Interview with **Dewey Knight**
Date: March 21, 1989
Interviewer: Madison Davis Lacy, Jr.
Camera Rolls: 1064-1066
Sound Rolls: 127
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 #1064]
[sound roll #127]

00:00:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

Anytime [inaudible]

00:00:22:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about Overtown in its heyday.

00:00:26:00

Dewey Knight:

Overtown in its heyday was a, a real positive thing to see. It was a community. It was a place where people came together around common factors. The revival, businesses of all sorts, furniture stores—

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible] cut—

[cut]

00:00:44:00

Camera crew member #2:

Team A.

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

Camera crew member #2:

You can go.

Camera crew member #1:

Anytime.

00:00:50:00

Interviewer:

Overtown.

Interviewer:

00:00:52:00

Dewey Knight:

Overtown was a viable community in which people had common causes and related to each other. There was economic development, businesses, furniture stores, clothing stores, a soda water bottling company. The professionals, doctors, lawyers, other professionals were there. It was a pla—was a focal point for Black people. Segregation, of course, contributed to that, but segregation caused it to be a community where people had a real sense of community. Youngsters were considered youngsters of the community so that

everyone felt some responsibility for youngsters. It was said once by a juvenile court judge that there's no such thing as a dependent Black child in Dade County, because the community will take care of 'em, and it's literally true that nobody or very few people suffered. We saw, however, some significant changes that came about, number one, because of the aspirations of Black people; but more importantly, negative changes that came about because of what was supposed to be something good: something called urban renewal, which ended up being urban removal, and ***I-95 which was basically developed to get people from suburbia downtown and, in the process, destroyed Overtown and that sense of community.*** I say that, because what did it do? It meant, it meant that people had to move. They were given very little for their property. There was no planned movement, and people had to do the best they could. And as a result of that, the, some landlords exploited that. Liberty City, which had basically, becoming Brownsville, an area for upward mobility where you could buy a lot and work weekends and build a house***, all of a sudden, you saw concrete apartment houses coming up—what we called concrete monsters simply because the, the demand,*** because of the pushout for Overtown ***was for space.*** These were small places that did not accommodate people. It was overcrowding areas. There was no zoning controls to ensure—these are single family residence, and next to it you had all kind of houses, and it really literally destroyed what was the major Black community in this area. And you never saw the redevelopment of that sense of community, in my estimation, that I was informed of and saw the end of Overtown.

00:03:38:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

[cut]

[camera roll #1065]

00:03:39:00

[slate]

Interviewer:

Where did people go who were displaced?

00:03:45:00

Dewey Knight:

Many of them moved to Liberty City and to Brownsville, another Black subdivision. We still had very rigid segregation. Subsequently, however, the areas immediately adjoining Brownsville and Liberty City, which were predominantly White—which were all-White—

were beginning to open up as real estate speculators got in. And because people did have moneys for down payment, so you saw areas like the area I live in, Edison Center, and these places open up, but initially it was into Liberty City, Brownsville, and overcrowding that area. Then, you have some of the other single-family areas that were predominantly White begin to open up in the northwest section. It did not happen, however, out of—without resistance, and there was a great deal of trauma for the early families that integrated those areas, which subsequently have become all-Black.

00:04:48:00

Interviewer:

Cut. [clears throat]

[cut]

00:04:50:00

[slate]

Interviewer:

After McDuffie was killed and those four officers went on trial, what was your expectation for the outcome of that trial?

00:05:02:00

Dewey Knight:

My expectation, as was the expectation of everyone in the Black community, was that those men would be convicted of killing McDuffie. To us, the evidence appeared to be overwhelming that they were responsible for the death of McDuffie and should have been dealt with accordingly.

00:05:25:00

Interviewer:

Why were the riots that happened so violent?

00:05:29:00

Dewey Knight:

The riots were violent, I think, because there was, number one, a very strong feeling that it was a contrived misjustice, that people didn't really do their best to try to convict these

people—and that this was an attack on all of us. There also—some speculate it might have been some planned and organized activity related to the reaction. You had the, the normal things that you have of breaking in stores, but you also had some very powerful destructive a-devices being used, which no one has really explained, to this point, to my satisfaction, so that the, the reaction was one of great, great anger and dissatisfaction about the McDuffie decision; and it was also, some feel, a, a, an opportunity for some planned destructive activity.

00:06:42:00

Interviewer:

There was a lot of money into this community after the riots, to try and rebuild things. What happened to it?

00:06:48:00

Dewey Knight:

Well, let—we need to be clear. Number one, there was a lot of money promised, over eighty hundred million dollars. Didn't nearly that much money get here. President Carter and others had promised the money. The money that came to this community from the federal government, and even the money from the state, was basically sent to rebuild or refurbish the businesses that had been destroyed. Ninety-five, 98 percent of the businesses that were destroyed were Black, were White businesses. They were businesses like Spot Lee Electric Company and storehouses, warehouses; large, White stores. And those were the people who maintain appropriate books, maintain inventory. I suspect some inflated inventory, but when the money was flowing down, those people were reimbursed—at least, for a substantial amount of that. I think, too, that those people were waiting to move anyway, so this was an opportunity, really, to get that money and move west of the airport, where business was moving at that time. What was left, then? The money that was supposed to come to the Black community to not only help the businesses that may have been hurt by the riot, but to help to rebuild some economic development, seems to have gotten retarded in the bureaucracy. That's a kind of funny statement, but people were told, Come to this office and apply for some money, and bring your last five CPA statements and your last statements from the internal auditor and external auditor, and, Just the fact that you have been operating a business successfully for thirty years is not enough. And some very clever, and from the private-sector side, some very smart and clever MBA and CPA types come over, Well, I don't see that you have this, and I don't see that you have that, and therefore you are not qualified, much like what happened to us with the SBA. So, so the moneys that did flow here went to people, to the White businesses that were burned out, in many instances. Very little of it seeped down to businesses in the Black community, and that was a substantial complaint. The other complaint was that—and it's a valid complaint—that much of the money that did come down to neighborhood organizations, or to neighborhood economic development organizations, was so tied in bureaucracy that nothing really happened with the

businesses except that salaries for people went on and on. So, the impact on—the positive impact on the Black community, of that money, was very limited.

00:10:02:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about political life here for Blacks in Miami. Why are people so powerless?

00:10:08:00

Dewey Knight:

Well, I think that we have to be very careful about what our perception is of power. I don't think that Black people are as powerless as it appeared. We are not as economic—we get compared economically to the White community, and we get compared to the Cuban community, people who are the exception. They didn't come here after a potato famine, famine. They came here because they were in power and were kicked out, and these were people who had operated viable businesses, had long training, et cetera, et cetera. And yet, when you compare us, we had the reverse. We have suffered with segregation and all that other stuff. One says, Well, what does that matter? It matters because the economic aspects of life in this country are most important, and if you don't control some of the pie—for an example: even today, it's estimated that a dollar coming to the Black community stays here one-and-a-half to two times. A dollar going to the Cuban community stays seven to fifteen times. So you don't really have that economic viability. On the other hand, you shouldn't be misled into thinking that, that there has not been significant movement in this community for Blacks. You can—this community was one of the first to get an approved Black set-aside program, approved by the Supreme Court, and not a minority set-aside, but a Black set-aside program, which—and the county, and the city, and the board of public [unintelligible]and certainly which is producing several hundred million dollars a year with Black companies and with, with Black employment. That, again, does not build in the way that it that, that the dollar amount sounds. We, while we have limited representation on the political bodies—we have one county commissioner; we have one city commissioner—these people are elected county-wide and are in position to do trading with others, so that there has been, there is some significant power. We have lost our, some of our power position, I would—because we are not a, a two-ethnic community; we are a tri-ethnic community. And what the direction now is to try to work out accommodations within that tri-ethnicity. In other words, building strategies to, to continue to move forward and to gain things, recognizing that the pie is split different ways.

00:13:15:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible]

[cut]

00:13:18:00

[slate]

Interviewer:

Where were you when the McDuffie decision was made?

00:13:25:00

Dewey Knight:

I was at the Holiday Inn on Biscayne Boulevard, where a, a group of Black leaders was meeting, had been meeting since earlier that morning to discuss the, the actions we needed to take, regardless of how the decision went. There was a great speculation, seen, having seen television reports of the trial, that it was, that there's a possibility these men were not going to be convicted, and we were trying to strategize to see how we could help this community to, to work through that in case it was a negative, and even if he, they were convicted. Right near the end of the meeting, well, it was really around four o'clock and we hadn't really formalized things. I got a call from the then-county manager who says that, Got bad news for you, that the McDuffie, the policemen were acquitted. Right away, when I tell the group, that kind of broke up the strategy, because everybody's scrambling, then, to determine what they were going to do. I was told to come to the command post, which was at the central police headquarters, and I, I was in my car. I went over to the, to the shop to get a county car. They didn't have any unmarked cars, so I took a marked car like an idiot, and I asked which was the best route to get to the command post to avoid the confrontation with the crowds. They said 95th Street because there was shooting on 54th, 62nd, 79th—I was going down 95th Street, and in front of some apartments close to 17th Avenue, all of a sudden the county car is being shot at. I kind of hit the gas and sped up. Didn't hit the car, but it was really a frightening situation. I get to the command post, and everybody is—the police are telling me, You got to be crazy for driving a marked county car through any of the areas. We went to the command post. At this time, the N-NAACP and several other organizations had called for a rally on the Metro Justice Building's steps, and the radio, local Black radio stations were really playing it up for everybody to go to the rally,—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Dewey Knight:

—but that rally—OK—

Camera crew member #1:

That's rollout.

Camera crew member #2:

[inaudible] five.

[cut]

[camera roll #1066]

00:16:01:00

[slate]

Interviewer:

Tell me something about the underclass. How do you look upon it and what, what do we do about it? Describe the underclass.

00:16:14:00

Dewey Knight:

I think, in order to describe an underclass, I have to go back to our, what I initially started talking about. Open—when, as Overtown, as I viewed it and heard about it, was a place where there literally was no class, because everyone was there together. Segregation required you be there, and people were treated as people—of course there had to be some—as people were able to become mobile and to move out, as people moved to Liberty City and Brownsville to build their little, buy their lots and build their little houses, and then as we had the great displacement of, of urban removal and the expressway, the people that were left were basically youngsters, mothers with children who couldn't get out, old people who couldn't get out, men and women with problems who couldn't get out. Alcoholism, subsequently, drugs. Some carried over with the, the immigrants who could not master the language or master the, the cultural functioning, so it was really the bottom rung on the ladder that was left. If there's—and we've seen a growing underclass everywhere, but Overtown is a—that does not mean that the, that there aren't people and were not people there who stayed because they wanted to stay, but they were very limited. And that does not mean that these people didn't have great potential, but they were ignored because the, the, ***the upward mobility types had gone. When everyone was there, when the professionals were there and everybody, things moved up. It benefitted everybody. And as a consequence, the housing goes down. The streets go down. There are very few businesses.*** There are

police problems. And when I say police problems with stealing and that kind of thing. And as a consequence, the people that are left are not only limited in their mobility, but they're limited in their functioning, too. And often too, while we talk a lot about doing something about it, we, it is caught up in many, many plans. The other thing that has, that has limited what has happened to Overtown, at least in my estimation, is the fact that most people tend to relate every Black community in the same way. So when we say Overtown, people think you're talking about Liberty City and Brownsville and Coconut Grove. And when solutions begin to, to arrive, we say, We want to do something about Overtown, and then what do we do? We immediately do something about Overtow, about Overtown by moving programs into Liberty City and Brownsville and Coconut Grove, and Overtown gets left out. What we're trying to do this time—and I'm working on a committee to try to—is to look at Overtown as an independent entity that needs independent attention, and try to find some, some doable deeds and some doable solutions and some doable actions for Overtown, and not just to say, Overtown needs it, but Liberty City has more people, so let's do it there.

00:19:49:00

Interviewer:

Back to the riots, one more question: how did government function during the course of the riots?

00:19:55:00

Dewey Knight:

Well, you had the essential governmental services: police, fire, hospitals, health. We had, we had a large cadre of community relations people who, some worked for government; some volunteered for government who were in the picture.

00:20:17:00

Interviewer:

Did it function well?

00:20:18:00

Dewey Knight:

They functioned well after having made some deliberate decisions as to how they were going to function. It was a deliberate decision made that we had better sacrifice property to save lives and to save injuries so that, while that was not a, a popular decision, really, because people outside of the area and people downtown, they came here and said, you know, You're the police! Get the forces in there! Call the national guard! Wipe them out! But a deliberate

decision was made to forego the property to save lives, and I think it was the right decision to do.

00:20:58:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

Camera crew member #1:

Cut?

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Camera crew member #2:

Stopping down.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:21:03:00