Interview with **Alan Lupo**
Date: March 21, 1989
Interviewer: Jacqueline Shearer
Camera Rolls: 4111-4112
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Team: D

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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 #4111]
[sound roll #440]

[slate]

00:00:14:00

Camera Crew Member:

Marker.

[slate]

00:00:22:00

Interviewer:

What was the Boston School Committee all about before the deseg, and who had reason to have a beef with them?

00:00:29:00

Alan Lupo:

You know, there's a great piece of mythology in the city of Boston, and it goes like this. The schools were wonderful before desegregation. Busing hurt the schools, tore them apart. Well, the truth is of course that bussing helped and bussing hurt. But the mythology, again, is that

the schools were good. The schools were not good before busing. The schools had been in trouble practically from the day Horace Mann pushed public schools, so we're talking 1830-something. From day one, you had a class problem. You had wealthy Yankee folk saying, We don't want our kids going to school with those swamp Yankees. You had all kinds of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants saying, There are too many Irish in the schools. You had loads of Jewish and Italian people coming into the public schools in late 1800s scaring the heck out of teachers and administrators alike. But mainly what you had in the Boston schools was a political patronage system. Now, patronage is not a dirty word. Good patronage is fine. You also had bad patronage. It was a real tight family affair. They went to the same schools, they grew up in the same neighborhoods, they got appointed to certain jobs whether they were competent or not competent, and the people who served on the school committee, with some exceptions, were mainly a bunch of pols who were trying to either advance in their profession, that is politics, or at least do favors for their pals. The school committee was a bucket shop. Stuff was for sale. You ran for school committee, or you ran for re-election, and what you ended up doing was holding what they call "a time." And a time is a political affair. And teachers would get in the mail little invitations. They were real cute. Help John Carrigan, or somebody, celebrate his forty-fifth birthday. He's always been our good friend, and for a fifty dollar donation, you can make him feel even better. And a lot of teachers, and principals, and headmasters, and administrators, and custodians, and secretaries, etc., felt pressure to contribute to those things. The message being that maybe your job wouldn't be so pleasant, or maybe you job wouldn't be period, if you didn't. That's what the Boston schools were.

00:02:49:00

Interviewer:

OK, so now, let me ask you this. You told me a great—if, if you could write the lead paragraph describing the first day of desegregation in Boston public schools in '74, how would it go?

00:03:03:00

Alan Lupo:

You know, I was standing in front of South Boston High School that day in 1974, and the buses rolled up, and some of the violence began, as was expected. But the story that came out of Boston was a story only of violence. And had I been a reporter that day, writing that story, I think I would have said something like this, "Despite a couple of centuries of racism, and bigotry, and class warfare, the city of Boston began desegregating its schools today with a minimum of violence." Because the real story of Boston is a story of two cities. It's a story of the traditional, alleged liberal abolitionist Boston, the progressive Boston, the folk who send Cesar Chavez money for his grape union. The folks who supported the Hungarian Revolution in 1800-something. But the other ***Boston is a very hidebound, distrustful, turf-conscious, class-conscious, parochial city full of people who did not make much progress over the years. I'm talking about White folks. They were not middle-income people. They were poor***

folk, and they were running hardscrabble operations. And they were scared folk, and they had had plenty of things done to them. Highways had come through their living rooms. Nobody bothered to ask. Airports expanded into their neighborhoods, nobody bothered to ask. Some of their neighborhoods had been torn down totally. Two of them integrated neighborhoods, nobody bothered to ask them. ***By the time busing came around, these people were ripe for revolution.***

00:04:53:00

Interviewer:

OK, now, I hear what you're saying, in terms of the violence wasn't the only story in Boston, but it did happen. And as someone who knows the city, how do you understand, how do you explain the phenomenon of hatred that did explode?

00:05:09:00

Alan Lupo:

The hatred is almost inherited in this city. We had people early on who came here for religious freedom, and as soon as somebody stood up and said, Gee, I think I'll be a Quaker, they either hanged them, or they banished them. That kind of set the tone. All right? And when the Irish showed up, the brutality exhibited toward them was as close as anything anyone has ever seen, not counting what has happened to the Blacks. Even more so than other immigrants. So we've had a tradition of this in the city. Not just in this city, in many places, but particularly poignant here, because everybody was fighting for crumbs. And the economy was hardly ever good. I remember personal experiences of the early '40s into the '50s, being in a gang. Happens to be a gang of Jews, self-protection. Protect your religion, protection your class, protect your turf, because somebody else is calling you names. Somebody else wants to get you. So, we had religious wars here, we had class wars here. The Blue Hill Avenue now runs through a Black neighborhood. Once upon a time, it was a Jewish neighborhood, and the Irish kids called in Jew Hill Avenue. And they didn't say that as a joke. Maybe to them it was a joke, but if you were Jewish it wasn't a joke. So that's the kind of atmosphere you had here. Now you have two groups clashing on the day busing begins. Two oppressed groups of people. You've got Blacks, who've been denied equal educational opportunity among many other things they're being denied. But they include some very tough customers from very tough neighborhoods, because it's the history of the world, that when you're poor, you're often tough. And they include a lot of White folks who are very tough, very tough customers, from very tough neighborhoods. Not necessarily as poor, but not that distant. How else could it have? How else could violence have been avoided?

00:07:18:00

Interviewer:

Now, paint us a word picture of what you saw and what you heard outside South Boston High that first day.

00:07:26:00

Alan Lupo:

What sticks in my mind from the first day of busing, standing outside of "Southie" High School, was a sort of a rush of a crowd, a verbal, not a roar really, but, but a—although that's what they called themselves, ROAR—it was like a, almost like a growl. And it was scary. And I heard the word "nigger." And I saw something fly through the air, a bottle or a can. And it smacked the ground near a Black person walking into the school. That sticks in my mind more than anything else in terms of what I heard, but then there's what I saw. And that's more important than what I heard. What I saw was Black kids looking at where they were being bussed and being disappointed. Black kids smiling as if to be cocky, but really nervous. Blacks walking as if to taunt the White kids, but I think really scared. White families looking with perhaps a combination of hatred and fear, and other Whites looking with no hatred but fear and curiosity. Children looking with ignorance and awe, their hands being held by parents who had been through a lot of hell in their White lives, and were looking at a change that they couldn't understand. It was a pitiful sight for everybody.

00:09:01:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut.

[cut]

00:09:04:00

Camera Crew Member:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:09:10:00

Interviewer:

People in South Boston felt used and abused by the media. As a representative of the media, what's your response?

00:09:15:00

Alan Lupo:

I've been on both sides of stories, both as a reporter and as a subject. And yes, no story is ever perfect, and no story is ever therefore totally accurate. So anybody who's been the subject of the media theoretically can feel burned or abused. Southie has a point. First of all, we shouldn't overlook the racism that was evident there, and that had to be reported. On the other hand, there was a lot of fear there. There were a lot of deeply-held sentiments that were more complex than racism, and we hardly ever got deeply into that. Hardly ever does it ever happen that we get deeply into that. But what burned me watching it all was that everybody shows up with the cameras to record racial fighting on The Hill, but when a well-to-do suburb quietly, behind closed doors, says effectively that a certain race or class of people can't live there, I don't see any television cameras.

00:10:17:00

Interviewer:

Excellent. Cut.

Camera Crew Member:

OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #4112]

00:10:20:00

Camera Crew Member:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:10:27:00

Interviewer:

So, can you tell us about that media-conscious exchange you heard that day in Southie?

00:10:31:00

Alan Lupo:

One day in Southie, we were coming up The Hill in one of the mayor's cars. And I was sitting with Bob Kiley, who was essentially a deputy mayor. And there had just been [coughs] I'm sorry.

00:10:46:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

[cut]

00:10:49:00

Camera Crew Member:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:10:56:00

Interviewer:

OK.

00:10:58:00

Alan Lupo:

We were going up The Hill one day in South Boston. I think it was probably the second, or third, or fourth week of busing. And I was with Bob Kiley, who was essentially the deputy mayor, sitting in one of the mayor's cars, heading up The Hill. There had just been yet another incident. Cops, White cops, dealing with their White neighbors, and police screaming get out of the way, and kids, and mothers, and fathers screaming police brutality, sort of a replay of the White college kids fighting the cops earlier, of Blacks dealing with cops in the streets. History was repeating itself in interesting ways. And a crowd of kids were moving up The Hill, and our window was open. And we clearly heard one kid say to another, No, that, that'll be too late to make the six o'clock, but it'll be on the eleven o'clock news. And Kiley turned to me, and shook his head, and said, Don't tell me these people aren't aware. In other words, they’re out there for a principle, bad or good, but folks also get out because they want to be on TV. There's no question about it. Now, I would argue that were there no television, there would still have been fighting in the street. There still would've been hatred. There still would've been moments of accommodation. But the presence of the camera is stardom. And for your lot of people—for a lot of people who will have their names in the newspaper only

when they die, and there will be a little paid death notice, almost anything, any kind of access to becoming a star, even for thirty seconds, is quite important to them, White or Black.

00:12:45:00

Interviewer:

Now, you told me that you thought there were a couple of levels of understanding connections between the civil rights movement and the anti-busing movement.

00:12:55:00

Alan Lupo:

You know, it was an ironic thing to watch and listen to the people opposing, actively opposing, busing. A number of them said essentially, if Martin Luther King was a hero for sitting on the street, or blocking traffic, or picketing, or demonstrating, how come we're not heroes? How come the media are treating us differently than it did the White college students who opposed Vietnam or the Blacks who had sit-ins? Some people were very sincere when they raised that question. They felt there was no difference. They felt they were demonstrating for their homes, their neighborhoods, their children, their, their view of education, their civil rights. Other people, I think, were a little less sincere. [phone rings] Some of the—

00:13:45:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

[cut]

00:13:47:00

Camera Crew Member:

Marker.

[slate]

00:13:51:00

Interviewer:

OK.

00:13:53:00

Alan Lupo:

Some people, I fear, were not so sincere. Perhaps some of the leaders who thought they were being cute, and may or may not have seen any parallels, but decided to run that guilt trip on the media and say, Oh, so now you're discriminating against us. So, you had both. You had those who honestly saw no difference, and believed that their civil rights were in danger, and they had a right to demonstrate, and you had those who maybe were playing it for all it was worth.

00:14:23:00

Interviewer:

Now, I wanna go back to the comment before, when you were talking about how people wanted the glamor of being on TV. Don't you think they understood the bad effect that it would have if what was on TV was violence?

00:14:40:00

Alan Lupo:

I think when you're living in a tight little neighborhood where disputes are often settled with a fist, that maybe you don't think that a fistfight or a confrontation is such a terrible thing. You're not gonna worry about your image, and I think there's at least one good reason for that. When you're living in that kind of neighborhood, and this I know personally, you begin to feel, after you're about six or seven years old, that a lot of the folks who put you down are from somewhere else and maybe they're hypocrites. They have more money. They have more benefits. They get jobs at federal government that they call appointments. Our kind of folk get jobs that are called patronage, you see? There's a difference there, America. And a lot of people feel that. So, you settle disputes one way. Maybe by shouting, maybe by fighting, maybe some kind of political connection. Other people settle disputes more quietly, but not necessarily more humanely. And if your back is up against the wall, or if you think your back is up against the wall, you're not gonna worry about what the rest of the world thinks of you, because you figure the rest of the world isn't out there to help you anyway.

00:16:04:00

Interviewer:

Excellent. Cut.

Camera Crew Member:

Stopping down.

Interviewer:

Great.

[cut]

00:16:08:00

Camera Crew Member:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:16:14:00

Interviewer:

So, can you give us that story?

00:16:17:00

Alan Lupo:

During busing, in my own community, which is just on the Boston border, it's a self-governing town, it's not part of the city, it's technically a suburb. About 20,000 people in one square mile. A number of us decided it would be a good idea to get involved in the METCO program, in which Black youngsters are bussed voluntarily to suburban neighborhoods. The state pays the cost, and the White kids stay in their own schools. We had our heads handed to us by our own neighbors. Some of it was racism, which of course everyone denied. A lot of it was fear. And what it was essentially was a precursor of what was going to begin happening outside the big cities. The fear, the racism, the anxiety of being outside the big city and wondering who's next in this revolution that nobody seemed to understand. People who had known me for years continued to be my friends, and I am their friend, during all of this. But they let me know in no uncertain terms, and with much discomfort sometimes on their own part, that this was not going to happen. And indeed it didn't. Our school committee voted four to one against it, and what was this piece of trauma? What were we talking about? We were talking about eighteen Black youngsters, aged five to what, eighteen? Coming in every day on a bus, and filling up empty seats in our adequate, but not extraordinary, school system. Oh! Some people said, No, it's a long trip. It could be dangerous for them. We don't have enough empty seats, they said. Well, the Blacks were willing to take the long trip. They were willing to encounter whatever real or alleged danger might've existed, and as far as no empty seats, we subsequently closed two schools for lack of students. But I could tell that people were afraid. And I'm not sure, and I don't know if they were sure, what it was that scared them.

00:18:52:00

Interviewer:

Excellent. Cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:18:54:00