



Interview with **Lonnie Lawrence**

Date: December 14, 1989

Interviewer: Madison Davis Lacy, Jr.

Camera Rolls: 1134, 1139-1141

Sound Rolls: 164

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.

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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 #1134]

[sound roll #164]

00:00:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:00:14:00

Camera crew member #2:

Thirty-three

00:00:16:00

Interviewer:

They talk a lot about Overtown in its heyday. Tell me what it was like growing up there, man.

Lonnie Lawrence:

Well, I'll tell you, it was not compared to anything I don't think. I think—

Interviewer:

Start over again and try to give me a statement. You know, Growing up in Overtown—get Overtown in it.

Lonnie Lawrence:

OK.

Interviewer:

All right, go ahead.

00:00:30:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

*Growing up in Overtown was different from anything else that you could probably even imagine. And I guess because, you know, it was like family. You know, everybody was like family. There was so much togetherness, so much—everything there was, was like, like close knit.* You know, the schools, you know, you knew everybody. Everybody did everything basically together. You know, running around the streets, you know, and, and enjoying all the little things that were ass, associated with Overtown. You know, and you look at the fact that, that what we called the, the shotgun shacks, you know, were, were important to us. And I think about Overtown now, and, and the little shotgun shack I used to live in is, is I-95. I-95 ran right straight through it. And we called them shotgun shacks because—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Lonnie Lawrence:

—they were wooden houses, but you could stand—

00:01:31:00

Camera crew member #1:

We gotta stop. We rolled out.

Interviewer:

We rolled out.

Lonnie Lawrence:

Oh, OK.

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible] short end.

[cut]

[camera roll #1139]

00:01:36:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:01:39:00

Camera crew member #2:

Thirty-four.

00:01:40:00

Interviewer:

All right, start again and tell me about shotgun shacks man.

00:01:42:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

Oh, you know, shotgun, the shacks, you know, the reason why they were called that was because you could stand outside a shotgun shack and, and really look right through because, you know, the, the, the, the wood, you know, sort of set up. And you can see in the house from standing outside. And that's why they called them shotgun shacks. You know, like you took a shotgun and blow a hole in something. And you can see right through it. And we had all kinds of little, little, little things over there, you know? And, you know, one of the things that, was Good Bread Alley, which was really land with shotgun shacks. And most of them were smaller, you know? I lived in a two-story one. But, but when you look at Good Bread

Alley, people say, Well, why do you call it Good Bread Alley? Well, Good Bread Alley was what it was called because it was good, and it was the kind of place where everyone broke bread together basically and shared a lot, you know? There is, a lot went on in there. And it was just a good feeling with people living and being in Good Bread Alley. And that's basically one of the reasons why it got its name as Good Bread Alley. There is so many things that, you know, you can think about and talk about, about Overtown. You know, going back to, to, to, to the Orange Blossom Classic days when, when people used to step out. You know, I mean, you know, that was a time to get out the, out the rabbits and the, and all those little fuzzy things and put them around your neck to go to the Orange Blossom Classic parade.

00:03:07:00

Interviewer:

OK, we've got roll out.

00:03:08:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

OK.

00:03:09:00

Interviewer:

Good, OK. Now we'll start on a full roll.

[cut]

[camera roll #1140]

00:03:14:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

00:03:14:00

Camera crew member #2:

Thirty-five.

[slate]

00:03:16:00

Interviewer:

Trying to get an idea of the vitality of business life and social life, and I need to hear you talk to me—tell me something about, a story, an illustration of a restaurant you went into.

00:03:26:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

Well, I think a good, a good illustration would be—well, there were several restaurants over there. But, but I think a good illustration would be you look at how people, how seriously they took that back in, in the Overtown days. I mean, it was serious business, you know. Linen tablecloths on tables, linen napkins. I think about a place where I used to go in, and, I mean, you know, they were decked out, you know? Nice little white linen aprons they used to wear. They used to wear the little, little things on their head—you know, sometimes you see them in movies, you know? People, you know, people don't realize it actually, Overtown, they had places like that where people did that. They had a restaurant in the, in the, in the Sir John that actually had that kind of sit down dinner. And people served, you know? And, and you got good service. You know, you didn't have to wear, you didn't eat out of paper plates. You ate out of china. You didn't use plastic spoons, and forks, and knives. You used silver wear. And it was that kind of thing over there. And, and, and it was, it was really the kind of, of atmosphere that, that a lot of people miss now. Because we really don't have that kind of place.

00:04:41:00

Interviewer:

All right, let's go on to school now. You, you met Arthur McDuffie in, in high school. Do you remember the moment you met him? How you guys became friends?

00:04:50:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

Well, well, Art and I grew up basically, you know, a, a great deal in the same, the same community. So, we, we knew each other. We sort of hung out. And, you know, I, I, I can remember in, in, in elementary school, we went to several different schools. You know, one of those things where, where we went to Douglass Elementary, Phyllis Wheatley Elementary, and Dunbar Elementary, you know. It's kinda amazing to go to three separate elementary schools, you know, in your, in your lifetime. But we did. And, and one of the things that happened at Douglass Elementary was that it was a wooden, a wooden building. And they had to do some repairs because we had a big 'ol hole in the floor. So, we had to transfer us.

Half of us went to Phyllis Wheatley. Half of us went to Dunbar. And, you know, it just went on and on. And when I, I, I, Art and I basically were in school together throughout. He was a year behind me. And we basically knew each other throughout school. You know, Art was a band member. He played in the band. He was, he was really, really, really big on that 'cause he, he enjoyed that kinda stuff.

00:05:58:00

Interviewer:

Why did you like him?

00:06:00:00]

Lonnie Lawrence:

I liked him 'cause he was, like, a, a really free flowing guy. You know, his, he had the kind of personality that, that you could, you can really, you can really like the guy. Straightforward, you know, stand up guy. But, but really a, a kind of guy that you could really, really be friends with, you know? And, and helpful. You know, he, he, he befriended you, you know, and, and he wasn't the kinda guy to take advantage of you. You know, if, if, even if the opportunity existed, it wasn't that kid of a situation.

00:06:32:00

Interviewer:

You guys hung out in high school. Did you ever go on double dates or anything like that? I remember you telling me something about prom.

Lonnie Lawrence:

Yeah. [laughs] Yeah, we—

Interviewer:

Tell me about that.

00:06:39:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

—we, we, went to the prom together. We were getting ready for the, the junior prom. And, and he went over with me and some other folk to, to get ready for the prom. And, and I had rented this car for the prom, and it was one of those push button Plymouths. And we all sitting there BS'ing in the car after we had finished decorating the auditorium, Bay Front

Park Auditorium, and I pushed the button on the car. Well, the button that I pushed was, was the forward instead of reverse, you know? Sitting there talking. And I wiped out, killed two parking meters, and the police were sitting there watching us [laughs] kill these two parking meters. Fortunate enough I didn't end up really getting into too much trouble about it. But, but we were all—and we laughed about that, you know, constantly, you know, how I killed these parking meters. [laughs] You know, it was really a trip.

00:07:29:00

Interviewer:

Did you, did you, did he, you knew that he was dating Frederica?

Lonnie Lawrence:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Did you, did, all right, tell me. Did he ever talk about Frederica, and what did he say?

Lonnie Lawrence:

Yeah. You know, Art, they, they had a real, real thing going on. And—

Interviewer:

Try to put Frederica and Art in a sentence together. You know, Art and Frederica had a real thing.

00:07:47:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

I think Art and Frederica had a, had a real true romance going on long before they, they ended up getting married. And I think a lot of us saw that. You know, they had their ups and downs. You know? They had their, their ins and outs, their splits and everything. But, but I think we all realized that. And we said, you know, we'd say, One day you guys are gonna be together forever. You know? And, and, and, and it did. It finally ended up where, where the two of them really got together. Because they had that kind of relationship.

00:08:18:00

Interviewer:

OK, now you left school and lost track of Art. And then when did you re—hook up with him again?

00:08:21:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

[laughs] Well, the strangest thing is that when *I graduated from high school, I went to D.C. and worked up there for a year. And lo and behold, I went into the Marine Corps after being up there for a year, and who the hell do I see? You know, and I walk in the barracks, and there he was.* And I, and I couldn't believe it. You know, because I hadn't seen or talked to him or anything for over a year. You know, after I got out of school. And, and we spent quite a bit of time together because we were basically in, in a platoon together throughout that particular training in, in the Marine Corps. And we ended up, after our specialized training and everything, ended up being assigned to a, a ship together. And it was, it was the strangest thing, you know? Hadn't seen him for a year and end up in the service with him and serving, serving aboard a ship with him together.

00:09:12:00

Interviewer:

Now, when you were aboard the ship, what did you two guys, what, what kind of jobs did you have? And, and what kind of a marine was Art McDuffie?

00:09:20:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

Well, *Art was a, was a, was a hell of a Marine. He was truly a reflection when you see that commercial about, you know, about this guy in the, in the uniform, and, and, and carving out something that really—that's, that was Art. Art was really the kind of person that took a, a lot of pride in, in how he looked in that, in that Marine Corps uniform.* A true representative of, of, of what the Marine Corps stands for in terms of, in terms of that kind of pride. And, and, and we were—for a while there, he was a, a, what we call a captain's orderly. And that means he was assigned to the, the, the command of the ship as his, you know—some people call it bodyguard or whatever, but he was there to, to deal with the, the captain. And he was assigned that particular task. Basically our duties aboard the ship anyways was to run the brig, and, and to be security for, for the ship, and, and what have you. And—

00:10:19:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop down now.



[cut]

00:10:22:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:10:24:00

Camera crew member #2:

Thirty-six.

00:10:26:00

Interviewer:

Tell me the story about how Arthur was, gigged and was hurt by that.

00:10:31:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

Well, Art, we were standing inspection, of course we were standing, stood inspection every day. And, and Art got gigged by the, the sergeant who was inspecting us for a cabled in. It's like if you got a string hanging somewhere. You know, that's, that's what that's equivalent to. But he, he was so meticulous. You know, he, it, it bothered him because he took so much pride, you know? Here is a guy that who would sit and, you know, make sure his uniform was ready for the next day, and put it, you know, and, and sit and shine his shoes, and shine up his brass, and, and do all those kinda things. But, I mean, it really upset him. I mean, he was so hurt by it. And to the point where he, he actually confronted the sergeant not in a combative way but to say, you know, Gee wiz, you know, you know, one little, one little string, you know, you're gonna gig me by? But, but that was, that was, that was Art. He, he felt strongly about it.

00:11:26:00

Interviewer:

Did he ever talk to you about service, patriotism, why he was in the Marine Corps, you know, what kinda—?

00:11:34:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

Well, you know, we talked about, about staying in. And the fact that he felt good about doing what he was doing. And I think we both did—felt very good about, you know, felt, serving our country as we, as we saw there was a need to do it. And I think we also felt, and I, I, I know we talked about it in terms of character building. You know, we felt that we were better having been in the Marine Corps than, than we would have if we had not gone in. And we both discussed staying in. We were both approached by re-upping. And, you know, we, we, I think we both decided, No, you know, we don't wanna re-up, but, but we really feel good about having, having served this time.

00:12:21:00

Interviewer:

So, now you lose track of him again 'cause he leaves the service, right?

Lonnie Lawrence:

Right.

Interviewer:

All right.

00:12:26:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

Actually, actually what happened was we went to—I went down to, to Guantanamo Bay, and we, I think that was when we split up, when I went down to Guantanamo Bay. Because I believe he stayed in, in, Virginia for a while instructing at one of the, one of the schools up there. And I lost track of him. Didn't see Art anymore. Didn't really talk to him anymore. For quite a while. Then what happened was later I found out that Art was back home. You know, I came, I came to work for, for Metro Dade on the police department. And I ran into Art one day, and I said, Geesh, you know, you know, you know, first of all I miss him out of school. Then I see him again in the service. Then I miss him for a while, and then here, here he was. And at that point, you know, Art was saying, you know, Well, I'm, I'm trying to get, you know, get things squared away, you know. He, he was working then as, as—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Lonnie Lawrence:

—an insurance agent and doing some things. So, he was developing his family and everything.

00:13:34:00

Interviewer:

OK, we got roll out.

Camera crew member #2:

You remember when we rolled out?

Interviewer:

He was just starting to move to the—

[cut]

[camera roll #1141]

00:13:39:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

[slate]

00:13:40:00

Camera crew member #2:

Thirty-seven.

00:13:41:00

Interviewer:

OK, when you met up with him again.

00:13:45:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

He, he told me that—

Interviewer:

Start, When I met up with him again.

Lonnie Lawrence:

When I met up with him again, you know, and after the separate—

Interviewer:

Start again. One more time.

Lonnie Lawrence:

OK.

00:13:52:00

Interviewer:

I was, we were talking over each other.

00:13:53:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

OK. When I met up with Arthur again, you know, after our separation, we, we started talking. At that point, I was with, a police office with Metro Dade Police Department. And Art was saying that he was getting into doing insurance and selling insurance everything. And we even discussed at that point, you know, about him coming on with the department. Then he said, Well, you know, I'll think about it. You know, I, I, I have an interest in it, but I need to talk with, with, with Frederica about it. And, and, and I don't think Frederica really wanted him to get into it. Because you gotta understand, you know, we, we're talking about, you know, back in '68. And, and there were a lot of little things going on in terms of particularly as it relates to Black on the police department. Blacks were, were, were being, being brought onto the department, but there was a lot of apprehension about Blacks being associated with the police department. So, you know, there was that part of, of what was going on. And off and on during that period of time, you know, we would see each other, talk to each other, not that much contact 'cause I think both of us were, were sorta, you know, doing our own things in terms of families, and, and whatever. So, we didn't really have that much contact during that period of time.

00:15:09:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now take me to the time, the point where you first learned, that meeting in your office when you first learned that Arthur had—

00:15:17:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

Yeah, well [sighs] I, at, I was in the public information office. I had, you know, gone through several assignments. And at that point, I was assigned to the, the public information office for the police department. And we were having a discussion relative to an incident that had occurred. And a, where a Black motorcyclist had been, been chased and subsequently allegedly beating, beaten to death or whatever by some of our, our police officers. *The young lady who was handling the case from the internal review section, I asked her, I said, Well, you know, who is this person that you're talking about? You know, because I hadn't really heard anything about it. And she told me the name. And I sort of just sit there because I thought, Well, maybe it's somebody else. And, you know, it, it, it—when, when I finally realized that, that she was talking about the Arthur McDuffie that I knew, that I had grown up with, I just couldn't react to it.* And I had to sort of get up and, and move around a little bit because it, it, it just didn't seem possible. And then the more I found about it, I guess the more it really bothered me. But it was, it was difficult.

00:16:52:00

Interviewer:

So, what did you do next?

00:16:55:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

Well, I guess, you know, things began to start to happen. It began to draw a lot more publicity about what had happened, what had occurred. You know, because his death actually occurred sometime, occurred, occurred after the, the actual beating occurred. *I found myself in a very difficult situation. Because I, I found myself being an official spokesperson for the department, but trying to deal with the fact that here was a person who was a very good friend of mine, who I grew up with, who I knew very well was the, the victim of, of this police brutality.* It made it very difficult to, to, to balance that. And to the point where I, I, I made some statements speaking on behalf of the department and everything else, but I also made some statements to, to some folk relative to how I felt about what had occurred. It was very difficult. You know, real difficult because, you know, you know, and, and I guess people say, Well, you know, you, you should, you should be oblivious to those kind of things. But it's difficult to be oblivious to those kind of things, particularly when this person

is someone that you know very well. And, and, and all things point to the fact that there was something wrong done.

00:18:27:00

Interviewer:

Dorothy Graham yesterday, who you know, basically said, Black woman are fools for having Black male babies because, you know—

Lonnie Lawrence:

[laughs]

Interviewer

—like, they can't get justice in this country.

Lonnie Lawrence:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

What, what do you think about that statement?

00:18:38:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

Well, I, I think that based on, on past history, there is, the, the perception is that Black males just don't get justice. I think that however, that, that, that we can control a lot more of that in the sense that [sighs] more and more of us getting involved in, in what we're doing in a system that really handles that will, will begin more and more to, to create the, the, the perception that there is fairness. And, and, and I think that one of the things that just recently happened in terms of the, the trial shows that, that it can happen. But I think overall when you look back at history, Blacks who have been victims of, and I say victims, of, of a system that basically speaking has, has not been blind, have not gotten fair deals. And I think that it, it, it takes a lot more involvement by those Black males. You know, I, I, I, I, I don't want us to lose sight of that, that I think it takes more involvement by Black males to make that system work the way it, it should work.

00:19:49:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop now. Good?

Camera crew member #1:

Very good.

Interviewer:

Very good.

[cut]

00:19:53:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:19:55:00

Camera crew member #2:

Thirty-eight.

00:19:56:00

Interviewer:

All right, Lonnie, give us your take man, on the community's response to the acquittal of the men who were accused of killing McDuffie.

00:20:04:00

Lonnie Lawrence:

Well, you know, I, I think their response to, the, the response that the community had to the subsequent acquittal of those officers involved was, was shocking. I, I, I think the, the—and, and, and not the community's response. I should say our, our response. We, we were surprised. We were stunned. We just knew that at least some of them would get convicted. I think the, the community's response was, was that they were outraged, and, and probably rightfully so. You know, we had been doing some things to try to bring this community together after this thing happened. And to have the system once again to just say, Well, we don't care, and, and that's basically what people felt. You know, that, that it was all right for these people to do what they did and not be punished for it so to speak. I have never seen

such a response so rapidly to such a situation. You know, I, *I stood in my office window talking to my director at that point* because at that point I was, I was in charge of community affairs, community relations for, for the police department. I had just been, just been appointed and promoted to that position. And I'm standing in my office window, *and I look out the window. I'm talking to him on the phone. And I said to him, I said, You're not gonna believe this, I say, But I have never in my life seen so many Black folk in one place than I see right now. And he says, What the hell are you talking about? And I said, It's about to hit the fan because they are marching down 14th Street—*

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Lonnie Lawrence:

—and just a flood of people were coming down. And I, I—you know, you didn't know what to do.

00:21:56:00

Interviewer:

All right, we're, we're roll out. Did we roll out after the fan?

Camera crew member #1:

I think we covered that.

Camera crew member #2:

I think [inaudible]

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:22:03:00

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