Interview with **Jitu Weusi**
Date: November 3, 1988
Interviewer: Louis Massiah
Camera Rolls: 3059-3062
Sound Rolls: 328-329
Team: C

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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 #3059]
[sound roll #328]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Time code thirteen fifty-eight. Nineteen is the scene.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:00:18:00

Interviewer:

OK, we're trying to establish that, that you're a longtime resident of Brooklyn. Was, was parent involvement in the school something new in Brooklyn?

00:00:29:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, as a longtime resident of Brooklyn, I had known my mother, Mardesta, to be active in the parent association of our community during the time that myself and my brothers and sisters attended public school, and to encourage other parents to be involved in the PTAs of the community. Many new parents who had recently moved from the South were concerned that their children receive the best possible education and that their children be successful in the public education system. And my mother had explained to them that the only way that their children would be successful is that if they became active in the local parent association and helped to make the schools a better educational opportunity for their children, and give their children the maximum opportunity for success educationally. So, I grew up around parent involvement, and I understood and knew that parent involvement was very important to the success of the schools.

00:01:34:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop camera for a second.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

—on that roll.

Interviewer:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Interviewer:

New question. OK, we’re going to a new question.

00:01:42:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:01:44:00

Interviewer:

Why, why did you feel it was necessary, you plural, why did you feel it was necessary to form an African American teachers association? How did it come about?

00:01:54:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, I was a young teacher in the 1960's, having entered the school system in 1962. And myself and people like Albert Van, and Dorothy Joseph, and Marsha Goldman, Audrey Williams, we were all new teachers. And we began to notice a lot of injustices in the school system internally from the point of view of teachers. We began to see behind the scenes what went on and how the misedu—miseducation of our children was not just a mistake but was calculated and perpetuated. And so we began to talk about the need for a organization of Black teachers [truck drives by] to take some affirmative action in behalf of our children and to begin to do some things that would help to push the educational process of Black children along in the inner cities. And eventually this type of thinking led us to come together as a group which was the African American Teachers Association.

00:02:53:00

Interviewer:

Why was it necessary to form something outside of the union?

00:02:57:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, the teachers union basically at that time, the United Federation of Teachers, they were a young organization. [truck drives by] And basically their major concern were issues involving teaching, pay issues, payroll issues, issues involving benefits, vacations, pay, you know, increments, medical benefits, etc. They were not concerned with the quality of education in the school system at that time. And so we wanted to deal with the organization that would deal with the quality of education, what was wrong with our young people, why wasn't the school reaching our young people. And so we wanted to deal with an organization that would be more centered around the question of providing a better educational opportunity for Black youth rather than issues around pay and benefits like that.

00:03:52:00

Interviewer:

OK. Could you talk about your meeting in September of ’67 with Rhody McCoy when he was first appointed unit administrator in Ocean Hill-Brownsville?

00:04:01:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, the African American Teachers Association had a very significant convention in 1966 in which we came out in favor of the concept of community control. And when the three experimental districts were established by the Ford Foundation in 1967, we were very concerned that these districts move forward the concept of community control of schools by the communities, and the parents, and the activists that were in the communities. And so in 1967, after the parents had—the governing board had been selected in Ocean Hill-Brownsville and they had appointed Rhody McCoy as the unit administrator, myself and Albert Van, we met with Mr. McCoy to try to offer our assistance as an organization. We wanted him to know, we wanted to go on record having said to him that [truck drives by] that African American Teachers—

00:04:57:00

Interviewer:

Let’s stop one second. Let’s stop.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

00:05:00:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:05:02:00

Interviewer:

OK. Once again, could you describe your meeting, the meeting of the African American Teachers, Teachers with Rhody McCoy in ’67?

00:05:11:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, Rhody McCoy had been appointed the unit administrator of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville experimental school project in the summer of 1967. And myself and Albert Van, representing the African American Teachers Association [truck drives by], we wanted to extent to Mr. McCoy the fact that our organization was supportive of the efforts of the [truck drives by] Ocean Hill-Brownsville project and that we were prepared to assist him in whatever way possible to make sure that that project was a success. And that was the essence of our meeting in 1967.

00:05:44:00

Interviewer:

Did you wanna have more Black teachers coming into, what—

00:05:48:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, we were prepared to transfer large numbers of Black teachers from other districts throughout the city to Ocean Hill-Brownsville. That was one of the things that we offered to do. However, Mr. McCoy felt at that time that that would not be necessary.

00:06:03:00

Interviewer:

Why not?

00:06:05:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, his feeling was in September of 1967 that he could work with the teachers basically who were union teachers and that he did not feel that he was ready to change the staff in Ocean Hill-Brownsville in September of 1967.

00:06:24:00

Interviewer:

OK. How, how, and, and when were you placed at I.S. 271?

00:06:29:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, originally I had been a teacher at Junior High School 35 in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. It was a ninety-nine percent Black school, and I was proud to be a teacher at that school. And I tried to contribute much to the young people at that school. However, in February of 1968, I was suspended from that school for taking my class to a Malcolm X memorial program. The Superintendent of Schools at that time, Bernard Donovan, held a hearing on my teaching record. And we had literally hundreds of parents who showed at the Board of Education to support me. The, the superintendent therefore felt under pressure not to fire me as a teacher. Also at that time, Herman Ferguson, who was a consultant to the Ocean Hill-Brownsville project, had suggested to Mr. McCoy that I be brought into the district since the district, into the Ocean Hill-Brownsville District [car horn] since that district was in need of good teachers. And so Mr. McCoy called Bernard Donovan and suggested that if he wished, he could assign me to I.S. 271, Junior High School 271, which was the [truck drives by] flagship school of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville project. [car horn] On March the thirteenth, 1968, I was assigned to Junior High School 271 on a permanent basis.

00:07:57:00

Interviewer:

OK. What did you find when you came into I.S. 271 that March?

00:08:01:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, we, Junior High School 35 was supposed to be a bad school. But when I came into Junior High School 271 in March, I found conditions that I couldn't, that were only, can be described as incredulous. There was no teaching going on. The teaching had just stopped. Teachers came in in the morning with radios, with coffees, and cake, and newspapers. Teachers left their classrooms to place their bets at the track. The, the, the teaching process within that school had been suspended. Young, groups of children roamed the halls. Children brought games to school. They brought comic books to school. There was no formal teaching program taking place in Junior High School 271 in the spring of 1968.

00:08:53:00

Interviewer:

Why, why do you think that was the case? Why, why, why had the teaching fallen? I mean—

00:08:59:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, it, it was my belief that there was a calculated effort on the part of the union teachers, the United Federation of Teachers union teachers, members, supporters to sabotage the experimental program and that by creating conditions that suspended formal educational programs they sought to show the city and the Board of Education that this group of parents running this experimental program didn't know what they were doing and that no education was going on. And therefore the project was a failure. And then the school system, the experimental system would be turned back over to the city, and that would be the end of the experiment.

00:09:44:00

Interviewer:

OK. What were you trying to do in your classroom? You might talk about consciousness, raising the, the bulletin board. And also you should say what, what, what courses you taught or what class you taught.

00:09:52:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, I was a history teacher by profession in the public-school system, so I saw, I saw my— [buzzing noise]

00:09:59:00

Interviewer:

Let's just stop for a second.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Let's stop for a second.

Jitu Weusi:

Yeah, you can pull that out.

[cut]

00:10:03:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

And roll. Mark it.

[slate]

00:10:07:00

Interviewer:

OK. Once again, what were you trying to do in your classroom?

00:10:11:00

Jitu Weusi:

I was a history teacher by profession and training within the Board of Education, and I saw my role as raising the consciousness of young African American children to the circumstances surrounding their development and making them more motivated to try to achieve educationally within the school system. I used all types of literature. I used bulletin boards. I used audio/visual materials. I used trips, as well as materials that I concocted myself.

00:10:41:00

Interviewer:

Could you tell the story about the bulletin board?

Camera Crew Member #2:

We have to stop here and start again.

[cut]

[camera roll #3060]

00:10:46:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:10:49:00

Interviewer:

OK, briefly could you tell the story about the bulletin board, about why you put it out there and then what happened?

00:10:55:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, I had constructed in, when I arrived at Junior High School 271, I had very little means of communicating with the [truck drives by] student body, with the teachers, and the adults in the school. And I decided that I would use the bulletin board as a means of communication. I constructed a bulletin board and put it in the rear hallway, and it was an immediate success. I had on there various pictures of Black heroes and heroines. I had various political slogans of the day, pictures about Black History and so forth. And the kids took to it almost immediately, and it became one of the most popular spots in the school. And although other bulletin boards in the school had been torn down, this bulletin board was never touched. In fact, interestingly enough it was touched the day after the assassination of Dr. King. It was ripped. And we didn't know who ripped it at the time, and we came to find out that it was ripped up by a White teacher. And the students became so incensed over the fact that this teacher would go to the bulletin board and destroy this bulletin board that it caused a very chaotic atmosphere in the school among the students.

00:12:07:00

Interviewer:

OK Weusi, you can be specific. What did you, what was up on the bulletin board? What were some of the, the, the, the posters or some of the slogans?

00:12:13:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, we had her—we had pictures of people like Stokely Carmichael, and Rap Brown who were the heroes of the Black Power movement of that day. We had this large poster of Uncle Sam with the slogan, "Uncle Sam wants you, nigger," which was a anti-militaristic poster of the day talking about the fact that the United States government was recruiting young Black males to go and fight in Vietnam for freedom that they did not in fact have living in the United States. We had various political slogans and historical slogans that were very popular during that time. Black Power, other slogans of that type.

00:12:56:00

Interviewer:

OK. And why did that teacher take the poster—

00:12:59:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, the teacher removed or tore down the bulletin board because she felt that it was inflaming the students in a anti-White atmosphere. It was providing the students with anti-White ammunition or food for thought. And so she felt it was her duty to tear the bulletin board down, to destroy and deface the bulletin board in this way.

00:13:28:00

Interviewer:

All right. Did any of the parents find you too radical?

00:13:31:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, some of the parents did in fact find me too radical. I know one particular parent, Elaine Rooke, who was the PTA president at Junior High School 271, me and her had a number of confrontations as she found my style too Black, too political, too militant for the tea— students. And I remember her son, Anthony, she used to tell him to stay away from Mr. Campbell because he'll get you in trouble. And so there were parents in the school who found me to be too radical and too militant as a teacher, certainly.

00:14:08:00

Interviewer:

OK. After the, the nineteen teachers are transferred, and there's a strike, how did community organizations and what community organizations came to rally in support of Ocean Hill-Brownsville?

00:14:21:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, all over the city, organizations came to the support of [truck drives by] Ocean Hill-Brownsville. We had organizations in the Black community like the Black Panther Party, the Republic of New Africa.

00:14:34:00

Interviewer:

Stop.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Cut.

[cut]

[slate]

00:14:39:00

Interviewer:

OK. That May of ’68, what organizations and how did organizations rally to, rally to the support of Ocean Hill-Brownsville?

00:14:48:00

Jitu Weusi:

Citywide, organizations came to the support of Ocean Hill-Brownsville after the UFT str—teachers struck in 1968. In the Black community, organizations like the Black Panther Party, the Republic of New Africa, CORE, the African American Teachers Association all came to the support of Ocean Hill, brought their followers into the schools, recruited teachers, retired teachers, teachers who were working part time to teach classes, and generally kept the atmosphere of the schools in an orderly manner, in a pleasant manner, and did not allow any of the riotous behavior that was anticipated by the United Federation of Teachers to occur. So, then on, on the broader level, you had Dr. Milton Galamison, the late Dr. Galamison, who had organized a citywide school movement, he brought in activists from the Bronx. Evelina Antonetty brought in Hispanic parents. Annie Stein from the West Side of Manhattan brought in sympathetic parents of White extraction. And other parents, there was a Japanese woman who brought in some Asiatic parents. Other parents throughout the school system who had their kids in the school system and realized the importance of what was going on in Ocean Hill came to the support of the district.

00:16:12:00

Interviewer:

OK. And who, who was in the school teach—teaching during this time?

00:16:16:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, we had a combination of those teachers who had refused to follow the lead of the union, they made up about 30% of our staff, we had college students who were either graduating or graduated, we had retired teachers who were no longer working but who came out to support the Ocean Hill movement. And we had community supporters, people who were not necessarily teachers but who could do some of the things that teachers had done like tutoring children in math, tutoring them in reading, etc.

00:16:46:00

Interviewer:

OK. That summer, you knew there was gonna be a strike in the following, the following fall. What happened? What was the plan?

00:16:52:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, the plan was to make sure that we had enough teachers in September—[siren]

00:16:56:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Stop. Let's do it again.

Camera Crew Member #2:

No, you can keep going.

Interviewer:

OK. That, that summer—

Camera Crew Member #1:

You got it?

00:17:01:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

No, we didn't get it. Keep going.

00:17:02:00

Interviewer:

That summer, you knew there was gonna be a strike in the fall. What happened?

00:17:05:00

Jitu Weusi:

The plan was to recruit enough teachers during the summer so that when September came, if none of the union teachers came back, we would have adequate teachers to cover every class in the district. We recruited from among Black teachers citywide. We, the African American Teachers Association was instrumental in doing this. We requested that they transfer into the Ocean Hill-Brownsville District and become part of the staffs of those schools. Also you had political movements. As you know, the SDS political movement had been split on this question of Ocean Hill-Brownsville and community control. But those members of SDS that had supported the Ocean Hill-Brownsville movement [truck drives by] transferred large numbers of their members into the Ocean Hill-Brownsville District. So, when September came, we had more than enough teachers in Ocean Hill-Brownsville to replace the striking union teachers.

00:17:56:00

Interviewer:

OK. We're at the fall of '68, there's a strike. Could you talk about the feeling of pride? Because Ocean Hill Browns—the experimental districts including Ocean Hill-Brownsville were the only schools that were open. Could you talk about how it felt to be able to—

00:18:11:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, it felt great. We had outfoxed Albert Shanker. We had outmaneuvered the unio—United Federation of Teachers. We had shown that this downtrodden community faced with a crisis, using its own resources, could overcome. And there was a, a feeling of jubilation. And the parents and community were so much behind us and so supportive of us, this made it feel that much more exhilarating to know that we had community support. I used to walk through the streets of Ocean Hill at that time, and it was so beautiful. Parents used to come up and tell me to come in their house and have some fish, or have some chicken, or have some coffee, or have a cold drink. These were parents who were pouring out their heart to people who they felt were doing something to educate their children.

00:19:00:00

Interviewer:

OK. What did you feel you were part of in Ocean Hill-Brownsville? I mean what, more than just being a teacher, what did you think was going on?

00:19:05:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, I, I felt I was part of the freedom struggle of Black people. I was part of the ongoing struggle of the Black community to establish itself, to obtain self-determination, to obtain dignity, and to obtain liberation.

00:19:20:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, there were the police outside. You had the White teachers picketing, or the teachers picketing. Who were the police protecting during the, this fall strike of ’68?

00:19:31:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, the police department played a funny game with us. We could always tell when they were going to, what, what, what, what moves they were gonna make. If they had Black policemen on the line, they were gonna be friendly. It was gonna be an OK day. We didn’t have to worry that day when the Black policemen were on the line. But whenever they moved in the White policemen, especially the tall guys with the helmets on and the sticks in their hand, we knew immediately that that meant that confrontation was coming. So, we pretty much calculated what the scene looked like, and we know what action the police would take by how it looked.

00:20:07:00

Interviewer:

Are there any particular incidents that you remember outside of I.S. 271?

00:20:11:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, I remember several incidents. I remember very vividly the second strike when the students marched out of the school and marched into the street, saying that they would refuse to stay in schools where these teachers who were fired were. And I remember the exasperation on the faces of the representatives from the mayor's office and the Board of Education. They all along had felt that the students had no means of expressing their feelings. And so when the students marched out and there was a community wide march through the streets of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, we showed another aspect of our power. We showed youth power. We showed that our young people, too, were able to think and act on their own. [truck drives by]

00:21:01:00

Interviewer:

OK. The teachers are reinstated. And I know some of the teachers you said made, made their lives miserable. What specifically was done to these ten teachers, I think at this point, that were reinstated back into Ocean Hill-Brownsville?

00:21:13:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, we felt that, our feeling was, that these teachers were not wanted and that it was our responsibility to let them know at every juncture [truck drives by] that this community no longer wanted their services, and that they should know—

00:21:28:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Don't stop, but—stop when you hear the trucks.

Interviewer:

Cut.

[cut]

[camera roll #3061]

00:21:32:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:21:34:00

Interviewer:

OK. The ten teachers that were reinstated. You said some of the teachers made their lives miserable. Could you describe what, what do you mean specifically? What happened?

00:21:44:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, our feeling was that these teachers were not wanted by the community and that we should do everything to let them know that the community no longer wanted their services, and that if that meant that [car horn] when we were walking down the halls we had to let them know then that they were no longer wanted, we did that. Or when they came in the lunchroom and were eating their lunch, that we had to let them know that they were no longer wanted then, we did that. Or when they were punching out at the time cards, if we had to let them know then, we did that. So, we just let them know at all opportunities that they no—were no longer wanted in this school by this community.

00:22:22:00

Interviewer:

What, what sort of things were said to them?

00:22:25:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, we said things like, Why don't you go get another job somewhere else? Why don't you go miseducate children someplace else? Why don't you take your racist outlooks to another community? We no longer went it here. And that, You're not gonna stay here in peace. We're gonna continue to hound you until you leave this school.

00:22:43:00

Interviewer:

All right. Now, one of—after the school began again, the, the school board, the school union said they wanted you out and, and I think five other, five other, other teachers. What were you thinking then? I mean, did you think that if you went out that you could save things? What, what was going through your mind?

00:22:56:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, I wasn't worried about the union wanting me out. I knew I had the support of the community. I knew I had the support of parents. I knew that I had the support of activists all over the city, and I wasn't worried about the union and their concerns.

00:23:11:00

Interviewer:

OK. Could you talk about how the strike brought the Black community together all over New York? You said now finally Harlem, you know, Bed-Stuy. Could you just talk about all those districts coming together and talk about national leaders that came in during this fall of '68 strike?

00:23:24:00

Jitu Weusi:

Yes. ***Well, the strike was a unifying factor in the Black community. Groups that had previously been at each other's throat found themselves together at rallies and meetings surrounding Ocean Hill. It was an issue that whether you were CORE, or the NAACP, or the Urban League, or the Black Panther Party, or the Republic of New Africa, you could rally around this community issue. Everybody understood the importance of Black children receiving a quality education,*** and all organizations were willing to rally in support of Ocean Hill-Brownsville. I don't think there's been an issue in New York City that has gotten the total support of all elements of the Black community as this educational issue. Whether it's been the appointment of Dr. Thomas Minter as chancellor of the public schools, or whether it's been the demand for Black educators, or more Black supervisors, or whether it's been the support for Ocean Hill. There hasn't been an issue in New York City that has united our community than the education issues.

00:24:25:00

Interviewer:

And briefly, could you mention the regions? Like how Harlem, Bed-Stuy, you know, all these regions—

00:24:31:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, as you know, New York City has always been, has this kind of re—neighborhood regionalism, this sort of competitiveness among neighborhoods. You know, the people feel that Harlem is the most relevant neighborhood, and others say, No, it's Bedford-Stuyvesant. Or, No, it's the South Bronx. Or, No, it's South Jamaica. But I think that when we began to move on this education issue, people realized that it didn't matter whether you were living in Harlem, or South Jamaica, or Bed-Stuy, or the South Bronx, that we were receiving the same dirty deal around the question of education. So, that when we began to move on this and began to confront the powers that be around this question of education, all of the communities came together. Leaders from Harlem came to speak in Brooklyn. Leaders from Queens. I remember David Spencer from the I.S. 201 Project, he came out to support us. I remember Dick Gregory, who at that time was a national leader, came in here to support us. H. Rap Brown came in. The head of the Urban League, the late Whitney Young, he came in. Groups and leaders from all over the city and all over the nation came in to give support to the parents [truck drives by] at Ocean Hill-Brownsville.

00:25:40:00

Interviewer:

Could you describe the march across the Brooklyn Bridge? It began, began at City Hall, went to 110 Livingston Street. What was the reason, and, and talk us through that.

00:25:48:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, certainly one of the proudest days of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville struggle was the march that took place in late October of 1968. This march showed that Ocean Hill-Brownsville was not just an instance of confrontation, that it was in fact a citywide symbol. And I think it was approximately 30,000 people gathered at City Hall Park, and we marched arm in arm, locked, across the Brooklyn Bridge to the Board of Education. And it was a memorable sight to see so many people, a broad cross section of people in the educational struggle. Dr. Galamison, Rhody McCoy, Dick Gregory, Al Van, Rap Brown, Sonny Carson, leaders from the Republic of New Africa all locked arm in arm. And it showed a tremendous amount of unity. It showed that we were not going to be denied around this issue of changing the New York City public school system. And when we reached 110 Livingston Street, there was a massive rally. And I think that the message that was given that day was that the Black community's demand for change within the New York City school system was not gonna be denied.

00:27:02:00

Interviewer:

OK. What was happening with the students? You talked a little bit before about the student march into the streets. Could you talk about the formation of the African American Students Association? What was happening with the students?

00:27:11:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, in the fall of '67, we teachers began to hear the voices and demands of students for the need for change. And these students were brought together to form the African American Students Association, and these were representatives of high schools all over New York City. I remember a young man from Harlem by the name of Ron Dicks who represented the Harlem schools. And we had a young man from Queens, Arthur Teer, who was representing Andrew Jackson High School. And then we had people like Adeyemi Bandele here from Tilden High School. And we had students from schools all over New York City. The bright schools like Brooklyn Tech. Charles Angel, I remember he was a representative from Brooklyn Tech. As well as the vocational schools even. We had a young woman by the name of Ellen Shepherd from Fashion High School. So, this, this student association was a cross-section of young people who understood the need for change in the public system and who were ready to put their bodies on the line to bring about this change. And they had a lot of impact. First, they helped to impact by opening many of these schools during the strike. It was the students that, who demanded that many of these high schools be open. And in fact, opened them up during the strike. Secondly, they held demonstrations themselves. They held demonstrations on the street, and then one demonstration culminated in a march of students throughout the city to Ocean Hill-Brownsville. That march was met with one of the bloodiest riots that happened during the Ocean Hill-Brownsville demonstration. You saw busloads of police jumping out of buses, beating these students. And while we sympathize what was happening, this became an understanding for these students that they were not gonna win changes. They were not gonna win movement or changes easily. That they were going to run up against forces that were gonna be willing to bloody them, to beat them, to put them in jail if they wanted the change.

00:29:25:00

Interviewer:

OK. Could you talk about anti-Semitism? How much was anti-Semitism, anti-Jewish feeling a part of what was happening in Ocean Hill-Brownsville?

00:29:33:00

Jitu Weusi:

I don't believe that anti-Jewish feeling was any part of what was happening in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. Many of the persons who supported Ocean Hill-Brownsville were Jews. There were Jews within McCoy's administration. There were Jews working in the schools. There

were Jews who were consultants to the district. In other words, there was no issue of Jewish anti-Semitism or Jewish work in the district that came up. That was not a question. What anti-Semitism was, it was a means for the teachers union to, the, to deflect criticism of their role from them to the community by using this question of anti-Semitism. [truck drives by] In other words, at the end of Ocean Hill-Brownsville, the teachers union looked bad. They looked like the aggressors. They looked like the United States Army looked in Vietnam, you see? So, they needed to change their image. And one of the ways that they sought to change their image was to bring up this issue of Ocean Hill-Brownsville of anti-Semitism and say that this was the reason why they were against the district, because the changes that we were demanding were anti-Semitic. You see? And so therefore this was a means that they used to rally their people and to not, not make themselves look bad in the eyes of a lot of people. But as far as I'm concerned, this was not an issue.

00:30:59:00

Interviewer:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Changing sound rolls.

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

[sound roll #329]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

00:31:03:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Time code fourteen seventeen.

[slate]

00:31:07:00

Interviewer:

OK. You read a poem written by Sia Berhan on WBAI. Could you talk about that incident? And also do you have any regrets for having done that?

00:31:17:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, Julius Lester, who was the major factor at BAI during that time, he's now a professor at the University of Massachusetts, asked me to come on his show. He had came out, he had taped a class of mine on Black History. He played it on the air. He had gotten a very favorable response from his listeners, so he asked me to come on the show and talk about Ocean Hill. When I got to the studio, I showed him some poems from some students, and I asked him did he think I should read these poems. I said these poems were raw responses of young, Black students to what was goin' on in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. And I asked him if he thought I should read any of them. He selected this one. He said, Yeah, this one sounds really like dynamite. He said, Why don't you read this one on the show? I said, Don't you, do you feel that we'll get a reaction? He said, Well, hey, look, this is a controversial show. You know, we're gonna read this poem. So, we read the poem. We read her poem, which was called "Hey, Jew Boy" [sic] and we read that on WBAI radio at the time. We got some response from the BAI audience that night.

00:32:22:00

Interviewer:

Could you start again? And make sure you say Sia's name and—

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, let's stop. I'm sorry.

Interviewer:

I'm sorry.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Going to new camera roll. 3061 is out.

Interviewer:

University of Massachusetts.

Jitu Weusi:

Right.

[cut]

[camera roll #3062]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Scene nineteen.

00:32:37:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:32:39:00

Interviewer:

OK, the poem by, by Sia. Could you tell me how it came to be read on WBAI? And, and did you have any regrets for having read it?

00:32:45:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, Julius Lester was a revolutionary Black media person of that day who had a program on WBAI radio. He had came out to the school, taped a class of mine, and then played it on the radio. And it had gotten a very good response. He invited me up to the studio. I think it was December the 27th, 1968. And we were doing an interview show. I showed him a poem by Sia Berhan that was a raw response of a fifteen-year old youth to what had happened in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. And he asked me to read this poem on the air, and I read the poem. There were a few callers who called in. The poem was entitled, “Hey, Jew Boy” [sic] and there were a few callers who called in after the reading of the poem and expressing their feeling that the poem was kind of, you know, bitter and filled with hate and so forth. But nothing big came out of that radio broadcast until approximately three weeks later on January 15th when Albert Shanker revealed to the world that, you know, this poem was an indication of the anti-Semitic response of Ocean Hill-Brownsville and that teachers like myself were teaching these youngsters anti-Semitism within the school system, particularly within the experimental project at Ocean Hill-Brownsville.

00:34:13:00

Interviewer:

All right. Do you regret having read it?

00:34:14:00

Jitu Weusi:

No, I don't. I think the response was raw. The child had very little knowledge of the whole total picture of Jews and history of Jews. In fact, she had been taught most of her life by Jewish teachers who had taught her about the Holocaust, who had taught her about injustices to the Jewish people. And she was just finding it unusually strange that now some of these Jewish people were performing injustices to her people. And that was what she was saying in the poem.

00:34:44:00

Interviewer:

OK. Could you talk about the, the Independent School Movement, the [unintelligible] and how they had roots in, in what was going on in Ocean Hill-Brownsville?

00:34:53:00

Jitu Weusi:

Well, in September of '68, a number of us at I.S. 271, Junior High School 271, decided to start an evening school to provide classes and instruction for the youth and adults of the community. This was just an idea that we had, and it became a tremendous success. We had dance classes where thirty and forty women would come in to participate. We had Black History classes where we had twenty-five, thirty people taking Black History class. We had sewing classes and other classes that the community at that time identified that they would like to have. And this evening school became an instant success on very little money and very little advertising. So, this told us that if we could do this, and it could be successful that we could in fact develop our own types of schools. So, two years later, after Ocean Hill was over, this is exactly what we did. We went to develop The East, which was an educational and cultural center. We developed the Uhuru Sasa which means Freedom Now School. And we developed other independent schools and independent educational programs throughout Brooklyn.

00:36:07:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speed. 1406.

00:36:10:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:36:13:00

Interviewer:

OK. Was, was parent involvement something new in, in Brooklyn?

00:36:17:00

Jitu Weusi:

No, parent involvement was not new. I went to Brooklyn schools all my life. I grew up in Brooklyn in the '50s. My mother was the president of the PTA, of our local PTA for over seven years. She served as the president. She served as a representative to the United Parents Association, which is a citywide bod—body. I would say that after World War II with the increasing numbers of Black parents that were moving to locations like Brooklyn from the South, they were concerned about the quality of education that their children were going to receive. And the only way that they could assure that their children would receive any kind of meaningful education in the public schools was by being involved. And so you found larger and larger numbers of Black parents becoming involved through the PTAs, through the United Parents Association, and through other types of school and educational organizations.

00:37:15:00

Interviewer:

OK. OK. OK, I think—

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:37:19:00