Interview with **Robert Kiley**
Date: October 16, 1989
Interviewer: Jacqueline Shearer
Camera Rolls: 4138-4139
Sound Rolls: 482
Team: D

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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 #4138]
[sound roll #114]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:00:20:00

Interviewer:

OK, so, I'd like you to help us set up the School Committee in Boston in relation to the issue of quality education, school desegregation, busing.

00:00:32:00

Robert Kiley:

Well, the School Committee, five-person group, had been working the school desegregation issue for years, and years, and years. Louise Hicks is a name that will live forever, part and parcel, with the School Committee. And you have to remember that she had run twice for mayor by the early 1970s, once in 1967 and then again in 1971, as a member of the School Committee. Her opponent in both cases was Kevin White. And the issue, certainly in 1967,

was school busing. In fact, in the late 1960s, the term "school busing" really emerged in Boston as a national question. Mrs. Hicks was on the cover of a news magazine, before she ran for mayor. So, the question of the quality of education, the racial composition of Boston schools districts, went back a long way and are very much part of the fabric of the School Committee. By the l—early '70s, the issue had been worked, and worked again, and reworked, and reworked, and overworked. It had become very emotional, and that's the stage for 1972, '73, '74, and the lawsuit.

00:01:46:00

Interviewer:

How rational was the, the city discourse on the issue of race, and busing, and school desegregation?

00:01:54:00

Robert Kiley:

I don't think it was very rational at all. And as time went on, and as it became increasingly clear that the, that the—what the judge would do, there was a kind of massive delusion going on within the city itself. A lot of people were ignoring the issue. ***I think it's not unfair to say that the business community, the financial community, and I would say the religious community took a walk in the early 1970s, leaving really only the politicians and the parents as the people who cared about the issue. And in a certain sense, the parents got pitted against one another. White neighborhoods against Black neighborhoods in a way that no one had ever bargained for.*** Little planning went on, so that when the judge finally came down with a decision in June of 1974, there was quite literally no mechanism, no instrument by which school desegregation was gonna be accomplished. Just three months after he reached his conclusions.

00:02:50:00

Interviewer:

Can you give us a little bit about what the role of race in school politics was?

00:02:58:00

Robert Kiley:

Well, at the risk of oversimplifying it, I, I think it's fair to say that Black parents found themselves, throughout the 1960s, in the position of supplicants and unsuccessful supplicants. Whites dominated the School Committee. Race quickly became an issue, and it became a highly-charged, very emotional environment. But neither the school department or, or the city government was really prepared to deal with race, once the judge had acted, once

the courts had found that the system in fact was a segregated system. So that the years 1974 and 1975, which w-would have been difficult in any event, became almost impossible.

00:03:44:00

Interviewer:

Now, I'd like you to think back to, that day in October '74, when the mob in South Boston attacked the Haitian on his way to pick up his wife from work, and, and beat him up. How had this city come to that place? Where was the leadership?

00:04:01:00

Robert Kiley:

Well, the attack on the, the Haitian, which occurred roughly a month after school started, can't be seen in isolation, because violence was a, was a major dimension the day after school opened. First day was a, was a moderately calm day, but by day two, day three, things were in very, very difficult straights, both in South Boston and in Hyde Park. So that, the, the Haitian event was a kind of—the, the attack on the Haitian was a kind of exclamation point, but there'd been incidents involving kids on buses coming from a staging area on the edge of South Boston into the high school and junior high school complex. Nary a day went by without there being a close call of one kind or another, and of course the South Boston schools were, were under-attended to say the least for most of that, that first year. But there was a highly-charged atmosphere, and the sense one had on the ground was that, almost anything could happen. The goal, really, of the people in charge at that stage was to try to keep people from being killed.

00:05:09:00

Interviewer:

How do you understand that, that things were, were like this?

00:05:14:00

Robert Kiley:

Well, I came to Boston in 1972 and found the attitude surrounding the Boston school case, which was already being litigated, to be very odd. There was one group of people who was reluctant to admit that there was even a lawsuit or that there were issues at stake. They were people who tended to look in the other direction. If they had kids, their kids were in the parochial schools or the private schools. Then, you had the, you had people who were deeply dependent on the public schools for education, White parents and Black parents. They were pitted against one another, and then you had the School Committee, which was really not so much concerned about school policy as about advancing themselves politically. The School

Committee then had a reputation for being a means to higher office, as Louise Hicks seemed to be underscoring, although paradoxically in the case of Mrs. Hicks, I think she really did care about these issues. She was opposed to school busing. She genuinely was against it. She was not just another politician trying to use the issue to advance herself. I think this was a question of conviction in her case.

00:06:22:00

Interviewer:

So now I, that leads into another question, which is we have footage of Mrs. Hicks talking to a mob outside South Boston High, who had come after a White kid had been stabbed. And she's pleading with them to let the Black students inside return to Roxbury. And the mob yells back, "No!" They won't listen to her. What does that make you think of in terms of Mrs. Hicks, and, and what she did?

00:06:45:00

Robert Kiley:

Well, she, during the 1960s in a certain sense she became a one-issue candidate, and the issue was school busing. Temperamentally, I think it's fair to say that she was a rather moderate person. And a not-unreasonable person. If you were dealing with her on issues outside the, the, the context of school desegregation, she was an easy person to deal with. I think her natural instinct was one of conciliation and peace. She was not out looking for trouble, and temperamentally, not a, an, a, a demagogue or an agitator, but she certainly found her issue. And she worked it very hard, and she had a real following and a real constituency, as often happens with really emotional issues, as school busing became in Boston. Your constituency gets out in front of you. You are running to keep up with them, and I think during the couple of years that preceded the judge's findings, certainly during the months that preceded the opening of school in the fall of '74, the constituency was really way out in front of the leaders, and the leaders were racing to get up, and it became very emotional, and very difficult to control. When school opened, and violence broke out as it did throughout that fall, then people began to come back into it, business leaders and others, but it was too late to be of very much help in 1974.

00:08:08:00

Interviewer:

Did things have to be the way that they were? Could things have been different?

00:08:12:00

Robert Kiley:

Well, I'm not a determinist. Sure, things could have been different. Maybe there, there might have been some elections in the School Committee that might have turned out differently. Not all the members of the Boston School Committee during the ten years prior to school desegregation were of one mind on the question of equality of education or racial comp— racial composition of the schools. So, an election here, an election there, it might've turned out differently. I think, if, if moderate leadership, people who cared about education, and who knew that race was an issue in Boston, had gotten engaged earlier, and if enough of them had gotten engaged earlier, the outcome would've been different.

00:08:55:00

Interviewer:

But now you said that it was very difficult to be rational on this issue. Could you speak to what the, the climate of, of leadership was in, in respect to this?

00:09:07:00

Robert Kiley:

Well, when I say it became difficult to be rational on the issue, when it became more and more clear that the judge was gonna make a finding that would cause school desegregation to occur, that indeed the school was in fact segregated, that a lot of decisions about resources and assignments had been made on a racial grounds, when that became clear, and there was no mystery about this, then to be opposed what the judge was ultimately, to, to be opposed to what the judge ultimately was going to do, no longer became reasonable or rational. It had to become emotional, and you would hear arguments like, Well, the reason why we can't have racial mixing in the school is that there'll be fights, and there'll be violence, and there'll be all kinds of awful things that will happen. These are catch-twenty-two sorts of propositions, because in order for statements like that to be credible, the conditions already have to exist, which are emotional and irrational, and that's the situation we had by the time of the early '70s in Boston.

00:10:06:00

Interviewer:

Great. A cut?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sure.

Interviewer:

I, I, do we have anything—

[cut]

00:10:15:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:10:19:00

Interviewer:

OK, so I'd like you to describe the relationship between race and politics in Boston.

00:10:26:00

Robert Kiley:

Well, by the early 1970s, the, the genie of racism was out of the bottle and stalking around. It—one of the things that, that was very interesting about that period, '74, '73, leading up to the judge's decision and stoo—school desegregation, there was, there was little if any communication going on. Certainly between Whites and Blacks, on what seemed to be almost an inevitable situation. There weren't meetings out in the margins. People weren't willing to face up to the fact that one day, there was gonna have to be work going on together. So, I can't help but, but believe that, however much we look at that period and try to rationalize everyone's behavior, that, that racial feelings really were at work and under-girded what happened in the early 1970s. There's just no way around it.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Robert Kiley:

And that genie was stalking around in a way that it got out of control, and it just wasn't able to be managed in the fall of 1974.

00:11:29:00

Interviewer:

OK, OK. We lost the end of that, but I think we got it complete.

Camera Crew Member #2:

We lost the sentence just before no way around it.

[beep]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Which was, like a—

[cut]

[camera roll #4139]

00:11:40:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:11:43:00

Interviewer:

So, I'd like your perspective from the inside of the relationship between race and city politics in Boston.

00:11:50:00

Robert Kiley:

Well, the question of race and politics in Boston, early 1970s, I guess turns out not to be that complicated. I was in a somewhat unique situation in that I was a deputy mayor and charged with the responsibility of making the judge's order happen in the fall of 1974. But the genie of racism was already out of the bottle, was stalking the city, and among other things, that made it extremely hard for even people of goodwill, Whites and Blacks, to talk to one another on this issue. So that in the months leading up to the judge's findings, in June of '74 and then in the intense months leading up to the opening of school in the fall, racism really did lurk in the background. It had become very volatile, very highly charged, and very difficult to get a dialogue going. I don't think really effective cooperation, collaboration, and communication really started to occur until after school opened, after there had been violent incidents, and then people really got scared and concerned, and you had people from all walks of life actually waking up, trying to come to their senses, but it took a good year, year and a half, to regain control of that situation.

00:13:01:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:13:03:00