

Interview with **C. Herbert Oliver**

Date: March 13, 1989

Interviewer: Sam Pollard

Camera Rolls: 3076-3078

Sound Rolls: 336

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 C. Herbert Oliver, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on March 13, 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 #3076]

[sound roll #336]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Can you mark it, please.

[slate]

00:00:14:00

Interviewer:

And you might personalize this answer by talking about your, your children.

C. Herbert Oliver:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

When you moved to Brooklyn in 1965, what was the state of the schools? What, what did, what did you see?

00:00:25:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

When I first moved to Brooklyn, the schools were in need of change because the, the young people were not getting, really, an adequate education. They were not getting a sense of their own worth. And most of the teachers did not live in the community. And I felt that it would be better if our young people could get a chance to know teachers in another setting other than just the classroom. But that was hardly possible for most of the teachers in this district.

00:01:03:00

Interviewer:

What was the ethnic makeup of the teachers and of the students and of the principals, the supervisors?

00:01:09:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

Most of the students were Black and Puerto Rican, majority Black. Just about all of the—most of the teachers, were White. I don't know the exact percentage but most of them were White.

00:01:24:00

Interviewer:

OK. How was the experiment going to change things in Ocean Hill-Brownsville?

00:01:30:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

It was hoped that the parents would have a, a decisive say in the governing of the schools and that we could bring into the system more Black teachers and more Black supervisory personnel. And we felt that this would give the young people an image and, of Blacks who are succeeding in the school system. And, they could also say that, I can also become a teacher. I can become a principal. They would have role models to follow.

00:02:02:00

Interviewer:

OK. What role did the parents begin to play in, in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville experiment?

C. Herbert Oliver:

They were s—very much involved in—

Interviewer:

OK, I want you to say the, "the parents."

00:02:14:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

Yes. Well, the parents, there were parents who served on the Governing Board. They were very committed and dedicated people who wanted to see a change for their children and for the children of posterity. And they were able to bring parents into the schools. Our Governing Board meetings often had two, three hundred people at a PTA meeting.

00:02:37:00

Interviewer:

Specifically, what was the mood like? And what were some of the specific things that the parents did?

C. Herbert Oliver:

They brought to the Governing Board, matters concerning their own children.

Interviewer:

Once again, and once again, and make sure that you say "the parents."

00:02:52:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

Mm-hmm. Yes, the parents brought to the Governing Board their own concerns about their own children expecting that the Governing Board could do something to help their children to achieve better in the schools. Various new programs were brought in, brought into the school by Rhody McCoy and these were attempts to help improve the learning skills of the young people.

00:03:18:00

Interviewer:

OK. Were there specific things that teachers, teachers transferring in from the African-American Teachers Association, were there specific things that they brought in terms of the developing consciousness, Black consciousness to the classroom?

C. Herbert Oliver:

They brought a consciousness of—

Interviewer:

Again, if you could say what you are referring to once again.

C. Herbert Oliver:

OK.

Interviewer:

The teachers from the African-American Teachers Association.

00:03:40:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

I see. OK. The teachers of the Ameri—Afro-American Teachers Association brought with them a consciousness of Black culture and Black history and they made an impact on the tu—students in the schools with that emphasis, which was good.

00:04:01:00

Interviewer:

Great. Were you struck, coming to New York from, from Alabama, were you struck at all by the alliance between Puerto Ricans and Blacks? Did it seem unusual to you or did it seem natural? And what, and what do you think was the reason for the alliance?

00:04:16:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

It seemed to me to be a natural alliance, that is the alliance between the Blacks and Puerto Ricans. They were living together and at home with each other and suffering from the same inequities in the system. So, it seemed to me to be just a natural alliance.

00:04:36:00

Interviewer:

OK. Why was the selection of principals such an important issue in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville experiment?

00:04:45:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

The selection of principals was exceedingly important because there were no principals in the district at all when we began. And we felt that we needed, we knew that Black people were capable of running schools. I knew that. I had come from the South where all of the schools were Black and all of them had Black principals. So, I didn't feel that Blacks in the North were incapable of running schools. They could. But somehow the system had shut them out. And I remember hearing Rhody McCoy say that if they went by the selection process of the Board of Examiners, it would take several decades before one Black principal could be chosen because there were 800 or more ahead of them, that is White principals.

00:05:34:00

Interviewer:

OK. What did it mean when the State Supreme Court ruled against the hiring of those principals? What did it mean to the experiment? What kind of blow was that?

00:05:45:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

We felt that this was a serious blow. That is when the state ruled against hiring Black principals, we felt that was a serious blow to our efforts. However, the Governing Board continued, and McCoy continued to press for state certification for teachers and supervisory personnel. And that was eventually granted. And the teachers, and, that we had chosen and principals who were not on the list, we were able to keep them.

00:06:14:00

Interviewer:

Great. Did you see the struggle in Ocean Hill-Brownsville as part of the civil rights Black liberation struggle?

00:06:21:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

Very definitely, I saw the struggle here in Brooklyn as a part of the same struggle that we had faced in Birmingham, Alabama. Yes, it was certainly a part of the struggle for freedom, for equality, for dignity, for a proper education for our children.

00:06:36:00

Interviewer:

And, and why was education so pivotal in the struggle?

00:06:39:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

If you, we felt that education was crucial because if you don't get a proper education, you cannot fit into the society. And, if you do not have a proper image of yourself, you cannot fit into the society either. And we felt that this could be achieved if parents had a deciding voice in the running of the schools. And that's why we pressed for community control.

00:07:10:00

Interviewer:

OK. Why did—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Let's cut.

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #3077]

Interviewer:

I'm gonna ask you a variant of the first question again.

[slate]

C. Herbert Oliver:

OK.

00:07:17:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it please.

00:07:20:00

Interviewer:

OK. What, what, what were some of the major differences in the education provided your children in, in Birmingham and the education that they saw when they came up to, to Brooklyn?

00:07:32:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

*Well, when my family moved here from Birmingham in 1965, they came from totally segregated schools. The children were all Black. The teachers were all Brack—Black, the principals were all Black. One of my sons was above the national average in mathematics, but when he came to the schools here in Brooklyn, within one year, he was flunking math. And I went to the school to find out why.* And in the South, when I went to, in, in Alabama, when I went to a school, I was welcomed. The principal was glad to see a parent there and I could discuss any problem with, with my children there. But when I came to the school here in Brook-Brooklyn, I couldn't get to see the principal. Someone wanted to know why I came, what I wanted to see him for, and that he was not available. So, I simply said, Well, I'll wait for him. I was, I was, I had, had expected to see the principal. That was my custom. But here, I couldn't see a principal. So, I simply said, I'll, I'll wait until he comes, because I intended to see the principal. So, in about a half an hour, the principal came. And I talked with the principal and told him what the problem was. We went and talked with the teacher. *The teacher said my son was doing fine. I said, He's not bringing home assignments and he's flunking math and he came here from Alabama and he was ahead of the national average and you telling me he's doing fine? Something is wrong.* And that just made me fired up to do something to change the system because I, I could see it was destroying children and it was hurting my own child.

00:09:15:00

Interviewer:

OK, great. Wonderful. Again, did you see the struggle on Ocean Hill-Brownsville as part of the civil rights or Black liberation struggle and, and in what way?

00:09:26:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

The struggle for civil rights in Birmingham was part and parcel of the struggle here. My involvement in Birmingham however, was mainly with instances of alleged rights violations or police brutality. And I was engaged for five years there in documenting cases of police brutality and circulating them around the nation and around the world. We had the same situation here when we came to Brooklyn. There were many Blacks who were being killed by policemen and it was called justified homicide. However, the, the school situation here the, it was slightly different in that you, our young people were structured to fail. And we felt that this was not why you have schools and we wanted to, and we felt that our involvement was necessary to stop that process and to help our children get an adequate education.

00:10:25:00

Interviewer:

Great, good. Why, that, that night in May, May 7th '68, why did the community find it necessary to transfer those nineteen teachers and administrators? And could you describe that night?

00:10:38:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

Well, when the nineteen teachers and supervisory personnel were transferred from the district on the night of May 7th, 1968, it was at the recommendation of the Personnel Committee. They had been having problems with some of the teachers and they felt that they should transfer them to the Central Board of Education, which meant that they would no longer teach in the district. They were not fired. We knew that we could not fire. We di—we did not attempt to fire. We'd simply transferred them and transfers were being effected constantly between our district and the Board of Education. When people wanted to leave, they were transferred out. When some wanted to come in they were transferred in. Our action was simply to transfer out of the district those nineteen personnel. Most of whom were White. One was Black. And this was for seeking to better the education for the children.

00:11:40:00

Interviewer:

And how did it happen that night? I mean, was there a vote? I mean, how, how, how did it proceed?

00:11:46:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

There was a vote. *There was discussion. There was disagreement. There was a vote.* There was a community group that came in and insisted that the Board take action. And without knuckling under to them, the Board felt that they should take action and they did take action and transferred the teachers and supervisory personnel to the Central Board of Education.

00:12:08:00

Interviewer:

OK. How did the struggle for community control in Ocean Hill-Brownsville come to be associated with Black anti-Semitism and ultimately, what was the effect of that perception of anti-Semitism?

C. Herbert Oliver:

Well, after the transfer of those students—

Interviewer:

Teachers. Once again.

00:12:26:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

Pardon me. And after the transfer of those teachers and supervisory personnel, we noticed articles in certain publications labeling us as anti-Semitic, and we felt that this was unfair because we had not given any consideration to the ethnic background of any of the teachers and supervisory personnel who were transferred. But somehow, that managed to stick. But as the strike in '68 in the, in the fall of '68 continued, those charges continued to, to mount. And even though the Jewish teachers in the district took out a whole page ad in the New York Times saying that the district was not anti-Semitic, it did not seem to have any effect. The union however took a tract which was apparently anti-Semitic in nature, that had been written some three years earlier, and attached the name of Ralph Pointer to it, a young Black man from Harlem and said that he had written this. And they circulated this all over the whole city. And that made the public perceive of us as anti-Semites and that has stuck to this day. But it—

00:13:41:00

Interviewer:

What, what was the effect on, on, on Lindsay once that became the way Ocean—the Governing Board was labeled or the experiment was labeled?

00:13:50:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

I don't know that that had any effect on Lindsay. I'm not aware of any effect that that had on Lindsay.

00:13:54:00

Interviewer:

OK. How did, how did the, let's back up. How, how did the community react when, when Donovan removed McCoy from Ocean Hill-Brownsville in October? What happened? What, what was the reaction? And what happened that next day outside Junior High School 271?

00:14:14:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

After McCoy had been transferred out of the district, there was very much disappointment and dissatisfaction in the community. And I do have a recollection of some kind of violent outbreak. And I do have a recollection of a young man standing on top of a car and urging the young children to violent acts. And he was trying to stir them up to do things that they shouldn't do. He had no connection with the Governing Board. We learned later that he was in the employ of people who were working against us and people were urged to avoid him and from that time forth, he was not able to stir up anyone else.

00:14:57:00

Interviewer:

OK. How did that rally outside City Hall on, on Murray Street come about? What, what are your memories of that day? You know, the speakers or the varieties of people who were present? Could, could you talk about that a little bit?

C. Herbert Oliver:

There were literally thousands and thousands of people who came to that rally in front of City Hall. I do not recall the speakers other than McCoy. But—

Interviewer:

OK, let's back up. Who, who called that rally? Let's start from the beginning. And you might mention District Sixty-five, the, or Black trade unionists, once again.

00:15:35:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

The rally that was held in front of City Hall in support of the Governing Board had been organized mainly by the Black workers of District Sixty-five and they were able to bring out a huge number of people. I don't have too much recollection of what people, what was said there. I only remember that there was a great enthusiasm and great support for the Governing Board. And at one moment, the word was given, in fact, someone told me when to tell the people to, Let's march across the bridge. And I gave the word, Across the bridge, and that's when it began. A line of policemen came across the roadway because there was no preparation for this. And some ministers who led the group, among them, Bill Jones and Wyatt Walker, simply walked right on through the police line and the policemen stepped aside because there were just too many people for about a dozen policemen to try to tackle.

00:16:30:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

[cut]

00:16:33:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:16:34:00

Interviewer:

OK. How did that rally at City Hall come about and could you just talk about some of your feelings and memories and perceptions of that day?

C. Herbert Oliver:

That rally at City Hall was brought about through, mainly through the action of the Black Workers of District Sixty-five. They were the, the moving spirit behind it and they were able

to produce as many bodies as came out and there must have been either seventy-five to a hundred thousand people that were gathered.

Interviewer:

Could you try once again. Black trade unionists, nobody will, people won't know.

C. Herbert Oliver:

Black trade unionists. OK. [laughs]

Interviewer:

Yeah. Once again. How did that rally come about and what was the spirit that you felt?

00:17:10:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

That rally came about through the efforts of the Black trade unionists of District Sixty-five. They arranged for it. They set up all of the, everything that was needed for the sound trucks and everything and they produced the people. And I was very struck by so many people coming out in support of the Governing Board and they were from all over the city, and all races, Black, White, and all shades in between. It was a very, very great day. I think that was the height of our experience in Ocean Hill-Brownsville.

00:17:44:00

Interviewer:

And, and then the march across the Brooklyn Bridge, how did that happen?

00:17:47:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

At one time, I was given the cue to say that we are to march across the bridge. And there had been no preparation for that. And so, I gave the cue that we are to march across the bridge. At that time, about a dozen policemen moved across the bridge to block the marchers. But several people, being led by Reverend William Jones of Bethany Baptist Church, and Reverend Wyatt Walker of Canaan Baptist Church, simply walked on through the police line and the police stepped aside and the march was on. We marched across the Brooklyn Bridge to—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

00:18:25:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

C. Herbert Oliver:

[laughs]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Cut. All right.

[cut]

[camera roll #3078]

00:18:28:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:18:31:00

Interviewer:

OK. It's been al—it's been alleged that the, the Governing Board was run by extremists. Could you say in what way was the Governing Board influenced by really, just the currents of the day and what, and what, what were the limits? I mean, if you could give me a story or an example of, of the thinking of the Governing Board at that time in terms of the Black consciousness?

00:18:55:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

The Governing Board of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district was not run by extremists unless you wish to consider me an extremist or McCoy. My interest was only in education. And I believe that was McCoy's interest also. I believe that was the interest of the parents on the Governing Board and all people serving on the Governing Board. We were not extremists. There were extremists in the community who wished to, to take control of things but we stayed to the issue of education. There was a time when representatives from the Republic of New Africa came and requested a meeting with the Governing Board. And we gave them an audience. And they wanted us to separate from the United States and declare Ocean Hill-Brownsville an independent state and to apply to the United Nations for membership. And our response was immediate, that we were not elected to set up a new nation. We were elected only to run the schools. And if we attempted to set up a new nation, the people who elected us would be the first to say, Get out of here. We didn't elect you for that purpose. So, we didn't, we couldn't go along with that.

00:20:13:00

Interviewer:

Great. Good. Once again, could you talk about that day, the, the rally outside of City Hall and your memories of that day and your feelings?

00:20:24:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

Well, the high point of the Governing Board was on that day, a very beautiful day, when we gathered outside City Hall and people were there by the thousands and thousands and thousands. And it was a very, everyone was ecstatic. Everyone was happy about it. People of all ages, races, and there was complete support for the Governing Board. Lots of speeches were made and people were just very, very enthusiastic. And it was a high point for the Governing Board.

00:21:01:00

Interviewer:

Was there the sense that you, that you would lose, that, that the Governing Board would be dismantled? Was there a sense that that was where—

00:21:06:00

C. Herbert Oliver:

Not at that moment. We, we felt that we could triumph. We felt that we had the support of the city and from the turnout, we did. There were from 75-100,000 people. And that was, that was a mighty, a mighty turnout and we were very pleased with that.

00:21:23:00

Interviewer:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Cut.

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:21:28:00

Copyright 2021 Washington University Libraries