

Interview with **Thompson Gaines**

Date: October 27, 1988

Interviewer: Louis Massiah

Camera Rolls: 3041-3043

Sound Rolls: 319-320

Team: B

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 Thompson Gaines, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 27, 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 #3041]

[sound roll #319]

[slate]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Fourteen mark one.

00:00:15:00

Interviewer:

Mr. Gaines, I know you were very active in the civil rights movement. How did you see your involvement in the Stokes campaign as an extension of your work in the civil rights movement?

00:00:25:00

Thompson Gaines:

Well I saw my extension in the Stokes campaign—

Interviewer:

Ask you, do you wanna just start that once again all right?

Thompson Gaines:

OK. Did I?

00:00:35:00

Interviewer:

OK. I'm sorry. How did you see your, your work as can—in the Stokes campaign as being connected to the civil rights movement?

00:00:43:00

Thompson Gaines:

Well, I felt that this was another way for people to show the inequities or to amend the inequities in our society by supporting a man who was as qualified as any other person we had as a mayor of our city, that he was supposed to be given a chance to show that he could govern the city. And this was my reasoning for becoming involved. You see in my time growing up as an adult, and over the years, I witnessed so many Blacks and other minorities who were not allowed, because of their race, to use their abilities to the full extent. And I've always resented that fact. So, when we had this fine young man to come along and say, I want to be mayor, I felt he deserved my support and others.

00:01:45:00

Interviewer:

OK. When, when Carl Stokes, this young man, this forty-year-old man would come into Glenville, how would people respond to him? How did people react to Carl Stokes when they saw him?

00:01:54:00

Thompson Gaines:

Well, Carl had a lot of charisma, he was an eloquent speaker, he seemed sincere and he was the type of fellow that just charmed you and made you really feel that he was dedicated to proving that he could be a very inspirational leader and also make a good mayor. There was

no prob—there was no doubt in my mind that he could be, and would dese—and deserved this opportunity.

00:02:27:00

Interviewer:

Did you feel it was particularly important at that time to elect a Black mayor in Cleveland and if so, and if so, why?

00:02:33:00

Thompson Gaines:

Well, it, it, it served more than one purpose. Black children or children, minority children always need a role model and one of the reasons that I felt that this man, ah, should be elected, it would—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Thompson Gaines:

—motivate children it would show children if you go to school—

00:02:56:00

Interviewer:

OK. We just ran out of film.

Thompson Gaines:

Oh. Right then, OK. Am I doing all right?

Interviewer:

You're doing great, you're doing great.

[cut]

[camera roll #3042]

[sound roll #320]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

00:03:02:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark two.

[slate]

00:03:05:00

Interviewer:

OK. Why was it important to elect a Black mayor? What—why was it important to you to elect a Black mayor?

00:03:11:00

Thompson Gaines:

Well, it was important to me to elect a Black mayor because we had something to prove. We wanted to prove that Blacks as well as other races of people were qualified to sit in these key positions because they had the ability. And also we felt that this would be a motivator if we elected Carl B. Stokes the mayor of the City of Cleveland, this would be a motivator for other young Blacks to get an education and prepare themselves to participate in the mainstream of life in our society in the United States.

00:04:00:00

Interviewer:

I want to ask you one question again. How, how did people react to Carl Stokes when he would walk down the streets of Hough or Glenville or someplace on the West Side? How did Black people respond to him when they saw him while he was campaigning?

00:04:11:00

Thompson Gaines:

Well, they were thrilled! I, I recall very clearly we were parading down this particular street with Carl B. Stokes in the motorcade and one little Black youngster came up into the crowd and, and he saw Carl Stokes for the first time. And he went screaming, He's Black, he's Black, he's Black! And this was, to me this was what we were trying to do. This, this child

represented what we were trying to do to show Black children what, Look what you can be if you qualify yourself.

00:04:48:00

Interviewer:

Did you have to try to convince people to come out—

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

—and register and vote during the primary? Wa-was it hard to get people?

00:04:55:00

Thompson Gaines:

Yes, definitely. Not all people, but *there was a certain segment of people who felt well, this, they had this negative attitude, they felt well, this just can't be. We, the people just won't elect a Black man* and this, this what was hard and so hard in the campaign in the role that I played, as well as many others, in knocking on doors to get people to sign petitions to—or come out to vote. It was just difficult to get them to believe in themselves, that we can do this. We have Carl B. Stokes now, our candidate for mayor, and we can do this if you just come out and vote.

00:05:37:00

Interviewer:

Did they ask questions about Stokes' background that they wouldn't ask of a White candidate?

00:05:42:00

Thompson Gaines:

Yes. To me, it always mystified me. The first thing they would ask, Is he qualified? Now mind you, here is a man that graduated from college, went to the University of Minnesota Law School, had his degree, have a, had had a degree, where we had in the State of Ohio at one time our President of Council was a high school dropout. We've had one President of Council who was a high school dropout and we've also had a mayor of the City of Cleveland who was a high school dropout.

00:06:15:00

Interviewer:

I'm gonna ask you that once again. He went to undergrad, I think, at University of Minnesota so you can just say went to college and law school. So, did, did people ever question Stokes' qualifications when, when you went out to, was that—

00:06:26:00

Thompson Gaines:

That was, that was, that was it. They would a...they would question his qualifications. Now, mind you at the time we did not have brochures with Stokes' qualifications. We, we were not wearing these, we were just saying, Carl B. Stokes is a candidate. And, but now mind you, he was a Ohio legislator first and we felt at the time we thought that this was qualifications enough become mayor.

Interviewer:

OK. Anyway, but, that's good.

Thompson Gaines:

OK.

00:07:00:00

Interviewer:

On, on primary day, what did you do? I mean, this is he's running against Locher in the Democratic primary, what, what, what, what was your work that day?

00:07:09:00

Thompson Gaines:

Our role that day was, we had difference parts of the city and we had, we'll use the word "group captains." And our job was to go door to door and remind the people, Today is the day that you must, will you rather, come out and vote for Carl B. Stokes for mayor. And we had, naturally, we had a records to, to show us how the number of registered voters in a particular precinct. So, we knew that it, we had a projection of, it was already prepared, to say, well, at eleven o'clock, you should have at least seventy voters. At two o'clock, you should have 140 voters. This is just an example I'm giving you. And at that time I believe the polls closed at six-thirty. So, for example, if our information showed that we had 200 people

in a particular precinct, and at four o'clock, only 100 had voted, we knew that we had to get busy and go knocking on doors and this was the role that many people played. I like to always remember these people. These people were not paid, these were people who took a day off from work or housewives who left their homes to participate in this movement, or this election, that particular day.

00:08:51:00

Interviewer:

How, how did you feel after Stokes won that primary? Did you think Cleveland might be a different place? What was the feeling in Glenville? What, how did you feel, how did, how did your friends feel?

00:08:59:00

Thompson Gaines:

Well, we felt that we were a step closer to showing that showing of unity amongst a people. Or now, remember, I, I must make this very clear when I say people, I'm not only speaking of Black people. There were a number of White people who supported Carl B. Stokes. There were a number of White people who participated in the role that I played because they felt that this, that Carl B. Stokes was qualified and entitled to, to be the mayor of the City of Cleveland.

00:09:39:00

Interviewer:

OK. After the primary's over and you're going through the general election—

Thompson Gaines:

OK.

Interviewer:

—what was it necessary to do now to make sure that the momentum continued and, and that you got the vote out? What did you have to do?

00:09:49:00

Thompson Gaines:

Well, it was just a, it was just a, a matter of continuously like, I guess, any other game in life, it was just talk it up in the City of Cleveland or the City of Glen—I mean the, the section of

Glenville and all other parts where Blacks lived, there were a number of street clubs. And someone would volunteer to be a guest speaker or, or the club itself would invite an emissary from the Stokes campaign to speak and these people would be volunteers. In other words, we had a corps of voluntary speakers. There were people who would give teas and on a given Sunday afternoon there would be maybe fourteen, fifteen teas and a guest speaker would, would, would to, go there. When I say a tea, a gathering of people. And a guest speaker would appear and speak on Carl B. Stokes' behalf and many cases, Carl B. Stokes himself would appear as, as much as it was physically possible for him to do and this is the way we kept it up.

00:11:04:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, when Stokes is running against Taft in the general election and Taft is, is rising in the polls, he's, he's, he's gaining more support, did you ever feel that Stokes might not win? Did you ever feel that you, that it was a lost cause or—

00:11:19:00

Thompson Gaines:

Well, you...in politics, you always have to, in, in my opinion, in my experiences, you have to always run scared—

00:11:30:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

All right, stop, we just ran out.

Interviewer:

We ran out. Gonna do it again.

Thompson Gaines:

Am I doing all right?

Interviewer:

You're doing wonderfully.

Thompson Gaines:

OK.

Interviewer:

Very well. We just ran out.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:11:39:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark three.

[slate]

00:11:40:00

Interviewer:

OK. We're in early November now and, and Seth Taft is really rising in the polls. You know, this is '67, are you afraid that, are you losing hope, do you think that Stokes might lose and what do you do?

00:11:56:00

Thompson Gaines:

No. *We never gave up hope because I guess that, we were, we were very loose in this endeavor because* we had nothing to lose. Actually, we had, I had witnessed and all of us had witnessed more unity. *Carl B. Stokes had, had brought more unity amongst the people of Cleveland than, than I had ever witnessed and losing really wasn't part of my thought at the time.* It was a fact that we had managed to come this far in unity and that, just to be truthful, the thought of losing did, really didn't cross my mind.

00:12:41:00

Interviewer:

OK. What was the feeling in, in Glen—something's going on there. We gotta stop.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

00:12:48:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark four.

[slate]

00:12:50:00

Interviewer:

OK. It's November 3rd, 1967, that's that Sunday.

Thompson Gaines:

OK.

Interviewer:

Taft is rising in the polls and it seems like he may beat Stokes. Were you ever afraid at that time?

00:13:02:00

Thompson Gaines:

No. I felt that it might be close, but you remember in '65 the only reason we didn't win in '65 was because we had the, the number, enough people to, enough Black people with the support that we were getting from Whites to elect Stokes in '65. So, the only reason that we didn't win in '65 was the fact that a number of registered pe—people who were registered to vote did not turn out because they didn't have the confidence that he could win. But with this almost win of '65, you see, we had the enthusiasm there and the same, they would not, we were, we knew or we felt, rather, that they would not make the mistake and not come out this time to vote for Carl B. Stokes. So, I felt it would be close—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Thompson Gaines:

—but I never was worried about losing.

00:13:58:00

Interviewer:

OK.

Thompson Gaines:

That's my personal.

Interviewer:

Great. So, we're gonna change mag—the film one more time.

[cut]

[camera roll #3043]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, marker.

00:14:06:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark five.

[slate]

00:14:08:00

Interviewer:

OK. Do you remember election day, November 7th, '67? What, what did you do that day?

00:14:15:00

Thompson Gaines:

The same thing that we did in '65. We had people assigned to various districts, or wards, I should say.

00:14:30:00

Interviewer:

OK. What did, what were you doing?

00:14:32:00

Thompson Gaines:

What was I doing?

Interviewer:

Right.

Thompson Gaines:

Well I was, it's really difficult to remember one single assignment. I was mostly just being sure that everything was in place. And what I mean by "everything was in place," to be sure that the people in front of the booths, in front of the polling places, had literature to give the people for, with Carl B. Stokes' name, mostly observing the turnout. We were confident that the people who were turning out was for Stokes, but we were trying to more or less monitor the flow, that was what I was doing.

00:15:10:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, after Stokes wins late that night, what is the feeling on the streets of Glenville, in, in the street, on the West Side? What, what, what's the feeling when Carl Stokes has finally won this election?

Thompson Gaines:

Well, I, I can't speak for the West Side because I wasn't there.

Interviewer:

East side, excuse me.

Thompson Gaines:

OK.

Interviewer:

All right. Once again, what's the feeling on the East Side in Glenville that night when, when Stokes, Stokes wins the election?

00:15:34:00

Thompson Gaines:

A moment of, an hour rather of, of great elation, of a job well-done by many people. We felt that, well, we were a group of idealists that we thought that our city was going to be turned around, we thought we were going to be a united city. And when I say united, I am speaking of East Side and West Side because we thought Carl B. Stokes at that time was the man to do the job.

00:16:04:00

Interviewer:

OK. And again about the coalitions, what, what were some of the groups that came together that helped form, that helped, helped, helped Stokes in this campaign? What were some of the groups?

00:16:16:00

Thompson Gaines:

Well, as I, I said before, there weren't too many named groups. The Congress of Racial Equality played a major, many of their members played a major part, let me say that. But as group-wise, we, it was not a, organizational things. I often said that we were the best disorganized organized group of people. You see, these people just came off the streets and housewives and factory workers and people who were dedicated to this cause. But as far as a, a group, I would say that the ministers, some of the ministers were with, supported Carl Stokes, but I wouldn't say that that was the deciding factor. This was just a grassroots movement and I, I really can't give credit to any particular organization as such, other than the, the, the man, the little guy, the little woman in the streets. I, I just can't contribute this, this success to any established organization.

00:17:30:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's stop camera for a second. Terry, I'm not sure what, what—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

What is your [unintelligible]?

00:17:38:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark six.

[slate]

00:17:40:00

Interviewer:

What, what did this unity that you, that you spoke about, what did it mean to you?

00:17:44:00

Thompson Gaines:

Well, it meant to me that this was a, a, a step for people in the right direction. As, as I said before, there, the, the, there was, there was not, not only were Black people in this movement, there were White people, and we thought this was going to be a step, the first step in a series of achievements for people united for a, for a better world to live in. It wasn't basically all Black. We, we, we had ideals that we could foresee in the future. People in all sorts of governing capacities simply because they were qualified not because of they race, creed, or color. And we thought this was symbolic of what America could become, not only Cleveland but what America'd become, because all of, of America, I guess, and some of the world was watching this happening in Cleveland.

00:18:44:00

Interviewer:

OK. And we're just gonna go back to that question. Were you surprised when people questioned Carl Stokes' competence? I mean, what would happen, did you have to convince people to vote for Carl Stokes, that is Black people, when you were working in the wards, when you were working the streets?

00:18:58:00

Thompson Gaines:

Yes. In many instances we did because you see Black people for so long have, have been subconsciously taught that they were inferior. Black people were never taught in history their heritage or, and their achievements. For instance, I, I was out of high school before I re—

discovered who Crispus Attucks was, you see. I was out of high school before I discovered who Booker T. Washington was because we were not taught this in the schools that I attended, we, you see—

00:19:39:00

Interviewer:

In, in relation to Carl Stokes, specifically, did you have to convince people about who Carl, Carl Stokes—what questions would they ask of him, what would you tell them?

00:19:46:00

Thompson Gaines:

Well, I would relate back to the fact that he was a state legislator and had a bachelor of science degree, was a graduate of law school, and then I would compare his academic qualifications to other White leaders who had, who they had accepted. I pointed out that one of the presidents of City Council was a high school dropout. And also I, I mentioned to them that I had never heard the Black community question the qualifications, the academic qualifications of, of White representatives or, or White persons who came into our communities seeking our support.

00:20:30:00

Interviewer:

OK.

Thompson Gaines:

OK?

Interviewer:

Great. OK. Stop.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

00:20:38:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark seven.

[slate]

00:20:40:00

Interviewer:

How, how did, how did you use what was going on in the, in the South, the Southern civil rights, Southern voter registration movement as a way to motivate people in Cleveland to come out to vote? What, how would you, how would you use that?

00:20:52:00

Thompson Gaines:

Well, we, we brought out the fact that...pardon me, we brought out the fact that there must be something to the opportunity or the privilege of voting or else, and we would point out that people in the South were giving up their lives, sacrificing themselves for this right, being abused, driven off of, off of their farmlands, off of sharecropper farmlands because they were seeking to vote. Now, we pointed out to the people that if these people feel, are willing to make this big of a sacrifice to register to vote, and here in the North you have this opportunity, why can't you? And this worked in a number of, in most cases. This was enough leverage to get the people to vote, to register to vote.

00:21:48:00

Interviewer:

OK.

Thompson Gaines:

OK.

Interviewer:

All right, I, I think that's great.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK?

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:21:56:00

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