

Interview with **Sonny Wright**

Date: March 21, 1989

Interviewer: Madison Davis Lacy, Jr.

Camera Rolls: 1070-1071

Sound Rolls: 129-131

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.

Preferred Citation

Interview with Sonny Wright, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on March 21, 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 #1070]

[sound roll #129]

00:00:11:00

Camera crew member #1:

K.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

Camera crew member #2:

OK.

00:00:19:00

Interviewer:

When you came here thirty years or so ago to Miami, what was it like for you?

00:00:24:00

Sonny Wright:

Well, it was a different experience. I, I grew up in New York, and I lived there most of my young adult life. And so when I got to Miami it was a little bit different. I was really surprised at some of the things, at some of the customs that was a, I guess you'd say of the area at the time. Of course we had segregation. That was different, now. Segregation was happening all over the United States and I suppose there was discrimination even in New York and prejudice and everything else. But it's just just that when you got down to Miami then you saw the signs, you know, back of the bus and those kind of things. So you know, we experienced that and that was different. But then I think the other thing that was different is that in the, those days Black people lived basically all in the same communities and there was a little bit more cohesiveness. There was businesses flourishing on the Avenues, 2nd Avenue, 3rd Avenue. And it was really a fun place in spite of a lot of things that would appear to be negative, such as the segregation and discrimination, and the prejudice-type things that I just mentioned to you. But it was a fun place. I mean, a lot of things was happening in Miami at that time. And I kind of enjoyed it.

00:01:36:00

Interviewer:

Is that why you stayed?

00:01:38:00

Sonny Wright:

No. I got stuck. I, I got down here, I came with the idea of passing through. I was headed to Cuba at the time. I worked in the post office—

Interviewer:

Let's stop. Let's stop down.

Camera crew member #2:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Camera crew member #2:

It's this thing.

[cut]

00:01:48:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:01:54:00

Interviewer:

So who compelled you to stay in Miami, man?

00:01:57:00

Sonny Wright:

Well, like I said, I got stuck here. I, I came down with the idea of passing through. I really wasn't—my destination was Cuba. I worked in the post office when I was in New York. As a kid I worked there. And this was a vacation for me. I had heard a lot of stories about Cuba and finally I decided that if the opportunity presented itself, I wanted to go. So I was passing through Miami. In fact, I passed through Miami, went to Cuba, came back from Cuba broke, basically as I planned because I worked in the post office and they were supposed to send my two weeks check. And I was going to go and pick it up from this post office box that I'd already previously, you know, provided for. And then true to form, I opened [laughs] the post office box, no check. Typical post-office kind of a deal. So I was very disappointed, not receiving a check but I knew I had one coming. So I said, well, you know, I made a few arrangements. But bottom line is that I stayed around here doing odd jobs and things because I was going to, I was scheduled to go into the armed forces. And I felt that since I was down here, I might as well just be inducted in Miami as opposed to going back to New York. And a few things happened, and I found myself really involved. After not going in the army, I met people and was convinced that maybe I should go into a business. And I opened up a little small restaurant after working at odd jobs and doing various things. And so, you know, one thing led to another and before you know it, it's thirty years and here I am, you know, [laughs] Miami—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

[laughs]

Sonny Wright:

—my hometown. [laughs]

00:03:31:00

Interviewer:

Stop down.

Camera crew member #2:

This is—stop down?

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

[cut]

[camera roll #1071]

00:03:33:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

Camera crew member #2:

OK.

00:03:40:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about the bank. What's its name and how did it come about?

00:03:44:00

Sonny Wright:

The bank? Peoples National Bank of Commerce. In 1983, January the 5th, 1983, after one year of—

Camera crew member #2:

Stop, stop, [unintelligible]

[cut]

Camera crew member #2:

OK, go.

00:04:00:00

Interviewer:

OK. Tell me about the bank. How did it come about, what's its name?

00:04:03:00

Sonny Wright:

People's National Bank of Commerce. On January the 5th, 1983, we established the People's Bank, National Bank of Commerce. It was an existing bank. We bought the bank and it was the first time in Dade County that there was a, that there was a Black bank. And it was something that I believe everybody in Dade County wanted to see happen. All the Black people, at least, wanted to see it happen. And I think the total community, for that matter. Because there never was a Black bank, a real Black bank in Dade County. And we were able to, with the help of a lot of our friends, acquire this bank. And it was, to me, and to others who participated with us, including Joe Robbie incidentally who's the owner of the Miami Dolphins who played a very key role in help, helping us to acquire the bank, along with some other people from the Cuban community, Raul Masvidal, for example who at that time owned a bank and was very helpful. And I mention that because I think it's important to know there was other people in the community besides the Black community who also felt that it was a good thing to have a Black bank. And we did get quite a bit of cons— cooperation from the total community in establishing the bank. But it was a dream that came true and the bank is something that we hope will be able to play a role in this community to help to bring about the economic development which we've all been striving to achieve all these many years.

00:05:34:00

Interviewer:

Why after thirty years? What, what do you attribute the Cuban great success after thirty years?

00:05:42:00

Sonny Wright:

Well, I don't know if it's thirty years or, or maybe if it's longer. I think that, like most people that look at what the Cubans have accomplished and have some idea of their background, you have to recognize that initially a lot of the Cubans that came here, came with money. They came with education. They came with skills. They came away from a government that they didn't want to be subject to. So they came seeking political freedom and freedom of speech, and all the things that America represents. And they came and they brought something with them. They brought their skills. They brought their, their wealth in a lot of instances. But there were many of them that did not have, maybe, great skills or great amounts of wealth. But what they've done is they've done what the Black people need to do. That is stick together, work together, pool their resources, do the things that make the difference. And what the difference is, is that when people understand that their destinies really are interwoven, I mean, and, and recognize that the, the real value of relationships and, and of, and of opportunities, for that matter, is in seeing that people around you that you are friendly with, that you have some influence with reach the heights. Because if my friend is in a position and he has control and he has power, then at least I have an opportunity, whether he gives it to me or not, it's there for him to give it to somebody. So we need to recognize, in my opinion at least, anyway, that the idea is to not pull the other man, but push and try to see if you can't, as you make your stride to reach your goal, to do what your destiny calls for you to do, push somebody, in this case we're talking about somebody Black, in order that he might be able to reach back and pull somebody. And together we pool our resources. We learn to buy from our own community. We learn to respect one another. We learn to control our neighborhoods. And we learn to do all the things that other people have already demonstrated to us that work. Not only the Cubans, what about the Jewish people? Well, when the Jewish people came here, at least when I came here, they were saying there were signs on the beach. I never saw any of the signs. But they must have been there because I've read about it, I heard about it. There were signs on Miami Beach which said that no Jews, no dogs allowed. That had to be very, I mean, you know, hurtful to a Jewish person to see a sign like that. It's something like, you know, White water fountain, Black water fountain, sit at the back of the bus, same kind of thing. But today, the Jews own Miami Beach. That's what it's all about, man. I mean, now if you go to Miami Beach and you want to do something you have to deal with them because they understand the value of working together.

00:08:45:00

Interviewer:

Stop—

Sonny Wright:

That's what it's all about.

Interviewer:

—down.

Camera crew member #2:

I'm going to change camera rolls. I mean sound rolls, excuse me.

[cut]

[sound roll #131]

[slate]

00:08:55:00

Interviewer:

OK. Tell me what it was like trying to buy a hamburger when you got here thirty years ago.

Sonny Wright:

Oh, you remember that story I told you, huh?

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

00:09:01:00

Sonny Wright:

Yeah, I, when I first came here, I recall going into a Royal Castle. Royal Castle's like a Burger King or a McDonald's of, of today. And I made the mistake of sitting down waiting for a hamburger that I was going to take out because I knew that you couldn't eat the hamburger there, but I felt like, you know, since I had an opportunity to sit down and wait for the hamburger it wouldn't be a problem doing that. And I sat down. And I was told by the clerk that I had to get up. And of course I was very embarrassed because the place is, you know, full of people. And I explained that, you know, I was just waiting for the hamburger. And he explained to me that I couldn't sit down and wait for it. I had to stand up and wait for it and when I got it I had to leave with it. And that was really a, a, an experience that I think a lot of Black people have, you know, had at one time in their life in one way or another. But as we discussed earlier, I think that the idea really is not so much the ability to eat at in

hamburger place, but I think more importantly, to buy one. And I think that's what it's all about. And I think that that's where Black America has to go. It has—we have to try to see if we can't control the resources in the community and keep our dollars circulating among ourselves more than one time because that's what the whole thing's all about, to be able to create opportunity for our business people and to create jobs for our young people and our pop, our general, our population in general. Not to mention the other people that we would employ. But we have to begin to, to use our resources in a way in which it benefits us more than what it presently does today.

00:10:40:00

Interviewer:

Stop down.

Camera crew member #2:

Cut.

[cut]

[wild sound]

00:10:42:00

Interviewer:

What a shame, you're right. What's a shame? Just like you did just now.

Camera crew member #2:

Rolling.

Sonny Wright:

OK. And that, that's what it is, man.

Interviewer:

I get it, I understand.

Sonny Wright:

Yeah.

[cut]

[slate]

00:10:52:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about the [inaudible]?

00:10:55:00

Sonny Wright:

It was a shame. A real sad thing. And the real shame and the real sadness is that, you know, when are we going to learn? I mean, when are the White people going to learn that in order for everybody to live in this community and, and enjoy the, the, the natural resources that God has given us, our God-given resources in this beautiful city, that everybody has to have an opportunity to share in that? When are the Cubans going to learn that their blessings they've discovered in this community need to be shared with others in this community? When are the Black people going to learn that we're going to have to work a little harder if we want our piece of the pie? And we're going to have to start working together. And when are we as a community going to learn that by working together and doing all the things that people should do to make a strong community, that everybody benefits? There's no losers. You know, if you have a cancerous sore on your arm and you neglect it, I mean, your whole body will deteriorate, and you'll die. And that's what's happening here. I mean, one segment of our community cannot seem to get itself together. Now, you know, it's the thing where I believe that it was going to require more understanding and more sincere commitment on the part of all of us to make this community what it really ought to be.

00:12:21:00

Interviewer:

Stop.

Camera crew member #2:

OK.

[wild sound]

Camera crew member #1:

Roll sound. Whoops. I'm rolling. [laughs]

Interviewer:

My man.

Sonny Wright:

That's my line, man. [laughs]

Interviewer:

[laughs]

Sonny Wright:

[laughs]

Camera crew member #1:

Roll with the speed.

[cut]

[slate]

00:12:41:00

Interviewer:

What happened after the riot?

00:12:43:00

Sonny Wright:

Well, a lot of people did a lot of talking and a lot of meetings. And nothing happened. I mean, it was like business as usual after a certain period of time. And that's the real sad thing because, you know, we've had another riot since then. And another one since then.

00:12:57:00

Interviewer:

OK. We don't need to get in—

Sonny Wright:

OK.

Interviewer:

—we can't get into that.

Sonny Wright:

OK.

Interviewer:

So just, just give me that bite again.

Sonny Wright:

OK.

00:13:01:00

Interviewer:

What happened—

Camera crew member #2:

Just a second. Wait, I've got to change my focal lens.

Camera crew member #1:

Start after the riots.

Interviewer:

After the riots?

Sonny Wright:

OK.

00:13:07:00

Interviewer:

OK? What happened?

00:13:09:00

Sonny Wright:

Well, nothing happened. Just a lot of talking, a lot of meetings, and then nothing happened.

Interviewer:

Why?

00:13:16:00

Sonny Wright:

Well, because I think you have to do more than just plan for people for the most part. I think that's what's been happening in this community. You have to plan with people. And I think that the people that you're planning with have to have some resources in order to have some input. And so in my personal opinion, what has to happen is we have to make a greater concentration on economic development and try and, to get the small business people to become a part of this community. I mean, a part of, a real part of this community. And we do that by supporting our small business people and by getting the kind of commitments from the people who have the resources to work with us. And I don't think that the average Black businessman want any more than any other businessman want. But it's just that there's more resources in the broader community than there is existing in the Black community. For example, in 1984, according to a grand jury report, there was six hundred Black businesses in Dade County expected to do twenty-five million dollars in business. There were twenty thousand Latin business in the same report, expected to do seven and a half five billion dollars in business. Well, if you've got seven and a half five billion dollars of, I guess you could say, money flowing through your community, well, obviously, you can do more with that than you can with twenty-five million. So I think that what the whole thing is all about is that in a capitalistic country, since its America, you have to have some capital. You have to deal with capital, deal with making money, deal with—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Sonny Wright:

—having money circulated among the people in the community.

00:14:54:00

Interviewer:

OK. We've rolled out.

Camera crew member #2:

That's a roll out.

Sonny Wright:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

That's fine—

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:14:58:00

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