Interview with **Rhody McCoy**
Date: October 12, 1988
Interviewer: Louis Massiah
Camera Rolls: 3003-3008
Sound Rolls: 302-304
Team: C

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

Preferred Citation
Interview with Rhody McCoy, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 12, 1988 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 #3003]
[sound roll #302]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Scene two, take one.

[slate]

00:00:16:00

Interviewer:

OK. What was the situation for Black te—Black teachers, particularly Black males in, in the New York City school board in, in ’67? Particularly a Black teacher that had an aspiration for a job in, in, in the administration of the schools.

Rhody McCoy:

The history in that city, I think there were three principals.

Interviewer:

Could, could you start again? "The history in New York City..."

00:00:42:00

Rhody McCoy:

The history in New York City school system, there were three appointed principals. Two were women, and one was male. And he was in an elementary school, elementary school appointee. So, for many, many years, there were no Black principals and only one Black male. Many years. They could not pass the civil service examination.

00:01:17:00

Interviewer:

Why, why was that?

00:01:19:00

Rhody McCoy:

Well, in the beginnings, they would knock 'em out on grammar. They'd knock 'em out, if they passed the grammar parts, I think there were five parts to the examination. If they passed the grammar then they would knock them out on the interview. Speech patterns and whatever, whatever is necessary for 'em to knock 'em out.

00:01:40:00

Interviewer:

Cou—let's maybe personalize it a little bit. For you as, as, as a Black male teaching in, in the school system, what, what, what was it like for you in, in '67?

00:01:49:00

Rhody McCoy:

I took a different route. I went into the—well first I was not intending to be an educator. So I went into the "600 schools", which was the schools for the emotionally and socially maladjusted. And I became a substitute. I tried to pass the examination, I think three times, and I wasn't able to make it. The first time, I missed it on the short answer. The second time, I missed it on the interview. And I think the third time I missed it on the, on the physical. But it didn't discourage me because I was not interested in being a teacher. It was a job that I needed to support a family. But in that process, I began to meet any number of Black males

who were interested in, one, getting into the system. So, you had to be in the elementary school license or a junior high school license as a teacher for five years. And then you would be eligible to take the assistant to principal's exam. And then after five years, you could take the principal's exam. Or if it wasn't five, it was three. But it was a, a graduated years of service before you could take the examination. So, going the "600 school" route, they had no Black males at the time that I entered the system when their population was predominantly Black. So, it was easy to give me a substitute license. And then little by little, a couple people began to encourage me and suggested that I study and take a cram course, and they would help me. And so I passed the, the examination, the first exam in health education and became a teacher. And then having been in the system for two or, I think three years, and, and they shifted me from school to school where the need because of the disruptive Black students were. They began to know me. They recognized that I was a good teacher. I won a number of awards, et cetera. And I instantly began to move towards being an assistant principal, and I was given the assistant principal-ship. Didn't pass the exam but was given assistant principal-ship. And then finally, I just took the school.

00:04:00:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's, let's, let's jump ahead a little bit. When you, you, how, how were you chosen to, to come to Ocean Hill-Brownsville as, as the administrator? And, and what was your first interaction like with the community groups in Ocean Hill-Brownsville? A little bit of the story that you were telling earlier.

00:04:20:00

Rhody McCoy:

Either Father Powis, a name who I did not know, and/or a Reverend Oliver, or both, a name I did not know, called me and asked me would I be interested in working with some schools in Bedford–Stuyvesant over the summer. At that time, I was the principal, and I'll quickly define and say "acting principal", 'cause I didn't have the principal's license, but I was the principal of, of the Peter Cooper School at 82nd and West End Avenue. And I went out for an interview. The interview was conducted in Junior, Junior High School 271. And obviously I must have been the last candidate that day, and I was sitting out in the hall. And they gave me the proposal to read, and I read it. And by the time I finished reading it, I saw one person come out from the interview, and then another person came out from the interview. And I made up my mind at that point that what I read on paper and what I saw coming out as potential, and I made the assumption, directors of the summer program, there was a game being run on the people. So, they called me in. It was my turn for an interview. And I think Father Powis or Re—or Sam Wright, Assemblyman Wright, introduced me as being a principal up in upper Manhattan who had had a number of years in the "600 schools", who had worked with Milton Galamison, and they gave me all of the things but said they had asked Edith Gains who would they recommend, and she told them to talk to me because I was an aggressive, dedicated individual. And so the interview started, and I said to the

people, Let me just say this to you, a game is being run on you. This is a fraud, and it's a hoax. It's designed to detour you from what your goal is. And this is a summer program, which is the typical kind of things that they do. And one of the board members said to me—

00:06:22:00

Interviewer:

Could we, we just stop a second. Now, what do you mean? You, you saw people coming out, and, and they looked—and you knew some sort of game was being run. And, and also explain what you meant by "the proposal."

Rhody McCoy:

OK.

Interviewer:

All right, so, so you're, you're sitting in the hall. And, and what are you seeing?

00:06:38:00

Rhody McCoy:

I was reading this proposal. It was a proposal drafted by the Ford Foundation and the union for a pilot program, experimental pilot program with some six or seven schools for the summer. It was designed to see if community people could do something with their schools. Basically it, it really was tantamount to a needs assessment. That these people would be assembled over the summer, and they would sit down in some sort of organizational structure and tell what was wrong with the schools. So, once I've read it, you could see that nothing could possibly happen of any consequence from that kind of proposal and over the summer. What was significant in it, it had some dollars in it. So, that's the first thing that alerted me. But while I was sitting there, I watched a number of people leave the interview room, which I'd, which I knew was going on at that time. And I knew these people. I knew them. I knew what kind of educators they were or were not. And I knew that they were not serious, and they were looking for a summer job. I mean, I'd had the experience with them. I knew them all on a first name basis. So, I decided at that particular point if the community was in fact looking for a director, those guys were not the one. I, I didn't have any intention of being the one at that particular moment that I walked into the room and talked to them. And Clara Marshall said, said to me, she said, Who do you think you are? And she called me a few choice names and said, What makes you think you can do this job? And if you, if we, we did give you the job, what would you do with it? And I said, First thing is, everybody's gonna have to follow my directions. I'm the pro. If you hire me, I'm the pro. And I'm gonna put it together for you, but we have—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Rhody McCoy:

—to all make a commitment that we're gonna do it. And that's when it started. And what we did was we organized. Each parent representing a school.

00:08:34:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop. Roll out.

[cut]

[camera roll #3004]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

00:08:38:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark two.

[slate]

00:08:40:00

Interviewer:

OK. You—start again. You, you were outside in the hall. And, and briefly summarize the proposal, the people coming out, and Clara Marshall's response when you, when you talked with her.

00:08:52:00

Rhody McCoy:

I was given the proposal and asked to be seated out in the hall and wait for the interview. And I began to read the proposal, which was a proposal between the Ford Foundation and the teachers union for a model program for the, in the summer involving community people to assess their schools. It had no connotation as to decentralization or anything, but it was just

really to assess the schools. And they were gonna give the parents a few dollars for, for their work effort. And while I was reading the proposal, the door opened, and a candidate came out, and then another candidate came out later. And the third one came out, and I knew all of these people. And I said, If these are candidates for this job, and after having read the proposal and seeing what it meant then I knew they had worked a hoax on them and that these people were not serious about quote-unquote doing anything in terms of education of the children. While I, after I was called inside, I think, I think Assemblyman Wright introduced me and told them all my background, where I had worked, and that Edith Gaines had recommended me to come out and, and apply for this job because she knew I was an aggressive and dedicated educator. And at that point, Clara Marshall, one of the community people, at that time, there was no board. It was just a community group, asked me who did I think I was, and she called me a few choice names like a [unintelligible] red, and I'll leave the rest to the imagination. What did I think that I could do, and, and who told me I could do anything. And I told her I was the professional, and I could do the job. But they'd all have to have a commitment, and they'd have to do what the professional said. And I think at that point, Mrs. Rook was most supportive. She said, This is the kinda guy, he's talked better than the other people, and his credentials are just as good as the others. And then Ms. Bishop said, I'm—I suggest that we ask Mr. McGuire to, to do the summer program. And I said, Fine. Let me tell you again, one, I'm already a principal. I don't need this job. But I know what can be done with this opportunity if everybody is committed to doing it. And they said fine. And we organized right that very day.

00:11:20:00

Interviewer:

OK. In the fall '67, there was a strike. And, and you knew the strike was coming. Talk a little bit about the discussion to keep the schools open and how, how that came out, how the community gov—how the community groups decided to keep the schools open.

00:11:39:00

Rhody McCoy:

One of the first things that we did was to organize around the schools. That is to have at least one quote/unquote "governing board member" for each school. And so we designed petitions, election petitions and groups to go around from door to door throughout the entire community to ask; one, would they support a governing board and sup—and two, elect an e—a representative from the school, and an alt—alternate. And they had to sign a petition, and they had to sign a second petition so that there would be no conflict of interest, there would be no padding the ballot boxes and so forth. So it would be two independent people with petitions representing each school. So, we had the community heavily involved. And it, the, the question of, of being paid in money was no longer issue because there wasn't enough money to pay all these people. Now, you had both the community involved. You had a proposal on the table with the Ford Foundation and the, and the teacher's union supporting a pilot program for the summer. We got into it, and we had the elections. And a governing

board was conceived, and that governing board asked me to be the director. We fumbled around for titles, and I still recall Hattie Bishop saying, Pay him 75,000 dollars a year. And everybody said, My Lord, we'll sink the program. But with this governing board, we now set about what were we gonna do in the schools, what would be the program in the schools, what did this professional say would be the program in the schools. And we started organizing for September. The strike was being debated between the city hall and, and the teacher's union. And in a sense, it was peripheral to what we had to do. When it finally came down that it appeared that there was going to be a strike, Mr. Shanker and a couple of his assistants, I think Sandy Feldman and somebody else, came to our board to ask them to support the strike and not open the schools. At that point when they made that request of the school board, I said, I don't wanna be in this room if that decision is made because I'm 100% opposed to it, and I think you should be opposed to it. And they were. And their feeling was, Hey, we've gotten an opportunity to run our schools. Why would we now postpone it? I mean, that's not us running the schools. We are now postponing it because somebody else is asking us to.

00:14:25:00

Interviewer:

So, so then, so then what, what, what happened once the strike was called? What, what was the next step for you?

Rhody McCoy:

The school, our schools opened. Our schools opened, and we were ready to go to work. In the interim, we had to appoint some principals, and I think that's key. Over the summer, I had put out a, a call for—

Interviewer:

OK, could you just say, "In the interim, we had to appoint some principals..."

Rhody McCoy:

Some principals. Right.

Interviewer:

Just so, begin that once again.

00:14:54:00

Rhody McCoy:

In the interim, we had to appoint some principals so that when schools opened we would have a principal and a staff. And we, and we did appoint principals. We appointed Lou

Fuentes to be the first Puerto Rican principal appointed in the city. Dave Li, the first Chinese principal in the United States, and Percy Jenkins to be the junior high school principal, and Mr. Harris to be a junior high school principal. And we also appointed, I'm fumbling for the guy's name, a Jewish principal who Miss Hanson thought was an excellent principal, and I concur.

00:15:35:00

Interviewer:

OK. How did you keep the schools open in '67? How, how did you keep them, even though there was a teacher strike going on?

00:15:43:00

Rhody McCoy:

At that time, two or three things happened. We didn't lose many teachers out to the strike. For, for whatever reason, some of the teachers who had seen what was taking place over the summer I guess felt maybe their jobs might be in jeopardy. And so they came back in at the beginning. And then we manned it by parents. Parents actually came in and took charge of classrooms. That lasted, I don't know, maybe a month or so. And s—s—teachers began coming back to us.

00:16:27:00

Interviewer:

OK. What was the process for appointing new principals to the school? How, how did that work? And also the process for appointing new teachers. Could you just describe that?

Rhody McCoy:

Well, the first thing we had to do is agree that it should be the right—

Interviewer:

OK, could you just say, "The process of appointing principals and teachers"—

00:16:44:00

Rhody McCoy:

OK, the, the, the process for appointing teachers and principals or, or the administrators was based on the community feeling that it had a right to appoint those who taught their children and appoint those who would set the educational tone for their children. Since we had

opposed the strike, we had then become a public issue that this district is operating when all the other school districts are closed. And so it became a strike issue. Close 'em down, or we'll continue to strike, that kinda thing. So, in an effort to deal with that, they allowed, that is the school system, the, the parent school system, the New York City school system, allowed us to appoint these principals using the state criteria, which is quite different from the city. And so it allowed the governing board members to select the principals. Now, what they did was they interviewed every candidate as a group first, and then the particular board member for the school that we were, or I was making the assignment for that person would also inter—interview 'em. And if they concurred, they were selected. When they began to interview for teachers, they set up a, a gymnasium and put tables around, and brought in all of the governing board members and as many parents who were interested in talking to perspective teachers. And they, they did it well. They did it smartly. They knew that you had to have a license, so they knew anybody coming to teach would have a license or could get a license. So, that was not a criteria. They wanted to know what they would teach their youngsters, did they like children, were they afraid of Black children, would they come to their homes, could they come to their homes. They, they asked the kind of mundane and important questions to the parents because once the parents has select them then they counted on us professionals being able to do the job. And obviously they're gonna hold me as the, at that time then called the unit administrator, responsible for the educational program.

00:18:55:00

Interviewer:

OK. Could you talk more about the role of the parents and the community in Ocean Hill-Brownsville and what, what sort of activities were they carrying out? And were there any unusual community characters now in the schools that normally would not have been in the schools before?

00:19:09:00

Rhody McCoy:

That's, that's a big question. Yes. The, the excitement, and the fun, and the joy begin to blossom when you talk about the parents being involved. What, what did they do? Well, first the parents went in the schools. They, they, they set a tone so you didn't have any such thing as disruptive children. OK?—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Rhody McCoy:

—We put up libraries, started libraries.

00:19:37:00

Interviewer:

Let's, let's just stop.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Ran out. Ran out.

Interviewer:

OK. All right, so we'll just—

[cut]

[camera roll #3005]

[sound roll #303]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:19:41:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark three.

[slate]

00:19:51:00

Interviewer:

OK, how, once again, what was the role of the parents with, with this new experiment? What, what was their role in the school? What were some of the activities, and did you see people from the community in the schools who, who you wouldn't normally see before?

00:20:05:00

Rhody McCoy:

The, the parents, when they manned the classrooms during the strike, their eyes opened. Their hearts opened. And they began to understand or believe, or break that myth that there

was something mystical about teaching and that they were qualified. Because you had many of these parents who were either high school graduates or college personnel. Like Miss Hanson, she went to college, so she, and, and some of her friends. So, you had professional people who were single parents or who were parents in the community who now quote/unquote "came into the classrooms" and began teaching, wanted to begin to be actively involved in this process. Now, that's one level of parents. The governing board members would assemble, and I would have to present to them every single program that I wanted to put into the school, give a rationale fo—for it, talk about its cost, its, and the personnel involved, what they anticipated out—it was unbelievable. Because in my teaching career, I had never run into such a situation. I walked into the classroom, and I taught what I plea—please, et cetera. Here, I had to answer to the community for it. What else did they do? They began to operate the libraries because we didn't have librarians. So, we set up libraries, and they operated libraries. Then about six or seven of them became involved with the teacher's, college professors. Dennis Littky in particular was a graduate student, and he designed a test, a reading test if you will—these are parents—that at one point the board admitted that their test was better. In addition to that, they administered the test. They wrote the results on a piece of paper, and they wrote the remedy, the solutions to the problems identified by the test, and sent them to the parents with their name on 'em and did the follow up. These are parents of a very poor, downtrodden, maligned community. Community folk other than those who were in the schools. You heard me talk earlier about Paul Chandler.

00:22:34:00

Interviewer:

Just say that, just don't, don't refer back. Just say, "Paul Chandler."

00:22:37:00

Rhody McCoy:

Paul Chandler, a community, a young man in the community, a student, along with eight or ten other community folk would patrol our community every day. They'd pick up all of the young people who were late coming to school or trying to play the hook and kept the drugs out. And came into the schools and talked to the youngsters about staying in school, the value of education, and set some role models for 'em, and brought role models in like Eubie Blake and others. Everybody in that community began to play a role in the schools. The school became the focal point of the community.

00:23:17:00

Interviewer:

Was, was there, you had talked briefly before about an, an excitement and, and a—

00:23:22:00

Rhody McCoy:

Oh, ***it was a joy to go to a board meeting. Not only were the board members present, but the community folk were sitting around. And they had as much input as the board members. And it was always on a positive note. How do we help the youngsters?*** Let me take a quick illustration. We must have had seven experimental programs or new programs, if you will, in that district. And they only could come in by the parents, collectively by the board agreeing to it. The school representative would acknowledge the program and take it back to the parents of that school, and the parents had to approve the program. So, you didn't have anything going on in that school or those schools that the parents were; one, not in, aware of or not knowledgeable about, and two, didn't support. So, you had a, you had a, you know, that usual thing that they say that you need parent support. And if you have a good home and good parent support you're gonna get good education. Well, we got it. We were able to get and enthusias—the entire community came together around the schools.

00:24:32:00

Interviewer:

OK. How were the teachers transformed? How were they interacting with the parents? How, were they, was it difficult? What, what was the feeling? Were they happy?

Rhody McCoy:

[sighs]

Interviewer:

What, what was going on?

00:24:41:00

Rhody McCoy:

If, if memory serves me correct, let me talk about that in two or three different ways. I think at first the teachers were sort of, Let's watch and see. Kinda suspicious because now, you know, that with the appointment of these principals and new teachers, it put their potential promotions in jeopardy. Or it put the system that they had previously adhered to in jeopardy. 'Cause if you suddenly now can use the state system rather than the New York City system of appointing teachers through that examination and appointing principals through the state system, they had to work to show that they were good performers, that they were competent.

00:25:28:00

Interviewer:

Could, could you just say that again? And, and, and rather than saying state, could you just say, ex—explain what that system was as opposed to the New York City one?

Rhody McCoy:

The, the New York state—

Interviewer:

I mean the teachers were, were wary.

Rhody McCoy:

The teachers were concerned about—

Camera Crew Member #3:

00:25:42:00

Did you start again?

00:25:44:00

Interviewer:

Sure, OK.

00:25:46:00

Rhody McCoy:

The teachers were concerned about ho—the promotional system and the appointment process because in the district, we had appointed teachers from the—using the New York State criteria, which was simply a degree, so many hours in certain subject matters, and approval by the local entity who was in charge. And in this instance, it would be the governing board. So, a teacher seeing a person move from teacher to principal would wanna do and perform well because this is the best opportunity in the world for them to get promoted. Because if you did the civil service, which is New York City, they have a list. And that list had ten years to run. So, you saw quick chances of; one, promotion, OK, two, it, it scared them a little bit because here were parents evaluating teachers and professionals for the first time. They had never been in that situation. They were always judged by another professional. And in this instance, they were judged by parents. And, again, the two systems were now put in jeopardy. So, if you'd look at both the promotion of the teachers and their opportunities, they suddenly now are saying, I'm caught between wanting to stay with this program, for personal

and professional reasons, as against having to adhere to the union criteria. And it was on that basis that when the union said, We will pull you out of the schools, that they went out.

00:27:25:00

Interviewer:

OK. When was the first attack against the experiment from the union? When did the union first, you, that, that you felt sort of verbally or, or publicly attacked the experiment?

00:27:39:00

Rhody McCoy:

[sighs] My answer is gonna be very jaundiced, because the proposal itself that the union sanctioned was very deliberate to sabotage any effort by a group of community people to do anything about their school. Just the proposal itself. And it was very clear in that proposal that they anticipated that the, the present junior high school principal or the principal who was there, the junior high school principal who was there, was gonna be the director of the program. So, I'm, I'm saying already that the union had sharpened its teeth. The strike was incidental, so the strike was just the next step in the process when we didn't go along with them, bingo. They said, no. Now, after the strike was settled, and they came back, they wanted all their teachers back teaching. Sure, we'll take 'em back. They'll go through the interview process. Well, they weren't gonna do that because then you would destroy the union. So, that became a, a fight, the issue of protecting the union and what the union had. So, they never intended for this pilot program, for whatever it was, to have any meaning. And the way we had designed it and implemented it, it became obvious to them that they had to fight it from the beginning to the end. But they, they say all along, Hey, no, no, no. We, we weren't fighting. We'll put our teachers back in the room. Well, if you're already admitting that you've got a governing board which the parent New York City school system and the superintendent acknowledged that you have a governing board, and, and the history was that they had said it was an illegal election. And finally they said it was a legal election. To now let the union come in and just place its teachers back in, obviously they were still fighting the process.

00:29:33:00

Interviewer:

OK. Weren't there teachers on the governing board? And, and how did they get off if, if they were on there originally?

00:29:40:00

Rhody McCoy:

If memory serves me correct, there were two at large teachers on the governing board. In the original group, I think there were more teachers. I think the union had assigned several teachers to stay with the program while it was being developed over the summer. But then when they had the governing board elections, I think the, they left a space open for two teachers. I, I think one was Phyllis Waxman, and I can't think of the other person's name. But they stayed with the program. I don't think they had any—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Rhody McCoy:

—anger, or any distrust, or any misgivings about the program. I think they were more conscious of union because, face it, we didn't have the money to pay 'em. They, they were paid by New York City school system. And even though New York City school system is saying you're legitimate, they still had the control over the dollar. They sort of blended in. They, they were not, not a problem.

00:30:40:00

Interviewer:

OK. What happened around the death of Martin Luther King in, in April?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sorry, we just ran out again.

Interviewer:

All right. We need to stop for a second.

[cut]

[camera roll #3006]

Camera Crew Member #1:

And marking.

00:30:47:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark four.

[slate]

00:30:50:00

Interviewer:

OK. Around the death of Martin Luther King, what, what happened in the schools in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, and what, what was your decision as a result of whatever happened within the schools in Ocean Hill?

00:31:05:00

Rhody McCoy:

If memory serves me correct, the death of Martin Luther King brought two reactions that ultimately ended up in us closing the schools for the day. The students came to us and asked to close the schools down. And, and, because there was a lot of unrest, and nobody wanted to study. They wanted to talk about why and what had happened to a peaceful guy who was trying to do something. And then a number of the governing board members also approached and talked about closing the schools down. And so with these two bodies coming together, they came and asked that I, you know, pass out a, a word to close the schools down in commemoration for Martin Luther King's death, and which we did.

00:31:58:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop one second.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, mark.

00:32:01:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Scene two, take five.

[slate]

00:32:03:00

Interviewer:

Great. OK. Once again, I mean, how did the death of Martin Luther King, did, did that affect the experiment with, did that change the mood within the schools? And, and what was your reaction as, as an administrator?

00:32:21:00

Rhody McCoy:

Well, I think it, the death of Martin Luther King impacted on us in different ways. First of all, it was, it was a very sad moment. And then secondly, the students reacted because here we're talking about obeying the laws, and, you know, being good citizens, and so forth. And here is a gentleman who all over the United States is talking about peace, and, and, and talking for the benefit of mankind, and somebody assassinates him. That bothered 'em. And then when they thought and heard that it was a Caucasian who had assassinated him, it made it even worse because some of the subtle reactions were, you know, Whites had been running the school system and doing the X, Y, and Z. And, and we had sorta gotten away from that. We had gotten into education, so this sorta brought it back up again. Among the adults, it was more discouraging. That, that here we had lost a, a spokesman, a, a pathfinder. And I think for a while, it put a veil over the, over the, over the experiment. That we didn't have for about I guess two months any enthusiasm. As a matter of fact, I recall we cancelled board meetings. It was just a, a, just a veil. A very sad time.

00:33:47:00

Interviewer:

OK. Could you talk a little bit about this, this student association, this, this emerging group of Afri—African American Student Association. And, and what impact and what, what work they did within the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school.

00:34:00:00

Rhody McCoy:

I think that there were really three different groups of students, but let me stay with the ones that were most active. In Junior High School 271, you had Al Vann, who was the president of the Black Teachers Association, and Les Campbell, and a number of other Blacks, I, I would like to call them for another set of reasons Black militants. Those who were committed to educating the youngsters, who were committed to Black youth. Those who were committed to Black males. And they spent a lot of time trying to get these youngsters to see the need for an education and to take a place in the society. So, they engaged themselves in a whole host of, of what I would call very worthwhile community activities. As I say, they chaperoned the little youngsters. They, they, they stayed after school in, in meetings with Les Campbell and not the recreation of basketballs, and, and racing, and running up and down. They, they spent

time in their studies, in Black studies. They did a number of things. They set up a, a food program in the community. And they also took that step forward and met with the Hispanic youngsters, and they began to do food programs together in the community. So, the, the, what used to be kids hanging out, not going to school, snatching pocketbooks in the subways, doing all kinds of antisocial things had suddenly materialized into a very healthy community. I can recall White teachers who previously would, would come for an interview and said they would get mugged in the subway. They were afraid to go to the subway. Well, these youngsters would w—escort them to the subways. They're not, not, nobody told 'em. They would just be waiting for the teachers when they came. Black and White teachers. So, there was a more positive hope. I'm, I'm gonna use the word hope. Let me go back quickly and touch with Martin Luther King. I recall very vividly that some of the teachers showed up for the after-school program, and these two young men., one I'd said, one I believe was probably, in my judgement, one of the finest young men I've ever met in my life—and unfortunately I don't remember his name, but I see him very vividly—accosted these teachers.

00:36:26:00

Interviewer:

Could you start again? Could, could you just start again? And don't say that you don't remember his name. Just go ahead.

00:36:32:00

Rhody McCoy:

The, the incident had to do with Martin Luther King's death. And these youngsters came to me because there were teachers who showed up for work after school. And these youngsters asked me to please close the after-school program down, as well as the day school program down because these young, these teachers would be getting paid when there's nobody, no students there. And they should be out supporting and having the same kind of feeling about Martin Luther King's death. So, these kids were indeed community minded, as well as having a new look at themselves in terms of what their education goals were. It was a pleasure.

00:37:18:00

Interviewer:

OK. Could you talk about the slow pullout of some of the establishment forces and what, the, the Ford Found-Foundation's pullout of Ocean Hill-Brownsville. Their, their decision to not support it at the same level you were expecting. And, and then finally the school board's pulling out of support. And—

00:37:34:00

Rhody McCoy:

Well, there's, there's so many dimensions of withdrawal of various entities. I don't believe the Ford Foundation ever pulled out. This is my personal version. For instance, I'm sure that they continued to fund Dr. Kenneth Clark's organization, I think it was called MARK. And Dr. Clark was instrumental in working with us in Ocean Hill-Brownsville for a long time. He did not have or enjoy the, the welcome that he should have because the community was suspicious of, of, of researchers, let's just use that word, even though he was Black. And that Ken Clark was a, I guess an integrationist, for lack of a better word. So, also Mario Fantini personally worked with Bernie Donovan to help us move Boys High into the complex. So, even though dollars weren't forthcoming, people, i.e. the Ford Foundation representative Mario Fantini, stayed with the program. So, there, there's some misconceptions that people pulled out. There were two or three lawyer's groups, legal groups, Mort Stavis' group that never came in with, with, with a, with a price tag on them. They just came in to participate and helped us. The school system, the Bernie Donovan's group pulled out. And, and I don't wanna, I, it's impossible for me to tell you why they pulled out. But I think they pulled out under pressure from the union. They had to see the experiment fold. And what was happening was that they were moving towards this quote/unquote "decentralization."

00:39:22:00

Interviewer:

OK. And, and let's jump forward. In, in May of, of '68, the transfers began, began of the, of the 19 teachers. How was that decision made to, to transfer that, the teachers? What was that process? And, yeah, could you just talk about that process? How that came about.

00:39:38:00

Rhody McCoy:

It would take a long time to tell you the horror stories that, when the governing board came on board suddenly became an issue. For example, there was one instance where a girl was held on a, a hot radiator and burned. The teacher said of course it was an accident, he, he was trying to restrain the girl. There was an instance where one teacher was an insurance agent, and he would go lock himself up in a room and take care of his insurance business. There was an absentee principal who had been absent for seven years. I mean, the horror stories can keep going. So, when the time came for the governing board to begin to look at its teaching staff, it did not want certain people back into the district. And they had to find a reason. These ex—these examples that I gave you were legitimate reasons that the parents now had an opp—opp—opportunity to tell them, Hey, don't come back. But that was already cushioned by the system and the union. They had a very clear statement in the proposal that if any teacher did not want to participate in the experiment they could ask to be removed, and they would be removed. It was clear. Send them, and if, if in fact we did not want a teacher, we could send the teacher down to the Board of Education for reassignment. And there're all kinds of horror stories behind that. So, when these parents decided that these were the

teachers, who were still doing the same things that they had done, shouldn't be in the district teaching their children, they brought 'em to me. I think the first list was about twenty-one or so names. ***And we sat down and talked to the governing board member of the school, and the principal of the school, and we came to the conclusion that these people were not gonna work well in the system. And they had also demonstrated that they were opposed to the experiment.*** They weren't teaching, and, and a variety of other things. So, the governing board made the decision collectively based on the recommendation of myself and the individual board member—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

00:41:49:00

—to ask those teachers to go back to the, to the, to the central headquarters for reassignment.

00:41:54:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop down.

[cut]

[camera roll #3007]

[sound roll #304]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:41:59:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark six.

[slate]

00:42:02:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, the, the teachers are, are transferred. Can you, can you just talk us through very briefly the, the strike in May of ’68 after the transfers were put, it was recommended that these nineteen teachers be transferred? What happened next?

00:42:19:00

Rhody McCoy:

The teachers, some of the teachers felt that they, they were being unduly criticized in, in being asked to leave. And the union said that we had not followed due process, and therefore it was not legal or appropriate for us, or professional for us to remove these teachers. And then I think the, there was another little glitch in here that when you brought these teachers up, we asked them to go down to the board for reassignment, which was under the regulations and the rules of the, of the proposal. They felt or at least Dr. Donovan approached and said, If you let them go one at a time, we can absorb them without any problems. Well, this is not the function of Bernie Donovan any longer. If you acknowledged that it is a legally constituted board under the rules, and it made its decision, who are you to decide. Well, that brought the union down. And the union said, Either you take these teachers back, or we strike. And so we refused, and they pulled all the teachers out. And then they went city wide again. So, here we are back in the limelight again of being cast as the monsters doing illegal things, and well that made everybody afraid at that particular point.

00:43:49:00

Interviewer:

When did, when did the issue of antisemitism first come into the picture? When was that first brought up, and how was that brought up?

00:43:55:00

Rhody McCoy:

Well, I thi—[pause] I suspect that it, it was, it was a, if I’m talking, the reason I’m hesitating, because the incident of Les Campbell reading a poem gave, and if, if I take some of the quotations of people like Ken Clark and them, you ga—you just made Les Campbell the best paid friend of Al Shanker. That you, you handed him what he needed by reading the poem. So, the, the, the incident of the poem was not important. It just happened to be the thing that was publicized that he could grasp on. I think the question was engendered by the union in term, in terms of talking to is constituents. And meaning that the people, the Jewish people of the city of New York and probably the state of New York, that we were destroying the union. We were destroying civil service. We were destroying all this. Because on any number of speaking engagements that I was asked to appear before, the question of—the Jewish people would ask me, why are we trying to put them in the ovens. Because the overwhelming percentage of teachers of that nineteen were obviously Jewish because that’s what you had in New York City. So, they were saying, Why are you destroying, and taking these postures

against Jews? So, I'm saying the subtlety was always there in the White community. We, we weren't paying any, any attention. And when I say White, I mean the Jewish community. And so when the, the incident came with Les Campbell, it helped Shanker unify the Jewish community behind him because up to that point, I had more Jewish kids coming into our school district while the schools were on strike coming into our district going to school.

00:45:53:00

Interviewer:

Now, could you, could you talk a little bit about what the plans, and during the summer of '68, when you knew there was gonna be a strike, a-again in the fall of '68. You knew that the teachers were gonna walk. What were your plans with the, the community board?

00:46:08:00

Rhody McCoy:

Well, we had built up some very good relationships with the colleges in the area. And we knew that if the teacher were gonna go out, we'd have to have teachers. And so we recruited teachers. And I think we recruited some 500 teachers that came in from Ivy League schools, and, and local colleges who had heard about the experiment, who read about it. Some of the college professors who were in charge of student teachers had talked about it and lectured about it. It was in, in fact the true educational experience for many of them. And so we set this process up to go and hire replacements. And of course we had to get permission from the school system to pay 'em. So, we figured the best way to do it is to go ahead and hire the people. Remember, we are a legally constituted board even though they don't wanna admit it. But we were, so we hired the teachers and put 'em and processed 'em so that the system had to pay them. Now, the teachers were out. Now we had all of these new teachers, and you obviously must know that they were all White. There were very few Black teachers, period. So, our question was never—and, and by the way, the parents interviewed 'em the same way that they'd interviewed previously, so there was never a question with us of Black versus White. It was how do we get the best education for our young people.

00:47:34:00

Interviewer:

OK. Was there ever any possibility of a truce with the UFT by the time we got to the fall of '68? What, do you think there, was there ever any way that the UFT was gonna support the experiment by this, by the fall of '68? Was there any possibility for peace?

00:47:47:00

Rhody McCoy:

Oh, I'm, I'm sure that there were several possibilities. One would be to get rid of me. If, if I would step down, they would support the project. There was no question about it. If we would take the teachers back and let them have their regular assignments, there would be no problem. If we'd get rid of Les Campbell and Al Vann, there'd be no problem. If we, if we did not appoint any more principals the, using the state system and go back. If we administered standardized—there were all kinds of opportunities by the union or offers from the union, and, and let me add that the union of supervisors were right in bed with, with the teachers, teacher's union. So, yeah, there were all kinds of opportunities for them to support the project if, if we'd've done any or all of these combinations of things. But then what would you have had? You wouldn't have had a project. You woulda had a shell, or you'd have some semblance of a project. So, they made offers and overtures religiously, so, the supervisors union as well as the teacher's union.

00:48:50:00

Interviewer:

OK. The, the incident where you, where you marched across the Brooklyn Bridge, how did that come about? What, just describe that event in the fall of '68.

00:48:58:00

Rhody McCoy:

Mayor Lindsay had, I believe to this day, Mayor Lindsay was in support of, of the experiment 'cause I think he saw some good things. And I think some of the people like McGeorge Bundy and them who had been out, Roy Wilkins, the people who had been out and had told him we were dead serious about educating. And we, we had done some miraculous things. As a matter of fact, after the experiment was over, they tested all these youngsters who we refused to give the standardized tests. But the system tested them, and they tested out, blew, blew the scale. So, they saw good things happening. And what we were going to do was to go over and, and, and demonstrate in, in front of Mayor Lindsay's office the support of the community to continue the process. Because we had gone through the, the, I think at that time we had gone through the trusteeship, or the trusteeship was over. So, then the, the other part of that was they, they wanted to bring, I know his name now, Mr. Bloomfeld. That was the ex-principal of 271 back. And if you recall, they, they—

00:50:13:00

Interviewer:

Let's, let's just stop. Can we stop the film for a second? OK.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Take, take seven.

00:50:16:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:50:19:00

Interviewer:

OK. Briefly could you just describe the event of, of marching across the Brooklyn Bridge? What, what brought you to, what, what started it?

00:50:30:00

Rhody McCoy:

The, the community felt that given the attacks by the union that we had best go over to City Hall and, and demonstrate to City Hall and the officials that the community was in support of the program despite all of the headaches. And so that was orchestrated to walk over the bridge. Actually we, we did not walk over the bridge. We went down and met at City Hall. And from that spontaneously some of the parents, I'm thinking of Miss Hanson and Miss Torres suggested that, and Reverend Oliver that we, to demonstrate for the city that we walk over the bridge. Then when we cross the bridge, you'd be right in front of, of Board of Ed headquarters. You'd just walk over the bridge to the Board of Ed headquarters and take this entire community and show both the mayor and the school system that they were in support of, of the program and didn't want it to change. And then we left the Board of Education and walked back to Bedford-Stuyvesant.

00:51:30:00

Interviewer:

OK. What, what mistakes, what mistakes were made by the board, by the community board as far as you can see? And what were some of the, some of the mistakes that, that you as an administrator may have made in, in, in the administering of Ocean Hill-Brownsville?

00:51:45:00

Rhody McCoy:

I, to the best of my recollection, I don't think there were any mistakes made by the, the board. You, ***you've got to understand that these were community people who were disenfranchised with the system, who were nameless and faceless, who had never been incorporated and included even though their children were mandated to go to school. For them to take on that responsibility was tremendous.*** And they did a herculean job. The problems, and I think we made as professionals and me included, was that we had been in the system too long. We were, we were imbued with the bureaucratic system. We had to do things according to certain criteria, which we had learned or had been subjected to in our careers. And we didn't have the resources to do it independently. So, we really in a sense depended on the school system. We did not have the kind of coalitions that a union would have or that the non-Black community had. We had only our own resources, and they were just meager.

00:52:46:00

Interviewer:

OK. Stop film for one—

[cut]

[camera roll #3008]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:52:51:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark eight.

[slate]

00:52:53:00

Interviewer:

OK. What, what, what I wanted to get a sense of was the difference for the students between school as it was prior to Ocean Hill-Brownsville and then afterwards. And, and also what difference it was for the parents. What, what you saw, that blossoming that you, you began to speak of earlier.

Rhody McCoy:

[sighs] As I see it unfolding in front of me now, the teachers who are now parents, come to school sharp and dressed, committed to—

Interviewer:

OK, let's just start again. May, maybe "The parents who are now teachers..."

Rhody McCoy:

Parents who are now teachers.

Interviewer:

All right, let's, let's just start once again.

00:53:35:00

Rhody McCoy:

The, the parents who are now teachers came to school beautifully dressed, and sharp, and ready to take on and assume this professional mantle. And now these youngsters who had previously seen ninety percent of the teachers White are now looking at their parents, or the parents of their friends, who are teaching. So, you already had a change in the learning atmosphere, that these youngsters now are awed by their parents and their parents' friends or other adults in the community, who they never saw as teachers, now see not only the, the, the parents in the school, but see them as teachers. And this new role model was just fantastic. As I said, no more hooky. No more truant playing. We, just everybody was coming to school. Now, the parents took this seriously because when they were manning the classes at the beginning, they began to see and understand that they had something to contribute, that they were just as capable of teaching their youngsters as the teachers were. And with some guidance and some help from the professionals, bingo. They could do it. And so they got involved in all dimensions of teaching, the research, the program evaluations, the teacher evaluations. It was a phenomenal situation. Everybody was happy. Everybody was coming to school. And even though we were in different schools, we came together regularly. Not by mandate, i.e. a board meeting, but out of common cause. We want to talk about libraries and how we could get libraries done. We'd talk about Black studies programs. And we'd talk about not having or the extended classroom when we'd send youngsters down to the courts, et cetera. So, the youngsters now see an entirely different [plane flies over] educational arena. They weren't playing hooky. They weren't disruptive in class. Their parents were sitting there. Their parents were making 'em study. And they wanted to study. Their parents were there in the schools, where heretofore you'd say the parents are not in the school. They are now in the schools in mass.

00:55:40:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's just stop for a second. Is that plane OK?

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Scene two, take nine.

[slate]

00:55:45:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Good. And five and four.

00:55:52:00

Interviewer:

OK. I know that, that you, you knew Malcolm X and had, had visited him on, on, on a few occasions. Could you talk about how your philosophy of education, what was your, what was your philosophy of education and how that was affected by your, your meetings with, with Malcolm X, and the responsibilities of education in the Black community?

00:56:15:00

Rhody McCoy:

Well, I had an idea about education, and my idea was very simple. That schools were not there to teach the skills, i.e. reading, writing, arithmetic. But to present or prepare a learning environment where youngsters would be educated. That they would be able to read sufficient materials, hear two or three different points of view, and be able to think for themselves, and make intelligent decisions based on things that were important to them in their lives. When I talked to Malcolm and had the occasion to talk to Malcolm, as well as Herman Ferguson and, and Wilton Anderson, we had the same idea. It was not skills we were interested in, because the materials that they were giving our youngsters wasn't worth the time of day. It wasn't gonna do anything for their lives, i.e. all the distortions in the textbooks about Blacks and, and American Indians. All that kinda foolishness. So, what we were looking at is how do we educate our youngsters. And, and Malcolm's posture, that's what he said from day one. Wake up, and let's learn. Get, get educated. Not, not talking about skills or reading and writing.

00:57:41:00

Interviewer:

OK. Stop.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, here we go. Marker.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Scene two, take ten.

00:57:48:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Now, there's ten fingers. Marker.

[slate]

[slate]

00:57:51:00

Interviewer:

OK. How did, how did it feel that day walking across the Brooklyn Bridge with, with all those people?

00:57:59:00

Rhody McCoy:

I think I had about two or three emotions at the same time. The first one was probably the proudest moment in my life. That that many people felt; one, that I had the job or was doing the job, and two, were committed to the education of the Black student. It was something. And they were, they had a song they were chanting. I don't remember all of the words. But it was a support song. Secondly, we had been told that there were FBI agents in the crowd, and so we began to have some other kinds of apprehensions. C—not FBI but CIA agents in the crowd and that they were gonna arrest a few people or do some things to people. And so I had that kind of fear. And then finally I had the, I guess the happy feeling. That if you look at that picture, there are a lot of students there. A lot of students. Boy. [laughs]

00:59:02:00

Interviewer:

OK. Once again, just, and just say, “Walking across the Brooklyn Bridge...” or, you know, that, just begin it once again.

00:59:08:00

Rhody McCoy:

Walking across the Brooklyn Bridge was in my judgement the greatest moment of my life. That I was amongst the people who felt I was doing a good job and supported it, and who were committed to the education of Black kids. And secondly that there were just so many youngsters there. I mean a lot of youngsters. Cheering and orderly, and in support of, of the program and the project, and their parents. And then of course the, we were kind of apprehensive and had some fear because we had heard that there were gonna be some trouble. There were agents, CIA agents or whatever they were, and they were gonna create some problems. And we were sort of nude because the police refused to escort us across the bridge.

00:59:58:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop.

[cut]

[end of interview]

01:00:03:00