

Interview with **Renault Robinson**

Date: April 14, 1989

Interviewer: Madison Davis Lacy, Jr.

Camera Rolls: 1092-1095

Sound Rolls: 142-143

Team: A

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

Preferred Citation

Interview with Renault Robinson, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on April 14, 1989 for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #1092]

[sound roll #142]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark one.

[slate]

00:00:15:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about your relationship with Harold. When did you first meet him? How did you get to know him? [inaudible]

00:00:19:00

Renault Robinson:

Well, Harold was a south side legislator, and I lived on the south side all my life. And we met because I needed someone who was Black who would sponsor a bill to help us attack the issue of police brutality throughout the state. We were really interested in Chicago. Harold volunteered, knowing full well that he would be castigated by Daley and his forces for doing so. And we got very close during that period. This was the middle of the '60s. We used to meet with each other at his south side office, at his home in Springfield. He was a very helpful person, independent guy, and felt that what we were doing was right.

00:01:08:00

Interviewer:

You guys knew each other all that time, and you, and you really, you got to like one another, didn't you? I mean—

Renault Robinson:

Quite a bit 'cause we got to know each other.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

00:01:16:00

Renault Robinson:

And to that extent, I felt he was a mentor in that he could tell me a lot about the system. And he came in the Democratic Party. He came up as a machine politician. He had been involved all of his adult life. It's all he did was be a politician. That was his primary job. His other jobs were just ancillary to being a Democratic politician.

00:01:41:00

Interviewer:

Now, you were with him, too, in the 1977 campaign, right?

00:01:44:00

Renault Robinson:

Absolutely. During that campaign—well, actually it, it, it was a learning situation. We wanted to know what would it really take for a Black to run a citywide campaign. What would it take? What did you have to do? How did you develop the support? How did you handle the press? How did you get people to assist, and help, and participate? How did you

raise money? We felt that the situation was one where we could train. We knew we couldn't win because Blacks were not prepared, but we didn't know how much they weren't prepared. That campaign taught us what we needed to know and paved the way for '82, '83.

00:02:27:00

Interviewer:

All right, we'll stop down.

[cut]

00:02:30:00

Camera crew member #1:

And marking.

00:02:31:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark two.

[slate]

00:02:32:00

Interviewer:

Bilandic is now the mayor. Tell me about the snow.

00:02:35:00

Renault Robinson:

Well, we started with what was no more than a normal snow. And after a while, there was an unusual accumulation. We had what you call a snow command in Chicago, which was very efficient. If Daley didn't teach anybody anything else it was be sure and get the snow up and be sure and keep the streets clean. ***Bilandic went on TV and made a lot of promises about what was gonna happen with the snow because it was unusually hard. It had paralyzed neighborhoods. It had closed schools. It had made transportation impossible.*** However, the biggest snafu in the world occurred when decisions started to be made by department heads and people running agencies without coordination with the mayor's office. For one, they decided to skip all the stops on the rapid transit line and go all the way downtown and pick up White people and take them to work. Well, obviously this infuriated the Black

community. Bilandic went on TV and promised to clean all of the school yards out, the areas where kids played, so neighborhood people could park in the cleared school lots, which were in every neighborhood, and therefore be able to get out the next morning and get to work. However, they did it in the White neighborhoods and didn't ever get around to doing it in the Black. And there were one snafu after another. Jane Byrne was like, had no chance to win anything. But after these snafus, people became so incensed, so angry. And then on election day, it turned out that election day was a beautiful day. The snow stopped. The sun shined for the first time [laughs] in weeks. And everybody rushed to the poles to register their disappointment with the system. And the system was crushed. Albeit fifteen or sixteen thousand votes. But yet and still, Jane Byrne had won. We, we termed her snowflake. Her acceptance speech was made before total strangers 'cause she had no committee. She had no workers. She had nothing. But everybody flowed into her headquarters the—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Renault Robinson:

—night of the election after it became apparent she was winning.

00:04:56:00

Camera crew member #2:

We're at rollout.

Interviewer:

Where did we go out?

Camera crew member #2:

Her acceptance speech.

Interviewer:

That's OK. That's fine.

00:05:03:00

Interviewer:

This question now, I've got a lot of material about what went down with the school board appointments, the CHA, and a lot of her insults. I need some of the juice. Like—

00:05:15:00

Renault Robinson:

OK, I'll give you some.

00:05:16:00

Interviewer:

All right. [laughs]

[cut]

[camera roll #1093]

00:05:17:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark three.

[slate]

00:05:19:00

Interviewer:

It's the Byrne administration. The insults are starting. Tell me about it. Give me some—

00:05:24:00

Renault Robinson:

Well, everything was tumultuous. Day after day, different kinds of things were happening between the CHA, the school board, and etcetera. One day, Jane called me into her office and said, Renault, you are attacking the guy at CHA, Swibel, and I need him. Back away. Leave him alone. I said, I can't. I said, This guy is causing the Black community and you one hell of a problem. I said, I'm gonna go forward. That was our deal. But she said, I wanna change our deal. I said, I'm sorry, Jane. I can't change it. I said, I'm going forward. Swibel has gotta go. She said, Renault, you gonna cause me any amount of difficulty if you don't back away from Swibel. I need him to run the city. I said, Jane, he's bad for the city, and he's bad for my

people. I'm sorry. So, we continued to force Swibel out of his chair. She tried to stack the board with White appointees to outvote me, to keep me from being able to force him out because the chairman was chosen by the membership. She tried stacking the school board because of the same type of situation. She tried all kinds of things, and they all backfired in her face. She had to hold onto the people who ran the city, the machine. And at the same time, she wanted to try and pacify the Black community, the people who voted her into office, figuring that she had plenty of time to be able to get them back. Obviously it didn't work.

00:06:54:00

Interviewer:

All right, now you're talking to Harold, maybe daily, maybe every other day, weekly, whatever. And there is a golden opportunity presenting itself. Describe the golden opportunity as you guys saw and discussed it.

00:07:03:00

Renault Robinson:

Well, Harold and I talked daily, sometimes every four hours depending upon what happened. Whether he was in Washington or Chicago in that he was a congressman, and he traveled back and forth. *The real issue with Harold was did we have an opportunity to make Black people understand what was going on and what could happen. It had nothing to do with the incidents. Black people had been insulted every kind of way you can insult Black people. Over the years, they had been insulted daily. Plundered by example after example. And it tended to just wash over their heads, and they didn't understand. They didn't do anything about it. They didn't, They cared, but then they didn't care. It was like, Well, what can we do about this? And so Harold was saying, Look, if we're gonna end up with people havin' the same reaction, we're not gonna be able to pull it off.* And I said, The difference, Harold, is that this time people know that the person involved is not the machine. The person involved beat the machine and then joined them because they didn't know how to run the town. I said, That means somebody else can beat them. I said, That's the difference.

00:08:11:00

Interviewer:

Now, your focus was not originally on Harold though.

00:08:14:00

Renault Robinson:

No.

00:08:15:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about that.

00:08:16:00

Renault Robinson:

The focus wasn't on Harold because picking an individual was like the old theory of violating the crab in the barrel. I mean Black people were not about to let one Black person be named mayor. I mean that just wasn't their thing. So, the issue of trying to pick one person out and say, This is the guy, and let's all go for him, was never gonna work. The issue first was to get people to understand that they had to do something to demonstrate they had the capacity to win. Which would convince them they had the capacity before you even talked about a candidate or anything else. And that issue then evolved itself around voter registration. That was the only physical act that people could do that cost no money that would convince them that they could win the election. Because White people would have to certify how powerful they were. With an increase in voters' registrations roles, Whites would then predict whether or not we could do it. And Black people believed what White people said unfortunately. And so when they saw in the White press, Well, with this tremendous impact on voters' registration taking place if the Blacks carry it out, they have a real chance to win. We used the [laughs] White media that traditionally worked against us to help us win the election.

00:09:32:00

Interviewer:

Now, tell me a story about ChicagoFest. How did that go down from your perspective?

00:09:36:00

Renault Robinson:

Well, it was simple. ChicagoFest was a Jane Byrne situation. She felt that it was important to have parties and festivals to keep people happy. The whole plantation mentality. She felt that if we had ChicagoFest, had a big party, it would make White people happy. It would make Black people happy. Money could be made by the politicians, and everybody would be happy. And we felt that that would be a golden opportunity to do something about it. But we didn't feel that way in the beginning. It was a lark. The Reverend Jesse Jackson was on a radio talk show one Sunday morning, called Sunday Morning Live, answering questions about the plight of Black people as he always does in his traditional eloquent fashion. And somebody said, Well, we ought to do something about this Jane Byrne who has insulted us with the school board, insulted us with CHA, and went on, and on, and on. And maybe we

ought to boycott ChicagoFest, which is her thing, and let her know how dissatisfied we are. We ought to do something. And it was a statement out of frustration, and no planning, no nothing. And Jesse reacted by saying in his own way, Well, maybe we ought to think about it. It might make sense. But I'll have to check with the community to see what they say because we can't do this unless everybody is gonna participate. You know how Black people love parties. One thing led to another, and the Black community decided, Let's try it. And with many of the Black leaders working in concert with Jesse, we had a successful boycott. The real success came when Stevie Wonder, a real star in the Black community in those days, decided he was not gonna come and forgo a fee of a quarter of a million dollars. Black people felt that, Well, maybe we got something goin'. And they stayed away in record numbers. Whites stayed away also, fearing any trouble.

00:11:37:00

Interviewer:

All right, now everything is going down. Forces are taking shape. Lu Palmer is doing his community, his political education plan. He conducts the plebiscite. Lead me up to that from your point of view with respect to your relationship to Harold and how Harold ultimately got there that night for that plebiscite.

00:11:55:00

Renault Robinson:

Harold was totally against the plebiscite. He was absolutely against the issue of choosing a candidate before the Black community had mobilized, had understood what was at stake, and had demonstrated their capacity and their willingness to do what was necessary to win the election. He had been through an election already. He knew what that was all about. There was always those few people who would go with a Black no matter who he was. And, but the majority of us were not ready to make that step. People believed in their vote, and they wasn't gonna throw it away. And a lot of people believed the voting process was irrelevant and weren't gonna participate. If we didn't convince those two groups, we didn't have a chance. And so Harold knew that personality wasn't gonna do that. It had to be issue oriented. So, the people themselves felt they had something to gain by their own act. They had been involved with Black politicians, and that had not given them anything. Because the Black politicians were all puppets to the Whites. So, they weren't about to follow some Black politicians like a pied piper. And Harold knew that, and I knew it. And so the issue of a plebiscite turned him off. This was being done though because people wanted to identify a leader. They felt it was necessary. Many people felt it was necessary. Who is it gonna be, they said. We gotta have a, a, some sort of community reaction to people who are out there. But Harold was totally against it, and I must admit I was, too. What happened though was that the thing caught on. The plebiscite, the day it occurred, Harold had let everybody know he wasn't gonna show, and he wasn't gonna participate. They wanted Harold to participate because at that time, he was very popular as a congressional candidate, running for reelection. People felt that Harold had to be there because he was the prime guy to be the candidate. The others were just show.

And with Harold not attending, it was gonna be a flop. The organizer, Lu Palmer, was very upset that Harold was not gonna attend and said that he would give a very negative speech if he didn't. In the end, we had spotters in the, in the place, and we felt that because of the crowd, because of the, the inertia that Harold had to come, *took a lot of doing to get Harold to show up there. And only after a prearrangement between myself and Lu that Harold would not be forced to declare his candidacy did Harold finally agree to show. And with great reluctance he came and made one hell of a speech. Absolutely electrifying speech.* Turned everybody on in the place. They were stomping, and screaming, and yelling. And right afterwards, he walked right out because he was still very angry with Lu. Because he felt Lu was blackjacking him, forcing him into a corner he didn't want to be in. And I felt, quite frankly, that it was a mistake because we needed to first get people to act on their own out of self interest before we directed attention to an individual.

00:15:07:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop down here.

Camera crew member #1:

K.

[cut]

00:15:08:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark four.

[slate]

00:15:13:00

Renault Robinson:

The day of the plebiscite, which was a Sunday afternoon, Harold was making his rounds, making speeches about running for congress. We had people at the affair, and the affair had gotten tumultuous. I went over there myself to see because I knew Harold said he was not coming. Absolutely not coming, and that was the end of it, period. And don't ask him to come. I went over there so that I could get a feel for what was going on. I was amazed at

what I saw. I knew electricity was in the air. I called Harold in the car, and I said, You gotta come. He said, I'm not coming over there, Renault. I told you. I'm just not coming. I told you what I feel about this thing. That's it. I said, Harold you gotta, come. You got to come! And we talked back and forth, and back and forth. And finally I convinced him to come over. He would not be put in a corner. He would not be jammed up against the wall by Lu Palmer. And he would not have to declare his candidacy for mayor. He said, I'm running for congress. I must—a politician's job is to win the office he's after, not fake it that—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Renault Robinson:

—and run for something else.

00:16:20:00

Interviewer:

We got rollout. We got rollout. Where'd you rollout?

Camera crew member #2:

Running for congress.

Camera crew member #1:

Running for congress. OK, what—

[cut]

[camera roll #1094]

00:16:26:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark five.

[slate]

00:16:28:00

Interviewer:

Harold comes into the hall. What happens?

00:16:31:00

Renault Robinson:

It was incredible. People jumped to their feet. Harold strolled down the aisle. It went, the place went wild. You gotta understand that there were a number of people there to speak that day, all in their own right community leaders and etcetera who had, had been chosen by Lu Palmer to participate. But it was obvious what the sentiment of the crowd was. It was Harold. It was Harold. Harold's expression of seriousness and bitterness went away, and his face sparkled. By the time he got to the lecturing, he was a different person. His speech was incredible 'cause he had no speech when he walked into the door. He gave a speech that told people they had to have hope, that to win it took something other than having an individual. To win, it took a process. To win, they had to get their friends, relatives, children, and others to register to vote. That the key to this whole thing was to register to vote. We had no chance of winning if we couldn't register and vote. And he harped on that theme. And that did it. After that was over, the registration process was on in earnest. Harold won by the largest margin that, of anybody that has ever won for Congress in the first congressional district.

00:18:05:00

Interviewer:

Now, later that night, all of you folks gathered at Lu Palmer's basement according to him. What went down? Tell me from your perspective what happened.

00:18:14:00

Renault Robinson:

Well, at first Lu had called a meeting of a number of close people that he felt were both involved in the movement and both knew Harold to talk about what we were gonna do about Harold's reluctance to run, Harold's reluctance to campaign for mayor, Harold's reluctance to declare that he was in it. I was there with of course the point of view that Harold had 'cause I supported it and thought it was right. The others felt that they needed a crutch, my words. We need somebody that we can pin our hopes and hang our ambitions on. They felt we couldn't get people to register without a candidate. I felt we could. Harold felt we had to. The thing was degenerating into, Well, we're gonna have to find another candidate, and a whole lotta other garbage. I felt we should call Harold and get Harold over to the meeting. Harold of course did not want to come to the meeting because he was absolutely angry at Lu because

he thought Lu was trying to put him in a position which would cause him one, to possibly lose the congressional race, and two to not be in a position to get the registration figures that we were looking for by basin' it on personality, that too many people wouldn't participate. Too many people didn't even know who Harold was. So, consequently Harold finally came to the meeting after, again, more [laughs] coaxing. But said that if an argument is started, he would walk out, and that would be the end of it. Well, Lu Palmer promised and swore that there would be no argument and no badgering of Harold. But as soon as Harold hit the door, two seconds later Lu was badgering him. It erupted into a brawl. Harold became visibly angry at what was going on and said he wasn't running for anything and that was that, and started to walk out. ***We were able to sit Harold back down and say, If you were to run, what would it take to show you that people were really serious? And this was of course part of a prearranged proposition. He said, 50,000 new registrants and \$100,000. Fine. Then we let Harold go. I stayed, and we worked through how we were gonna accomplish that.*** The rest is history.

00:20:43:00

Interviewer:

Now, when you went to see, tell me how you, that, that conversation you had with Ed Gardner when you went to see him at Soft Sheen.

00:20:50:00

Renault Robinson:

Well, I was in the midst of a fundraising campaign for my organization, the Afro American Police League. We always needed money because we were rattling bones with the police department, and people were scared to [laughs] identify with us. So, we had to get money from quote, angels, people in the suburbs, big business people who didn't care, and so forth and so on. One day I was riding down the expressway trying to figure out how I was gonna pay my rent that month and my help, and I heard on one of the radio stations that some nice gentleman had contributed some money to what I considered a worthy cause but not a popular cause. And I said, Hm. So, I picked up my car phone and called information and got this gentleman's telephone number. Had never heard of him before. Called him, and he answered the phone, which was unusual because, you know, we're always so important we never answer [laughs] the phone. I asked him if I could come by and talk to him. He said, Yes, and I turned around the on the expressway and went to see him. Talked to him about our organization, all the things we were trying to do. And he said, Is it really gonna make a difference? I mean, are you, do you think you're gonna make a difference? What really would make a difference? I said, Obviously politics would make a difference. I said, We could control our destiny if we had people in the right elected positions who had the administrative authority to dictate change instead of us standing on milk crates picketing and screaming. He said, What would it take to do that? I said, A voters' registration campaign. He said, But those things never work. I said, True, but we could make it work. He said, But how? And we got into a long conversation about methods, and this, and this. And finally he said, Well, let

me call in my wife and my son, who at the time I didn't know how integral they were to his company, but they, it's a family run business. They all came in. They listened to my spiel. And he wrote out a check for \$5,000. He said, I wanna help. I wanna participate, and I'll offer my company, my staff, everything to back this effort. And I said, Great. I'll take you up on it. And that was the beginning of a historic voters' registration campaign. Gardner made his money off of hair products. And the way he got people to buy them was through the media. Through the media that Black people use, radio. Not TV, not newspaper, but radio. I picked up on that, realizing that the only thing that was common to all of us, rich, poor, middle class, was that radio. And consequently we de, decided to use that medium as a way of subliminally getting our message out to Blacks. Register them to vote. We used jingles, messages, disk jockeys, everything we could in between records. We used record stars. We used popular people. We used talk show programs. Everything we could to reinforce the message. We even created a special jingle, which matched the rhythm of the times that said, You gotta register and vote. Ultimately it all worked.

00:24:07:00

Interviewer:

Stop down.

[cut]

00:24:09:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark six.

[slate]

00:24:11:00

Interviewer:

OK, tell me the story about that, that CHA protest, one [unintelligible] at CHA.

00:24:16:00

Renault Robinson:

Well, Jane Byrne had decided finally, because they took a head count, and there was only one person wavering which would have given me authority to take over the board as chairman. So, in order to prevent that from happening, because the community was pressuring this one Black woman, they decided to quickly add new board members. And so they decided to add three White board members, which would of course take the ability for me to take over the board out of my hands. A protest developed as a result of that. Because the Black community saw a clear line of the mayor's hand saying, I'm not gonna let Black people control their own destiny even in public housing. I'm gonna put three White people in here to do it for you. And it was a horrendous outcry. The day of the confirmation hearings in city council, the, the council was stormed by literally hundreds of protestors. They all came into the council and interrupted the proceedings, the testimony by the people who were candidates. It was tumultuous. People were arrested. They had to put up barricades. ***It was wild. But of course the city council approved all three of them anyway. What happened though was that we said, This is exactly what we needed. This shows Black people unless we register to vote, we have no chance of ever overturning this kind of oppression.*** So, it became a way where when a reporter asked me when it was over, Commissioner, did you lose this fight today? I mean, they made all these people anyway, I said, We may have lost that one. We may have lost the battle, but I think they lost the war.

00:26:02:00

Interviewer:

Stop down. That's good.

[cut]

[wild sound]

00:26:05:00

Renault Robinson:

And I said, No, no, I can use my popularity for somebody else, not for me.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Renault Robinson:

That's the way [laughs] Black people are.

Interviewer:

[laughs]

00:26:13:00

Camera crew member #2:

OK.

00:26:15:00

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

[sound roll #143]

00:26:15:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Boom, seven.

[slate]

00:26:17:00

Interviewer:

In these stages, what was Jesse's dynamic in all of this?

00:26:21:00

Renault Robinson:

You gotta understand, Jesse Jackson is a mobilizer, a person who can take an issue and excite the populous about the issue. And in this instance, Jesse knew this was a live issue that gave people an opportunity to do all the things he had talked about, take the bull by the horn, and make things happen. So, Jesse was critical to this whole process because he had a forum. He knew how to generate concern around the issues. And Jesse was good at making people understand one and one was two.

00:27:00:00

Camera crew member #1:

We had a boom in there.

Interviewer:

We had a boom in there?

Camera crew member #1:

Yeah.

Camera crew member #2:

[inaudible]

Camera crew member #1:

It dropped in right at the last. We probably should change right now.

Interviewer:

OK, let's change.

Cameraman:

Oh, let's—oh, sorry.

Interviewer:

You may have to do that again. I see him fla—

[cut]

00:27:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Oh, wait. Wait one second. Oh, nope.

Interviewer:

You got speed?

Camera crew member #1:

Speed.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark eight.

[slate]

00:27:23:00

Interviewer:

OK, tell me again Jesse's roll and dynamic during this.

00:27:27:00

Renault Robinson:

Jesse was able to mobilize public opinion around the issue. Jesse had a forum. People attended that forum from all walks of life when the issue was something that touched all of us. He could talk about brutality. He could talk about housing. He could talk about the schools. He could talk about any issue and bring people to the attention of that issue. And he did the same thing in voters' registration. Jesse was an integral and important part of Harold's ability to become mayor.

00:27:57:00

Interviewer:

All right, now go forward in time. I mean, we're now, where Harold has decided to run, or he's going to run, or he's running. How did that go down? Tell me about that.

00:28:06:00

Renault Robinson:

Harold never decided that he was gonna run. Harold, the last thing Harold said to me was he wasn't gonna run. Harold was reluctantly drug into the ring. And I took his hat off his head and tossed it out there. I arranged to have an article placed in the *Chicago Tribune*, front page, headline, that said Harold Washington Declares. I also arranged to have a op ed

column, which is opposite the editorial page, which talked about the rationale of why he could win. And I had a third news article in the newspaper that same day that also gave additional rationale. All of these were to hit at the same time, announcing his candidacy because he refused to do it. He flatly refused to announce that he was running for mayor. The night before we had the articles printed, there was a huge meeting of Black community leaders at Roberts Motel because they were saying, If Harold won't run, we've gotta pick an alternative. And I sat there knowing that the next day this article was gonna come out and also knowing that Harold was gonna be [laughs] shocked that he had been thrown out there, but realizing full well, knowin' his personality, he wouldn't pull back. He was mad at me, but it worked. But he never on his own decided or made a decision, conscious or otherwise, that he was gonna run.

00:29:32:00

Interviewer:

Now, at that point, did he make you his campaign chairman?

00:29:35:00

Renault Robinson:

No, he didn't make, I was already, I was the campaign organizer.

Camera crew member #1:

Hold it.

Camera crew member #2:

[inaudible]

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible]

00:29:42:00

Interviewer:

OK. Campaign chairman. Did he make you a campaign chairman?

00:29:45:00

Renault Robinson:

No, he didn't. That was a role I assumed because I was in a key position in the minds of all the players. And I was also trying to raise money, keep the support base in order, keep Harold at the trough. I mean all of it. So, by virtual of definition of my role, I became the campaign organizer. The role of campaign chairman or campaign manager were functionaries. The role of keeping everybody together, quelling disturbances, bringing people who didn't like each other into the same room, that was my role. My ability to get people to, to submerge their differences to work towards a common goal was my strength in this thing. And to keep Harold on line. Because Harold was not frantic for running for mayor. Believe me.

00:30:37:00

Interviewer:

All right, so now, so it didn't really matter that the campaign moved from your offices in downtown, huh?

00:30:43:00

Renault Robinson:

Well, no. It was in my office because there was no money, and I had an office. There were no money to buy telephones. I had a dozen telephones. I had a staff. I had volunteers. So, we assumed control of the candidate in terms of providing him with security and etcetera. We were able to provide an office 'cause he couldn't use his congressional office for that kinda activity. It would have been a, a violation of federal law. I was able to get people to provide money and support. I had already gotten Gardner to participate and other Black businessmen to participate. So, it became a convenient way to get things going. It was a nest to launch the effort. We all knew we had to grow out of my offices, and we did. We raised enough money so that in January of '83, we were able to open up downtown. And, and from there, we opened up, I don't know, a dozen offices, a dozen and a half, throughout the city. And we were off and running.

00:31:46:00

Interviewer:

Tell me how Harold built bridges between the various communities, Blacks [inaudible]—

00:31:50:00

Renault Robinson:

Harold offered everybody a participatory role. Harold was not a dictator. Harold knew the damage that the machine had done to everybody. And Harold said there were more people on the outs than on the ins. We're gonna offer everybody on the out a chance to come in.

Harold's was a politics of inclusion instead of exclusion. The machine was exclusion. You're not with us, you out. With Harold, it was there are more out than in. All of you are not gonna be in. Women are gonna be in. Blacks are gonna be in. Hispanics are gonna be in. Liberals are gonna be in. You know, working every day people will not suffer because these others are gonna be brought in. That was his message. I will treat everybody fair. My community won't get no more than they got coming. And neither will anybody else. My administration will be mixed. We will serve everybody. I'll have Polish, Hispanics, and this, and that, and everything else involved for the first time. We're gonna make errors, and we're gonna make mistakes, but we'll make them together.

00:32:54:00

Interviewer:

Well, now what about this business about one-third, one-third, one-third? Tell me about that.

00:32:59:00

Renault Robinson:

Well, I'm not sure what you are—

00:33:05:00

Interviewer:

You said, it was, it was about one-third Black, one-third White, one-third Hispanic. That shows up in some of the literature. Was that a—

00:33:13:00

Renault Robinson:

That came along much later. I, I think in the very beginning, his issue was we're gonna bring the outs in. It wasn't really that one-third, one-third kinda thing when we got started.

00:33:26:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop down here. OK. Now, let's go on to Harold. We'll talk about Harold—

[cut]

00:33:31:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

00:33:31:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark nine.

[slate]

00:33:33:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about Harold the person, like you'd like to remember him, a story if you can.

00:33:38:00

Renault Robinson:

Well, Harold was in many peoples' eyesight an introvert because he stayed to himself. He liked to read. He was an intellectual, and that's not a popular kind of person in the Black [laughs] community. He was not that outgoing a person except with close friends. Harold stayed in a one-bedroom apartment, very small, kitchenette type thing. And so when his friends came over, we were always crowded together on his couch or whatever to talk about whatever we were talking about. And the place would be piled with newspapers, and books, and magazines. We'd say, Harold, get all of this crap out the win—why don't you clean this place up? There is nowhere to move around. But that was Harold. That was our guy. And he always amazed us with some story about something in his grasp of political history, which always amazed me. But he definitely was not mayoral. He didn't have the presence of a mayoral candidate. He didn't dress like a mayoral candidate. He didn't have the attitude of a mayoral candidate. He didn't have the, the ego of a mayoral candidate. He was a real live person who you could become friendly with. You knew you could, you could attach yourself to him. He was strong in his sense of what politics was to the Black community 'cause his father was in, involved and everything else. But he never got overly concerned with his self and his presence. And money didn't mean anything to him. That's the kinda guy Harold was. A good guy but no presence.

00:35:21:00

Interviewer:

What has all this meant now? I mean, do—remember we're staying with, around the time of his election in '84, '85. Tell me what, what did we wrought, what, what have you wrought here? What does it all mean? What do you think?

00:35:33:00

Renault Robinson:

[pause] Well, I think it means several things. I think first of all it shows that if people are determined to take their own destiny in hand and have some direction and some understanding of what it takes for them individually, individually to do, to make it happen and are convinced that it's gonna be painless, one, they'll do it. Two, with the example of Harold, they know what's possible. 'Cause that was beyond everybody's wildest dream. Everybody had always been told, If you do this, something is gonna happen over here, and we never seen it happen. Here, we will, we told everybody if we tried it, if you did your own individual part, it would work. And everybody did, and it worked. Then you add to that a common man who is precious, who wasn't selfish, who wasn't egotistical, who wasn't driven by money or personal fame or anything else, who was a handmaiden. He worked for the people and rose to the occasion and became great because of the circumstances, not because he planned it. That tells us something. There is a future for Black people. There is a lot of Harolds out there. Non-descript individuals. As people told me, Oh, Harold Washington is not mayoral. You're, you're choosing the wrong guy. You're barking up the wrong tree. You gotta have this and that. Not true. People will deal with genuine honesty, sincerity, realness instead of all the phoniness that most politicians exhibit. Harold showed Black people not just in Chicago but around the nation that if you work on behalf of the community, you can succeed. But you gotta be honest 'cause people can tell the difference. Harold was a once in a lifetime.

00:37:44:00

Interviewer:

OK, we can stop down. Good.

00:37:48:00

Cameraman:

That's it.

00:37:48:00

Interviewer:

That's it. That's a wrap.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:37:51:00

Copyright 2021 Washington University Libraries