

Interview with **Dale Bowlin**

Date: December 7, 1989

Interviewer: Jim De Vinney

Camera Rolls: 1130-1131

Sound Rolls: 160

Team: A

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 #1130]

[sound roll #160]

00:00:16:00

Camera crew member #1:

Take one. Marker.

[slate]

Interviewer:

All set?

Camera crew member #1:

Yep.

00:00:22:00

Interviewer:

OK. If you would just tell me about the Central District and what, what, what the idea would've been.

Dale Bowlin:

Central District was a low socioeconomic area comprised to a great degree of Black citizens who—

Interviewer:

Yes, OK. Would, would you just look at me when you're talking?

Dale Bowlin:

Sure.

Interviewer:

I'm, I didn't [unintelligible], so just look at me. Start, start again.

00:00:44:00

Dale Bowlin:

OK. The Central District is a, primarily a low socioeconomic area made of, made up of Black citizens, many of who live in low-cost housing projects and who are working people to a great degree. Many single mothers, single-parent homes in these low-cost housing projects and so forth, and policed by our Central District, which primarily sits in a shopping center directly in the middle of the Central District.

00:01:15:00

Interviewer:

OK. And tell me then, what, what is the ideal kind of police protection that should be prevalent in—

00:01:22:00

Dale Bowlin:

Well, interestingly enough, we were having some difficulties with the citizens out there. There was a, I'd say, a lack of understanding between the police and the citizens in that community. So we wanted to find out exactly what it was that the people in the Central District were looking for in terms of a relationship with their police officers. So we had an independent survey conducted by some folks out there and identified some of the interesting, I think, things that police, that police need to be doing all around the country to, to, if they really want to, to become successful with the community and primarily the minority community. The survey identified that the citizens out there, the minority citizens aren't

angry with the police. What they're concerned about is that they have a lack of understanding with the police. They don't know them. There's no personal relationship. They see the police coming by eight-hour shifts. They see the police officers maybe not showing a great deal of understanding for their problems. They come very quickly, they leave very quickly, they perceive that the police officer doesn't really care about the problem because they talk in very legalistic terms that the lay people many times don't understand. Obviously the police officers, because many of these areas, this lack of relationship with the citizens and them, they want to get this over and terminate the contact with the citizen as quickly as possible and go on to something where they feel more comfortable. So, what this survey showed us is that the minority citizens there wanted a police department, they wanted police officers, that there was a personal relationship with. That they knew 'em, they understood them and that that, in fact, the police officer showed some personal interest in their problems.

00:03:17:00

Interviewer:

Now in 1979, what was the attitude of the police department at that time as far as assigning officers to that Central District?

Dale Bowlin:

Well, it wasn't good. Central—

Interviewer:

OK. Gimme a statement there, because they didn't hear what I said.

00:03:31:00

Dale Bowlin:

OK. The Central District of the Metro, at that time Public Safety Department, was a punishment area, in my opinion, and I think the opinion of several others. Some of the worst officers in terms of their records—excuse me. What's this?

00:03:52:00

Unidentified speaker:

Chief, I'm sorry sir [unintelligible]—

[cut]

00:03:54:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

Camera crew member #2:

This is take two. Marker.

[slate]

00:03:56:00

Camera crew member #1:

You gonna re-ask the question?

00:03:57:00

Interviewer:

Yes. OK, tell me again, sir, what the attitude was in 1979 toward assigning officers.

00:04:05:00

Dale Bowlin:

Central District, being one of the more least desirable places to work because it was, *it's a very busy area. It's a very volatile area. There's a lot of serious calls in that area. It was not a pleasant place to work for most of our White officers, and so, in my opinion, it was used as a punishment area.* And one of the most graphic illustrations I can use of that is that there was an article being run in the newspaper at that time; a series of articles concerning police brutality. And the officer in those articles who was identified as the most brutal officer in our department, allegedly, by the *Miami Herald*, was assigned to that district. He came to that district and, at the time, was the commander of the district. And I said, of all the people we don't need here is this officer who has a history of problems a, around use of force and having to fight with citizens and so forth. However, I was told he was going to be put there because he'd fell outta disfavor with some of the people in top management, and he ended up there. So I think, but I don't think that this is just endemic to the Public Safety Department. I think all around this nation in police departments there are punishment areas and many of 'em are in the Black areas, where we should have the best police officers. I think many times the, *some of the worst police officers are put in there, to punish them, to show that this is where you're gonna end up if you defy the administration and so forth. And I think that's what happened in our, I know that's what happened in our department.* And I think that fit into the problem. It was a tremendous management problem to manage that very volatile district and at the same time be given employees who did not share the philosophy of Let's get along with the community and let's give 'em the best service.

00:05:59:00

Interviewer:

Thank you very much. I'd like to move on now to how you first learned about the McDuffie case.

00:06:06:00

Dale Bowlin:

I received a call at about six o'clock in the morning from one of the sergeants who had been out there on patrol that night and he advised me that there had been an incident in which some of our officers had been chasing a gentleman on a motorcycle and the, this gentleman had an accident and he slid down on his motorcycle, and he slid and his head slid into a curb and he had a fractured skull, and it was very possible that he wasn't going to live because of this injury.

00:06:38:00

Interviewer:

OK. And what did you do then?

00:06:41:00

Dale Bowlin:

I went over to our Central District headquarters, my office. And I, I don't know why but I had a feeling there, there seemed to be a great deal of officers in, in talking to each other very quietly and so forth, and I had an overall feeling that something was wrong here. I didn't feel good about it. So I asked that our internal review section respond to the station and look into this matter. And a sergeant by the name of Linda Saunders did respond and begin questioning and so forth.

00:07:16:00

Interviewer:

OK. And what were some of the early findings you found that made you suspect that something was wrong?

00:07:20:00

Dale Bowlin:

Well, one of the things, *when I went and looked at the motorcycle, I had some background training in accident reconstruction, I know when a motorcycle slides on its side that the pegs which stick out, the rubber pegs where you rest your feet should have had worn marks on them from coming in contact with the pavement. I didn't find that. I didn't believe that that motorcycle slid on its side.* I also looked at the gas tanks and found that the gas tanks had actually impressions of Kale lights, which are long police flashlights, six-cell steel flashlights, which was allegedly one of the murder weapons used. And I saw the impression of the flashlights on there, and, and I felt from the start that something was wrong. I did not feel that he had an accident. I felt that something more had taken place.

00:08:13:00

Interviewer:

I'd like to stop down just very briefly [inaudible] and see where—

[cut]

00:08:18:00

Camera crew member #1:

Take three. Marker.

[slate]

00:08:22:00

Interviewer:

OK. Sir, if you would just explain to me what happens to a police officer in a high speed chase.

00:08:27:00

Dale Bowlin:

I think of all the, there's a couple of instances when a police officer, i, it's frightening for them. And I think one of the most frightening circumstances a police officer can get into a high speed chase. You're being forced to chase someone, not forced, but you're chasing someone because he's broken a law, or you've noticed something suspicious, he's fleeing and you know there's something going on that deserves your attention. This person deserves arrest, stopping. And yet this person may be going through red lights and stop signs at eighty or ninety miles an hour, and you're being forced to do the same thing. And it's one of the most frightening experiences that you could, could ever be through. I mean, it's not

something that police officers wanna go through. Contrary to this thing that you may see in movies that it's thrilling and police officers enjoy, to the, to the opposite, police officers are very frightened during this time and, and it's something they don't care to go through.

00:09:24:00

Interviewer:

What should happen now when they finally catch the, the person and try to apprehend them?

00:09:29:00

Dale Bowlin:

It's interesting that of all the times police officers get into problems and, and where their troubles start, it's around a police chase at the end of which there's a great deal of emotion going on within the police officer, fright and so forth, and rather than maybe sometimes, if he's not a good officer, being able to control his emotions, he may continue on and carry over and maybe strike the person that he was chasing and so forth. It calls for a great deal of situational behavior. Being able to say, now that I've caught this person, I've got to turn all these emotions off, all this fright off, and I have to act professionally. It's just like a police officer fighting a citizen out here that's resisting violently. You're in a fight for your life. This person may be trying to take your gun away, they're biting you, they're kicking you. And yet, at the end of all this when you get them under control and when you get the handcuffs on them and they're under control, then a police officer has to be able to turn that emotion off and to bring himself under control, because anything beyond that becomes police brutality or, or police poor behavior. A—and it's very difficult for any human being and a police officer to be in a very violent fight and then get the upper hand, or in a very frightening chase and finally catch this person and then turn off all your emotions and act as if you're some professional doctor. I mean, it's something that's very difficult.

00:10:59:00

Interviewer:

That's very good. OK. I think we might be at the end of the film roll—

[beep]

Interviewer:

—you didn't run out—

[cut]

[camera roll #1131]

[slate]

00:11:11:00

Interviewer:

And after the McDuffie incident, the, when the accident first happened there were several officers who were then subsequently arrested, or at least charged. What was the effect on the police department, the other officers who had to continue their duty?

00:11:26:00

Dale Bowlin:

Well, we'd had something like 244 articles on police behavior just prior to and up through the McDuffie incident. I mean, there was this tremendous animosity between the media and the police. So it had a, an effect on the officers like, it's us, you know, against them. Nobody cares for us. We're out here by ourselves. We were short of personnel at the time. Some of the officers were saying, We're not going out on the road. We don't have sufficient backups, we don't have enough people to do this job. It's very unsafe. We don't like it. There was a great deal of poor morale. There were labor problems. There were threatened wildcat strikes. It was a very unmanageable situation. [plane flies over]

00:12:09:00

Interviewer:

As you went toward the trial then, what were your expectations, or what did you think should happen in that trial?

Camera crew member #1:

We should probably [inaudible]

[cut]

00:12:18:00

Camera crew member #2:

Five.

[slate]

00:12:23:00

Interviewer:

OK. Your best thoughts on what the attitude should've been toward, or was toward the trial.

00:12:29:00

Dale Bowlin:

Well, I think as a department we were down. We, we, everybody felt bad about it. I can't remember a more embarrassing or debilitating type of incident ever happening to a police department, especially our department. We, we'd been a proud department. We, we have always felt of ourselves as, as a good department, giving good service, very professional. Our director at the time was well known for his professionalism. We felt good about ourselves, and then suddenly the bottom dropped out with this incident and, and it couldn't be explained away. It, it couldn't be just saying, Well, that was just something that happens because police officers were out there doing their job and this guy chose to run. We, we knew that something beyond just a officer having to do a job had occurred. We knew something terrible had occurred and, and we felt embarrassed about it. And to a great degree the morale within the department centered around whether or not they were found guilty. We as a department had a black mark against our name that will probably take years to ever live down. I think till this day people associate that incident with our department.

00:13:47:00

Interviewer:

[clears throat] Did you expect the not guilty verdict?

00:13:56:00

Dale Bowlin:

I don't know what I expected. I, I expected a not guilty verdict with some of the officers because I think there was overkill. I think they, too many officers were charged. I think the tactic of charging so many officers was not an effective tactic. I made my feelings known there. I think that there was a very terrible crime committed that night, and I don't think that we were as effective as we could've been in prosecuting that crime and the person involved in it.

00:14:31:00

Interviewer:

Describe what happened after the, when some of the first events started. I don't wanna go into a moment-by-moment account, but just tell me what the general reactions were as you tried to command the, the district and prepare for the riot that was developing.

00:14:46:00

Dale Bowlin:

Well, nobody expected the type of reaction we got. Most riots start off at a level of anger and violence and so forth that escalate to burning buildings, and, and finally escalate to killing people and things of that nature. This riot started off with such a level of anger by the citizens, immediately there were killings taking place. People were being dragged from cars, their tongues were being cut out, they were being set afire alive in their cars right at the start of the riot. Police officers on their patrols were being shot at. And so, I was trying to bring some order, to set up a perimeter around this to keep the White citizens from getting into those areas where they were being attacked and killed. And so, I would order police officers, for example, set up at Northwest 22nd Avenue, 62nd Street [car horn] and I want you—

00:15:45:00

Interviewer:

Just a second. Just, OK.

Camera crew member #2:

It's probably good now.

00:15:49:00

Interviewer:

Just say I, I would direct officers to set up.

00:15:51:00

Dale Bowlin:

OK. I would direct officers to set up a certain intersection, and I would say, Stop the citizens from going in there. Let's seal this area off where the violence has taken place. And they would come back on the radio and say, I'm not staying here. I'm being shot at. I'm pulling outta here. You get somebody else to do it. I mean, just open defiance on the air. And looking back on it I can't blame 'em. We were totally overwhelmed by the anger and the number of people that were angry and the violence that was taking place. We weren't ready for it.

00:16:23:00

Interviewer:

You mentioned to me on the phone that you, you really lost control or that it was out of control. I wonder if you could just talk about that just a little, sir.

00:16:30:00

Dale Bowlin:

Well, at the time that the verdict came out they were having a, a rally down at the Justice Building. And they were rallying on the steps, and then the verdict came out and when it did, it was a not guilty verdict, people were very angry and they swept around the Justice Building complex, they began burning our cars, they began burning citizens' cars. They came to our building, our headquarters building and they said they were going to torch it. Thankfully, we were able to stop that. The city sent over a group of officers that were able to stop them from doing that. But out in the areas of Liberty City, it was totally out of control. We had no chance at all to bring it under control. At the time I think we had about, in the central region about twenty officers on duty, so it was impossible to try and control it with that many officers, so we went on an emergency basis calling officers in, asking the city for all the help that they could give us, and of course the city was tied up with their own problems.

00:17:34:00

Interviewer:

Stop down just a moment. I think I'm just about [unintelligible].

[beep]

[cut]

00:17:39:00

Camera crew member #2:

Speed six.

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:17:43:00

Interviewer:

OK, again, addressing the response.

00:17:46:00

Dale Bowlin:

Within the department itself there was not a great deal of animosity between the Black officers and the White officers. Both, I think, sides knew, we call 'em sides, or both type of officers knew that they had to depend on each other in the long run in this situation, that there'd come a time when they would need a backup officer out in the district and they had to depend, whether it be a Black officer or a White officer. I don't think there was a great deal of animosity. There were a great deal of questions about the management of the department. The management of the department I don't think was addressing or meeting any of those needs as to better relate— [plane flies over]

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

[unintelligible] We'll be able to take it up where he started talking about—

00:18:30:00

Camera crew member #2:

That one is rolling.

Camera crew member #1:

Is it? OK. [laughs]

Interviewer:

Yeah, you know, we, we're all done we get past this take.

00:18:35:00

Dale Bowlin:

[laughs]

[slate]

00:18:37:00

Interviewer:

All right. Speak to me about the management.

00:18:39:00

Dale Bowlin:

The management of our department was very inflexible and I think very co, conflict oriented, and I think that carried over. There was this feeling within the officers that management really wasn't in step with the community. And while they may be trying to get in step with the community at a grassroots or at the police officers' level, the management itself was a very conflict-oriented management style and I think that came outta the fact that we had a corruption problem prior to the director taking over that took over. And he came in the institute a very inflexible personality within our department. If the law has been violated and this is the person that violated the law, make the arrest. And I think out of that grew a personality of numbers. Numbers of arrests you should make, then you got on your performance evaluation you did a good job. Number of tickets, then you did well in traffic enforcement. And I think we overlooked a lot of the things like judgment and initiative and interpersonal relations that police officers need to be successful not only with their counterparts, the other officers, but also out there doing the job day-to-day. And I don't think we were measuring some of those things, and we've tried to correct that. To a great degree, I think the bla, Black officers felt that they had been let down by management because of this inflexible type of pressure put on them to not be a human being, but to be a robot. It's interesting to me, I could get police officers, Black police officers that were raised in the Central District and put 'em out on the streets doing the job, and they began to get citizens' complaints. And when I'd enquire into this why, You were raised out here. Why aren't you getting along with the citizens? and they said, This pressure for numbers that we have prohibits me from using a lot of the interpersonal skills that I need to do this job. And, and I had a great deal of concern about that. I have concern about that now in modern-day police departments.

00:20:46:00

Interviewer:

I'd like to ask you what, what was learned from the McDuffie incident and how things changed.

00:20:51:00

Dale Bowlin:

Well, one of the things we did was to develop a, a team approach, a modified team approach in the hotspot areas. For example, one of the housing projects where a lotta the violence centered around, where officers were, each time they would go in there would be rocked and bottled and cursed at to answer a call, and they would get in very quickly and get out so that there was no relationship between them and the citizens. We took a couple of volunteer officers, a White officer and a Black officer, and I asked them, This is gonna be the toughest assignment of your life, and I want you to work nothing but this project, and I want you to do it on foot. And for the first four weeks of that assignment they got cursed at, there were rocks thrown at them, they began to scream at them each time they came in. There was just this great hostility between them and the citizens, but they persisted, and we persisted, and an interesting thing happened. They began to see over a period of weeks that these became their police officers. They were there every day, they weren't leaving, they were on foot. And we knew there was a great deal of criminals living in there, and there was a great deal of good citizens, but they—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Dale Bowlin:

—certainly weren't going to identify the crooks and then be left there alone. So, it gave us an opportunity, for example, the officers would be walking through a development and someone would say, Hey, can I see you for a second? and say, I don't want you to say nothing, but I happen to know that that person over there that lives there robbed the convenience store last night. But don't say I said it. So, we began to arrest the real criminals, and then the kids, the younger kids began to refer—

00:22:32:00

Interviewer:

OK. Need to stop down here. It sounds like [unintelligible]—

[beep]

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:22:37:00

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