

Interview with **Laverne Barkley**

Date: August 22, 1989

Interviewer: Terry Rockefeller

Camera Rolls: 3119-3121

Sound Rolls: 353

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 Laverne Barkley, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on August 22, 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 #3119]

[sound roll #353]

[wild sound]

00:00:13:00

Interviewer:

—nice little ball. They just coordinate the sound and then the camera, and then I'll ask you a question, and then just answer. Just—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speed.

[picture resumes]

Interviewer:

—just think of having a conversation with me.

00:00:25:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Tilt it down a little bit.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, take one.

[slate]

00:00:31:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me some about Elliott, and the kind of person he was, and the curiosity, and the things he did?

00:00:39:00

Laverne Barkley:

Well, Elliott was a very complex individual. He was interested in a lot of things. He liked reading. He liked people. His mind never tired of reading. It was just like eating and drinking to him. He read lots of books, all types of books. He liked Nietzsche and his works. He liked things about communists...or I should say he read things about them. He was interested in the Eastern cultures, and the Lamas, and their type of religion. And there's so many other things he was interested in, which you, you can tell by looking at the library in there. The majority of those books belonged to him. And we still have more on the attic steps that just won't fit into that library.

00:01:51:00

Interviewer:

When, when he was at Attica, what kinds of things did he tell you that he believed about the people there? What were, what were his hopes, and what did he feel that the place was doing to people? What were his concerns about the conditions?

00:02:10:00

Laverne Barkley:

He didn't like the way men were treated there. He thought that it was dehumanizing. And he felt that although the men there were paying for a crime or whatever, they were still men and should be treated like men. He felt that the guards, or some of the guards I should say, were horrible. Some of them were really horrible in the way they treated the inmates. He felt it so strongly that whenever he came out to visit, when we'd go to see him, he would come out, and he would give the Black Power salute. It was, like, in defiance, I think. Not anything

real mean or nasty, but just to say, just to show that I am a human being, I am a man, I make choices, even though I am behind bars.

00:03:20:00

Interviewer:

What did you feel when he did that?

00:03:23:00

Laverne Barkley:

I always felt afraid for him. I would even vocalize that to him, because as a matter of fact I, I told him many times that, if something happened to him, there would be nothing anybody could do, because they could say it was an accident. And certainly he wasn't gaining points with them by his, the way he conducted himself. Although it wasn't menacing, but it's just the way, his way.

00:04:05:00

Interviewer:

When, when the uprising happened, when the, the rebellion happened at, at Attica, how did you learn about it? Do you remember?

Laverne Barkley:

I had just left Fight headquarters on Prospect Street. And I was coming home, and I heard it on the car radio.

Interviewer:

What? Can you tell, tell me more? What, what did you hear?

00:04:27:00

Laverne Barkley:

I heard that he'd been killed. And I hoped and prayed that he would not, although I had reservations about it. I felt that *the moment I saw him speak on television, I, I said, I said to myself, Elliott, what have you done? What are you doing? Because I felt that they would make him pay for that, and pay dearly.* And he, ultimately, he did.

00:05:02:00

Interviewer:

But there was something very courageous about, about how he spoke out. Can—

00:05:08:00

Laverne Barkley:

I know. I'm just speaking as a mother. I've feared for him and for his life, and I wanted him home. That's all I wanted, him to come home safe and sound. And I felt, why would you do this? Knowing that you will be home this week, one day this week, you'd be home. The date had been set. I don't remember exactly, but he was coming home to us. So he jeopardized that in order to speak out for them, for the inmates, and he was, he had already written a book about the conditions there at that prison. And I...the things he wrote were things he felt strongly about. And I guess he couldn't do anything otherwise but what he did. So I think that, no matter how I felt about it as his mom, I think that he had to do it. Because I myself, I wouldn't. I don't believe I would have jeopardized my freedom and possibly my life, risk not being, not coming home to your family. I don't know if I would have had the courage to do it. And I [pause] I, I, I think that it's something people do. You wonder why people, other people do things sometimes. How did you? How could they find the courage to do certain things? But I guess ordinary people, at certain point, point, at a certain time or a place, a point in their life, they take a stand for something. And there's no other explanation other than that, something they really, really believe in. I myself, I feel as though I let him down, because we had gone to see him Sunday, that Sunday. And Betty, my daughter Betty, was with me and a friend of Elliott's was with me, and he had asked me specifically to bring his book out, to bring his book home. And I said to him, Why, Elliott? You're coming home anyway. You'll be home in a few days. Bring it when you come. So I feel, I feel I let him down. I wish with all, I wish I had have brought it out. I wish I had.

00:08:10:00

Interviewer:

Tell me something about the kind of person that Elliott was, the kind of impetuous and maybe kind of had a little bit of bravado. How, how, how did he get in trouble with the law, and how did he end up at Attica?

00:08:26:00

Laverne Barkley:

[sighs] Well, he, he was the type of person that you can't put in a cubicle, because just, you can't do it. Person like Elliott, he would see something happening, a few guys fighting with a person, one person, and he would go and jump into it. No matter what, you couldn't, you know, you just couldn't restrain him from doing something like this. And he was the type of

person that would give his friend or, or anybody the shirt off his back, because he did it a lot of times. They couldn't wear his pants, but, they would certainly take his shirts, you know? He was sort of, he was very thin and tall, and normally he'd have to have his pants tailored to fit him. He was a very neat person, very clean person. Always had his nails would be clean, and shiny, and I couldn't even say the same for me, you know? But that was part of him. That was Elliott. He experimented with things. At one point he experimented with drugs. At that time, I think it was heroin, I think. And prior, prior to this, all of his life, his father was a mason contractor and would give him things, buy him things. He, he wore nice clothing, nice shoes. And some of my husband's employees would say, or laborers would say, You, you give those, you, you buy those boys Florsheim shoes, and man, I'm working for it, and I don't, you know? I can't buy them, those things like that. And I think Elliott had money to first experiment with drugs, whereas maybe some other kids during that period didn't. But there's one time he, I think he...his father had stopped giving him the monies that he had been giving him for some reason, and I think that was when Elliott, I think he snatched a purse. And I know now that he was so very, very upset with himself, and so very—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Laverne Barkley:

—remorseful for what he had done. And—

00:11:24:00

Interviewer:

That's...you're doing fine. We just, we, the camera just runs out of film—

[beep]

Interviewer:

—about once every ten minutes. So, we have lots more film, we're just gonna—

[cut]

[camera roll #3120]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Take two.

[slate]

00:11:36:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Camera thirty-one, twenty.

00:11:39:00

Interviewer:

Just if, if you can finish that story, tell me how, how he ended up getting in trouble, and, and going to Attica, and then what he learned about the prisons, and what he told you about the prisons.

00:11:50:00

Laverne Barkley:

All right, let me finish what I've, I say about that—

00:11:54:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sorry. Let me just change that.

Laverne Barkley:

—drugs. No?

Interviewer:

We, we have one more technical problem.

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Take three.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Hit the button. Tilt it down a little.

00:12:10:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Take three.

[slate]

00:12:14:00

Interviewer:

OK, finish that.

00:12:16:00

Laverne Barkley:

He was very much ashamed of what he had done. And his, he, he asked his sister Betty to stay up with him all night. He said because he was gonna get that stuff out of his system, and at that time, there were no rehabilitation centers, and I realize now how very, very strong he must've been to do this. He went to Attica, however, because he had violated his parole.

00:12:53:00

Interviewer:

Can I just start—

Laverne Barkley:

It had something to do with—

Interviewer:

Could you just mention his name? Could you say, "Elliott," or "my son Elliott..."?

00:12:59:00

Laverne Barkley:

My son Elliott went to Attica because he just violated his parole, according to the parole board. Which he had not, and which the lawyer had overturned this, and proven that he had not violated his parole, and consequently that's why he was being sent home. He was coming home the week of that Attica uprising. He was coming home to us.

00:13:33:00

Interviewer:

Did you learn a lot about prisons, or did, did the experience of having Elliott in prison, and, and your visiting in there, and your hearing what, what he felt, change your mind, change what you thought about jails in our country, and, and the purpose they serve? And...

00:13:52:00

Laverne Barkley:

Well, I fear for anyone who goes to prison, because I think you're really lucky if you come out healthy and come out alive. There's so many things there that can happen to you. I feel that sometimes treatment by some of the guards might even precipitate someone doing something foolish, and then jeopardizing his well-being. I, I feel that, and I agree with Elliott that men should be treated as men. It could only be beneficial for everyone concerned. This is very important, I believe, that when men go to prison, that they learn that, [car horn] it's, it's, there is a chance for them. They aren't bitter, and they can come out and be [car horn] useful citizens. But I do believe in some instances it doesn't happen because of what goes on behind those walls. I, I think Elliott must have been very, very...must have been very upset, maybe even surprised, that these things happened in prison. That's why he wrote a book about it. That's why a lot of his time was spent writing that book.

00:15:38:00

Interviewer:

Now, I wanna, I, I asked you something before, and I don't think I made my question clear. How did you learn that the inmates had, had taken over the prison? How did you find out about that?

Laverne Barkley:

I found out about that from the news. I saw—

Interviewer:

Can you just, just, just start and say that "I was watching the news," or, "I had been," it was right after you visited Elliott that, that happened?

00:16:03:00

Laverne Barkley:

Yes, it was I think the next day.

00:16:06:00

Interviewer:

OK, just start with that. Can you just start with saying, "I think the day after I visited Elliott," or...?

00:16:12:00

Laverne Barkley:

I think the day after I visited El-Elliott the uprising began. And then, I saw him on television speaking out for, about the conditions there, and the treatment there. I was, well, I, I was upset about what he was saying, but at the time, I was more fearful about his life and safety. And it was, as I said one day, I was, I think it was the following day, I was coming from Prospect Street, from Fight headquarters, and I learned that he had been killed.

00:17:07:00

Interviewer:

Did you ever go to the prison during the riot?

Laverne Barkley:

No.

Interviewer:

Did you stay here watching?

00:17:12:00

Laverne Barkley:

No, I didn't go during the riot. I sat here. I had a tremendous telephone bill, which some of the organizations later helped me pay, some of the organizations here in Rochester, because I called every well-known legislature-legislator, entertainer. I called every organization that I knew, could ask someone, Give me a name of someone else I would call. And ask them to go to Attica, call there, do whatever they could, because I believed that a lot of people were gonna lose their lives. I did this, because I was fearful...I just, nobody could tell me. They would tell me, Well, it, it, nothing is gonna happen, that type of thing. Couldn't happen, but I lived with it. I couldn't sleep, because it was there inside of me, and I did everything I could at that time to try to contact people who had a little, a weight. They could, they could contact someone, and sort of keep them from going in there, killing anybody.

00:18:35:00

Interviewer:

One of the big concerns that the inmates had was, was for amnesty. And they were very hopeful that Rockefeller might grant them amnesty or at least come to Attica. How did you feel about Rockefeller?

00:18:50:00

Laverne Barkley:

I felt so, I thought, [sighs] how small can you be? When all these men's lives are at stake, and they're only asking for things that they're entitled to as human beings. That you think so little about the situation that you won't even go to see firsthand, I think perhaps if he had shown some interest, and if he had gone, perhaps he would've stopped the carnage. But, now I find out that...some people are saying that they can't even hold him responsible, because he didn't make a lot of things in writing, or put a lot of things in writing, but there's plenty of stories. There's plenty of articles, quotes from him after that, trying to justify his actions. And I don't believe that anyone in that prison would have started shooting without his consent. They had to be told to do it, by him, nobody else had that power. So yes, he is responsible.

00:20:23:00

Interviewer:

Can we stop down for a minute?

[beep]

Interviewer:

You're doing very well.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

—was that when we told the history of Attica, we wanted people to understand that—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Speed.

[picture resumes]

Interviewer:

—inmates can't just be separated from the rest of—

00:20:39:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take.

[slate]

00:20:41:00

Interviewer:

—society. You have to understand that. People are connected to their communities, and the job of prisons is, is to allow them to return, as you, you were telling that to us before, that people deserve to come out with their dignity intact. But, how, how did the community here respond?

00:20:59:00

Laverne Barkley:

They responded tremendously. All of the ministers here, all of them, all of people [sighs]. The cards, even monies that was sent, and places all over sent cards regarding Elliott. Not in this state but in other states as well. I couldn't believe how many people were so sympathetic and cared so much. And our governor didn't. I just couldn't believe.

00:21:43:00

Interviewer:

Can you again tell me about those things that Elliott did see...that the prisons, they had to change because of what they were doing to the people who were, who were put inside, how the prisons were destroying people?

00:22:00:00

Laverne Barkley:

Well, from what he told me, [car horn] I, these were his concerns. And I'm, I'm, I'm sure that his book certainly told it more in detail and in depth than, than I can tell you now, or even that he told me about.

00:22:22:00

Interviewer:

What, what were his—

Camera Crew Member #3:

We should move on.

Interviewer:

OK. Let me flip the switch.

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

00:22:31:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Camera thirty-one, twenty-one, sound three, fifty-three. Take five.

[slate]

00:22:41:00

Interviewer:

If you could, in your own words, share with me one more time the ways in which Elliott explained to you that the prisons were dehumanizing? The kinds of things that happened to a man in that prison that didn't allow him to live like a man. What kinds of things was he concerned about?

00:23:04:00

Laverne Barkley:

He was concerned about the treatment of the inmates. He was concerned at how degrading...that they, they made the, they degraded the prisoners. They were not helpful in any way. It was as though they were creating a climate of frustration [pause]—

Interviewer:

How did Elliott—

Laverne Barkley:

—futility, they had nothing. They couldn't stand for anything. They couldn't change anything. They just simply had to endure. And sometimes that's difficult for a man to endure day, after day, after day. Sometimes they begin to feel as though they are worthless. And that's very, very dehumanizing.

00:24:16:00

Interviewer:

What were the kinds of things that happened between the, the inmates and the guards?

00:24:22:00

Laverne Barkley:

To be frank with you, I do not—not that I haven't been frank all along, but the little things that went on between them, that caused the situation, I don't know. I just don't know. I think they would have been explained in his books. He merely said that they were dehumanizing. They were making a climate in there that was difficult to survive in. That you had to fight for your...maintain your, your dignity, your manhood, and your integrity, so matter what. You have to stand for something, no matter what they did. And as I said before, I think this was his, the way and the reason we would come out always defiant, and giving them that power salute.

00:25:21:00

Interviewer:

Te-tell me about that again, just, just tell me the whole story about how you would go into the visiting room, and sit down, and Elliott would come out, just describe it for me.

00:25:31:00

Laverne Barkley:

Well, we would go in, and first we'd have to be checked for anything metal or anything like that you're bringing in. And then we were allowed to come in the visiting room. We had to wait for them to come down, to come out. Every time he came out, and every time we visited, whoever was in that, that visiting room, they had guards and other visitors, other inmates as well, would see Elliott come out and give that Black Power salute. And when he'd sit down, I would say, Elliott, don't do that. You know?

Because you're here. You're in prison. You're behind bars, where you have no power and nobody to help you. If they decide to do something to you, they can say it's an accident, and, and nothing will be done. You just can't do that. You frighten me. You make me afraid for you. And despite this, my telling him this, numerous times, I just stopped, stopped telling him, because he would always come out the same way, giving the Black Power salute.

00:26:59:00

Interviewer:

During the uprising, one of the concerns of the inmates was, was for Governor Rockefeller to come in there, personal...witness what was going on. Tell me how you felt about that, and if you can remember to use the Governor Rockefeller's name so we know who you're talking about.

00:27:20:00

Laverne Barkley:

When I saw [sighs] Elliott on television, I was very, very frightened for him. I knew that what he was saying and what he was doing, there was nothing wrong with it, it was right, but to me I was just fearful for him. And I feel that our governor, Governor Rockefeller, should have shown enough interest to come. He was asked to come several times, and I'm sure other officials there asked him to come. Perhaps Arthur O. Eve, and someone else, and the others that were there. I don't know, but I know I was calling. I was calling, and I called Rockefeller several times, his office, and to no avail. Governor Rockefeller didn't seem to care. All he could do was stay away, and issue an order for the prison to be retaken. That's all he did.

00:28:34:00

Interviewer:

In your own words, tell me some more about what Elliott believed, the kinds of things that inspired him, and how he viewed his fellow inmates, and...

00:28:49:00

Laverne Barkley:

He sympathized with his fellow inmates. He did to such an extent that he jeopardized his coming home that week. He was there on television vocalizing the, their concerns. I, I, I can't say anything more than that, that he not only was on lip service, because he, unlike them, they were, they're, they were going to be there. He was coming out of that prison within a couple of days, but he took the risk, and he stayed, and he was their spokesman. And this is, if you look back, if I look back on things that he did in the past, sort of something like that, when he'd jump into a situation that wasn't his doing, but he felt was unfair, there's three or four guys that are beating up on one guy, it wasn't his fight, but he'd do that.

00:29:57:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

[beep]

Interviewer:

Do other people have follow-up questions?

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

00:30:00:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Take six.

[slate]

00:30:04:00

Interviewer:

How had you felt all your life about jails?

00:30:09:00

Laverne Barkley:

I've always had a negative, negative picture of jails. I think it's borne of even when I was a child growing up, when I'd see Black men being dragged up and beaten with billy clubs, and hauled off to jail. You had no voice. You couldn't speak. You couldn't explain. All you could do is get hit over the head and dragged off to jail. These are my recollections, as, as a, as a youngster even. And I don't think my views have, have, have changed very much through the years. I do believe there is a difference in how policemen police certain sections of a city. Even to, just a few minutes ago, sirens are blasting all the time, practically all the time. And when they come out to take someone, people are trying to explain, and if you talk more, you shut up. You know, if you try to say something else, you're gonna get cracked with that billy club, and you may be just telling them exactly what happened, trying to explain, but you don't, you don't get the opportunity. It's as though that you're not important, or you're, you always are guilty. You've got to go to jail. And I'm not saying that all policemen are like this, because I'm sure they aren't all like this, but my, my association with them, when I was a child growing up, and a teenager, has been that some people I've known whose houses they've gone—come to, and they've kicked in walls, damaged furniture, hit them over the head, took the fathers away with the kids screaming. It's bad enough to come in and hit someone with that billy club. But you don't have to damage their, their furniture, their belongings, and things like that. That isn't necessary.

00:32:33:00

Interviewer:

How did you feel when Elliott was sent to jail? Did you feel that he'd gotten treatment that he wouldn't have had he been someone White? Did you feel that the system was unjust in that way?

00:32:45:00

Laverne Barkley:

[sighs] I felt that Elliott got the treatment he got, because he was uniquely himself. Elliott, and that he would stand for himself no matter what. And under those conditions, and where...and the fact that he was behind bars, that type of attitude and behavior is certainly not looked on, you know, positively. So therefore, I feel as though Elliott would have a problem if you disliked—especially a Black male that's forever being himself, and forever going to be, no matter what happens to him—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Laverne Barkley:

—no matter what you do to him. Even if you put him in the hole, he's gonna come out the same way, because he won't change unless he feels that there's a good reason to change. And certainly there wasn't anything wrong to me with his being, acting like a man, and letting you know that he is someone important, because he's made in God's image. He is a human being.

00:34:02:00

Interviewer:

That's wonderful. Thank you.

[beep]

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:34:11:00

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