

Interview with **Helen Kelly**

Date: June 5, 1989

Interviewer: Sam Pollard

Camera Rolls: 2138-2139

Sound Rolls: 265-266

Team: C

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 Helen Kelly, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on June 5, 1989 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 #2138]

[sound roll #256]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:00:15:00

Interviewer:

OK, Mrs. Kelly. Could you tell me about the urban renewal that affected your neighborhood many years ago?

Helen Kelly:

Oh, you mean when they put the expressway?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Helen Kelly:

Call it Edsel Ford now.

Interviewer:

Right.

00:00:26:00

Helen Kelly:

It used to be different streets, Henry Street and Mulberry Street and all these different streets was in that area. So, where the expressway is now, my house was sitting right in, in there where the expressway—so, when they asked us all to, to move, I didn't wanna move because I liked the, the location. I was right off of Hasting Street, middle ways the block off of Hasting, and that's why I wanted to stay there. But one day, one morning the bricks start coming through the window and I knew it was time to go. So that's why we left from there. So the, the urban renewal run us all outta there.

00:01:08:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's cut. Let's do, do—that was nice. Let me do it one more time.

[beep]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

I want you to tell us, you know, I lived on such-and-such street.

Helen Kelly:

Oh, I forgot that part.

Interviewer:

All right. And then this is the street that was designated for urban renewal. They were gonna build an expressway through there and they wanted [unintelligible].

[cut]

00:01:27:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

And marking.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:01:29:00

Interviewer:

OK, Mrs. Kelly. Tell me about where you lived when the city was starting to do some urban renewal in your area.

00:01:34:00

Helen Kelly:

I was living at 949 Henry Street. That's off of Hasting and Russell. And at the time, the people's talkin' about the expressway coming through, that is the Edsel Ford Expressway, what it is today. We didn't wanna leave from there, but one morning woke up, the bricks started coming through the window and I knew we had to leave from there.

00:01:58:00

Interviewer:

What [unintelligible]

00:01:58:00

Helen Kelly:

But it was, it was, it—the place, the reason we wanted to stay there due to the fact it was right off of Hastings Street, middle ways the block, and we was, we had access to bus, the Oakland Avenue bus going north and, and south. That's why we really wanted to stay there, but...and the schools was close, both schools walking distance for the children, the church was, they had a hospital, children hospital was right there on Frederick and, and I think

Kerby, in that area. So, everything was right there what you need. The stores was there and everything.

00:02:40:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's change the [inaudible]—

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

—so you had all this stuff happening in one—

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

—day. You were in your apartment. Tell me, tell me a little bit about what happened that day, that morning when the bricks came through your building.

00:02:49:00

Helen Kelly:

Well, they was tearing the house down next to me and one of the two, three bricks come through the window. I was still in the bed and I jumped up to see who was out there fighting but [laughs] I found out they was tearing the building down next door. I called my husband and said you better come home because they're tearing down the, this building next to us, we'll be next. So, we finally moved from there to where we at today.

00:03:15:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's cut. That was good. That was good. Now I wanna ask you about—

[beep]

[cut]

00:03:19:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:03:23:00

Interviewer:

OK, Mrs. Kelly. Tell me about that Sunday morning and how you heard about the riot.

00:03:28:00

Helen Kelly:

Oh, I got my kids ready for church, for Sunday school rather, and the bus came by, came— they walked from Highland and, to... We lived on Highland and they walked from Highland and 14th to Lynwood and Highland to catch the church bus, and they went to school. And so, *when my daughter got to church she called back and said, Mama, it's Judgement Day. I said, Whatchu mean? Said, Everything is burning, I said, Why? She said, They say there's a riot goin' on. And I almost had a fit behind that.* And I was worried until they brought 'em back home after church, till they come home, thank god, in one piece.

00:04:07:00

Interviewer:

And what'd you do after the children got home? I mean—

Helen Kelly:

We kept 'em in the house so—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. Just start again.

00:04:14:00

Helen Kelly:

We, we, we kept 'em in the house and told 'em that you couldn't go outside because we didn't want nobody shooting to hurt 'em. And so, everybody stayed in the house. My husband and all of us, we stayed in the house.

00:04:25:00

Interviewer:

I'm, I'm gonna ask you that again. So, when you say, "My children came home, I wanted to keep them in the house. I didn't want 'em to go out there, I didn't want 'em to get hurt. I was concerned about what was happening out in the street."

Helen Kelly:

Well, I was concerned [laughs] about what was happening—

Interviewer:

I know.

Helen Kelly:

—out there in the street.

Interviewer:

I just need you to say, "When, when, when my children got home."

Helen Kelly:

From church?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

00:04:41:00

Helen Kelly:

OK. When the children came home from church, they was telling me how so many things was burned up coming home, what they saw on the bus coming from, from church. And I said, Well, the best thing we gonna do is stay in the house. And they said, Well, we can go in the backyard. I said, I don't think y'all should go nowhere because it's too bad out there. So, I

was very much concerned. I told my husband he couldn't go to work. We all had to just stay there in the house. So we, so when the, the troops came in and they was riding those trucks, you know look, what, what you call 'em with the guns on 'em?—up and down the street, and they housed them over on Central High School playground, that's where they were. And they was up and down that street all night and all day going. When they come down 12th, 12th, 12th Street is one way going north, and they would turn when they'd get to Highland and go back over to Central High School to the parking lot where they was housed at. So—and those guys, they'll say, Get off the porch! And so, people on the porch, they run in the house. So, that's the way that went. It was very devastating watching all that kinda stuff.

00:05:55:00

Interviewer:

Let's cut.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

Looking back on what happened when you—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speed.

Interviewer:

—oh.

[cut]

[camera roll #2139]

00:06:04:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:06:10:00

Interviewer:

Going back to the story you told me about when the expressway's coming through your house; what do you think it did to the community, the expressways coming through that section of town?

00:06:19:00

Helen Kelly:

Well, it divided people. When you put a, when you could go right across the street to visit somebody, you had to go across a bridge. That divided the community, you see. And so, a lotta time you hear that these things was done that too many Black people—didn't want too many Black people together at one time. So, and they done a good job of that dividing so they could conquer.

00:06:48:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. If you, if you could tell me again the story about when you were watching the troops come up and down the street and you would be out on the porch and they would yell and stuff. Tell me that, tell me that story again you told me earlier. During the riot.

Helen Kelly:

Well, when they said go back in the house—

Interviewer:

If you could just say, "When the troops were going up and down the street..."

00:07:08:00

Helen Kelly:

When the troops was goin' up and down the street they had a bullhorn and said, Go back in your house. And so, people went back in the house because they had guns. That's one thing we do know, the, the damnation of a gun.

00:07:23:00

Interviewer:

Yeah, but you told it to me a little more fiery before. You know, when they came down the street, when you were out on the street and the troops came by, what did they say? What did they actually say?

00:07:32:00

Helen Kelly:

Well, they just told people to go get off the streets, get, but we was on the porch. We wasn't out in the street, we was on the porch and they said, Get back in the house. So, everybody went back in the house. So, you be nice, we be nice, so, we could throw some bad bricks, if we had to.

00:07:53:00

Interviewer:

Right. When New Detroit came about, what did you think the new goal of Detroit, the goal of New Detroit was gonna be?

Helen Kelly:

It was supposed, and, and it still is, to build the community, help build the community by give the pe-

Interviewer:

Excuse me. I just need you to include the goal of New Detroit. Say "The New Detroit" in your answer.

Helen Kelly:

New Detroit goals—

Interviewer:

Yeah.

00:08:15:00

Helen Kelly:

—is to help to give people grants to do things they wanted to do when they didn't have the opportunity to do before. That's, that's what self-determination is all about. That's a arm of New Detroit.

00:08:32:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's cut a second.

[beep]

[cut]

00:08:36:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:08:40:00

Interviewer:

OK, Mrs. Kelly. What did the expressways do to your community?

00:08:44:00

Helen Kelly:

The expressway divided the community. When you could walk across the street and talk to your neighbor, it's no longer there. You gotta go across a bridge, and if you go across that bridge you ain't gonna find that same neighbor because that space, street is gone. All those houses in that neighborhood is gone. And the people are scattered every which way but where they were in before they put the expressway.

00:09:10:00

Interviewer:

So, the city was doing what in terms of the Black community, as far as you could see?

00:09:14:00

Helen Kelly:

I guess that you'd call it urban renewal and rehabilitation of the community. I don't know. I'd say it was divide so they could conquer, that's what I would call it.

00:09:24:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's cut.

Camera Crew Member #3:

That was nice, thanks.

Interviewer:

That was—

[beep]

[cut]

[wild sound]

Camera Crew Member #4:

That chair OK, Mrs. Kelly? Are you comfortable in that chair?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speed.

Helen Kelly:

Yeah, I'm all right.

Camera Crew Member #4:

OK.

[cut]

[sound roll #266]

00:09:35:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:09:39:00

Interviewer:

After all this was over, Mrs. Kelly, did you think that the riot accomplished anything? Did you see Detroit in a different way? Do you think it was different after the riot?

00:09:47:00

Helen Kelly:

Well, people realized they hadn't done what they shoulda done with the community, but I don't see where it accomplished that much myself because you couldn't buy a gallon of milk nowhere around the neighborhood 'cause everything was closed up or burned down. So...

00:10:06:00

Interviewer:

If you could just tell me that one again, just include people thought that after the riot. I need the word "riot" in your answer.

Helen Kelly:

They would do what?

Interviewer:

Just need to have you say riot in your answer, the word "riot." People thought that after the riot that nothing had been accomplished. Whatever you feel, however you felt.

Helen Kelly:

But you askin' me did the—

Interviewer:

I'm askin' you how you felt. I just need—

Helen Kelly:

Oh, how I felt?

Interviewer:

Yeah. I'm askin'. I just need the word "riot" in your que- in your answer.

00:10:31:00

Helen Kelly:

Oh. Well, as I said before, I don't see where the riot accomplished nothing myself but a lotta burned up buildings and no, people don't have no, some of 'em lost their homes. So, I can't see where it accomplished that much. But the one thing I do know that the people, that they couldn't buy a loaf of bread or a quart of milk nowhere in the neighborhood after those riots was all over.

00:10:59:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's cut. OK.

Camera Crew Member #3:

We got it.

Interviewer:

[unintelligible] it's fine.

[beep]

Interviewer:

Thank you.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:11:07:00

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