

Interview with **Emma Darnell**

Date: October 27, 1988

Interviewer: Jacqueline Shearer

Camera Rolls: 4038-4040

Sound Rolls: 415

Team: D

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

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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 #4038]

[sound roll #415]

00:00:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:00:17:00

Interviewer:

OK, Ms. Darnell. In March 1974, Maynard Jackson named you commissioner of Administrative Services. What was your area of responsibility, and how did you feel about being named to your new post?

00:00:30:00

Emma Darnell:

My area of responsibility included the city's entire support operation in 1974 when Maynard Jackson appointed me to serve as commissioner of the Department of Administrative Services. And when I say the support operation, I'm talking about a purchasing operation of 100 million dollars. A personnel operation involving 8,000 employees. General services,

records management, and all the traditional functions and components of a business organization that have to do with supporting the service departments. I felt extremely excited. But as I look back, I, I think that the emotion that I felt more than any other was some feeling of duty and responsibility. Frankly, it was really just another assignment. Because in those days, in the administration of the first Black mayor of the city of Atlanta, I think all of us were just caught up with the overall purpose and mission which was to do a good job and to, for the first time, change the government in a way that would be a benefit to those who had been excluded up until that time.

00:01:54:00

Interviewer:

Could you speak about the development of the affirmative action program? What was your share in that?

00:01:58:00

Emma Darnell:

Affirmative action program for the city of Atlanta, which we developed under the direction of Mayor Jackson in 1974, actually started with that first conference that I held with the mayor the day that I was appointed. He said only one thing to me that day with respect to what he wanted done. He said words to this effect – Emma, I want Black people brought into this government. I want Black people to have an opportunity to participate in not only the personnel operation with jobs but in the, in the purchasing and the procurement operation. And of course this was new. I had served in the administration of the outgoing mayor, Samuel Massell, who was the first mayor who hit hard on affirmative action with respect to jobs. In fact most people don't understand that really in terms of quotas, Sam Massell had higher quotas than Maynard Jackson because he said fifty percent of all department heads should be a minority, should be Blacks. But in any case, the, the function of affirmative action was...affirmative action was a strategy. We looked at it primarily as a goal. And the goal was to stop the historic practice in the government of the City of Atlanta of excluding people from jobs, meaningful jobs, excluding people from contracts and opportunities to participate in the procurement operation for no other reason than the color of their skin. That was the purpose of affirmative action. It had no other meaning except that.

00:03:46:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK [inaudible]

Interviewer:

So who—

[cut]

00:03:49:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Interviewer:

So—

00:03:52:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Just a second, Jackie. Yes, you're fine.

00:03:56:00

Interviewer:

How did you execute your authority? What were you able to accomplish?

00:04:00:00

Emma Darnell:

The authority which we exercised in the implementation of the city's policy regarding affirmative action was based upon law. The city council of Atlanta, under the leadership of Morris Finley, who is still a member of city council, adopted an ordinance which said basically that if you do business with the city of Atlanta, it is necessary that you demonstrate objectively that you hire, train, and promote qualified minorities and women. It was an ordinance that for the first time involved more than a policy statement, which we had for many years. The ordinance said that without a demonstration objectively to the satisfaction of the city and the procedures were outlined that the prospective vendor or contractor did not discriminate against minorities, that of course no contracts would be let. We had the same kind of policy and procedure with respect to inside the government. Department heads were required to demonstrate that they had taken positive steps to eliminate patterns of

discrimination within their departments. If they did not then the sanctions which normally follow in the supervision of performance occurred. The mayor adopted a very strong position on this. And of course as commissioner of administration, we enforced it.

00:05:36:00

Interviewer:

Cut. OK.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:05:42:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Jackie.

00:05:44:00

Interviewer:

So, how did you as commissioner of Administrative Services execute this policy of affirmative action?

00:05:50:00

Emma Darnell:

Once it was clear to me that it was the policy of the mayor and the city council of Atlanta that we take positive steps not to discuss discrimination and to talk about it but to eliminate and eradicate discrimination from the government, and to open up the government so that every person qualified would have an opportunity to participate I really began to take the kind of steps that you would normally take in a business organization when you have goals to accomplish. First, I tried to find the, the strongest most competent persons that were available to provide leadership in both the contract compliance area, as well as in the affirmative action area. We did so. We were very fortunate in identifying...it happened to have been women in both instances. Women who had the technical knowledge and had the personal integrity necessary in order to do this work. This was not your usual run of the mill bureaucratic task. It required not only a knowledge of the law, but it required a, as I've indicated earlier, the

kind of integrity that was necessary in order to not having collected the data, having enough guts and courage to make a decision on the basis of the data. Then the next thing that we did in order to make this program successful was we established and maintained very strong linkages with the community. It is extremely important in the implementation of policy of this kind that the community, and yes, the Black community, is, is, is knowledgeable about what is being done, how it's going to be done. I think we make a mistake in the implementation of...and we did mistakes during this period. In the implementation of these policies by assuming, you know, a paternalistic attitude which says we know, we know what we're doing, and we'll tell them later what we're doing. I spoke at thirty-two churches a year. I spoke at twenty high schools a year. I spoke to Morehouse and Nohouse. I spoke to White and Black, business and nonbusiness segments of the community. Because *we were for all practical purposes engaged in a revolution. We knew that that's what it was. It was still the civil rights revolution. Those persons during the '60s laid down their lives and died to put us into these positions of power. We did not consider these positions of power to be ends in and of themselves.* We were to continue the revolution until we had accomplished the goal. So, the steps that we took were many of them the kinds of sound management steps that are taken in order to accomplish a task. But there were political tasks that had to be done. People have to know what you're doing and how you're doing it. And that consumed a large amount of my own personal time.

00:09:01:00

Interviewer:

How and why did you stir up so much controversy?

00:09:05:00

Emma Darnell:

Well, I stirred up controversy for two reasons. Number one, we were dealing with a problem that was a...one that carried with it a lot of emotional feeling. That's still true. When, when, *when you begin to move in public policy in areas that involve race, you can expect a great deal of emotion.* And some of the emotion is fear. We underestimated I might add how controversial these practices would be. We were extremely naïve. And one of the things that made this whole program so controversial was that issues involving race in the South and indeed throughout the nation in 1974 still created very, very strong feelings. Another reason that I think that I became very controversial is because of my own style. Number one, I was Black. Number two, female. Well, both. I was Black and female. And also I...my style is not exactly one of a, of a shrinking violet. I, I, I'm what some people call assertive. I have very strong convictions, and I express them in a very strong way. In fact my conduct and my style was very different from what people really expected from women in a leadership position.

00:10:44:00

Interviewer:

How did White businessmen react to you? Especially since you could say yay or nay.

00:10:48:00

Emma Darnell:

White businessmen reacted to me and to the program which became identified by me with a great deal of fear and alarm. First of all, because they operate in an environment that is controlled by men. OK? So, they had a lot of problems with dealing with a woman as an equal. It was very interesting the kinds of things that they would leak to the—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Emma Darnell:

—press. It was a pattern that many women during the movement of the '70s—

00:11:21:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. We'll have to continue this. We just ran out of—

Camera Crew Member #2:

It's a roll out of forty, thirty-eight.

Emma Darnell:

OK.

Interviewer:

It's great.

Emma Darnell:

OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #4039]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Forty, thirty-nine sound roll. I mean camera roll. Fourteen, thirty-nine timecode.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:11:36:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Just a second. OK, Jackie.

00:11:41:00

Interviewer:

OK, so can you tell us about how the mayor made clear what his minority requirements...participation requirements for the airport were?

00:11:49:00

Emma Darnell:

More than two years before the airport expansion occurred, Mayor Jackson made it very clear publicly and privately to representatives of the airlines, to representatives of the architect and engineer, to the general public that the expansion of Hartsville International Airport would involve significant minority participation. He also stated, and this became a rather controversial point, that with respect to the status of existing contracts at the airport, there were no existing contracts and that all contracts for the expansion of the airport would be bid. This of course created a great deal of controversy with respect to the architect and the engineer because we had done business with one architect and one engineer at Atlanta Airport for more than sixteen years. Consistent with that policy statement made by the mayor on numerous occasions to airlines officials and to others, in my shop, we developed the minority participation plan for Atlanta Airport which involved certain numerical goals with respect to employment for all persons who wished to qualify of...as, as contractors for the project. Because the very step of course was to develop the bidder's list. The contract compliance officer determined whether or not a contractor or a vendor met those quantitative requirements. And at that time, the requirement was that a contractor must demonstrate objectively that at least twenty-five percent of the total workforce was minority. We moved into the so-called joint venture concept only because it was very clear that in certain kinds of businesses such as an architectural firm or an engineering firm it would not be possible that the firm would have sufficient time and opportunity to meet those quantitative goals within

the time necessary for bidding. So, the joint venture concept was only developed as a strategy to be used by firms that could not reasonably meet the city's quantitative requirements with respect to employment. It was never our goal to substitute the minority business for the minority worker. We wanted to do both. And of course unfortunately joint venture began to be misunderstood not only in terms of the thrust and purpose of the joint venture process strategy, which was to increase minority employment, but it also began to be a codeword for Emma Darnell and for Maynard Jackson's whole policy of vigorous enforcement of the city's nondiscrimination laws.

00:15:08:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

[slate]

00:15:14:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK Jackie.

00:15:15:00

Interviewer:

So, I'd like you to give us a flavor of the warfare that was being waged around these issues then.

00:15:21:00

Emma Darnell:

Well, the warfare which raged around the city's vigorous enforcement of the law of this country as well as the law of the City of Atlanta during this period really was a surprise. I think that's the first thing that I want to say. I, I know it's very hard looking back now to believe that we were so naïve as to believe that we would be applauded by taking positive steps to go out and, and include rather than exclude American citizens from the government. I can say to you in all fairness we were shocked, and we were surprised not only about the

intensity of the opposition which we received from the business community, certain elements of the business community, and from certain contractors who had become rich at the city's expense, but we also were very much surprised at how devious and how deadly the opposition was. The opposition was expressed primarily through the local newspaper, then I might add under a little different management which began immediately when it was clear, when it was clear that we would not retain the same architect and the same engineer that we had used in Atlanta Airport for more than sixteen years. And I can recall Maynard Jackson having a meeting with the architect, with the engineer, with representatives from Delta Airlines where he said very clearly the contracts, you know, are non-existing. When that became clear then we began to be subjected to the kind of attack in the local newspaper beginning with about mid-1974 that never let up for the most part of the next two and a half years. First the attacks were on the concept of joint venture. Then there were a series of grand jury investigations. There was a grand jury investigation of, and believe it or not, the joint venture. I think that perhaps not in the history of America has a grand jury looked at a strategy of a procurement operation before. Then there was a grand jury investigation by the United States, the federal grand jury. And then there were a series of articles about who is Emma Darnell. A series of articles suggesting that the mayor could not possibly have enough intelligence and integrity to meet the requirements of his office and vigorously enforce the law that was discriminating against Black people. There had to be a Black woman really behind him, pushing him. And of course this is, this has, had been done before in Atlanta. I can recall when Hank Aaron objected to the blatant discrimination which he was experiencing at one time. We opened the paper one morning, and there was his wife's picture on the sports pages saying, Is this the problem? So, that was, that was a consistent pattern. And then it became so ridiculous at one point until I can recall that there was a story one evening in the newspaper made up entirely of sources say, it didn't have a beginning. It didn't have an end. It didn't have any point. It was strictly a personality profile of Emma Darnell.

00:19:08:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

And speed.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:19:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:19:14:00

Interviewer:

There was a lot of Black political success in Atlanta at that time. Is electing Black officials enough?

00:19:22:00

Emma Darnell:

Electing Black officials is not enough unless you elect Black officials who understand why they have been elected. The election of Black officials in Atlanta has clearly been of benefit to Black citizens in Atlanta. However, as the 1974 struggle for equality of opportunity in government, in purchasing, and in employment demonstrated, unless Black leadership is willing to remain steadfast, unless Black leadership is willing to remain accountable, yes, to the ten percent of the White community that helped them get elected but also to the ninety-five percent of the Black community without whom the ten percent would not have been enough, then it will not be enough. What really happens is as it has turned out, during this period I learned and all of us in power learned that being Black and in being in power alone, it's nothing about the color. It's nothing about the genetics. It's nothing about the hair, or the turban, or the beads, or the rhetoric. *What it's about is what's on the inside. You know, have you really been deeply and permanently affected by the blood that has been shed in order for you to sit behind the desk? Do you see Martin Luther King's grave as more than a white sepulcher with a quotation on it? Do you actually feel any sensitivity and responsibility to all of those folk out there in those churches, and those programs who stand up and give you big applause, believing that you stayed on the case? Or are you really in there trying to hold your ground to get your house, get your car, get your BMW, get invited to the right receptions, and be considered a leader?*

00:21:35:00

Interviewer:

Now, I'd like to also hear what you [car horn]—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Just a second. We're not gonna make it, we have to change rolls.

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #4040]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:21:45:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK Jackie.

00:21:47:00

Interviewer:

Atlanta is seen as an economic mecca for Blacks. Do you agree?

00:21:52:00

Emma Darnell:

Atlanta in comparison with other cities in the South and in the North also, maybe with the exception of Chicago, is a leader. But unless you add that qualifying phrase then of course the whole notion that Atlanta is an economic mecca is, is a myth. Atlanta is the second poorest city in the United States. Per capita, there are more poor people in Atlanta than any city except Newark, New Jersey. This surprises even native Atlantans. One out of three children in the city is poor. The fact of the matter is that the progress which Black businesses like other small businesses have been able to make in recent years has really been wiped out within the last eight years. For the first time in our history, you know, the, the rising tide did not pull our boats. And unfortunately most of the votes of the small Black businessman have been left behind. You only need drive down Auburn Avenue and Martin Luther King Drive, what was once called Hunter Street, where Black businesses twenty years ago flourished and see that the whole notion that Atlanta is a place of people, Blacks with money and prosperity, is a total myth. And a myth which in my judgement does us great damage.

00:23:32:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

And speed.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:23:38:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Just a second. OK, Jackie. Want to go in a little tighter, correct?

00:23:42:00

Interviewer:

OK, so I'd like to hear your comments, set in the 1970s, about the limits of Atlanta's economic growth.

00:23:48:00

Emma Darnell:

The limits of our growth during the '70s could best be illustrated by the fact that we had some Black contractors at Atlanta Airport. And at the same time, if you would ride down Auburn Avenue, you would see business after business closed. The, the initiative which we undertook in the '70s to open up the government to minority workers and businessmen led to success for a few. But for the great majority of minority businessmen in Atlanta, our initiatives had no effect at all. [siren] Our unemployment rates were as high before we instituted the affirmative action program as they were afterwards. And of course that is because government alone cannot do the job. We had enormous successes. We saw during the '70s in Atlanta, Blacks moving into positions all over downtown where they had never been before. That's because the city had forced businesses to hire them in order to do business with the city. And now—well, and businesses began to prefer. So, it, it had, we had many successes there. But overall, if you looked at the real economic condition of the average Black person in Atlanta, not the big companies, not the, not those in the clique but

the every day working class Black during this period simply did not see the benefits of what we tried to do.

00:25:45:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

And speed.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:25:52:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Jackie, OK.

00:25:54:00

Interviewer:

OK. What's your assessment of Maynard Jackson as mayor?

00:25:56:00

Emma Darnell:

I believe that Maynard Jackson did something at the beginning of his administration which any effective leader must do. He effectively articulated a vision of what this community should be and that it should be a community of inclusion. Never before in the history of the city had the Black community experienced a mayor who apparently understood their history, their tradition, and their goals, and their aspirations. My criticism of the Jackson administration is that what he started, what he talked about, he didn't do. He did not complete.

00:26:46:00

Interviewer:

Thank you. Cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

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