

Interview with **Eleanor Josaitis**

Date: June 7, 1989

Interviewer: Sheila C. Bernard

Camera Rolls: 2147-2149

Sound Rolls: 269

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 Eleanor Josaitis, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on June 7, 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 #2147]

[sound roll #269]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:00:14:00

Interviewer:

So, could you tell me a little bit about where you living in the mid-sixties?

00:00:18:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

In the mid-sixties, I was living in a community about twenty miles from Detroit called Taylor, Michigan. It's four miles from Metropolitan Airport. And it was a young community,

White. It was three bedroom brick homes, ranch homes with, with family rooms. And we moved out there because my husband had just gotten outta service and we could get a GI mortgage on this home, so that's where we were living. And I was a mother and a housewife and raising five children. And very happy with my life. Very happy with my involvement in the community. I had a lotta friends. I had a lotta neighbors that I loved, and we were raising our children together and, and things seemed to be what you would expect of your life, you know, happy, my husband had a good job.

00:01:10:00

Interviewer:

What was your sense living out there? How did your neighbors see the people in the city? There were, there was a lot of moving out of the city, especially White people.

00:01:16:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

There was a lot of movement out of the city at that time because expressways were being built, because new homes were being built, because large numbers of new homes were being built in the suburban communities at that time, and because of the number of people that were coming back from the service. That's where you could go to get, get a home and get a starter home. But my husband and I both grew up in the city, we lived across the street from one another for 16 years, so the city was very much a part of, of who we were and what our life was like. But the, the sixties and the struggle with the civil rights movement was very, very disturbing, and you could not sit in your living room and watch television and not be very much aware of what was happening in the world around us.

00:02:04:00

Interviewer:

OK, hang on a sec. Stop. That was great. Can you, I wanna ask you about—

[cut]

00:02:09:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:02:12:00

Interviewer:

So, if you could just tell me about the sense before anything is happening in the cities, but what it was like and what your sense was living in the White community.

00:02:19:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

Living in the White community during the sixties, to me, my remembrance of it was that things in the, in the community were fine. We were all raising our children and things were, were wonderful with our little part of the real estate. But when you turned on television and you saw what was going on across the rest of the country, the conversations then became very heated conversations because people would be talking about what they saw on television last night, or what was goin' on, or what was Dr. King all about, or what was this movement with the Black Panthers and what were these new expressions. So, there began to be an anger and the conversations became more and more heated, and there was more confrontations amongst people who thought they had exactly the same values and had the same point of view and were raising their children the same way. So, the, the conversations were loud and the talk was confused talk, talk—a lotta hatred, a lot of what's happening and why are people doing this and don't they know what their place is, and a lotta name-calling, and a lotta very derogatory name-calling. And just a lot of people who were, who were frustrated, who didn't understand what was going on, who didn't care to understand what was goin' on, who just cared to put it down and stop it in any way. Didn't wanna be a part of it but somehow felt that just by their own who they were in their anger that they could bring some sort of, make sense outta this and, and what do these folks think they're doing. So, there—

00:03:54:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop for a sec. OK, cut. That was, it was, that's a good answer. Let me ask you again the same thing.

[cut]

00:03:59:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Hit it.

[slate]

00:04:01:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, you, you were watching the civil rights movement and you were also watching the cities going up.

00:04:06:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

Watching the cities going up and watching the civil rights movement unfold and watching the anger and, and having it all brought to your living room, you had two choices. You could either watch it and feel some sort of empathy and feel the confusion and wonder what you could do about it, or you could watch it and completely ignore it, turn your back and pretend that it didn't exist at all. And I think in the suburbs where I was living at the time, both of those things were happening. But I can remember in, in the early sixties being invited to a meeting of the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, who was coming over to the Taylor Library to give a talk that night. And in, in going over there, carrying my little placard and walking around the library, opposed to the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, but that was not out of the ordinary. I mean the, the, I have to keep coming back to the word confusion because I think that's the word that summarizes it for me the more than anything else, confusion. What are we supposed to be feeling? But at the same time, I was fortunate because Father Cunningham was a weekend pastor of our parish, which was St. Alfred's Parish in Taylor, and he would come out there every weekend to preach. And I was so taken back by his ability to articulate what was going on through the Gospels, if you will, and articulate the, the nonviolent movement of a Dr. King and preach the sermon and kind of make sense out of what was going on but also translate it in a way that made you compelled to listen and to respond to it. So, when—

00:05:50:00

Interviewer:

All right, let's stop. I'm sorry, you can finish if you want to.

00:05:53:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

I just wanna finish the thought because when he—

[cut]

00:05:55:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Hit it.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:05:57:00

Interviewer:

So, you would have people in your home to talk about what?

00:06:01:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

Father Cunningham, because of his ability to speak from the pulpit, intrigued me. I would invite him back to our home after mass on Sunday. I would go up and down the block and get all the neighbors to come in, and we would discuss what was going on in the civil rights movement, and we would discuss—

00:06:17:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop for one second. Stop for a second. I just need, we, we, we're not gonna [unintelligible] who Father Cunningham is.

00:06:21:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

OK, I'll leave it out.

[cut]

00:06:22:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:06:25:00

Interviewer:

So, you were trying to get your neighbors to—

00:06:27:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

Father Cunningham was the weekend pastor and when he would finish the sermon, I would invite him over to our house and then I would get the neighborhood to come in and talk. And the purpose of getting everybody to talk was to try to understand what was going on. And the, the confusion, again, was unreal.

00:06:49:00

Interviewer:

Remember any specifics?

00:06:53:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

Name-calling. People who had no reason to ever come in contact with a Black person in their life didn't wanna be bothered with this movement, didn't understand it, didn't want to understand it, wanted it to go away and thought by turning their head that it would just disappear. And—

00:07:13:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about the moment when you decided, you tell me about this moment that really changed you.

00:07:19:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

I had a moment happening in my life that I hope I never forget, and what's called a significant emotional event. I was sitting in my living room watching television and watching the Nuremberg trial and being taken up and caught up with the emotion of that trial, and having the television series interrupted long enough to show me the Selma, Alabama march when they, when the cameras took me into that march and showed the police horses riding through the crowds with the cattle prodders knocking people over and listening to people scream, and seeing people fall, and seeing the troops come through. And I remember sitting there what seemed to be hours saying to myself, What is the difference between Nazi Germany and the United States of America? What would I have done if I'd lived in Germany? Would I have tried to stop it in any way? Would I have been involved? Or would I have turned my head? And then asking myself, What am I doing now? Am I doing all that I should do? Should I be doing more? What should I be doing, and what can I do?

00:08:27:00

Interviewer:

And when the riot happened in Detroit, how did this all [unintelligible]?

Eleanor Josaitis:

It, it all came into place for me when the riot in, in the '67—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Can we start over again?

Interviewer:

Sure.

Camera Crew Member #1:

I was, I was moving out when she started to answer.

Interviewer:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Go ahead.

00:08:38:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

In the, when the riot hit in 1967, I was at Sacred Heart Seminary for mass on that Sunday and remember looking out the window and seeing the smoke and seeing the police cars and hearing the sirens and hearing all the confusion and being told, Get outta the city, get back, hurry up and get back into your own community. And my husband and I had been down there with our children, and we went back to Taylor and I called back to Sacred Heart Seminary on the telephone and spoke with Father Cunningham and he interpreted what was going on for me. The following day my next door neighbor and I went down and walked the streets to see for ourself what was going on. First time in my life that my husband has ever been upset with me, and when I got back home he kept saying, "Eleanor, do you know what you're doing?" Because of the worry, and because of the fear, and because of the television communication that was, was just putting it all before our eyes.

00:09:39:00

Interviewer:

What was, what was the feeling in the suburbs?

00:09:41:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

The feeling in the suburbs—

00:09:41:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry [unintelligible]—

Camera Crew Member #1:

We're gonna roll out here.

Interviewer:

OK. Let's stop for a second.

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #2148]

00:09:48:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:09:51:00

Interviewer:

So, what was the sense from television of what was happening in the city?

Eleanor Josaitis:

The sense—watching television in the riot of '67 was—

Interviewer:

OK, you don't need to say riot of '67. We already, it's happening. So, just watching television.

00:10:05:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

Watching television showed pictures of people in the street, it showed burning, it showed buildings on fire, it showed total confusion, it showed tanks coming into the city, it showed troops, it showed a, showed people looting. ***It looked like a war-torn zone. That's all you could think of was, my god this is twenty miles from where I live and it's, they've dropped a bomb. That was what you saw on television. And what you heard in the community was, Why are they doing this? Why are they doing this?*** and, They don't know what they're doing. My god, look what's happening. And just—

00:10:50:00

Interviewer:

But I got a sense talking to you yesterday it was more than that, was the sense that it was getting bigger and the next step was gonna be Taylor, it was gonna be taking over.

00:10:58:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

When it went on and it didn't stop that first Sunday and it wasn't over right away and the troops started to come in and there was more and more conversation, then there became a fear in the community that it was going to spread and it was going to come out and Taylor was going to be the next place that would be riot—rioting would take place, or Dearborn, or someplace else. *So, the talk in the neighborhood was, we have to stock our basement with food, that's the first thing we have to do. We must go over to Dearborn and take pistol practice lessons. When do we wanna sit-sign up for the vigilante? When do you wanna go and stand at the overpass on Telegraph Road and wait for all the Black folks to come out from the city and riot in our community? And there was so much fear that that was gonna take place* that there seemed to me to be a sense of, of almost fear and hopelessness, *that it was gonna come so we better be prepared for it.* And that's certainly what I was experiencing. And again, the, the negative comments about people and the name-calling and "animal" was the, was the favorite term.

00:12:11:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut. OK, I wanna ask you—

[cut]

00:12:17:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:12:20:00

Interviewer:

So, what was your response to what was happening?

00:12:22:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

My response to what I was seeing on television and what I was reading in the newspaper was not one of fear. It was one of, how can I be part of this? What can I do? How can I demonstrate that this is wrong and that I want to be part of the change? So, immediately I was asking myself, What can I do? And joining again with Father Cunningham, my friend and, and pastor of my church, and saying, What can we do together? But I, [pause] the frustration was, how do we bring some sort of sense and some sort of calm to this? How can I get my neighbors and my family and my White friends to understand the, the, the anger and the fear and the frustration of Black people who are saying to all of us, Look America, I'm holding up a mirror, look at it, see my pain, see my frustration? And my desire was just to say, Can't we come together? Can't we figure out how to understand one another because we, we seem to be so different?

00:13:35:00

Interviewer:

So, tangibly, what did you do?

Camera Crew Member #1:

I'm sorry, Sheila.

Interviewer:

Oh, OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

I, I have my batteries..

Interviewer:

Is the last take OK?

[beep]

[cut]

00:13:44:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:13:47:00

Interviewer:

OK, so I'm looking for real life now, what you did, where you went, that you got food and clothes together, that kind of thing.

00:13:56:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

The following day, my response was, what can I do? So, I called a lot of friends and called people that I knew out in the area and asked if we could collect canned goods and clothing and whatever was needed, because that's what I was hearing was needed on television, and send some truck loads and—of clothing and food down to Sacred Heart Seminary where it was distributed, and did whatever I could at the time. Again, in an effort to show my understanding of what was going on and accepting the invitation of a Dr. King, who I thought was saying, Come and get involved.

00:14:41:00

Interviewer:

Well, tell, let's, let's move ahead to, to your moving back into the city and the, and the, the price you paid in terms of what you had to leave. Actually, cut for a second.

[cut]

Interviewer:

I don't need you to name specific people and I don't need, you know—

[beep]

[cut]

00:14:53:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker. [clears throat]

[slate]

00:14:55:00

Interviewer:

So, when it was over, what, what did you do?

00:14:58:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

When the riots were over and people were gathering around trying to figure out when the Black folks were going to come across Telegraph Road, and when the riot's gonna take place in the suburbs, my desire was to move back into the city. My husband and I—

00:15:13:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, stop for a second. You know what might be a, a better way to get into this? Well, you had, no, no—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

[beep]

[cut]

00:15:18:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:15:21:00

Interviewer:

OK, so when it's over with what—

00:15:23:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

When the riots in '67 were over, *there began to be a feeling that '68 was going to be a very hot summer*. And people in the suburbs began to start the talk of fear again, and start the talk of, What are we gonna do and how are we gonna brace ourselves? My reaction was exactly the opposite. My reaction was, let us begin to bring some sorta change. So, my husband and I sold our home and moved back into the city of Detroit. I wanted to live in an integrated neighborhood. I wanted my children to be raised in an integrated neighborhood. And I wanted to be part of the ongoing struggle. We didn't do that without paying a price for it. We paid a price from our neighbors who thought that we were making a tragic mistake; how could we possibly take five little children and move into an area that, just the year before that, they were rioting two blocks away? Family who loved us dearly couldn't understand why we would wanna subject ourselves to that. There was talk of, somebody oughta hire an attorney and take our children away from us. There was talk of, I'll never talk to you again. There was talk of, maybe you oughta use another name. There was just talk of, I don't know what you're doing, but it's wrong and you oughta think about it, and we don't wanna have anything more to do, do with you. And I think that if I look back on it now, I would say that it was fear. Fear for my husband and myself, fear for five little children. But to me it was exactly what needed to be done. If I was going to teach my five children that hatred was wrong and to hate somebody be-because of the color of their skin could not be tolerated and was exactly the opposite of what it meant to love your neighbor, then I had to show them by my example and by teaching them to live in an integrated neighborhood. And I was never gonna ask anybody to do anything that I myself wouldn't do.

00:17:32:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut. That's a nice answer.

[beep]

[cut]

00:17:37:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:17:39:00

Interviewer:

OK, so after you moved back into the city, what did—

Eleanor Josaitis:

After we moved back into the city, Focus Hope began to grow and our role—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, you need to say at least what Focus Hope is.

Eleanor Josaitis:

Want me to start over?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

00:17:52:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

After we moved back into the city and Focus Hope, the organization that I was involved with and cofounded with Father Cunningham, began to take our message of, of working together, Black and White people together, to anybody that would listen to us. We took it into the pulpits, we had home meetings afterwards where we would have the church community open up their homes and bring Black and White people together to talk. And the reaction that we were getting is one of acceptance, one of, hurray, I'm glad we finally talk, one of trying to understand one another, and again, the opposite of that which is, don't bring your message out here to the suburbs, I don't wanna hear it, I don't wanna be a part of anything you're talkin' about, and let—keep the riots there and I don't have to be a part of it. And being asked to leave places and being very confused by that and more than frustrated by it. Again, I have to go back to Dr. King and how difficult it must've been for him to be constantly confronted with the hatred and the, and the violence and the reaction, and experiencing just some of that myself and wrestling with it and saying, How do you deal with it? How do you forgive? How do you move forward? But—

00:19:16:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

Eleanor Josaitis:

That—

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Eleanor Josaitis:

—answer?

Interviewer:

Yeah. When the Kerner Commission came out—

[beep]

[cut]

00:19:22:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:19:24:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, if you could tell me about the relief that you organized.

00:19:28:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

The day after the riot, the call went out for clothing and food and things that were needed to help those that, in that torn part of the city. I came back home to Taylor and made as many telephone calls, and I called everybody and everybody's Aunt Martha in order to see if I could collect some food and some clothing, and sent about two yar—large trucks back into the city. But, I mean, I made a lot of telephone calls and called a lotta people. So, there were good-willed people that wanted to contribute and many of 'em just wanted to be invited and wanted to do whatever anybody asked them to do. And, of course, you got as many no's, I don't want any part of it, as we did, but I certainly called as many people as I could call to ask to, to help. And we were able to send the food and the clothing down, and it was definitely appreciated.

00:20:22:00

Interviewer:

Great. OK, cut. Thank you so much.

Eleanor Josaitis:

OK?

Interviewer:

Yes.

Eleanor Josaitis:

Thank you.

Interviewer:

We just need to sit still for 30 sec—

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #2149]

00:20:28:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:20:30:00

Interviewer:

So, if you could talk about people arming themselves.

00:20:33:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

The, the following summer, after the '67 riot, people thought that Black people were going to riot again, and what they were fearful of is that they would come from the city, move out into the suburbs and we would have a repeat of what we had. So, everybody was calling it the Hot Summer. [missing footage] And they were preparing for the riot of '68. So, the, the talk in the suburbs was, Buy a gun, stock your basement with food, and when did you wanna join the vigilante group. And the vig-vigilante groups were dividing themselves up so that they would take their turn standing at the overpass on the Telegraph Road, for example, and watching when all the Black folks were gonna be coming across the borderline. So, gun buying increased. It was not unusual to be asked if you wanted to go over to Dearborn, which was a suburb, and take pistol practice lessons and to be part of this movement that was gonna stop the folks that were comin' out from the city.

00:21:34:00

Interviewer:

So, during '67, though, before the fear of '68, what's happening in '67 among the White community? What's your—

00:21:39:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

One, in '67 the, the White community is, is fearful because they don't understand it, but it's still twenty miles away. It's not like it's gonna happen immediately, like it's gonna flow out from the city and it's gonna go. But after, after '67, as we got closer to '6—

00:21:58:00

Interviewer:

[unintelligible] but while you're watching on the news in '67 and it's going on day after day, wasn't there a fear that—

00:22:04:00

Eleanor Josaitis:

There, there was not the fear that it was gonna come into the all-White community twenty miles away.

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

Eleanor Josaitis:

That somehow we could stop that, or the people in the suburbs would stop it. That there, there, the city was a Black city, if you will, and there were more Black people there so the rioting was gonna take place right in the city. The—I think in '68 it was more the feeling of retaliation that we now have to go into the communities where all the White people are and we have to show our power, and Black Power was the sign and the symbol and, and carried the fear further. But in '67 I don't think it was the fear that it's going to hit my neighborhood right now, because I'm twenty miles away. But surely in '68 that was the talk and that, again, was the fear then. Now we're gonna go to all the White communities.

00:22:57:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut. Great. Thank you very much.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:23:04:00

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