, but that car had 15 separate attacks on it, if you will. One day it would be the windshield, another day it would a tire, or weeks later it would be another window. And that was very frightening, I must admit, and I did not sleep well for, for months. It was scary. Nonetheless, our decisions held. We took a lot of, we took a lot of heat for a long period of time and it was difficult, it was not easy.

00:30:01:00

Interviewer:

Why did you persist?

00:30:06:00

Tracy Amalfitano:

Because we believed that the issue was a right issue, number one. We persisted in this, and as I mentioned before, I mean, I, I got mad. I got mad because I believed that as much as people had a right to boycott, I had a right to send my kids to school, and it was my right, and why should anyone bother? If they wanted to do it, let them do it. Let them live with the fact that in ten years, their kid might turn around and say, How come you kept me out of school? I did not believe that was the right thing to do and I didn't want to have to live with that. I didn't want my kids ten years later saying, Ma, what did, you know, why did you do this? or, Why didn't you do this? I felt my kids should be in school and I sent them every day. So…

00:31:03:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:31:08:00