Interview with **John McDermott**
Date: October 25, 1988
Interviewer: Sheila Bernard
Camera Rolls: 2042-2044
Sound Rolls: 220
Team: A

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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 #2042]
[sound roll #220]

[slate]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Speed.

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

Camera crew member #3:

Mark.

[slate]

00:00:15:00

Interviewer:

OK. To begin, I want, would like if you could tell me briefly about Chicago's civil rights movement and the connections to the Southern movement.

00:00:23:00

John McDermott:

The Chicago civil rights movement has deep roots, but it really got started in the early '60s over the schools issue. And, it was a strong movement. I don't think it's appreciated that, how strong it was. It was strong, I think, because we had a very strong political organization, a political machine. Mayor Daley was the strongest mayor in the country. And, I think he presented a great target and challenge to the civil rights movement. I think the people who started it knew that this was, this was a tough game and didn't tolerate the kind of internal fragmentation and petty bickering that characterized the movement in many other cities, many other northern cities. So, people came together, basically, out of a concern first to do something to improve the public schools, to do something about the obvious unfairness of thousands of Black kids going to double-shift schools. That is, going to schools that ran both one session in the morning and another completely different session in the afternoon. Short-changing children, running four-hour a day class programs rather than five-hour a day programs. To do something about that, and that's how the movement began. And, as the battle got tougher, the movement got stronger. And, we were very impressed and inspired by Dr. King in those days. He was our hero. He—we were amazed to see what he had done in Montgomery, and then to see the spread of the movement, the students and the sit-ins, and the beginning of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. And, we drew inspiration from him with, on the basis of the whole idea of non-violent direct action. We just took that out of his book. And, that it was very powerful in the beginning age of television, to communicate to the larger society the wrongs, the unfairness that we were dealing with. That was the magic of the civil rights movement. It didn't mean that we had money. We had people, but we didn't have a whole army. We had a dedicated corps of people, and we had the truth, and we tried to tell the truth through the media, that there were certain injustices in Chicago, particularly in education and in race relations in general, and appealed to the decency in the rest of the society to make that change. That was King's method, and we adopted, adapted it here in Chicago, and so we looked at him as our leader. When I say we were a corps, I don't mean we were a tiny handful. The Chicago civil rights movement kept growing and growing. In 1963 or so, we were able to, to run school boycotts.

00:03:02:00

Interviewer:

OK. I need to stop you for a second.

John McDermott:

OK. Sorry.

Interviewer:

I'm, I'm, no, no, no, it's, it's—your answers—

[cut]

00:03:06:00

Camera crew member #1:

And marking.

Camera crew member #3:

Mark.

[slate]

00:03:12:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me about connections between Chicago people and the Southern movement?

00:03:17:00

John McDermott:

Martin Luther King was our hero. We were inspired by his bravery and by the whole idea of non-violent, direct action. Protest against injustice, we adapted his methods, and we also were impressed that he called on us, called on those of us in the North to help. We watched what happened in Montgomery, but as his movement began, I remember in Albany, Georgia, Dr. King had a protest movement going on, and it ran into difficulty, and he called on religious groups throughout the North including Chicago, to send help. We did send a busload of people. And, it was an extraordinary experience. They had—most of them were arrested, but they were also deeply inspired by what they saw. And, they came back like missionaries and radicalized a whole lot of people here in Chicago. Then, the March on Washington. We were able to send trainloads of people from Chicago. We ourselves were amazed at the turnout. We were afraid we couldn't fill one train, and then we filled it to overflowing. And, he had touched something in the heart of people all over the country, that basic instinct of fairness, the basic instinct of what it meant to really be an American, and people were responding. Black, and White, and everybody, and we filled the train to overflowing, and sent thousands of people to Washington, and that was also a transforming experience. So, we were helping him, but also we were grateful for his leadership. And then, because of those good relations, we felt we could call on him for help when we needed it. And beginning in 1964, when we had a huge rally in Soldier Field, we filled Soldier Field. In those days, it held a hundred thousand people, and I think he was impressed by the strength and unity of the movement here in Chicago, and so when the Selma campaign was finished,

which was in early '65, the spring of '65, he then was ready to talk to us about, indeed, bringing the movement to the North, and the North he chose was Chicago, to come to us, and that then created the marriage of the local civil rights movement, which was called the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, married, and in Chicago it was called the Chicago Freedom Movement. That was really the beginning of the freedom movement with Dr. King here in Chicago.

00:05:44:00

Interviewer:

How did you personally feel when you learned that Dr. King was going to come to Chicago and stay for a while?

00:05:49:00

John McDermott:

Well, I felt great, but after all we sort of knew each other. We had gone to Albany. We had sent people to Albany. We had been to Washington in '63. I was the director of the Catholic Interracial Council of Chicago in those days, and we gave Dr. King our annual award in the fall of '64, and he made a great speech, and it was a terrific success. So, we felt we were friends or allies, and we knew him, and after all we had been lobbying, and angling, and promoting the union for some time. So we, we were delighted when he said, I'm really, I'm, we're coming north, and we're coming to Chicago. We thought it was terrific.

00:06:28:00

Interviewer:

The, the first few months of the Chicago Freedom Movement have been described in various ways. Sometimes as rather unfocused. Can you tell me what, what, your version of what was happening?

00:06:40:00

John McDermott:

I think a lot of academics and journalists who were not present during those days didn't really understand what was happening. It may have looked unfocused to outsiders. It really was, in my judgment, a very creative process. Remember, what is a civil rights movement? It's a group of volunteers. It's a group of people who are not getting paid, who are acting out of deep conviction, who are protesting unjust conditions and therefore making themselves unpopular or pariahs in parts of the community, criticized by the media, maybe even risking their careers. They are doing fairly brave and risky things, and the question facing the civil rights leadership is, what is it that is going to touch the people so that they will volunteer and

form a powerful protest? You can't order them. You can't pay them. You have to help them see that their personal lives and action really make a difference. That's what was going on in the early months, it was a testing process. What program? What issue? What method will get through to Chicago, including our own people, our own potential supporters? It was an experimental period, where different approaches were used. Some worked, some didn't work, and then the movement moved on looking for another approach. So, what looked to some people to be chaotic and sloppy, really I thought was terribly creative. The original impulse was to build a movement to directly attack slums, end slums. A worthy endeavor, but very complex. Slums are caused by myriad, a myriad of causes. The landlords, ineffective laws, maybe problems with the zoning law or the building code, and many landlords themselves are marginal people. It really did not excite people, because I think they were aware of the complexity, they maybe have known landlords in the inner city that they were friendly to. It didn't turn people on, so the movement really kinda moved away from that to the issue of fair housing, access to housing in all parts of the city and suburbs on the basis of merit rather than basis of race. That worked.

00:08:59:00

Interviewer:

Cut there.

[cut]

[wild sound]

John McDermott:

I'm still talking too long.

[cut]

00:09:03:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

Camera crew member #3:

Mark.

00:09:06:00

Interviewer:

When we had talked before, you told me that one of the frustrations was that every time King would raise a problem, Daley would quick-solve it. Can you tell me about that, what was frustrating about that?

00:09:14:00

John McDermott:

Yes. [sighs] Well, this was the, the beginning of the marriage between Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the local civil rights movement. And, Dr. King had been accustomed to coming into very overly-hostile southern communities and analyzing the situation in terms of who ran things, and raising issues. This is a problem, and that is a problem. The reaction of the establishment in those communities almost always was negative. No. It's not a problem. It's none of your business. Get out of town. And, that negativism would arouse the supporters, would arouse the Black community and their supporters, and help to build the movement. Building a movement is a little bit like jiu-jitsu. You have to use the strength of your opponent. Well, here in Chicago, under Mayor Daley, he, he did not identity at all—I don't think this is fully understood. He resented the notion that he and the city of Chicago were like these southern cities. He had a sense that we were democrats, this was a liberal community. We had a human relations commission going back to the '40s. His theory about Chicago was that the system was fair. All you had to do was cooperate with him, and it worked for you, and that this was not a hotbed of racism. So, when King would raise a problem, he would come up with some kind of remedy. Often a superficial remedy, but a remedy, nevertheless. ***And it is true, in the minds of the people in the press, it became hard,*** and hard in minds of many White people, became hard ***to see Daley as some kind of enemy, because he would always respond.*** If Dr. King moved to the West side, and there were rats in the apartment, the place was deteriorated—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

John McDermott:

—why, within a few weeks, the wheels would turn, and the landlord—

00:10:56:00

Interviewer:

Sorry. We've run out.

John McDermott:

OK.

Interviewer:

I want [unintelligible]—

[cut]

[camera roll #2043]

00:11:03:00

Camera crew member #1:

And, that's a marker.

[slate]

Interviewer:

We'll wait—

Camera crew member #3:

[inaudible]

00:11:15:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me again what Daley's response was to movement strategies, how he would react?

00:11:21:00

John McDermott:

Mayor Daley resented King coming to Chicago. He was angry at the notion that Chicago was just like Mobile, or Montgomery, or Birmingham. He saw this as a progressive, northern city that had progressive policies. He thought of himself as a northern democrat—

00:11:39:00

Interviewer:

Excuse me, I'm sorry. Are we gonna hear the typewriter?

John McDermott:

[clears throat]

00:11:43:00

Camera crew member #3:

Cut it.

[cut]

00:11:44:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

Camera crew member #3:

Mark.

[slate]

00:11:48:00

Interviewer:

OK. If you could just tell me again about Mayor Daley's response.

00:11:51:00

John McDermott:

Mayor Daley was angry that Dr. King came to Chicago. He resented the notion put forth by the civil rights movement that this was just another hotbed of racism. He became very angry at the comparison between Chicago and Birmingham, or Montgomery, or a Mobile, southern cities. He argued that it was a progressive city, that we had a human relations commission, that we really did not need a civil rights movement because this city was committed to do the right thing. Well, whereas the local movement knew differently, ***when King actually came to town, Daley received him politely, and then every time Dr. King and the movement would raise an issue, Daley would institute some kind of response or program to show that the movement wasn't needed, and that the city was on top of the problem. This was particularly true if it had to do with city services. If Dr. King would go to, as he did, to the West side and help to shovel out the filth in an apartment in a very dirty, run-down section of town, by the next day the garbage trucks would arrive, and the place would be all cleaned up.*** Or, if there were rats seen by it, then the rodent team would arrive, and they

would be all cleaned up. And he did that over and over again, to try to make a point, so he was angry at King coming here, and he was trying to defuse the movement by this kind of tactic, and it, it was tricky. It made things more complex.

00:13:13:00

Interviewer:

Did you—was he not at all sincere when, when Mayor Daley announced his program to end slums by '67? Did any part of you believe it?

00:13:21:00

John McDermott:

It was rhetoric. I don't believe that, that Daley was an evil man. I think he felt that the city was making progress, and if what, all, what people had to do, including what Black people had to do, was cooperate with the system. Work through the Democratic party, and all things would be well. I think he was quite sincere about that. I think he was reluctant to face the fact that—

00:13:45:00

Interviewer:

Sorry, can you start that last sentence again, and use Mayor Daley's name? I think Mayor Daley?

00:13:49:00

John McDermott:

I'm sorry. I dunno what the last sentence was. I think Mayor Daley was sincere in his belief that what you, what Black people should do is not join the civil rights movement but work through the system. And the system was the regular democratic organization, and you joined it, and you worked from the bottom to the top, or you worked from the bottom up, and you received certain benefits or perquisites. I think he felt that, that was the path to follow. And he refused or was reluctant to face the fact that there were terrible injustices in the city, that there were terrible slums, and horrible living conditions, and that these were not, hadn't gone away, and were still around, and that there, there was ample justification for the civil rights movement to protest the inadequacy of the status quo.

00:14:36:00

Interviewer:

But, but Chicago had a human relations commission, and it had an open housing ordinance. Why was it? Why, especially why did they issue of open housing click so much with the freedom movement?

00:14:46:00

John McDermott:

Well, the, these, it's true, it had a human relations commission and an open housing ordinance, and these probably made the city better than cities that did not have these things, but they were relatively weak, and that the open housing ordinance, after all, had been passed before the federal government had a fair housing law. It was easy to circumvent them, and the—everyone in the community knew, and the civil, and the movement make it, made it more clear that there really were two markets. There was one market for White homebuyers and renters, and another for Blacks. And that the law was openly violated in many, many real estate offices, and many, many neighborhoods. The unfairness of that, and the burden that it laid on Black people, because they were unable to spread throughout the market, and take advantages of the market, the unfairness of that is what the mark, what the movement lifted up for all eyes to see, that this was the law here, and this was the practice there. And the protest demonstrations, the vigils in front of real estate offices, were in front of real estate offices where the local fair housing law was openly violated, and that clear evil of that system awakened a lot of people and strengthened the movement. Thousands of people came out to be part of a protest against this obvious unfairness.

00:16:12:00

Interviewer:

What was, in terms of the Northern cities versus Southern cities, what was it about Chicago that made it so much harder about de facto segregation?

00:16:21:00

John McDermott:

Well, I think that the—Dr. King, the Chicago, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, had developed a certain strategy about their work. They could come into a community, usually a smaller city, and in a fairly short period of time analyze who was who in the power structure and what were the problems. What were the most blatant forms of injustice against the Black community? And then, working with Black leaders to devise a strategy to attack these problems one by one. Here in Chicago, it's a huge city. In those days, well, even today. What—a huge city, over three million people. A, a Black, huge Black community, one of the largest in the United States. First there was the sheer logistics of the thing, getting a grip on it. You had to, you couldn't just talk to a handful of people. There were hundreds and thousands of institutions and neighborhoods, so that was the first obstacle, how to get on top of this gigantic monster. And then secondly, there was not the unity in the community. Many

Black leaders were part of, parts of the democratic organization, had felt that it would work for them, and didn't agree that this kind of protest was needed. So, you did not have the unity that you had in the South, and then thirdly you didn't have the overt, de jure forms of legal discrimination, here you had all the laws on the books, from the post-Civil War days. What you had were subtle and not-so-subtle practices that violated the law or the spirit of the law. So, you had all of these complications: the size, the fragmented community, and the subtlety of the problem, that made developing a strategy in Chicago and in the North, I think, more difficult, more challenging.

00:18:15:00

Interviewer:

Can you talk about the marching through the White neighborhoods? Actually, we should cut for a second, because I need to find out which marches.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

You were on the two—

[cut]

00:18:24:00

Camera crew member #1:

And marker.

Camera crew member #3:

Mark.

[slate]

00:18:27:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, what I'm looking for is a very personal story of what it was like as a White resident of the city, to wal—to march.

00:18:33:00

John McDermott:

Well, the highlight of the fair housing strategy by the Chicago Freedom Movement, were protest marches through White neighborhoods where the housing market was closed to Blacks, to stop at real estate offices where the open housing law, the city's open housing law, was clearly violated. That was the point. The—it was an eerie experience, if you lived in Chicago all of your life. And, our marches were Black and White people together for Black people to cross in, cross the boundary of Western Avenue into this all-White and then very hostile neighborhood, had been a familiar experience of fear and, and, and intimation, something you didn't do. But for White people on the march, it really was an extraordinary experience, because maybe they had done it before. They had never experienced the kind of change, the kind change from acceptance to hate by crossing the street before in their lives. For the first time in their lives, they were walking in the shoes of Black people, and they really did understand, because when you cross that line, and in those days it was Western Avenue. You went basically from kinda friendly territory, where the march was supported, and people were standing out on the street applauding, and waving flags, and wishing you well, into this very frightened and very hostile neighborhood. ***This neighborhood was convinced that we were there to take away their most precious possession, their homes and the beauty of their neighborhood. And as we walked deeper and deeper into the neighborhood, you had a great sense of isolation. Would I ever get out of here?*** Thank God for the Chicago police, who were nearby, ***and the expressions of anger and hate, the Swastikas which were held up,*** the housewives who turned their, their lawn sprinklers on you, and the, I remember we had a, a priest and nuns in our march with the Catholic Interracial Council, and the insults. The vulgar language which they were subjected to, it's ***just unbelievable.*** And so, it was a very eerie experience, yet a bonding experience. It was somewhat like war. These were your buddies in the foxhole, and you stuck together for mutual protection. You went to the real estate office in some instance, had a silent moment of prayer, and then we would move usually to Marquette Park for a little rally and a few speeches, and then finally the walk home. And I guess, it was like walking out of no-man's land, walking out of a warzone. When we crossed 71st Street, there was this tremendous sense of relief, and people began to laugh and hug each other, that they had made it. [laughs] It was an extraordinary experience, extraordinary, ***and it showed the problem. That's what all the point was, to show the problem, to show the fear, to show the rejection, to show the hate, to show the problem that we were trying to solve.*** And it was also an extraordinarily memorable, scary, exhilarating experience.

00:21:33:00

Interviewer:

Yeah. Were you ever actually hit?

Camera crew member #3:

Change.

[cut]

[camera roll #2044]

00:21:37:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #3:

Mark.

[slate]

Camera crew member #2:

[inaudible] clear.

00:21:41:00

Interviewer:

All right. We'll wait until he leaves the room. What I wanna do is, is move up to the summit, the agreements, the accords, the negotiating process, [door closes] and the negotiators were critil-criticized for settling for too little too soon. Can you, were you looking for a way out?

John McDermott:

Are we on?

Interviewer:

Yes.

00:22:05:00

John McDermott:

Oh. The negotiators have been criticized for settling for too little for too soon. I don't agree with that. I think we got what we could. I thought it was an honorable agreement. What was on the minds of negotiators for the freedom movement was the fact that, in a sense, we had reached our peak. It was the middle of August. Remember, what a movement is, it's a group of volunteers. It's a, it's summer soldiers, good people, but many of them were students.

Many of them would be going back to college in a few weeks. It was in our judgment time to get what we could with the strength that we had demonstrated. And, there is nothing wrong with the summit agreement in my judgment. It is not a perfect agreement. What people criticize is that many of the promises which were made to us were not kept. But, I think that's a problem of implementation and follow-through, rather than the agreement itself.

00:23:11:00

Interviewer:

In our earlier conversation on the phone, you told me that the Chicago movement fell apart after the accord on the issue of Black power.

John McDermott:

That's right.

Interviewer:

Can you talk about Black power and when you, as a movement person, first started noticing this new, new wave?

00:23:26:00

John McDermott:

Well, the Chicago movement did begin to decline in power and attractiveness to a broad part of the community when the issue of Black power presented itself. We first began to hear it vocally during the Meredith March, the James Meredith March to Mississippi, the march where he had been shot and then pulled himself together, and people came to his defense to continue that march. We first began to hear it, but hearing it from Mississippi simply opened a door that had been closed in Chicago. The fact is that, whatever the strength of the movement, there were people who were not entirely comfortable with the religious dimensions of Dr. King's leadership, with his sense of forgiving the sinner but not the sin, making the distinction between the evil of racism and maybe the basic decency of people. And his hope for the possibility of an integrated society of interracial harmony. There were people who were troubled by that, who thought that was too otherworldly, and it might not work. And, at the way America really worked, and the way Chicago worked, was that some people power, had power, and some people didn't. Some people were haves and some people were have nots. And the way they saw civil rights was, how quickly can we become haves? How quickly can we become ins? How quickly can we become winners? And of talk, the talk of Black power touched that desire, in my judgment, and took over gradually, and led to the weakening, in my judgment, of the Chicago civil rights movement in its inability to make the establishment deliver on the commitments of the summit agreement reached in August of 1966.

00:25:17:00

Interviewer:

As someone who had made a personal commitment years earlier to an integrated, interracial, non-violent movement for social change, how were you personally affected by this, by the new [unintelligible]?

John McDermott:

Well, I think you have to—

Interviewer:

Sorry. I was talking over you.

00:25:35:00

John McDermott:

I'm sorry. In terms of the, my own personal reaction to the new fashionableness of Black power, I guess I was disappointed by it, but I think of myself as a, a, a Christian humanist, and as a humanist, we are aware that people are noble but not perfect. People are—no group has a monopoly on perfection or on failure, and the Black community is a human, part of a human movement or a human community, just as every other community, and we have no right to expect all Black leaders to be saints, all Black leaders to have the vision of Martin Luther King, of the spiritual vision that he had. We have no right to expect that, and so, for me, I, I was not shattered by it. I—we live our own lives, by our own standards and values. Mine have not changed. I'm still an integrationist. I still believe that non-violent, direct action, non-violent social action enhances democracy and has made an immense contribution to this society. I see no reason for changing that, and I haven't changed.

00:26:51:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

Let me—

[cut]

[end of interview]