



Interview with **Karriema Jordan**

Date: April 18, 1989

Interviewer: Louis Massiah

Camera Rolls: 3094-3096

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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 #3094]

[sound roll #343]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:00:15:00

Interviewer:

OK. When did you first begin to think of yourself as an American of African ancestry? Your first sort of consciousness of, of being an African American.

Karriema Jordan:

When I was in fifth grade and I had my first Black teacher, that was Mr. Soares—

Interviewer:

OK. Could you just make sure you rephrase it as a...?

00:00:33:00

Karriema Jordan:

OK. The first time I really realized that I was an African American, just not a Negro American, was when I was in the fifth grade. I had a Black teacher named John Soares and he would tell us that we were not Indians, we were not Negroes, we were African Americans. Caused a lotta controversy with my grandmother who went up to school and told 'em I was not an African American, I was Indian, but he convinced me I was African American.

00:01:05:00

Interviewer:

Can we stop for a second?

[cut]

00:01:07:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:01:09:00

Interviewer:

OK. Once again, when did you first begin to think of yourself as an American of African ancestry? When did you first think of yourself as an African American?

00:01:17:00

Karriema Jordan:

First time I thought of myself as African American was when I was in the fifth grade and I had my first Black teacher, John Soares, who told us we were not Negroes, because N-Negroes didn't come from anywhere. We were not Indians 'cause our cheekbones weren't high enough, and we were Af—and he told us we were African Americans. Caused a lotta controversy between him and my grandmother, but he convinced me I was an African American.

00:01:45:00

Interviewer:

OK. And, and how, how did you get your name? If you'd tell the whole story about, you know, your first name and your first name you chose for yourself, and then the name you have now.

00:01:53:00

Karriema Jordan:

Well, somewhere at Pratt, when we were learning about African culture, there's a book on Mali-Songhai and another Afri...ancient African civilization, and it had a story about Nabawiyyah, Black woman prophet, and my name was really Nabawiyyah Weusi, and Weusi just meant Black. I met a Muslim brother one day who told me I was not a Black woman prophet, because I couldn't prophesize anything, so he called me Nab...Karriema. So, my name went from Nabi, Nabawiyyah to Karriema. Because no one said Nabawiyyah, everybody called me Nabi.

00:02:32:00

Interviewer:

OK, great. Could, could you tell the story of, of wearing your first afro at the Halloween party? Just, just start from the beginning, how, how—

00:02:41:00

Karriema Jordan:

Well, we had a Halloween party and I wanted to come as African American, or African really. And my mother really opposed that because that meant I had to wear an afro. So, in order for me to wear an afro, I had to have shorter hair. So I took the curl—the straightening comb and fired it up to as hot as it can get and just brushed it all over my head and it all fell off and I washed it and had instant afro. Didn't look great, but it was an afro and I didn't care.

00:03:13:00

Interviewer:

And then, then what happened after that?

00:03:14:00

Karriema Jordan:

Well, she was a little upset and I had to wear it like that until my aunt had a beautician just cut it short and made it an afro. And it's been like that since.

00:03:26:00

Interviewer:

OK. Oh, when did you first become aware that there was a, a struggle going on at your school, that is there was an effort to have more control by community?

Karriema Jordan:

When the teachers went out on strike.

Interviewer:

OK. And make sure you rephrase the question once again.

00:03:43:00

Karriema Jordan:

OK. I remember my first awareness that there was a controversy, or that there was community control or anything was when the teachers went out on strike and the Black teachers decided to keep the s-s- schools open. When I saw the police outside the school, when they turned our playground into a police precinct, when I saw the police across the street on the row houses on top, they were on top of the roofs and the helicopters and that's when it comes pretty fast that there's somethin' going on.

00:04:18:00

Interviewer:

Was there any time before the strike that you became aware of the struggle going on at your school?

00:04:23:00

Karriema Jordan:

Not really. It wasn't really a struggle that was brought out to the students. It wasn't until the teachers decided that their security and their pay meant more than whether I passed the Regents Exams or not, that it started affecting me and then I became aware of it.

00:04:43:00

Interviewer:

OK. Could you describe the events at Junior High School 271 around the death of Martin Luther King, the assembly? Just sort of talk me through that.

00:04:54:00

Karriema Jordan:

Well, the assembly...what happened is, I think previous to that we had had a teacher strike and, at that point, you're more aware of your Black leaders, and Mar-Martin Luther King and Malcolm X was one of them. And one of the things that I had a chance to listen to was Malcolm X, *A Ballot and the Bullet*. And to me that differentiated, well, that was the difference between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, was *The Ballot and the Bullet*. And when they killed Martin Luther King, they killed the ballot, so they left no other thing for us to do but to go for the bullet. And that day we had a big riot in school. And I remember Les Campbell in the assembly...Everyone was angry. We wrote on the wall, "Avenge King", "Kill Whitey." Teachers got upset. They, the White teachers claimed that they were being beat up, some of them, and some of them was hit by flying de-debris. I never saw anyone throw anything, but maybe it did happen. And I remember Les Campbell telling us, If you're going to riot this time, don't, don't steal toothpaste 'cause that won't stop a bullet. I'm sure that's the, the most famous thing from that whole assembly.

00:06:20:00

Interviewer:

OK. One—actually, we may go back to that again.

00:06:24:00

Karriema Jordan:

Yeah, he'll kill me. [laughs]

00:06:26:00

Interviewer:

[laughs] Right. Fall of '68, that's when the big, the big strikes were going on. What— was it like going to school?

[rollout on camera]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

was it like going to school? And could you talk about, you know, what, how your day began and, you know?

Camera Crew Member #2:

There's rollout.

Interviewer:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

That's a rollout on thirty, ninety-four.

[cut]

[camera roll #3095]

00:06:41:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:06:42:00

Interviewer:

OK. Fall of '68. What was it like going to, going to school then? Could you describe your morning and, and what you saw in and around Junior High School 271?

00:06:53:00

Karriema Jordan:

I was totally amazed to know...get up in the morning, you walk, meet my friend Cia. We get to school and first thing on the block is the school on Howard, *we came in from the Howard side, Howard Avenue side, and we had to go through barricades to get to the school. And you'd look up and on the rooftops, across the street from school, the cops were with their*

helmet gear and ri...their riot helmets and their night sticks and helicopters, and, *and the playground was converted into a precinct, and walking up to the school you have just mass confusion. You have the community people out there. You have the UFT.* And you have the Black teachers on the inside. *It was...you were just amazed. You couldn't believe this was happening, you know, and you just went to school.*

00:07:49:00

Interviewer:

And are there any particular scenes or, or incidents that you remember seeing outside the school?

00:07:55:00

Karriema Jordan:

The scene that I remember is in front of the school, the main entrance, the police keeping out the community people, me standing on the stairs looking down into this crowd and just seeing all the police and helicopters. I mean, they had their guns ready to fire. It was just, you just couldn't believe it. It was just amazement. It was like someone was filming a, a movie or something.

00:08:24:00

Interviewer:

Who, who do you think the police were protecting?

Karriema Jordan:

The UFT teachers.

Interviewer:

If, if you could rephrase the question.

00:08:28:00

Karriema Jordan:

The, the police were protecting the UFT teachers. That's who they were protecting. They definitely were not protecting me or the community people. We belong there. UFT teachers decided to be the outsiders.

00:08:43:00

Interviewer:

OK. What was the difference between the new teachers coming in, the teachers from the African American Teachers Association and the old teachers? What, what was the difference in what they taught, their attitudes?

00:08:54:00

Karriema Jordan:

Well, you have to understand the difference between the, the new teachers and the old teachers, number one, you had very few Black teachers in the school at that time. Number two, this was the end of the second strike. There was a lot of activity going around. So, basically, as a student, you were more curious as to why this was happening than you were as...you didn't really, your curiosity was more to why it was happening rather than who discovered America, you know, Christopher Columbus. So the teachers were addressing more and more those questions. And also, you, as a student, were willing to believe them more than UFT teachers because they were the ones who were conc...the Black teachers were the ones who were concerned as to whether you passed your Regents Exams or your classes or not, not the UFT teachers. At this—that, that point, they were very hostile toward the students, too. All of them, they were very hostile and they acted like automatically we were hostile towards them. But they made their choice, not the Black teachers.

00:10:12:00

Interviewer:

So, and again, further, what was it like having so many more Black teachers inside Junior High School 271?

00:10:19:00

Karriema Jordan:

Well, you learned a lot more. It was a lot more, you learned a lot more. You, you identified more. You learned that teachers were human beings, not some abstract something. They stayed after school. At three o'clock they didn't run downstairs and punch out. You know, they gave you more time. I mean, it was, it was more of a...***you felt more accepted. You weren't the outsider in your own school. They were part of your environment. I mean, they were Black, you can identify with them and they can identify with you. It's as simple as that. There's no big mystery,*** you know.

00:11:01:00

Interviewer:

Could you talk about the bulletin board that you and Cia created? Just describe that.

00:11:06:00

Karriema Jordan:

Oh, the bulletin board was very graphic, very nice. It had a Black Uncle Sam saying that the Liberation Army wants you. Had a lot of, Emory from the Panther Party, a lot of his, it was a collage of Emory's work, poetry from Cia. She had her po-poem about Hey, Mr. Jew man with that yarmulke on your head, had "guns, baby, guns." And out of everything that was there that was the thing that was opposed, that we had clipped out the words, "Guns, baby, guns" from the Black Panther Party and that was the whole controversy behind that bulletin board.

00:11:50:00

Interviewer:

OK. What were some of the other extracurricular activities that you sorta too—you were involved in, I mean, ma-mainly as a member of the African American Students Association?

00:11:58:00

Karriema Jordan:

Well, we did a lotta things, like we got out a lotta mailings about meetings in the community. We, we were really assisting mailings, clerical things, things of that sort. My activities at African Students Association, student didn't really start manifesting itself until I went to high school at Franklin K. Lane. Then we started organizing demonstrations and things of that sort.

00:12:28:00

Interviewer:

OK. Could you talk about some of your memories of, of any classes? You were talking before how in math class and science class and shop class there was, you know, the, there was an African consciousness and a consciousness generally. So, what are some of your memories of, of, of, of classes during the strike?

00:12:45:00

Karriema Jordan:

Some of my memories of the classes during the strike were...you try to have science, you know, but this, you just can't have a science biology class with all the political science going out, so you basically have a political science 'cause you, as a student you have to know why these, these things are happening. So, everything became more a political thing no matter what it was. If it was Miss Magnier's English class, either she'll, part of the class is talking about that, the other part now is focusing on Langston Hughes. If it was Mr. Magnier's shop class, you know, part, even while you're constructing whatever you're constructing in shop, you're still talking about what's going on outside, why is it happening? No debate, it's just, just discussion. History class with Al Vann became more of a political science. And it was healthy. This information was needed. You know, we, you know, we...I don't think the White teachers, and, and matter of fact, with the White teachers you didn't discuss these things. You didn't, didn't bother to even ask. They didn't volunteer any information either.

00:14:04:00

Interviewer:

Great, good. How was the strike? You know...you, you were an eighth grader, or I guess you were a ninth grade by then.

Karriema Jordan:

Eighth and ninth grader.

Interviewer:

Eighth and ninth. How was the strike affecting your plans? You know, how was it affecting your studies?

00:14:18:00

Karriema Jordan:

Well, we missed...the strike affected our studies because we missed a lotta school. We did take, we still were responsible for the Re-Regents Exams, but you didn't see any further than what was happening then, because what was happening right then, during the teacher's strike, was telling you that no matter what you did as a Black kid, it really didn't matter. So, I really don't remember any aspirations from that point to the next point. I knew I had to go to high school. I remember getting my final report card home in the mail. Very few classes did I go to really. There weren't any. There really wasn't a formal school. So, we really didn't have, it was just too many in-interruptions to have school. Your school was what's hap...what was happening in the community. Every single day was a new day, was a new thing, you didn't know what to expect, and that happened every day.

00:15:25:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut.

[cut]

00:15:29:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:15:30:00

Interviewer:

OK. You, you were born Theresa Jordan. How, how did you, how did you get your name [unintelligible]?

00:15:35:00

Karriema Jordan:

I was born Theresa Jordan, that's true, but slave names was out. You know, you remem— Jordan was the slave master's name and Theresa was some, I don't know. So, everybody adopted African names. I adopted mine from a book that, in a summer program, I read a book on African civilizations and one of the women in that book was Nabawiyyah, and so I thought Nabawiyyah was a great name and was woman prophet. And Weusi, my name was Nabawiyyah Weusi, Weusi meant Black. So, I adopted that name. Everybody called me Nabi. But I met a African brother who said to me that I was not an African prophet, a woman prophet and that was sacrilege, you know, so he decided to name me Karriema, which is a person in the Quran who did good deeds for the prophet Mohammed. So, I didn't oppose to it. One name to me was better, just as good as the other, as long as it was African. So I kept the name Karriema.

00:16:38:00

Interviewer:

Great, wonderful. Could you talk about the day you, Martin Luther King died and how you heard about it and then what happened in, in school?

00:16:45:00

Karriema Jordan:

What happened when Martin Luther King died was pretty devastating to us. I knew the moment I got into school something was going to happen. And I think right after home room period was when all hell broke loose and we just threw chairs around, wrote on the walls, "Avenge King", "Kill Whitey." And they...a, a big assembly was called, and I do remember Roy Innis being there, Les Campbell, I'm not sure but think Rhody McCoy was there. It was a lot of, they...we all gathered in the assembly and, of course, everybody is, is devastated from the news. And we were told not to riot. We were told if we were going to riot, not to steal toothpaste because toothpaste—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Karriema Jordan:

—don't stop bullets. And that's what I remember from that.

00:17:40:00

Interviewer:

OK—

Camera Crew Member #1:

That's rollout?

Interviewer:

Yeah, that's a rollout.

[cut]

[camera roll #3096]

00:17:43:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:17:45:00

Interviewer:

OK. Once we're inside the auditorium, could you describe...this is the day after Martin Luther King has been assassinated, could you tell us what happened?

Karriema Jordan:

Oh, there was a lotta screams about Black Power and—

Interviewer:

And if you could rephrase the question, I'm sorry.

00:18:01:00

Karriema Jordan:

What happened inside the assembly was, it was electricity. There's a lot screams of "Black Power" and "Kill Whitey." Just a lot of, just a, a lotta hurt and ex- being expressed. Les Campbell gave a long speech. I can't remember everything that was said in the speech. I remember Roy Innis was there, he said a few words. And I think Rhody McCoy was there. A lot of...Sonny Carson was there. Just a lotta people were there. And one of the things I do remember from that assembly is that "if you're going to riot, don't steal toothpaste because it doesn't stop bullets." And I think afterwards we dispersed. I don't remember goin' into the community and breaking windows or anything, but I'm sure we just went home from there. I'm not sure...can't remember any other activity.

00:19:01:00

Interviewer:

OK. Could you tell me about some of the activities that you and Cia did in the school? I want you to tell the bulletin board story again.

00:19:11:00

Karriema Jordan:

OK. Cia and I had a very unique situation. We were two students who had access to the school when all of the students could not have that access. We, we, we...one of the things we did was we put up a bulletin board. The bulletin board ha—was a collage of different poetries, different clippings from the Black Panther Party. We had a picture of a Black Uncle Sam that said, "The Black Liberation Army Wants You." We had a little clipping from the Black Panther Par-Party paper that said, "Guns, baby, guns" and something by H. Rap Brown. It was just collage of poetry and art and things of that sort. That, out of everything

that was on that bulletin board, the "Guns, baby, guns" is the part that made the newspaper [laughs] and they didn't, they wanted us to take that down. We took it down because if we didn't take that down the whole bulletin board would have to be dismantled. But we did things like that. We had access and no one questioned our access. We kinda ran the school.

00:20:25:00

Interviewer:

OK. You had a number of new African American teachers in the schools then. Some people have said that these teachers were teaching hate. Wha—was, was that true?

00:20:36:00

Karriema Jordan:

Did these teachers teach hate? They didn't teach hate, they didn't have to teach hate. The police, the UFT teachers, the media, how they reported what was going on, they taught us that, not to hate, but they taught us that we weren't worth anything. *What the Black teachers did do was to broaden us, our perspective of looking at things. We were no longer members of a small community called Ocean Hill-Brownsville. We were broadened to W.E.B DuBois, his readings, Langston Hughes, Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, H. Rap Brown, Mao Tse-tung, the red book. I mean, we became international and it was a good thing because Black people are the third world. The third world is much larger than European history.* They brought us back to ancient, ancient African history, I mean ancient world history, which didn't any longer start at Rome. It started with the Benin society and smelting of ore and silver and gold and things of that sort. We became much larger than just the community, and...till today, when I look at things, I look at it from a international perspective, and that was what those teachers taught us. They—hate was like, that was the least. I mean, why worry about hate?

Interviewer:

Great.

Karriema Jordan:

Wasn't—

00:22:12:00

Interviewer:

OK. Wonderful. Once again, could you just tell the afro story again? And just start, when did you first decide that you wanted to wear your hair in an afro?

00:22:21:00

Karriema Jordan:

Well, we had a, a party, a Halloween party and I had bought some African material. Well, it wasn't really African material, it was just some material. I was gonna wrap it up, and I needed to have my hair in an afro and my mother would not let me wear an afro, absolutely not, so I decided that the only way I can wear an afro is if my hair was shorter. So I took the straightening comb and fired it up till it was real red and I just burnt all the hair around to about ear length, washed it, and I had instant afro except that it was not really well kept at all, but it was my first afro and I wore it with pride. And my aunt, who was a little hipper than my mother, and her beautician really saw and felt sorry for me [laughs] and cut it down to a real nice afro. But my mother today still has not forgiven me for, you know, burning out my hair. [laughs] But I still wear my afro with pride.

00:23:21:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

Camera Crew Member #2:

[inaudible]—

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:23:27:00

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