Interview with **Jerred Blanchard**
Date: October 17, 1988
Interviewer: Paul Stekler
Camera Rolls: 4007-4008
Sound Rolls: 401
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.

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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 #4007]
[sound roll #401]

[slate]

00:00:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Camera roll 4007. Sound roll 401. Sound one.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:00:21:00

Interviewer:

Briefly, how did the strike start?

00:00:24:00

Jerred Blanchard:

How did it start? It was a terrible beginning. Two men workin', they're Black men of course, for the garbage department of the City of Memphis. They were leaning against the back of one of these big maws of the pickup truck, and it wasn't workin' well. And they were a little inside to get out of the rain, and, and in some manner the lever was tripped. And it, it makes you sick to think about it, but it, it just chewed 'em up, chewed 'em up. And there was no insurance. Except for the grace of the city, they would have gotten somethin' like five hundred dollars burial expenses and a couple of weeks' pay, and that would have been the end of it. And this was a shock when all of that information came out in the city of Memphis in the newspapers and to the brand-new city council, which had been on duty five weeks. And of course we assumed everybody had insurance. Not so. Not so. Tragic. A tragic beginning.

00:01:28:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about Mayor Loeb. What was, what was Mayor Loeb's attitude towards the strikers when this first happened?

00:01:34:00

Jerred Blanchard:

Mayor Loeb's attitude toward the strikers was that of a father whose children had gone astray. You see, he had been the commissioner when there were five commissioners who ran our city government prior to 1968. The city council mayor came in in '68. He had been a commissioner prior to that time. And one of his functions was picking up garbage. And he said over, and over, and over, I'm a garbage man. I understand this. And so he felt that he had been betrayed. He felt that he knew exactly what was good for these men. He knew how to treat them, knew what ought to be done for them. And the one thing they didn't need was a union. They needed him, Mayor Loeb, to look after 'em, and that's all they needed. That was his approach to it. And a more honest approach, if misguided, you can't ask for.

00:02:32:00

Interviewer:

Let's shut it down for a second.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound, sound two.

00:02:37:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:02:39:00

Interviewer:

What was Mayor Loeb like, and what was his attitude when these men first started striking?

00:02:44:00

Jerred Blanchard:

What was Henry Loeb like? Well, Henry Loeb never changed. He was the same man in 1967 as he was in 1968, and before and after those two years. He'd been a member of the five-man commission. And as such, it had been his function, among others, to pick up the garbage. So, he used to joke with everybody that he was a garbage man. Henry felt that he knew the men, that he knew their problems, that he knew the solution to their problems, and that he would take care of them much more effectively and look after 'em better than any union in the world. And of this he was convinced. Henry Loeb might have been misguided, but insofar as what kind of a man was he, did he have strong beliefs, was he fair and honest? Certainly by all of his convictions, he was. ***He simply didn't understand that instead of a garbage strike, he had a racial problem. And he never did understand that.***

00:03:52:00

Interviewer:

Was he paternalistic?

00:03:53:00

Jerred Blanchard:

Was he paternalistic? Well, certainly he was paternalistic. All Southerners and maybe all Americans with white skin tend to be somewhat paternalistic when dealing with persons whose skins are of a different color. Speaking only of myself and of some

observations I've made about others, I think that's quite true. I think it's an accurate statement.

00:04:22:00

Interviewer:

Back in there, we were talking about there was questions about if this was a spontaneous strike or not, and you told me—

Jerred Blanchard:

[laughs] Of course it was. [coughs] Excuse me. I think it's kinda funny. This is February of 1987. The weather is cold. It's wet. I was in New York City once.

Interviewer:

Can you start one more time? Because you said it was February 1967. It was February of '68.

00:04:49:00

Jerred Blanchard:

It sure was.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, we'll get [unintelligible]

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

00:04:52:00

Interviewer:

So, was this strike spontaneous?

00:04:54:00

Jerred Blanchard:

[laughs] Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Please bear in mind that this was February of the year 1968. I know that 'cause we'd been in office, we were elected in '67. We'd been in office five weeks.

And it was a cold February. It was rainy. It was a typical Memphis February. You don't have garbage strikes in the winter. I was in New York one summer when they had a garbage strike, and it piled up, and it stank, and it was a terrible place to be. But not here, man, we could sort of cold storage it right there on the street for a while. No, the strike was spontaneous. T.O. Jones had a belly full. He'd had a belly full, when he said, and this is a quote, I am a man. He meant it. And he was not being treated like a man. And all of a sudden it welled up in him, and he struck. And he got his men to go out with him. The union never even knew about it 'til he told 'em later.

00:05:53:00

Interviewer:

That's good. Bobby?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes?

Interviewer:

Shot number one?

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

Interviewer:

You still rolling?

00:05:56:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes.

00:05:58:00

Interviewer:

There was a vote that you took that, that brought attention to you. What's, what was that vote, briefly?

00:06:08:00

Jerred Blanchard:

There had been immediately after the strike commenced—

[Crosstalk]

Camera Crew Member #1:

I'm sorry, you don’t need a closeup, do you? I thought you said one.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Camera Crew Member #1:

You do mean—

00:06:17:00

Interviewer:

Yeah, sorry.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK. Can you start again please?

00:06:21:00

Jerred Blanchard:

Immediately after the onset of the strike, which is the second week of February, the question came up, what will the city council, if anything, what will it do about it. And none of us wanted to do anything about it. None of us. We thought that was business for the mayor. We knew one man could handle it a lot better than thirteen women and twelve men. Anyway, it was executive business. And the one thing we didn’t want to do five weeks into office was get involved in some sort of a power struggle with the executive. So, we said, Hands off. It’s not our business. But early on, it became quite apparent that Mayor Loeb was not gonna resolve the strike, that his mind was made up, and that if it were to be solved some way amicably, the city council had to be the agent that did it. So, about ten days into the strike, and I don’t remember the day, but it was probably the third Tuesday of the month at the regular meeting, there were a couple of motions. One was Louie Donelson’s motion, which called for a modest recognition of what was goin’ on without any dues check off. That was the big hang up between Loeb and the union. And then there was another one that Councilman J.O. Patterson], one of the able Black members of council, had sponsored, and

that was to give them full recognition, including the dues check off through the credit union. There was a motion to table that, i.e. not to vote on it. And at that point in time, I could not longer in any conscious at all vote on a pure racial line. Prior to that, we'd had ten White votes, three Black votes split right on that. I voted with the three Blacks not to table that motion, and then my telephone started ringin'.

00:08:25:00

Interviewer:

And then what happened?

00:08:28:00

Jerred Blanchard:

Well, for example, I shall clean up my language, it rang six o'clock every morning for weeks. And a man cursed me and said, Wake up, nigger lover. And then he'd hang up. Didn't bother me, I was up anyway. My wife was desperately ill. It bothered her [pause] considerably.

00:08:57:00

Interviewer:

Were, were there other reactions? Other places in terms of—

00:09:04:00

Jerred Blanchard:

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yes. [sighs] There were other reactions. And these, as a matter of fact once you make up your mind that you have to do something then you have the calm that comes from peace of mind. So, when I was told I didn't need to come back to my church, that didn't bother me. I kept coming back. When I was told not to darken the door of a country club where I used to play golf, I darkened that door, too. I was determined that nobody was going to be a dictator of my life. I was gonna do it my own way. And in that, I was as stubborn as Henry Loeb was.

00:09:48:00

Interviewer:

How are we doin' on time on the roll? Sorry.

00:09:50:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK. We have about a half a minute.

00:09:53:00

Interviewer:

Real quickly, how would you, how was it described in the White community that snow that postponed that march?

00:10:00:00

Jerred Blanchard:

Oh, that snow [laughs], I'll never forget it. We were scared to death. Martin Luther King Jr. was comin' to town, and we didn't want him to come. Nobody wanted him to come in the White community. And lo and behold, if he was due in to march on Friday then the proceeding Thursday, sixteen inches plus of big snowflakes started to fall. And by, oh, the morning of the march, there was no question but that the march would not come about. And the following Sunday, the White pulpits characterized this as a manifestation of White power. [laughs] White power. We just put off the evil day, that's all.

00:10:49:00

Interviewer:

Are we close enough to let, just let this one roll out?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yep.

[cut]

[camera roll #4008]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Camera roll 4008. Sound roll 401. Sound number three.

00:10:57:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

[slate]

00:10:59:00

Interviewer:

By the time you get to March, people must have heard of the fact that, that King might be coming. Dr. King might be coming to Memphis. What was the attitude of the White community in Memphis to King's coming?

00:11:12:00

Jerred Blanchard:

The attitude of the White community was one of dread. There's no other way to describe it. Please bear in mind that all of us who could read knew about Watts, and Newark, and Detroit, and all of the troubles that we'd had in our big city ghettos. And we knew about the march in Selma, Alabama, and Mrs. Montgomery and—or Rosa Parks in Montgomery, excuse me. All these things we knew, and somehow or other the name of Martin Luther King Jr. was associated with deep trouble. And Memphis dreaded his approach. We didn't know what was gonna happen, but I was quite sure that something would happen, just a question of when and how bad. And I believe that practically all of the people in town, and this includes of course the strikers and all of the civil rights leaders, anticipated that there might well be something that would go amiss. And if so, [shrugs] be it so.

00:12:17:00

Interviewer:

You told me, and this is not specifically, you know, pointing towards the, the eventual death of Dr. King, but you had said that, that something to the effect that the, the White community here knew that wherever King went, things happened.

00:12:30:00

Jerred Blanchard:

Yes. Well, there was no question about that. And we just didn't want it to happen here. And yet I know I was quite sure that the strike was gonna be concluded in some gruesome manner. I didn't know how, but there, there was never any doubt in the minds of a lot of people but that, whether or not Dr. King came, the strike would cause some things to happen. And there would be a lot of bloodshed, and probably property damage, and all that kinda business. And the, the strike then would somehow be settled. But I, I, I for one thought that's what it would take.

00:13:13:00

Interviewer:

Let’s stop for a second.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes.

[cut]

00:13:15:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound number four.

[slate]

00:13:18:00

Interviewer:

So, what was the attitude of the White community in terms of, of Dr. King coming to Memphis?

00:13:24:00

Jerred Blanchard:

No question about the attitude of the White community regarding his coming to Memphis. It was dreadful. We, we didn’t like it at all. Wherever he had been through these civil rights demonstrations, things had happened. And to most of us Southerners and I guess to most Americans, the things that happened really were unpleasant and not to our liking. He had led the march on Selma, Alabama, and he had been there when Rosa Parks had her difficulties in Montgomery, and when that terrible bombing occurred in Birmingham and a church blown up, little children killed. Martin Luther King Jr. was right in the middle of all of those things. And even then in the spring of 1968, he was preparing this Poor People's March on Washington, which was gonna be a massive demonstration. We didn’t want him coming to Memphis because that meant something was gonna happen in Memphis that, that we would not like to happen. And of course I for one and many, many other people tried desperately during those days to get the mayor to come off of it, so that we could settle it in Memphis without any intervention from outsiders like Bayard Rustin and Martin Luther King Jr. But we failed. Just flat failed.

00:14:52:00

Interviewer:

I want to finish up going back just in terms of how you felt with the reaction after you took that vote. How did you feel?

00:15:01:00

Jerred Blanchard:

My reaction after that vote was one of calm, really. Same way I felt after I made up my mind that I had the guts to march. [laughs] I mean, nobody wants to step out front in these things, and I sure didn't. I'm a follower. I'm no leader, man. I, I didn't wanna get mixed up in any of this business, but I had no choice. I could not live with myself and vote against settlement of that strike. And I knew that very clearly by the middle of February. There was never any doubt in my mind after that that sooner or later I had to do it. I had to vote with the Blacks. I had to vote with the civil rights movement, and I had to vote against a lot of things that I guess I had been identified with prior to that time. And after I'm [laughs], after I cast my ballot, it was kinda like the burden was lifted. I could look at the face in the mirror every morning, and I didn't feel so bad about seeing it.

00:16:17:00

Interviewer:

Stop for a second.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Rolling and speed.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound five.

00:16:20:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:16:24:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about the calls to your house and how you felt.

00:16:28:00

Jerred Blanchard:

The calls to my house were singularly unpleasant because they occurred, generally speaking, at night or early in the morning. And in particular, I remember this one fellow, he called at six every morning. And I will clean up his language. He said, Wake up, nigger lover. And then he'd hang up. Well, I was awake reading the paper anyway, so it didn't bother me any. But my wife was quite ill at that time, and she liked to sleep, and it awakened her. Other than that, nobody bothered me at the office. There were a few night calls, and there were a lot of calls from people who really wanted to talk. But that, that one hate call that came at six every morning, that was painful because of my wife's illness. And anyway, one really doesn't like to see this dark side of human nature demonstrated in that manner. It's so cowardly. A telephone gives cowards an excuse to come out of the walls and demonstrate their cowardly natures. And I hate to see humans stooping that low. They hide between the anonymity of the telephone.

00:17:46:00

Interviewer:

Thank you.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:17:49:00