



Interview with **Jesus Garcia**

Date: April 15, 1989

Interviewer: Dale S. Rosen

Camera Rolls: 1096-1097

Sound Rolls: 143-144

Team: A

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize II*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

Interview with Jesus Garcia, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on April 15, 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 #1096]

[sound roll #143]

00:00:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark one.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible] OK.

00:00:19:00

Interviewer:

Describe the politics in the Latino community under the machine of the aldermen and how they ran politics here.

00:00:29:00

Jesus Garcia:

Well, before we elected Harold Washington, before our community came to be respected, we had to put up with a lot of garbage in our own communities where we were the majority. We had machine aldermen, who were very insensitive, who demonstrated, I believe, just disrespect, and, I think a lot of contempt for the fact that the neighborhood changed. For example, in this community, we had an alderman who, in spite of the community being seventy, seventy-five percent Latino, mostly Mexican, didn't even bother to have a bilingual person in his ward office, ward public service office funded by taxpayers' money. And everybody here paid taxes, very hard-working people. Not having a Hispanic, having a bilingual person, someone who could simply communicate with people. Had machine aldermen that, when you want to see him, he'd look at the poll sheet to see, not only if you are registered, but if you had probably voted for him or not. You know, how bad can you get? Situation got so bad that the alderman, my predecessor here, moved out of the community, was living in suburbia, contrary to law. That was one of the things that we had to expose in our efforts to defeat him. This is a very young community. You need to have someone who is going to be visible, who is going to provide leadership, who is going to try to convey a sense of caring to such a young community that we didn't have under machine politics. In another ward, you had an alderman who just despised that the community was changing. Made public comments, documented that if these people didn't like it, they should go back to Mexico, that any animal—

Interviewer:

Cut. What happened?

[cut]

00:02:53:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark two.

[slate]

00:02:57:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about the alderman and the lists.

00:02:59:00

Jesus Garcia:

The machine aldermen in this ward would keep a list, by precinct, of all the favorable voters and the unfavorable or unreliable voters. And, if you wanted to see the alderman, first of all, you had to be a voter, and if you wanted to try to get services, you had to be a favorable voter, or go there and make a commitment that you would in the next election vote their way. And if you didn't, if you simply went in there as a concerned citizen saying you should have these services, because you're a taxpayer, you wouldn't get them, because you didn't play ball. We also had an alderman in the neighboring ward that showed his despise for the changing neighborhood, for the Mexicans, for the Latinos, for the minorities, he made public comments that if people didn't like it here, that they should go back to Mexico, that this was America, and that people had to learn to speak English, because no one was going to bend over backwards to accommodate to them. They were not special. People would go ask for their streets to be cleaned, [beeping in background] for basic city services. Those services were considered favors that the alderman would bestow upon constituents if they behave right. It was a privilege. [beeping in background] During the campaign of '83, he made a lot of really derogatory comments about how dirty these people were, about the fact that any animal, me, mean, meaning anyone who was not like him, could run for office, but that animals couldn't get elected to office, so it was okay for you animals to run, but you're not going anywhere, because we run it here. That was the bottom line.

00:05:08:00

Interviewer:

When did people recognize the need for independent action, independent political action.

[radio frequency interference]

00:05:14:00

Jesus Garcia:

I think that sense of—

Camera crew member #2:

Hold.

Interviewer:

We getting it again?

00:05:18:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mm-hmm.

[cut]

00:05:19:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark 3.

[slate]

00:05:24:00

Interviewer:

When did people recognize the need for independent political action?

00:05:28:00

Jesus Garcia:

Well, after the '80 election and the census, as we were approaching 1982, I think people were starting to hurt from the recession, from the Reagan policies initiated by that administration, and locally there seemed to be a lot of parties going on. Jane Byrne was making Chicago a party town, a festival here, a festival there, let them eat cake type of an attitude. And, I think the people were saying, Well, this may be entertaining, but we're hurting. People were concerned about jobs. People were concerned about whether or not they could make ends meet with public aid, with unemployment compensation, a gubernatorial race was heating up in the state of Illinois, and all forecasts were that those types of policies would probably continue. I think people started to get fed up. Latinos by this time had begun to understand that they were the fastest-growing group in the city, the state, and the country. However, we didn't have any representation. In City Hall, in the state legislature, in Congress, just a few. There was also a theme going around that the '80s were going to be the decade of the Hispanic, and I think all of these things came into play, and people said, Well, if this is gonna be our decade, we'd better get moving here, before the sun goes down.

00:07:13:00

Interviewer:

Describe the attitudes of, if we told someone about Mexican Americans attitudes towards blacks, some of the racism that existed in the community prior to the campaign.

00:07:23:00

Jesus Garcia:

The relationships between Latinos and blacks in the city had never been very good. There really weren't any relations. Relationships basically were formed when Latinos would hear that a black person robbed this Latino woman, that Mexican, [car passes] some Mexican guys went and beat up a couple of black guys for no reason. There was racial polarization about the use of a park in the community. These were the types of relationships that existed. The Harold Washington campaign focused in on the economics of things. People began to realize that working people all over the country were hurting. Blacks, Latinos, whites, all working people were losing jobs, were all concerned about the future. And it was the sense that we had to fight to better the conditions of all people. I think that was the most important message that Harold Washington was sending out, that managed to cut through the racism, because everyone was concerned about making ends meet, about survival, about living in communities that were healthy economically, in terms of healthcare, in terms of jobs, in terms of dealing with the social problems. Gangs, drugs, dirty streets, and Harold Washington was talking about decency. He was talking about fairness. He was talking about reform and reprioritizing the needs of the city so that the neighborhoods could become better places for everyone.

00:09:24:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about that one particular person and her transformation.

00:09:31:00

Jesus Garcia:

The '83 campaign changed a lot of people, a lot of us. It took people from where they were at, and it elevated them to become leaders who had to look inside themselves, because they were going to be leading people, a movement. And, one example that just makes me just feel so good about how far we've come as a result of the Harold Washington campaign movement, there was a woman in, in our, in our ranks, who really didn't know black people. Knew a little bit about music, 'cause, you know, at the parties and that, but had not really been, known black people, and was fearful. Had some racist, prejudicial attitudes towards blacks, and after getting involved with the Washington campaign, after meeting Harold Washington, it just totally changed her reality, because I think he touched her as a, what a great human being, what a great black human being. Hell! What a human being, so let's leave

the black out, and just deal with that. And, she went from being, I think, fearful of black people to understanding why she had been fearful, because she didn't know them, to getting to know not only him and feeling—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Jesus Garcia:

—good about knowing him, but also wanting to extend that to them, to the people.

Interviewer:

We rolled out on the camera, but I think we got, I think we got most of it.

00:11:27:00

Jesus Garcia:

I'm trying not to do an interview, either. I, I find myself, you know, talking to you as a reporter.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Jesus Garcia:

I gotta—

[cut]

00:11:35:00

Interviewer:

Right, right, right. We're just hanging out and you're lava mic'd. [laughs]

00:11:42:00

Camera crew member #2:

OK. You've got speed.

[camera roll #1097]

[sound roll #144]

00:11:43:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

00:11:43:00

Tech:

Mark four.

[slate]

Jesus Garcia:

[clears throat]

00:11:47:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about your personal transformation from going to being an activist to being involved in electoral politics.

00:11:55:00

Jesus Garcia:

Well, it was quite an experience. 1980, we were sitting around. We were very active in, in the community, but we saw ourselves as militant, and very pure, and we struggled, and we were committed, and, you know, we made sacrifices. And we kinda felt at that time that electoral politics was establishment, selling out, compromising, perhaps, principles. On and on. And, when we recognized that, if we wanted to empower our people, we had to find some practical ways of doing it, and discovered that the right to vote had been something that people died for, people struggled for, it was a continuation of the movement to get rid of slavery. Came to appreciate that, I think, because although our numbers were there, were there, there was no power there. We were weak, so as a result of realizing those things, we had to figure out, how do we become players in this game and keep our principles? Well, you discover that, once you become a player in that arena, you have to do some things. You have to make some adjustments in your life. We had to cut our hair a little bit more, shave in certain parts of the face that we weren't accustomed to, perhaps, shaving during that time. And, we had to start buying different types of clothing and attire. So, we went through some of these changes. We

were transforming ourselves, not just on the outside but on the inside too, and sorting out all of these things, and trying to keep one thing in mind. That was to have a clear perspective about what we were doing. We didn't just wanna be politicians or political activists in the electoral arena. We were trying to figure out how we became electoral, but kept our principles, and our morals intact, and I think these changes that you saw on the outside were also going on, on the inside. We really wanted to be able to feel decent about ourselves.

Interviewer:

Let's stop for a second.

[cut]

00:14:33:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark five.

[slate]

00:14:36:00

Interviewer:

So, what happened to you during that process.

00:14:39:00

Jesus Garcia:

Well, I went through another change, another big transformation. I was a guy in the neighborhood who considered himself kinda popular, knew a lot of people. I was kind of a hip guy, I was, you know, into it. Could talk about anything that people wanted to talk about. Serious, or music, or style and fashion. And I had to go through some big changes. I always used to tell people after I became a candidate for office that, some of the biggest sacrifices that I had to make were right up here. I used to have some mean sideburns all the way down here, and pointy like boots, and I had a little goatee that I'd never shaved since it first came out. That was, that was my pride and joy. And, in 1983, I had to shave it off. I remember, took the family out, and we went out for about a, on a weekend, and I told my wife, You know, this really means a lot to me. So, we went out, so that I could shave it and not have to worry about having a white spot there, so that I could get sun on it, and put sun tan lotion, 'cause I'm kinda light-skinned. So, we did that, and we had to go and get some sport coats and ties. Matter of fact, we checked out a couple of secondhand places, because we didn't have money to buy regular, you know, suits and sport coats. So, there were a lot of changes that people went through. We were really transformed.

00:16:16:00

Interviewer:

How did the other candidates appeal to Latinos? You talked somewhat about how, how Washington did. How did the other candidates, when they came to the community, what did they do?

00:16:26:00

Jesus Garcia:

Well, in the '83 election, I guess they came with their traditional approach. The most traditional was the, the Daley approach. They set up an "Amigos for Daley" campaign. He came, and they had the Mariachi band. And, the traditional approach. [phone rings] That had been carried out by machine politicians in Chicago. [phone rings] Mayor Byrne came in with her fiestas, [phone rings] OK? She was a little more progressive. She was beyond the amigos. She was Hispanics, [phone rings] I wanna help the Hispanics out. And, she was throwing her mini festivals.

Camera crew member #2:

Let's cut, we've got a problem.

00:17:10:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

[cut]

00:17:11:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark seven.

[slate]

00:17:14:00

Interviewer:

Tell me how Byrne and Daley would come into, into the community to make an appeal for votes.

00:17:20:00

Jesus Garcia:

At the '83 campaign, we say Daley come into the community kinda like, Hey, let's go to amigo land, and have the cameras rolling, the lights burning, and we'll make the spiel, put on the hat, have the Mariachis play, and say vote for me, because I am your amigo, and when I get in, I will help my amigos. Goodbye! Jane Byrne did a little more differently. She was into festivals and, you know, Chicago's a great city, we party here. We have ChicagoFest, and we have the neighborhoodfest. So, she came in, and a little more sophisticated. She might have the Mariachi band here, but then she'd have the salsa band here, and she would go up there and be, you know, just hipper than, than, than Richie, and would say, My Hispanic friends, you know, this is the decade of the Hispanic, and when I get in, I'm going to help you. We're going to have some great parties here, because the Hispanics are really going to come of age under my administration. Harold's approach was different. Harold came into the community, not making the grand entrances, not with a Mariachi band. He came here, and he came to talk about respect. He came and reminded us that, while he was a state legislator, and then a Congressman, he was defending bilingual education. He was defending immigrants' rights and fighting, [truck passes] and, and stopping discriminatory immigration legislation in Congress and in Springfield. And, Harold was saying, You need to have your own representatives. You need to have your own agenda. I wanna take that agenda and implement it when I'm elected mayor. But in order to do that, we've got to clean up City Hall, so that everyone can be represented. We need to fight for the interests of working people everywhere. That was not a traditional approach.

00:19:29:00

Interviewer:

Can you describe the reception that Harold got when he came into the community, that one you were telling me about?

00:19:36:00

Jesus Garcia:

We had opened up an office for Harold in the ward, and it was a humble setting, it was kinda small. It used to be a beauty shop, I think. And, he came on a Sunday afternoon. It was kinda cloudy out. And, people had started to sense that this thing is really building up. People were starting to sense that, even if we didn't win the election, we're winning, here. There's a sense

of victory. We, we've already won, and man, if we pull it off, I mean, like, we have really won. Harold came. It was kinda cloudy and drizzling a little bit. We had our posters out there. There were children and little babies out there, and we had our el sol sale, the sun rises for the Latino, and then Harold Washington and the sun. Looked like a bee, bee with the, with the yellow and black, and it was a great poster, and he came out of there, there was a mob there. We don't know where all these people came from. We expected fifty, seventy-five people there. It just grew and grew. He went inside, did his little ribbon cutting. It was so packed, he couldn't cut a ribbon. You know, we had the kids there with their buttons on, and they were going wild. So, we had to take him out of the office. We paraded him for about a block and a half, and the crowd just kept getting bigger and bigger. We dunno where all—huge signs were there, and people were just ecstatic about it. We knew that we were onto something then. I mean, people just went and worked the rest of that week until [car passes] victory day.

00:21:20:00

Interviewer:

How has, how did the campaign change the Latino community?

00:21:27:00

Jesus Garcia:

I think the most important thing about the campaign—

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible] move over there [inaudible]

Interviewer:

OK, sure.

Camera crew member #1:

Start.

00:21:34:00

Interviewer:

How did the campaign change the Latino community in Chicago?

00:21:36:00

Jesus Garcia:

I think Latinos felt that, for the first time, they were seen as important people, as people who were going to be involved in shaping the future. And I think that gave people a sense of belonging. It made people wanna come out. And people started thinking about [car horn] planning and getting ready to help build the future. I think that's what that campaign was about.

Interviewer:

OK. Stop down.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:22:18:00

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