



Interview with **Jesse McCrary**

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Interviewer: Madison Davis Lacy, Jr.

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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 #1111]

[sound roll #151]

00:00:16:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:00:18:00

Interviewer:

Jesse, you're telling me earlier about how government displaced people in Overtown. In fact, you called it governmental cancer. Tell me about that. What happened with respect to Overtown? Talk to me.

00:00:32:00

Jesse McCrary:

Overtown was destroyed because of government. More so, government is the villain. There are some particular examples I can cite for you. The Trans-State Transportation Department decided that that's where Interstate I-95 should go. The county government put its

administration building there. The federal government put a United States Post Office on the most popular social gathering place that Black people had in the history of this county. The new arena is in Overtown. The mass transit has a station in Overtown. Ya, you have to understand, Overtown is adjacent to downtown Miami. Downtown Miami cannot expand southward. It can't expand westward. It can't expand eastward because they'd be in the bay. And the only place it can expand is Overtown. Now Black people were easy prey. They had no political power because they didn't have any people in office. So what government did was they take, took a little at a time. First, they cut the finger off and then they cut the hand off and then they cut the arm off and pretty soon Overtown's dead. In addition to the fact, that many things in Overtown were owned by Whites who put up massive apartment buildings and when government started moving in, they immediately moved those tenants out because they saw chances to make huge profits from government's desire to move in.

00:02:08:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop down, sir.

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

[cut]

00:02:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

Open the claps a little more, right sticks one more. Mark it, please.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

00:02:18:00

Interviewer:

Well, some would say that, you know, government buildings in this town, that Overtown would serve as a magnet and it's actually investing in the community. How was—what was the deal?

00:02:27:00

Jesse McCrary:

They would have to understand, when government moved in, people had to move out. What you did was you—government moved in on a social institution and displaced that social institution, and what was cohesive at one time then became scattered. So that institution died called Overtown. And the people who lived Overtown, who were part of Overtown and other people who came from the outside, outlining areas, all gathered in Overtown for some reason, for church, for cultural events, for social events; and when government displaced those institutions, it displaced that society and broke it up.

00:03:16:00

Interviewer:

Now, do you remember that displacement, that disruption? What was it like? What did it feel like?

00:03:21:00

Jesse McCrary:

I remember it distinctly. W, one, there was no gathering place. The Sir John Hotel, for example, the Carver Hotel, the Mary Elizabeth Hotel, those hotels were to Black folk what the Fontainebleau and the Eden Roc were to people on the beach. Because that's where you saw the great entertainers, that's where you'd gather on a Friday afternoon if you wanted to be with the boys, or any afternoon. You would see middle-class people there, along with all other people, socializing, making the business deals, having dinner at night, seeing a good show. It is no more.

00:04:01:00

Interviewer:

Were there any opportunities for new Black institutions to take their place?

Jesse McCrary:

Yes. But that happens over a period of time.

Interviewer:

Start again.

Jesse McCrary:

Yeah, yeah. OK.

Interviewer:

Just to where at.

00:04:15:00

Jesse McCrary:

Yes, there were opportunities for new institutions to take the place of those. But you have to understand, Overtown was not built overnight. Overtown had a history. It had the history of being our place to gather. We are here. We are brothers. We are business people. And what you're asking or what some would suggest is that we'll go get forty acres somewhere and rebuild that. You can't rebuild history overnight. It took a long time to develop the Mary Elizabeth Hotel. It was years before we had a major hotel like the Sir John, that was previously called the Sir Calvert Hotel. You don't do that overnight. And the good will was some of the location. You know, you've got one hotel on this corner. You can walk down the street to the other one. You walk around the corner to the other one. You walk down the street a little further, there's the Magic Chef. And remember, what Overtown was was, was so attractive until there were people who came from distant places to Miami and the first place they were going to go was Overtown. It's like people who come to Miami and say, I'm going to Miami Beach. This was the mecca.

00:05:33:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's cut.

Camera crew member #1:

Cut.

Interviewer:

Good. That's good.

Jesse McCrary:

Yeah. OK.

00:05:39:00

Interviewer:

I think 'cause we don't have anybo—

[cut]

00:05:45:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:05:47:00

Interviewer:

All right, tell me one of your fond remembrances of being at the Sir John Hotel.

00:05:52:00

Jesse McCrary:

You know, I remember being in the Sir John Hotel one night, just sitting around drinking with the boys. And there's a small trio there. And some guy gets up and starts singing. Well, I don't know the guy from the man on the moon, but he looks familiar. Lo and behold, it's Little Willie John, singing "Fever." I mean it's that kind of thing. I also remember that I probably got my first job as a law clerk from being in the Sir John Hotel. I was in there and there was this very distinguished gentleman who was a lawyer here, named Henry Arrington. And I was so awed by Henry Arrington because Henry Arrington had represented Joe Louis, Dinah Washington, you name 'em, represented Cassius Clay. I mean Muhammad when he was Cassius Clay. So I went up to him and I said, Mr. Arrington, ya know, I'm just so happy to meet you, because he was an imposing fellow, ya know, very distinguished looking, and asked him for a job. I didn't get one, but he, subsequently, helped me get a job at some other place. But it was a place, all the time, that you could see a celebrity. And I guess that's why a lotta people went there, because they knew at some time during the night or day somebody famous was gonna walk through there.

00:07:07:00

Interviewer:

All right, let's switch tracks just a second. Now, tell me something about the non-group. Tell me who, what it is and who's on it, and what it does.

00:07:15:00

Jesse McCrary:

The non-group, let me tell you 'bout them, the non-group, the power structure in this town. The non-group is a group of 49 people, all of whom are rich, except for one of them, consist of the major executives in this town, the Florida Power and Light, the Southern Bell, the Eastern Airlines, the Burger King, the real, real heavyweights. You won't see their names in the newspapers, very seldom. But they control this town, because they be—they are the policy makers. And they are the people who can make things happen, government move. When there is a tax issue, for example, recently there was a tax issue. The non-group decided that it wanted to support that tax issue. The issue passes. And that issue was the mass transit issue. The governmental leaders in this town are not as strong as the non-group when it gets to the bottom line. They certainly have their sphere of power, but it's the power behind the scenes. And I'm convinced that the non-group is that single entity that makes government move in a direction, not a selfish direction, not a selfish direction, but in a direction that is going to be beneficial to people. It, it's done some things fo, for Blacks. As a result of the non-group, roughly about seven million dollars was pumped into an organization called Business Assistance Center, which was designed to give some financial aid to small entrepreneurs in the Black community. And that's without government, that was purely a private gesture.

00:09:09:00

Interviewer:

Has that worked?

Jesse McCrary:

No.

Interviewer:

Why hasn't it?

Jesse McCrary:

It hasn't worked because—

00:09:16:00

Interviewer:

Start again by saying, the Business Assistance thing hasn't worked.

00:09:20:00

Jesse McCrary:

The Business Assistance Ce-Center has not worked as well as it could. And the reason is, in my opinion, that the funds were put there for the reason to make access to finance easier. And I'm not suggesting that they should give the money away, but when the Business Assistance Center finds itself with the same kind of stringent requirements that you have at Southeast Bank, then the person might as well go to Southeast. And I'm not suggestin' a giveaway. But if you've got a man who has a mom 'n' pop grocery store and you're gonna require him to pledge his house, his home, require him to have very sophisticated financial statements, it's not gonna work. One of the interesting things about finance in this community, there is a Cuban banker, a very respected one, the elder statesman of bankers in this community who's Cuban, who said, You know, I run a bank but I run it on a handshake and how a man looks me in the eye. Say, I lose a few but most of it I get back. And I'm just saying that the Business Assistance Center needs to rethink its role and rethink its procedure. Obviously, it is changing now with new direction, and hopefully it's gonna work.

00:10:42:00

Interviewer:

Did that come—

Camera crew member #1:

Stop for a second.

00:10:43:00

Interviewer:

Yeah.

[cut]

[camera roll #1112]

00:10:48:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:10:50:00

Interviewer:

'Round '78, '79, '80, tell me, can you describe what the relationship between the police and the Black community was like? Go.

00:11:02:00

Jesse McCrary:

The relationship between the police and the Black community is bad; horrible, miserable, detestable. And it goes back farther than '79. You have to understand that in this town there was a time if you were a Black policeman, you could not arrest a White person. There was a time where they had a separate precinct. And you have to understand that when the city of Miami got its first Black policeman, they went on the street and they got six guys who were six-feet-four, gave 'em a gun and a badge and said, You're a policeman. It was not until the 1960s, late '60s that Blacks, who applied for the Police Department, were even able to go to the Police Academy. So, you had a mentality in the Police Department that still prevails in many instances, that I am a policeman, I am White, you are a Black, you will do as I say. And then there is the question of brutality. And the brutality has continued in this town and did not start to stop and government did not start to take some action until this town started burning. That's unfortunate. And we've had our share of burnings. But every time there has been a disturbance in this town, it's been because of police brutality.

00:12:32:00

Interviewer:

Do you, as an attorney and dealing with the community and police and government, do you recall any stories that sort of exemplify what you're talking about?

00:12:42:00

Jesse McCrary:

Absolutely. Let me, let me give you a horror story. I represented a Black policeman, who was an undercover officer, who was making a phone call one night at a hotel, right on Biscayne Boulevard in plain clothes. Two cops walked up to him and said, Boy, what are you doin'? He said, Listen, I'm about to make a drug buy. I'm an undercover officer with the City of Miami Police Department. If you don't believe me, go look in my car. Look up under the seat and there's my badge, or you can call Major Bronner, he'll verify. They said, We'll verify something. They put 'im in hi, in their car. This is a fella policeman. Put him in the car, took him to a warehouse area, beat him half to death, and then one of them, they called their sergeant. Then they discovered the guy really is a fellow policeman. They then said to themselves, What do we do with him now? Took him to the hospital, didn't let his family see him for two days, wife doesn't know where her husband is; big cover-up. That's against a fellow policeman. There're untold stories of people I've represented and other lawyers have

represented, where one policeman, a young kid was running away, the policemen caught 'im, grabbed him down from a fence, kicked him, eye gone. There are thousands and thousands of stories like that.

00:14:09:00

Interviewer:

Is Miami and its relationship with the police and the police and the treatment of Blacks in Miami any s—is there anything unique or special the, I mean, is it different than anyplace else in America? I mean, what makes this like that?

00:14:25:00

Jesse McCrary:

I think that it's like that because of what the structure of the Miami Police Department has been over the years. And remember, in police departments, as in other sections of government, the middle management does not move very often. It stays the same and those same hard, cold kinds of attitudes prevail at the middle management level and then trickles down to the guy on the beat because he knows he can whoop up against the brother's head any time, nothing's gonna happen but a reprimand. And until we change that middle part, it's not gonna change. There are some efforts to do that now. Obviously, there's a Black police chief. But even that doesn't change the middle management where the real day-to-day decisions are made. I'm not talkin' about policy. I'm talkin' about day-to-day decisions.

00:15:22:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop down.

00:15:23:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

[cut]

00:15:28:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:15:31:00

Interviewer:

Tell me, Jesse, do you think the Black middle class has abandoned Overtown?

00:15:35:00

Jesse McCrary:

The Black middle class has abandoned Overtown in fact and in spirit. Anybody who even have, faintly, comes up with the idea that Overtown is coming back alive, sadly mistaken. It's dead. Gone. Forever.

00:15:55:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop.

[cut]

00:16:01:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:16:03:00

Interviewer:

You said in so many words that l—Overtown is dead and is not gonna come back. Tell me that and tell me why.

00:16:09:00

Jesse McCrary:

Overtown is dead because of two or three reasons. One, people, the class of people who once made Overtown thrive, moved to suburbia. They come in in the morning and they go out in the afternoon. There is nothing to draw people to Overtown now. What exists in Overtown

now is government, and that's not the kind of thing that made Overtown grow. It will be prosperous, but not prosperous in the sense that it will be a mecca, a social setting, for Black Miami.

00:16:52:00

Interviewer:

When, after the riots, Jimmy Carter came to town, were you in that meeting that's reported that Carter made a lotta promises about helping the Liberty City-Overtown area?

00:17:03:00

Jesse McCrary:

I wasn't in the meeting. No, I was not.

00:17:06:00

Interviewer:

You're not in the meeting. How did Black people respond to the charge that a lotta people in three-piece suits sold them out after the riots, that nothing really has changed or is going to change?

00:17:21:00

Jesse McCrary:

[pause] I think that out there in the streets and in little houses across Miami, people were distrustful of a good number of people who call themselves leaders. For example, the White structure, power structure, after one disturbance brought in Andy Young. People said, Why are you bringing Andy Young in here to solve a problem that we can tell you about? And that's happened over and over and over again, that much of the power structure, has absolutely been insensitive to the concerns here. Now, the other part of it is, we have not been as militant as we should have been. There is no way we should have let Overtown disappear. But we got snookered. And we got snookered because we were not minding our knitting. We should have been there at the governmental board meetings, at the meetings that talk about development. We were not there. And we trusted people that it was going to be OK.

00:18:30:00

Interviewer:

So, politics is part of the answer somehow or another, or was part of the answer for Overtown?

Jesse McCrary:

Was part of the answer, is part of the answer. It is all politics.

Interviewer:

Tell me about it. Politics was part of the answer, you're telling me? Put politics in the subject again. Politics is part of—

00:18:43:00

Jesse McCrary:

Politics? The whole destruction of Overtown can be related to politics. Because it was the politicians who we did not, quote, control, where we had no representative there to look out for our interests and the interest that the politicians looked out for, where the interests of the landlords who lived on Miami Beach but who owned the property over here, for the bond issues that were gonna be passed to build this that helps their friends. Black people were not even thought about, no more than, Here's the area. We can move them out. I mean you had entrepreneurs going around offering people money for their property when they knew what the master plan was. And here was Black Miami, not even knowing. And one of the things we were not part of the process. We were locked out the process. So, if we didn't know what went on at the meeting, before the meeting, there's no way for you to get the full impact of what the meeting is about.

00:19:49:00

Interviewer:

Does the at-large voting system here in Dade County, Miami, at-large representation? Is that a strong factor?

00:19:59:00

Jesse McCrary:

The at-large voting system is bad for Black Miami. It is most difficult to get elected in this county of two million, almost two million people, with at-large voting. We have never had a single person elected in this county who is Black, full-time, except where that person was first appointed, and then built some coalitions. But the voting has gone, when you—when people run along racial lines.

00:20:32:00

Interviewer:

Stop down.

[cut]

[wild sound]

00:20:37:00

Jesse McCrary:

There is a big scheme out there, that it was—

Camera crew member #3:

OK. Got it. Written as a [unintelligible] plan.

Jesse McCrary:

OK. However, Dade County does now have a written master plan.

Interviewer:

Since?

Camera crew member #3:

Keep doing.

Jesse McCrary:

This is since the '80s that you're talkin' about?

00:20:53:00

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]. OK

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:20:54:00

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