



Interview with **Mary Hightower**

Date: June 4, 1989

Interviewer: Jackie Shearer

Camera Rolls: 2127-2129

Sound Rolls: 260-261

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

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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 #2127]

[sound roll #260]

00:00:14:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it please.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound one.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:00:22:00

Interviewer:

OK, so Mrs. Hightower, I'm gonna ask you a long question for the first one, just to warm up, OK? I'd like you to tell us what you were doing when the idea of Gary first came around, what you thought Gary might be about, and what you hoped it might be about.

00:00:40:00

Mary Hightower:

OK. What I was doing at the time, the, the Gary Convention was first about the voters. We were doing voter registration drive in our counties and getting ready for 1972's county and, and district election. So, what actually, what we were, how it felt, you know, at the time that they brought it before us really, we thought this was gonna be something that would really kinda enhance what we were doing local and that it was just something new. A new idea, a new experience, and, and, and really we didn't really know ex-exactly what to expect. But we were also hoping that it would be something that would help us to better what we were doing local.

00:01:41:00

Interviewer:

Why were you involved in voter registration?

00:01:44:00

Mary Hightower:

Well, we were, it, it was really the 1967 election that really got us really geared to get more involved in voter registration. We had a slate of candidates in '67, and we only ended up electing three people. And that was one of the problems that we realized is that we didn't have enough people registered to vote. And a lot of them that were registered to vote, we needed voter education. [thunder] So, this is one of the major projects at that time.

00:02:22:00

Interviewer:

Cut. JT, is that killing us?

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it please.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Two.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Lower the [unintelligible]

00:02:36:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

00:02:38:00

Interviewer:

So, if you were involved locally in terms of voter registration and education, why bother going out of state? Why, why did you go to Gary? What was in it for you?

00:02:49:00

Mary Hightower:

Well, we were involved locally, but we were also inexperienced as to what we, you know, the whole I guess, the makeup of what registration, what voter registration and voter education was all about. We were just sort of feeling our way through. And we had some volunteers that were helping us, but we felt like if, once we went to Gary, you know, this would really be an opportunity, and it would be a new experience, and we would gain some experience there that we could come back and to use there that would help us to even do a better job than we were doing then.

00:03:30:00

Interviewer:

Did you have any, any hopes about a third party?

00:03:36:00

Mary Hightower:

Not really. I guess a third party per se is just, a third party never really entered our minds. Mine. It didn't enter mine, and I don't think that it did with the other two people that went along with it. It was—

00:03:53:00

Interviewer:

So, what were you thinking might come out of Gary?

00:03:57:00

Mary Hightower:

Well, really I—an organized or Black, you know, organized group, or a national Black group organized that would be a national resource for the Black people. And this is what we were looking at. We, we had looked upon the Democratic party as being our party, but we, we still didn't have anything that we could really identify as being our own as Black people. And we thought Gary was it.

00:04:33:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

Interviewer:

Can you do me a favor?

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #3:

This is take three.

00:04:43:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:04:45:00

Interviewer:

I'd like you to describe like you did in the restaurant just now what you saw, what you heard, and what you felt when you drove into Gary that first day and then when you got inside the convention hall.

00:05:02:00

Mary Hightower:

Oh, OK. Well, when we went, when we arrived in Chicago that night, the very next morning we were all ready to go to Gary. We were being bussed over. And, you know, going over by bus, it was, I guess it was a lot more exciting than we really expected because upon approaching Gary and when we came up in the bus, we were getting to see all these banners and the signs, you know, letting people know that this was a, a Black convention. And it was a really exciting moment. You know, it was just a, a great experience. It looked like a, a big fair. [laughs] With, with so many people and so many cars, and different, we noticed tags from different states. And of course there were other bus, charter busses there. And it was, it was just a, a moment there that you could remember for, you know, I will remember for the rest of my life. And after getting out and then really going in and having to register, at that point it really came to you that it, it became real. That was the real moment that we was really here, and it was really truly convention. And we, you know, going through the, the hassle and, and the standing in line, and getting registered, and realizing, you know, that you could not go in unless you were a delegate, and you, and you had to register. And getting through that point, and, and then after going in and being seated, and to really being identified as a delegate from your state, that was really truly a, a moment to, to remember. And—

00:07:02:00

Interviewer:

Can, can you describe for us the, the roll call? You talked about how you felt when that went on.

00:07:08:00

Mary Hightower:

Well, it was, it was, at that point, you, you were a part of the convention. You know, you ma—it made you realize that you was really participating and to answer to your state, you know, as, as they would call. And this, you know, to say that it was really real. And at the, you know, going through the roll call and listening to all of the different states that were being called, and, it was...I had seen this happen over TV, but to be here and actually be participating, it, it was really a good, it made me feel real good to be there.

00:07:53:00

Interviewer:

OK, so you're feeling real good. But then you got a disappointment. You told me about when you got a, a visit. I'd like you to tell me about the visit, what was said to you, and what you said back.

00:08:05:00

Mary Hightower:

OK. Yeah, this was our second day at the convention. And we were brought, breaking up for, well, we, we had several breaks throughout the day. But we were visited by Mr. Evers, Charles Evers from Mississippi. But we really thought he was coming to participate and be a part of the convention, but he had asked to speak to the Mississippi delegation. And after we...you know, we went into a little room, and he, he addressed us. And that was when I was really disappointed, when I found out that he was coming there to, and then even objecting to our being there rather than supporting us. He said it, it looked as if we were coming there and fighting for, or fighting against what we were supposed to be fighting for in Mississippi. He felt that by us fighting for, to end segregation in Mississippi and to try to get more participation in the Democratic party in the state of Mississippi that this looked as if we were trying to create another party, trying to isolate ourselves from the Democratic party. But we, you know, we in no way viewed our trip to Gary in that manner. We really—to me this was an opportunity for Black people to come together to organize ourselves, you know, to, and to organize a Black body of people cro...throughout the states and to become a resource to each other. And we in no way looked upon it as being a way of iso-isolating ourselves or segregating ourselves from their party. And we were quite disappointed in, in the approach that, that he took at that time and, and his observation of, of what we were there, what we were all about.

00:10:09:00

Interviewer:

Now you told me the story about how to you, it was the same as, with the house story. Remember?

Mary Hightower:

Right.

Interviewer:

Being welcome in someone's house is different from owning a house. Could, could you tell that?

00:10:20:00

Mary Hightower:

Right, yeah. Well, you know, I specifically, in, after he—well, it was really hard to convince him. But I looked upon it as being, the, you know, Democratic party being a, a house owned by someone else. And we were welcome in the house, you know, and had res—and had free access to the house, you know, up to a point. But it belonged to someone else. And to me, a person needs their home. They need their own house. And if I'm able to get my house then, you know, you look upon me as equal, and then we can interchange our resources or so, but I need to own my home. And that is why I looked upon as the Gary convention as being our house. And, you know, equipping ourselves to be accepted equally and being able to contribute something—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Mary Hightower:

—to the Democratic party.

00:11:21:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

[beep]

Interviewer:

You rolled out? That was excellent.

[cut]

[camera roll #2128]

Camera Crew Member #3:

This is take four.

00:11:32:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Adjust the mic a little bit [inaudible]

Camera Crew Member #3:

OK?

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

00:11:38:00

Interviewer:

OK, so could you tell us the story about the visit from one of your leaders?

00:11:43:00

Mary Hightower:

Oh, yes. On the second day of our convention, we had a visit from one of our leaders from Mississippi. He had asked that we would, if he could speak with us, meet with the Mississippi delegation. So, we met with this lady from Mississippi, and we were, you know, our—really what I think all of our, our representatives from Mississippi were disappointed because we had thought that this person was coming up to, in support of our being there. But it turned out it this person was totally against our participating in the convention. And in fact, he had made remarks of our being there in our position to what we were doing in Mississippi, the whole fact that we were fighting to end segregation in Mississippi to gain more participation in a Democratic party. And he viewed our trip there as being totally against what we were fighting for there. But it was, you know, it wasn't. We didn't view our trip there in that way, in that manner at all. As a matter of fact, we felt that there, going there would help us to be more participate as leaders and as citizens to the Democratic party and to the whole notion of ending segregation in Mississippi.

00:13:28:00

Interviewer:

Can you make, can you tell us how you felt about the kinds of things that Baraka was talking about at the convention? Did you see any connection between what he was saying and what you were doing back home?

Mary Hightower:

Well, yes. When, when he spoke, and he spoke about the, the—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, could you begin it again and mention Baraka's name?

00:13:56:00

Mary Hightower:

Yeah, OK. When, when I heard Baraka, one of—when he was first introduced to us at, at the convention, it was really, after listening to him for a very short time, I began to feel pride. And the things that he talked about and, and thinking of the things that we were doing in Mississippi, the kind of work and the kind of activities that we were involved in in Mississippi, you can see a connection. It, it was, the whole concept of, of his working in Africa, it really, at that time it really brought to our, to my attention, and I think that it, it was that feeling with a lot of the people, and I know the, the group that came from Holmes County, that it was a sense of pride. And it was something, you know, if I, if I, it was at that moment that you, you could begin to look and feel proud about what you were doing and feel proud about yourself. You know, because I have a whole concept of, of people from Africa and what they were doing, and, and the kinds of people that they were [thunder], was, you know, just totally erased, you know, by sitting there and listening to him talk. Because we've in some sense felt that, well, what you're doing is not any different than what we're doing here. You know? Just in different places and maybe much smaller places. But our goals and our efforts are the same. And it was a great sense of pride, you know, to, to have listened to him and to, you know, have been in the same convention with him. You know? And—

00:15:53:00

Interviewer:

Now, had you ever thought of yourself in terms of Africa before this?

00:15:58:00

Mary Hightower:

Not really. We, you, you have, you have thoughts about it but not really knowing, not really, you know, being I, I would say just being ignorant of what the, the whole notion of Africa and what people are doing there, and, and the kinds of people that are there now. You—it's, it's like a hidden though. You know? You didn't, you didn't allow it to surface, and you didn't talk about it. But after the convention, you know, it was something you, we could talk about, and we could go back and talk to our people and, and, you know, talk and, with pride. And it made our people begin to feel good about themselves, yeah.

00:16:43:00

Interviewer:

Now, did you think in terms of the work that you already do, were doing back in Mississippi, were you thinking in terms of identity, in terms of new identity?

00:16:51:00

Mary Hightower:

Well, the, the work that we were doing and, and listening to him, it, it—you realized that, that that work in a sense was the same, and it was something that we could be proud of. And that the whole notion that, of, of hearing him and listening to him, it made us feel, you know, it, it gave me a new sense of pride. And it, and when you, when we went back to our people and began to express the kinds of things that he expressed to us, and a lot of it, the concept of, of the work that he was doing, a lot of the methods that he talked about were new to us. But then the, the end results and what he was trying to accomplish or what he's getting over to us about what we should be trying to accomplish that we, we felt that it was similar to what we were doing there. And in that sense, it made us feel that we were somewhat in, the same. And—

00:18:03:00

Interviewer:

Now, how, how do you describe what you brought back to Mississippi from Gary? What, what effect did it have on your work?

00:18:10:00

Mary Hightower:

Well, we were, we brought a whole new, we were motivated, and we were able to go back and, and carry that motivation back to our county. We had a new incentive and a whole new idea to use in going back to our people. And we were able to pass this motivation on down to our people and get them much more involved. And I think one positive note that even helped us further was [thunder] the fact that when we got this visit from one of our leaders from

Mississippi, we were viewed, we was shown over TV, and which our people back in, in Mississippi didn't understand the, the whole concept of what that visit was. But it was a positive move on our part because they viewed us as being participants in the convention. And it made us feel important. And, and it made us be viewed as important people when we got back to our homes, by our people.

00:19:18:00

Interviewer:

Now, you talked about how you were working on the elections and on voter education and registration. What happened the next election?

00:19:28:00

Mary Hightower:

As a result of that, the effort I believe from the convention, we were able to go back, as I said, and, and put new motivation and new life into what we were already doing. And we elected in '72, a year later, a majority to the Board of the Education and a majority to the Board of Election Commissioner. And those are people that runs the election and, and run the schools. And I attribute this to our trip to Gary, to the convention, and what we learned there, the experience that we gained there. We were able to carry it back into gain a lot more success in our registration and our voter, voter registration.

00:20:14:00

Interviewer:

Now, I'd like you to go back to the beginning and get again the description of the roll call, OK? I'd like you to describe, make believe you're talking to someone who has never been to any kind of convention what a roll call is, and how this one worked, and how you felt about it.

Mary Hightower:

OK.

Interviewer:

OK.

00:20:33:00

Mary Hightower:

All right. Well, the, on the very first day in order to be seated when, after we were registered and we were...when we went onto the convention floor, and to be, we were seated. And after everybody was there after the registration was over then they called the convention to order. And the next order of business was roll call. And the roll call was to identify each state or delegation from each state that was there. And you had to answer, you know, to the roll call. So like in school [laughs] when you're answering to being present. But only this was just, it was much, much greater to hear the, the answer to the roll call of these different states, members of this, of the delegation from states throughout the United States. And it was, it was just, it was almost undescrivable to, to, to remember each of the, the delegation, you know, answer to, to their roll call. And this went on for, I can't remember. But it, it looked like it took a long time to go, you know, through that roll call and to have people to answer.

[rollout on camera roll]

[rollout on sound roll]

[cut]

[sound roll #261]

[wild sound]

00:22:10:00

Interviewer:

—what it must have meant to a lot of people.

Mary Hightower:

It was. It was.

Interviewer:

You know—

00:22:14:00

Mary Hightower:

Because, so going down that list and going down, and like maybe, you know, it took, it probably didn't take as long, but it's just like it took a long time for them to get to Mississippi. You know?

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Mary Hightower:

So, [inaudible] real, real good feelings sitting there waiting and knowing that they're gonna get to yours, you know state.

00:22:35:00

Interviewer:

Yeah. Yeah. And that you're gonna be able to—

00:22:38:00

Mary Hightower:

And stand up and say—uh-huh, right.

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

Mary Hightower: It, it was. Yeah, that was a—

Camera Crew Member #3:

[inaudible]

Mary Hightower:

Yeah, as, as we began to talk about, the little, other little points that, that was really exciting points, you know, that, you know, it comes to mind.

00:22:54:00

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Mary Hightower:

And that, yeah.

Interviewer:

Yeah. It must be—

[cut]

[camera roll #2129]

Camera Crew Member #3:

This is take five.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, marker.

[slate]

00:23:06:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Take five.

00:23:09:00

Interviewer:

OK, so I'd like to have you give me a brief description once again of the roll call and how it made you feel. What it was and how it made you feel.

00:23:19:00

Mary Hightower:

OK, the roll call was, at, a way of identifying, you know, all the states that, all the delegates that would participate in the convention. And once we were all inside the convention and seated, they began the roll call. And the roll call really made you—now at that point, you realized that you were then truly in the convention. You know, you were, you were truly a participant in the convention. And I think it was, it was excitement, and anticipation, and, and anxiety, all of this was all into one. Waiting your turn for the roll call. You know, just hearing states after state being called and delegates that were represented there. And it just looked like it took for the longest to get to Mississippi. You know, our delegates. But once we got, got through it and, you could tell from the, the, the answer to the roll call from all the states it was just like the sound, people were answering with pride. You know? And answered to the name of their state. And each of us there, I think about all of us felt that way during the roll call. And this—at the, at the, during the, the roll call, another thing that came to mind that made you realize is once they got through it, it made you realize the number of people that were participating in it. And just hearing the different states call throughout. I

can't remember any state that didn't have representatives there. But it was a, a really truly good feeling.

00:25:15:00

Interviewer:

Now, you also said that it made you feel that you were part of history.

00:25:21:00

Mary Hightower:

Yeah. Mm. Well, to really, well, in the, well—let me go back and say when we first were getting ready to go, the, the, it was just an exciting moment to be going there and to be sent there by your counties, you know, to be representing the state. But after getting there and really realizing that this is truly a convention and really began to participate then, you, you know, we, your mind really began to wander, and you, and you think about I'm here, and I'm making history. You know, this is a historic moment for Black people throughout the United States. And I'm a part of it, [laughs] you know, from Mississippi in a little, small, you know, county. But I am apart of making history here. And that truly was a good feeling, you know. I, I felt important and felt pride that, that I've never felt before. And I felt very confident. And this is the, you know, a feeling that I was able to leave there and, and carry back to my hometown. You know, carry it back there.

00:26:34:00

Interviewer:

Now, you also mentioned that there was some reasons why you thought that we needed to do this. Could you go into that?

00:26:40:00

Mary Hightower:

Yeah. Well, we've never in my lifetime had experienced any, any kinds of resource from Black people nationally. Even throughout the states. And to, we had never had anything that we could identify to say that we really as a Black race had accomplished. And there was no organized body of Black people. And to me, this, all of that, you know, it brought together people from throughout the state, and it, it showed our people that we could really accomplish something. That, and we could really pull together a group of people and to organize these resources and, and make these resources beneficial to the people there and to our people back in, in our homes. And this, we, we, we were successful at doing this. And this is a historic moment that all the Black people were proud of and, and could be proud of.

And even to today, you know? That is a proud moment there that no one can take away from us, you know?

00:28:00:00

Interviewer:

Now, if you had to tell someone the one most important thing about Gary, what would it be?

00:28:06:00

Mary Hightower:

Well, the, the fact that we were able to pull together that convention and to organize ourselves, and to really organize a group of people to, to, to carry out a successful convention, and to leave there with a, a sense of duty and a sense of responsibility to carry back to each of our areas. And we gave ourselves a resource. We opened up a line of communication that we had never had before. And we gained a new experience. The, the experience of the things that we were doing back there, it told us once we got there what we was doing right, and what we was doing wrong, and what we needed to do more of. This convention provided all this to us. But more than anything, it let us know that we could accomplish something, you know, as, as a Black race. You know, that we could successfully accomplish something together, and this convention did that.

00:29:27:00

Interviewer:

Now, you also talked about how it felt to look across the room and see professional people and elected officials, and they had one vote, you had one vote. Could you tell me that?

00:29:39:00

Mary Hightower:

Yeah. Well, when we were voting, when you would have roll call to your vote, and, you know, it was at this moment when you, well, I, I was sitting there and seeing people vote. And to me, you know, I was on the same level as everybody else, you know? Regardless of my lifestyle, or my profession, and all, I was equal to everyone else there in the convention. I was accepted as everyone else in the convention. And to me, this was a great feeling. It was a, a feeling and a moment that, too, that I cherish and that I could carry back. To be there and to be accepted regardless of the professions that people were, the financial status that they were, the education level that they were. We were all equal.

00:30:37:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut. OK, I think we've got it.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

[beep]

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:30:43:00

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