

Interview with **Thomas I. Atkins**

Date: October 11, 1988

Interviewer: Jacqueline Shearer

Camera Rolls: 4003-4006

Sound Rolls: 002-003

Team: D

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 Thomas I. Atkins, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 11, 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 #4003]

[sound roll #002]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK. This is the interview with Mr. Tom Atkins, New York City. Brooklyn, New York.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Hit it.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, Jackie.

Interviewer:

You ready?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yeah.

00:00:28:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's begin with the fact that a bunch of Black parents went to federal court to sue the Boston School Committee for deseg. Can you explain how the parents got there?

00:00:41:00

Thomas I. Atkins:

The decision to file the federal court lawsuit was a last resort. We tried everything else. Black parents in Boston were committed to doing whatever had to be done to rescue those children from schools we knew were killing them educationally. We tried meeting with school officials. We tried boycotting the schools. We tried using the open enrollment program to transfer kids from one system, from one school to another.

00:01:20:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

One second. We didn't get the slate. It was off.

Camera Crew Member #1:

No. It was off.

Camera Crew Member #1

OK.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

This is the actual slate.

[slate]

00:01:35:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Watch your foot, [inaudible]. Both feet, both feet. OK, Jackie.

00:01:43:00

Interviewer:

Let's start again. And you can tell me again what motivated Black parents to wind up in federal court.

00:01:51:00

Thomas I. Atkins:

The decision to file the lawsuit in federal court was essentially a decision of last resort. We had tried everything else. Black parents were committed to doing whatever had to be done to get our children out of schools we were convinced were killing them. We met with the school administrators. We met with the school committee. We met with the superintendent. Nothing. We got a state law passed in 1965, the Racial Imbalance Law. No sooner was it passed that it became clear that it was gonna be impossible virtually, to apply and implement it in Boston. We started boycotting the schools. We started using the open enrollment system. Operation Exodus was formed. METCO was formed to take kids outside the Boston school system. The Bridge Program was formed to take kids to private schools. An-anything we could do, we'd try. We created a whole new school, the Massachusetts Experimental School with state funding. By 1972, it was clear that in terms of dealing with the problems of most of the kids in the Black community, nothing short of a suit in federal court would work and that's why it was filed.

00:03:16:00

Interviewer:

Now can you give me a sense of why federal court? Why did you think that was going to make a difference in terms of the situation in Boston?

00:03:28:00

Thomas I. Atkins:

I think the view was that if a lawsuit were to be filed, you only had two choices. You could file it in state court or you could file it in federal court. Legally...the precedents, the most important precedents had all been made in the federal courts, starting with the 1954 Supreme Court decision in the Brown case. Northern school systems like Boston began to be affected by school desegregation law. It was also the feeling of most of us who had been involved with this issue, that state courts were simply not suited for handling a case of this magnitude just in terms of its size, the logistics of handling a case of this size nor were they suited

in terms of the resources they had available. And we were concerned that this would be too controversial a case to take in a state court. All of those things led to the decision to put it in federal court. A single federal judge, sitting in a federal district court is the most...is the most powerful man in the American political system. Keep in mind it was one federal judge. No, no bigger than Arthur Garrity. No more power than Judge Garrity had, who pulled Nixon off his throne. We figured that probably could straighten out the Boston School Committee.

00:05:08:00

Interviewer:

That's a cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

All right, Sticks, hit.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

00:05:19:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, Jackie.

00:05:22:00

Interviewer:

OK. Can you give me a sense of what political activities had gone on, what your feeling was about the rate of success with dealing at the city, state and federal level in terms of this issue?

00:05:37:00

Thomas I. Atkins:

We started dealing at the city level because that was the most logical thing to do. Nobody thought we were going to wind up dealing with an issue as big as what it eventually became. And nothing succeeded at the city level. We [siren] got no support. We, we couldn't even get

the Boston School Committee to acknowledge that there were schools that were segregated, never mind how it happened. We weren't initially asking them to admit to any illegal action. We simply wanted them to acknowledge that there was a problem because we felt that was a predicate for doing something about the problem. They wouldn't agree to that. We could not get the mayor, none of the mayors, to use whatever political clout they had to muscle the school committee into addressing this problem. We certainly could not get the votes in the school committee elections to throw the fools out who couldn't see schools that were all Black as a segregated school. So, we had abandoned the city as a, as a, as a place to get any kind of political response or relief. The city was a wasteland. We went to the state in 1965 on a bill that had been filed several years in a row by Royal Bolling, state representative Royal Bolling. Eventually, the bill passed in a form that came to be known as the state's Racial Imbalance Law, what was hailed all over the country as a dramatic new step. Well, in fact, by the time the bill came out of the committee, we knew that it was worthless to us. We wanted a bill that would address the problem of racial segregation. What we got was a bill that identified schools that were more than fifty percent Black as illegal. Well, what about schools that were a hundred percent White? To us, those were segregated too. The school...the bill that we got gave very limited powers to the state to correct the problem. They had to go through an extraordinarily long and drawn-out bureaucratic process, which eventually meant that they had to go into court. They had to go to court to get relief for the kids. And we saw, when they started trying to do this, it didn't work. Boston was stronger than the state. It was more determined to resist than the state was to enforce. And Boston fought the state Board of Education and the state Commissioner of Education at every turn and succeeded in bottling them up. By 1972, the efforts at the state level were so clearly thwarted that the feeling was if relief is gonna come, it will come only at the federal level. And if it's gonna come at the federal level, in 1972, you got Richard Nixon in the White House. I mean, he's not gonna help us. So, if it's gonna come at the federal level, there's only one place it's gonna come from and that's out of the courts. That's why we got to the courts in the first place. It was by a simple, not very quick process of elimination. We eliminated all of the other alternatives except filing the federal lawsuit.

00:09:08:00

Interviewer:

Now, can you give me a sense of why was the NAACP that was the organization in the Black community that sponsored all this, this movement and activity?

00:09:18:00

Thomas I. Atkins:

Well, the NAACP wasn't the only organization involved. The NAACP was initially one of several organizations that were heavily involved in addressing the problems of education. Back in 1963 when I first got involved, the NAACP had an education committee that was just really getting off the ground. It had begun trying to gather information. It had started talking with parents. It had begun talking with people in the school establishment but it was

certainly not a, a, a well-oiled machine. There were program efforts under way at the Urban League. The Ministerial Alliance had held meetings and had tried to bring parents together and bring other folks in the community together. The Northern Student Movement was a very important voice in addressing northern problems of school segregation. There were a number of settlement houses. The South End settlement house was, for instance, was one that, that had begun to address issues of race in education. So, what happened was all of these various people and/or groups that had been working each in their own little corner came together in June of 1963 as part of a coalition to go to the school committee and ask for what we thought was a very simple thing. We want...*we just wanted them to say, Yes, there is segregation in the schools, and we wanted them to acknowledge that the problem exists and to commit themselves to do something about it.* That meeting came to be known as the NAACP's meeting. It was not. NAACP was one of many. The thing that made the NAACP eventually come to play a, and then the dominant role was that it was the biggest organization in the Black community. It was the biggest. It was the oldest civil rights organization. And it had resources available to it—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Thomas I. Atkins:

—from time to time, resources that had to be pulled in from outside Boston. It was a powerful national organization. So, the NAACP could call on assistance from its New York headquarters or it could bring people in from other parts of the state or from other parts of the country if need be. That's how the NAACP role came to be central.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

00:11:50:00

Interviewer:

Excuse me. We're out.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

That's a roll out. Camera rollout.

Camera Crew Member #2:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

Yeah. It's a camera rollout.

[cut]

[camera roll #4004]

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK. Hit any time.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Camera roll 4004.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Continuation of the same thing more or less, Jackie?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK. I'll come back slightly.

Interviewer:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Because that was tight.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

Interviewer:

Let me know when.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yes. Anytime.

Interviewer:

Yes, you're ready?

00:12:18:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mm-hmm.

00:12:18:00

Interviewer:

OK. So why don't we pick up with the NAACP story?

00:12:22:00

Thomas I. Atkins:

In addition to its, the fact that it was the largest and oldest civil rights organization, NAACP had the practical advantage of having resources that it could call in, whether from its national office or resources that could be called in from other parts of the state or other parts of the country. And by this time, the NAACP was the organization in the North that had some experience dealing with school desegregation. So, if you wanted to talk to the people who were the experts, such as they were, in dealing with northern school desegregation, it was the NAACP. Southern school desegregation, it was the Legal Defense Fund and the Justice Department. But in the North, it was the NAACP. So, we, we sort of backed into a leadership role. And other people were willing to permit that. Once it happened, it, like other things, became difficult to change.

00:13:30:00

Interviewer:

Can you also give me some background on how the NAACP developed a focus on education to begin with?

00:13:40:00

Thomas I. Atkins:

The NAACP agenda for dealing with problems in the Black community has always been essentially the same. It was to deal with all them. Housing, employment, and, and political action and, and, and public accommodations but education has always been the top of that tree. And the reason is a belief that unless the cycle of poverty and lack of preparation can be broken, the community is destined forever to be in the role of an underclass. And that means getting to the kids, helping the kids to know more and therefore, be prepared to do more than their parents, each generation. So, education was the logical opening wedge. The other reason education was, was chosen as an area focal, focal point is that it affected so many people simultaneously. No other institution, no other public institution in which there were major problems had centralized control and simultaneously affected so many people as a public school system. So, if you tackle the public school system, at least there was somebody to talk to. You want to deal with housing, who do you talk to? The real estate board? The brokers? The individual home owners? A person wants to sell or wants to buy, where do you go? In education there's a focal point by the nature of the beast. And that's what led back in the, in the late '40s and early '50s, to an increasing focus on education. Those race factors, Thurgood Marshall and the people who worked with him in developing a strategy and in honing the techniques saw this as an opening wedge, the thing that could be used to pry open a whole system of segregation and discrimination.

00:15:54:00

Interviewer:

Now, let's go back to Boston facing the deseg struggles. I want you to give me a sense of, were there any disagreements within the community about this strategy? Was everyone for investing all this energy and money and time into an integration fight? How, how did that all go down?

00:16:15:00

Thomas I. Atkins:

When the decision was made to file the lawsuit in the first place, there was no agreed upon strategy as to what the solution, what the remedy was gonna be. The NAACP did not have a remedy. It didn't have a, a proposal in its pocket or stashed away in a drawer somewhere as to what the judge ought to do if he agreed with the lawsuit that was filed. After...and as a, as a matter of law, the nature of the remedy that you get, says the Supreme Court, must be tailored by the scope of the violation you've proven in court. So, you can't really start putting a, a, a remedy together, a solution together until you have proven the dimensions of

the problem you've described. The, the, the actual work in developing a remedy did not start until Garrity's decision came down in June of '74. That's the reality. People find that hard to believe. They say, Oh, you knew what you were gonna do. Well, we didn't know what we were gonna do. So, work began on developing a remedy. In the community, there were enormous diverse, diverse views. There's always been diverse views in the Black community around education and about everything else. I mean, I, I don't remember a single time over the last twenty-five years, literally, twenty-five years, when on any of the major educational issues, there has been a total community consensus. We had people in the Black community in 1963, we got them in 1988, who say Black people will never be properly treated in a system that is run by White folks. We need to retreat, get our own resources, control our schools and teach our own kids, protect them from a system that is racist. Some call that a separatist view. Some call it a pragmatic view. It's never happened. We've had people for this entire period, this entire generation, who have argued that what was needed was a, a means of maximizing the choices that parents had. Those parents who want their kids in the public schools, fine. Those, there are maybe some who want their kids in private school. Give them the chance. There may be some who want their kids in public school but not in Boston. That's what METCO was about, public schools outside of Boston. There may be parents who want their kids in, in parochial schools. Well let's give them that opportunity. There may be parents who want their kids in schools that have never been created yet. They have an idea about some innovative approach. That school of thought is, is committed to the notion of maximizing choices. And then there are those who, who felt that for now, and the foreseeable future, most of the kids in the Black community are gonna be in the public school system. And what they get is gonna be determined by what it does and that we simply cannot afford to permit it, that system, to function without input from us. It was that view which eventually convinced a majority to come together and say, whatever else we do, we need to file this lawsuit. You know, we're not...the people who believed in maximizing choices, did not give up that, that search. They worked with Exodus, they worked with METCO or they worked with the Bridge. People who believed, in, in, the notion of developing schools that would be controlled by the community did not give up that. Schools began to be formed in the Black community and there are still some that exist. But everybody agreed that most of our kids were gonna wind up in schools run by the Boston Public School system. And that whatever else was done, we had to focus on that system.

00:20:16:00

Interviewer:

Can you comment on the brief period of time in the spring of '76 when the federal government was flirting with the idea of supporting a challenge to Garrity's order. Was that a time of crisis for civil rights lawyers, were you part of the mobilization that pressured the federal government?

00:20:35:00

Thomas I. Atkins:

By 1976, busing was a nationwide code word for, "keep the niggers in their place." I mean, we knew what it meant. They didn't have to tell us what it meant. We knew what it meant, OK. So, people could run racist campaigns without making racist statements. All, all they had to do was to say, What ever else I am, I'm against busing. Everybody knew what they stood for, OK. Louise Day Hicks ran for years on the slogan "You know where I stand." We knew where she stood. She was trying to stand on our neck. In 1976, you had Gerald Ford in the White House. He wound up there by accident and increasingly, people thought he was an accident but he was the President. And he was trying to bring the country together but he also wanted to stay there. He sort of liked it, you know. And he wanted to run for re-election. And it was at about the time that he was getting his campaign put together and Democrats were running around the country calling each other names as they always do, that one of the many appeals in the Boston School desegregation case wound its way up to the Supreme Court. And the issue presented to a Supreme Court that had not yet ever accepted an appeal dealing with the Boston School desegregation issue was whether it should accept this appeal. The Supreme Court does not have to accept an appeal. We didn't want the Supreme Court to accept the appeal. We thought that it would be the wrong message to send. It would encourage people who had, who had committed themselves to the position of never, never, would the constitution make me change my view on public schools. And we thought it would be the wrong message to send. Whatever your, your position was on the issues, we thought this symbolically was the wrong message to send. So, we organized under, primarily under the leadership of Clarence Mitchell, who was then the NAACP's long-time lobbyist, head of its Washington Bureau and affectionately known to many as the, the 101st Senator. Clarence Mitchell knew Gerald Ford from years and years of working with him. And he put together a meeting with the President—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Thomas I. Atkins:

—including Attorney General Edward Levi. At that time—

00:23:06:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry.

Camera Crew Member #2:

We have a rollout.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Camera Crew Member #2:

[inaudible]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, best to roll off on camera roll—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yeah, I remember where we are. It was a good time to stop.

Camera Crew Member #1:

—4004.

[cut]

[camera roll #4005]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Camera roll 4005.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Hit it.

[slate]

00:23:33:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, Jackie.

00:23:33:00

Interviewer:

You were talking about the meeting with Clarence Mitchell and Ford.

00:23:36:00

Thomas I. Atkins:

The meeting, the meeting was a very, very tense one. I wasn't at the meeting because at that time, I was trying the Columbus School desegregation case that I would ultimately argue three years later at the Supreme Court. But I got a rather copious report on the meeting. The NAACP's position was that whatever Gerald Ford's position was on busing, which he continued to say he was opposed to, that he could only have one position on the question of enforcing constitutional rights and that position had to be the same as Eisenhower had had when he sent troops into Little Rock. And Clarence Mitchell lectured Gerald Ford on the importance then of Eisenhower having done that and of how history had put him in a position to do the same thing. He said, Mr. President, you can't support this challenge because if you do, you send a message that the constitution can be thwarted by violent opposition. And it was an argument that...both the President and the Attorney General, Ed Levi at that time, agreed overrode everything else. As a result of which, the position that was taken by the United States on that issue was that the Supreme Court should not grant cert and it was not. Certiorari was not granted. The appeal was rejected. And I think it's important to note that there probably has not been another school desegregation case either before or after Boston in which as many individual orders have been issued. The count now is well in excess of 400. And the Supreme Court of the United States has never accepted an appeal from any one of those orders. Never. And it never will for the reason that it too believes that lawlessness cannot be rewarded by making it respectable.

00:26:08:00

Interviewer:

OK, now I would like to have you give me in as succinct a fashion as you can, the story that you told us in the kitchen about...beginning with the forty death threats and the calls to your kid and the warning about Southie and so forth.

00:26:27:00

Thomas I. Atkins:

From, approximately August of '74 until the end of the '74-'75 school year, because of the central role I was playing as essentially the spokesperson for the community on the school case, I was targeted for intimidation. So, I started getting death threats. I was averaging about forty death threats per week. I had had that before so it didn't particularly bother me. However, it took some rather bizarre aspects. Initially, these calls were coming in to my office at the State House, to the NAACP office and to my home. I was getting letters at all three places. And I found out, much after the fact, that some of the calls that came into my house were being answered by my children, who, like kids all over the country, I guess, tried to protect their daddy. And people would call to speak to me and to tell me that they were going to blow my head off only to find themselves being asked by one of my kids, Why are you gonna kill my daddy? And it was a, you know, it was embarrassing kind [laughs] of thing for them to have to try to explain this. Some of the people who, who started off calling for that purpose, wound up calling back to talk to my kids. I got wind of this in a

rather peculiar way. One night, I was home watching television. I got a call from a guy who identified himself as having called before. And he wouldn't give me his name. He said, You know me. You'll recognize me if I give you my name. He said, But I've talked to your kids. And I said, What do you mean you've talked to my kids? He said, Yeah, I've talked to your kids. He said, What I want to tell you is this. He said, There was a meeting tonight in South Boston and if those kids go over to South Boston High School tomorrow, all hell's gonna break loose. They're going to stone the buses. They're gonna attack the buses. They're gonna turn them over and they're gonna burn them. And I said, What are you talking about? And he, he said, That's the message. He says, I know what I'm talking about. Well, I'd never talked to this guy before. I had no way of crediting this. And, so, I wasn't inclined to initially. I went back and started watching television. But the more I thought about it, the less I believed I could take the chance that he was right...that he was not right. So, I called the Superintendent of Schools and, and relayed the information. Superintendent, suggested that I call, and I did call the police commissioner in Boston. I talked with him and his information was that yes, there had been a meeting that night in South Boston and yes, something was planned for the next day. He didn't know what. He hadn't gotten the information yet.

I called this, the person at the State level who was in charge of the State Police, 'cause that's who were, who was, at that time, in charge of protecting the kids in South Boston and I passed this information on to him. And finally, we concluded that we simply couldn't take the chance that those kids had to be moved out of that school the next day. There was no time to notify individual parents or children, so the plan was to meet the kids as they came into the Bayside Mall in South Boston at the Columbia Point Bayside area, where typically they would be put on, they would be taken from the buses that brought them from home and put on buses that would take them up to the high school, in, in effect, in a convoy. Police cars and motorcycles on each side. That day we intercepted them and took them instead to UMass Boston where we had arranged with, through the President of UMass and the chancellor, space—

[rollout on sound roll]

[cut]

[sound roll #003]

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

[inaudible]

Camera Crew Member #1:

[laughs] OK, ready. Got a good slate?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sticks, now.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK. [inaudible]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Pretend you're racing up Tom Atkins, Brooklyn.

00:30:51:00

OK, Jackie.

00:30:52:00

Interviewer:

OK, so, let's pick up with the UMass...

00:30:54:00

Thomas I. Atkins:

We had made arrangements to have people from the community come in and, and serve as, as freedom school teachers. So, none of the kids who were supposed to go to South Boston showed up that day. As my informant had told me however, there was a crowd of well over 1,500 people, between 1,500-2,000 people waiting for the buses and when it became clear that the buses were not going to arrive, those people were very upset. Finally broke up and one contingent of the crowd that had broken up was going down the hill from the high school, which sits up on a hill, to Columbia Road. And, as they got to Columbia Road, the light changed and for people to cross the street. And, it happened, as fate would have it, that the second car in line, waiting for the light to change, was a car in which this Black man, a Haitian, was riding by himself. He was on his way home from work. He worked at the Gillette Company. It was early in the morning. And one of the people in the crowd saw him and said, There's a nigger. Let's get him. And so, they attacked this car. He couldn't move his car forward. He couldn't move it backward. So, he got out of the car and ran. And they chased this man through the streets of South Boston and they finally, they finally caught him on a porch trying to get into a house. Nobody would open a door for him. And he was beaten

with, with sticks and bottles. At South Boston High School, it was quiet that day. A- at UMass, we had each of the kids fill out a questionnaire describing to us any problems they had had, whether anybody had, had mistreated them and if so, who it was. We asked them for their name and their address and the phone number and the school they, they'd attended the year before and the names of any witnesses and, and so forth and a simple description of the problem they had. It was just a one-page form. It was eight and a half by fourteen-inch form, legal size. And every one of the kids did fill these out and at the end of the day, I collected these. And, there was so much going on I didn't have time to read them that day. ***About a week later, I was sitting in my office one night and I reached into my briefcase and here were these forms. So, I took them out and I began, sort of absently, to read through them*** and it was, it was like being hit with a sledge hammer. It was an experience that I'll never forget as long as I live. Because ***as I read through one after another of these forms, what I saw, was that these kids couldn't spell. They could not write a simple, declaratory sentence.*** They couldn't spell the name of their street. They couldn't spell the name of their community. They couldn't spell Roxbury. They couldn't spell Boston as in South Boston. They couldn't spell high as in high school. They couldn't spell Negro. They couldn't spell Black, they couldn't spell nigger. ***And as I read [dog barks] these forms, none of which were grammatically correct or spelling proper. I just started to cry—***

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Thomas I. Atkins:

—and, and it reinforced the absolute correctness of our decision to get these kids out of those schools.

[cut]

00:34:34:00

Interviewer:

I think the camera rolled out after, you began to cry, which is great. So, we got the complete sentence?

Camera Crew Member #2:

We got the—

Interviewer:

So, we got the complete sentence?

Camera Crew Member #2:

—yeah, we got the complete sentence.

Interviewer:

Yeah, good.

Camera Crew Member #1

OK, that's on tape. That's a camera rollout. Camera rollout 4005. Sound three.

[cut]

[camera roll #4006]

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, hit it.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK. This camera roll 4006. Sound three.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Hit it.

[slate]

00:35:00:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

And can you wedge in three with Tom Atkins, Brooklyn, New York.

00:35:05:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, lets finish this up from when you read the questionnaires.

00:35:11:00

Thomas I. Atkins:

About a week later I was reaching for something in my briefcase and I found, this group of questionnaires that the kids had filled out that day at South Boston when they were at UMass. So, I took them out and I started, just sort of reading through them. And it was...I was shocked. It was a, it was a powerful, powerful experience. As I read through these questionnaires, it became clear to me that these kids couldn't read and they couldn't write and they certainly couldn't spell. They couldn't make a, a simple, declaratory sentence no longer than one page, one sheet. They couldn't spell the names of the streets on which they lived. They couldn't spell the word Black. They couldn't spell White or, or Boston or Roxbury where they lived. They couldn't, they couldn't spell high as in South Boston High School. As I, as I sat there, I just started to cry. *It was, it was...impossible to explain the feeling of pain, on the one hand but on the other hand, I knew we were right.* We had to get those kids out of those schools and this proved it.

00:36:33:00

Interviewer:

OK, now I would like you to go back in time to when you were telling us about some of the various opinions within the Black community. I want you to give me a reading of Black political power [unintelligible]—

Thomas I. Atkins:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

—in the city leading up to deseg.

00:36:51:00

Thomas I. Atkins:

One of the real problems that, that the Black community faced was that relatively speaking, it was small. We did not have a large enough community to control any political event, per se. And it showed itself in many ways, one of the ways it showed itself around the school issue, is because of the rich diversity of, of views as to what ought to happen, one of the views was that we should just recognize that Black children were gonna be mistreated if White folks were in charge of them and get control of our schools, run them ourselves, hire the teachers and teach our kids ourself. And it was an attractive notion but I and, and many other people in the community concluded that it simply wasn't a practical approach whatever your ideological views might be on integration. It wasn't a practical approach. What it, it depended on a notion that we were gonna make a deal with somebody, the school committee, the state, whoever. But we knew we didn't have the power to enforce the deal. If we made the deal and they broke it, what could we do about it? And so, we said, Separatism in Boston is not gonna work.

00:38:15:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, let's end by going back to the beginning. Since we have some film, I'd like to get you—

Thomas I. Atkins:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

—reintroducing us to this whole story and telling us how and why it was that Black parents wound up in court.

00:38:34:00

Thomas I. Atkins:

The, the question of how we got to the federal court in the first place has to be put into context of what we had done before. And we'd done everything we could. I mean, we started from the premise that whatever we had to do to get our kids out of schools that were killing them educationally, we would do. And we tried everything. We tried meeting with people, with the school officials. And that didn't do any good. We tried taking the kids out of the school and using the open enrollment program and sending them to schools in West Roxbury or, or in Hyde Park. And there weren't enough seats to help most of the kids. The few that it helped, we were glad for but there weren't enough that could be helped. We tried meeting with state officials, and we, we finally got a law passed at the state level. As soon as it was passed, it was clear it would never be implemented in Boston. Boston, Boston's resistance and, and will to fight was stronger than the state's will to enforce. We tried creating new schools. We tried finding opportunities through METCO for kids to go outside the Boston Public Schools but still stay in public schools. Or other kids to go to private schools. And again, we couldn't create enough opportunities for enough of these kids and we were finally left with the reality that our kids were gonna be for the most part, in the public school system. And it was the public school system we had to deal with and there was only one place we could go and that was to court. And as between the state court and the federal court, it was too big for the state courts, and it was too hot for the state courts. So, we just ran out of options. *We filed a lawsuit in the federal court because there was no other place for us to go. It was literally, the court of last resort.*

00:40:32:00

Interviewer:

Excellent cut.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK. Let's do room tone, please.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:40:38:00

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