



Interview with **Geraldine Williams**

Date: October 27, 1988

Interviewer: Louis Massiah

Camera Rolls: 3039-3041

Sound Rolls: 318-319

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.

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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 #3039]

[sound roll #318]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark one.

[slate]

00:00:15:00

Interviewer:

OK. In 1965, what made you think that the time was right to, to elect a Black mayor in Cleveland? What, what, what was the sign? What, what was going on to make you think that was right?

00:00:27:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, at that particular time, we had a little political club called the Nonpartisan Voters League. And Jean Murrell Capers was head of it. She had studied the statistics of Black voting in Cleveland, and she knew that there weren't enough registered Blacks at that particular time to elect a mayor or a public official if it were a three-way vote. And in order for it to be a three-man vote—that is if the candidate did not have to qualify in the primary. You can qualify by going out, getting an extra amount of signatures, and run as an Independent, and you'll be assured of a place on the ballot.

00:01:10:00

Interviewer:

OK, what, what, in terms of the mood of the community and, and mood of Cleveland, what would suggest that a Black man could get elected? 'Cause in a lot of other cities, it was difficult to elect a Black person.

00:01:21:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, in the first place, we had to find a politician that had appeal to—well, we had had Black people elected from Cleveland. Not for, not for the city office, but for state offices, state legislatures, state Senate. So, why couldn't we elect a, and we had had Black councilmen. There were plenty of Black councilmen. There were about nine or ten black councilmen at that particular time.

Interviewer:

Right.

Geraldine Williams

So—

00:01:43:00

Interviewer:

Could you just say that once again? There was a little bit of noise outside.

00:01:46:00

Geraldine Williams:

Oh, we had Black councilmen, about nine or ten Black councilmen. So, if there were enough Black voters to put these councilmen in these wards, we could almost depend on those wards to go for a Black mayor, at least we thought we could. [laughs]

00:02:01:00

Interviewer:

Jumping ahead, we're in '67 now. What did you think a Black mayor could do in Cleveland that a White mayor couldn't, couldn't do? Why was it important to, to elect a Black mayor?

00:02:11:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, we—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Geraldine Williams:

—thought we'd get a fair shake when it came to police relations, and maybe housing, and—

00:02:18:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop. We're just going to have to change—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Do you have a hammer?

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #3040]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Scene thirteen, take two.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Door's open. The door's open.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Stop?

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]. Cut.

Interviewer:

Cut.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Is that gonna bother your shooting?

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

Camera Crew Member #3:

[clears throat]

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

00:02:35:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Scene thirteen, take three.

[slate]

00:02:42:00

Interviewer:

OK. What did you think a Black mayor could do? We're, we're in 1967. What did you think a Black mayor could do? Why was it important in Cleveland to elect a Black mayor?

00:02:53:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, we thought a Back mayor could do as well as some of the White mayors had done, and we certainly thought it would be an improvement in police-citizen relations, because at that time they weren't too good. And we thought maybe he could do something about housing. We thought he would have the interest of the Blacks more at heart, which the White mayors didn't seem to have particularly.

00:03:17:00

Interviewer:

Did you have to sell Carl Stokes to the Black community? Did you have to convince people to vote for, for Carl?

00:03:23:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, certain sections we couldn't sell the politicians in '65, but we had no, no, not much of a problem of selling him to the Black community. But they were used to the name of Stokes. Stokes had run for state legislature on a bedsheets ballot, you know, like seventeen names all in one, and he didn't come in number seventeen. He came in something like ten or eleven. They were used to the name of Stokes. So, they thought it would be nice to have a Black mayor. We all thought so. We'd had one of every other ethnic persuasion. Why not a Black?

00:03:56:00

Interviewer:

OK, what, what was, what were your instructions to the campaign workers when they would, in, in the different districts, when they went out, what would you tell them to, to try to influence people to, to come and see, come out and support Stokes?

Geraldine Williams:

Well, you're registered, and you're voting. He's, he's been a good legislator, and he'd make an excellent mayor, and don't you think it's about time a metropolitan city should have a Black mayor?

Interviewer:

Yeah, could, just once again, and, and could you make sure you reframe the question? Because my, my, my question is gonna be knocked out. So, just say that the campaign workers would go out and, and say whatever. All right, once again. What, what would you tell your campaign workers to do?

00:04:31:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, the campaign workers would go out and ask the people, Wasn't it about time we had a Black mayor? We had Black councilmen, we had Black policemen, we had Black lieutenants in the police department. We had other Black elected officials, so why shouldn't we have a Black mayor?

00:04:49:00

Interviewer:

Great, OK. Now, you talked about the, the politicians in '65. In '67, all right? Let, let's talk about first '65 and then '67.

Geraldine Williams:

Yes.

Interviewer:

How did they, how did they feel about Stokes? What, what was their—

00:05:01:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, they were afraid to come out against Stokes. I mean, come out for Stokes, because they were all pledged to Locher, and they, and they wanted to keep their jobs safe—

Interviewer:

OK, I'm sorry—

Geraldine Williams:

—in '65.

00:05:12:00

Interviewer:

Sorry, cut. Stop.

Geraldine Williams:

We had—

Interviewer:

Let's stop for just one second.

[beep]

[cut]

00:05:18:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

00:05:19:00

Interviewer::

Scene thirteen, take four.

[slate]

Interviewer:

OK. The Black politicians, how did they react to Stokes in '65, and what change did you see in '67?

00:05:30:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, in '65, they thought the whole thing was a joke. They didn't think Carl had a chance, and only one elected official came out for Carl, and that was James Bell in Ward 11. And—but, when the campaign was over with, and Carl only lost by two thousand votes, it convinced the rest of the Black politicians that, yes, he could win. So, we had no trouble whatsoever in getting their support in '67.

00:05:55:00

Interviewer:

OK. Who was the—what, what people made up the, the Stokes campaign in '67? Where, where was the support coming from?

00:06:02:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, in '67 it came from all over. It came from labor, since Carl had demonstrated that he could win. It came from labor, it came from White elected officials, Black elected officials. Oh, all over, and it also came from all over the country. We [laughs] we sent out letters, and flyers, and things to other politicians in other cities and so forth and so on, and we got a lot of money in for the '67 campaign from people all over the United States. Since this was really something different, something new, something momentous, I guess they wanted to get in on the action. And then, we were all idealists. We appealed to all the people that had ideals that politics could really be better, so they sent us money [laughs].

00:06:47:00

Interviewer:

Great. Do you remember the primary night in '67, when Stokes beat Locher. What, what were you doing? What, what—where were you that, that night?

00:06:56:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, I was at headquarters.

Interviewer:

And just [unintelligible]—

Geraldine Williams:

We had a bank of phones going, because we had people at every polling place, and as soon as the vote was counted at the polling place, rather than wait for them to come down to the Board of Elections, we'd have them call in the vote. Because you see, after the vote is counted, tallied at the polling place, they paste, put it on the door. And our people would go up and get the tallies off the door, and they would call it into headquarters. So, we were a few minutes ahead of the count that was going into the Board of Elections. And I was down there on, on the phones helping man the phones.

00:07:31:00

Interviewer:

OK, so when, when did you know that Stokes had won? Do you remember that?

Geraldine Williams:

In '67?

Interviewer:

In '67.

00:07:38:00

Geraldine Williams:

Oh, well, there was a snafu in, in the counting of the vote, and the fellow that worked with me, Big Kenneth McGee says, Well, I'm going to the Board of Elections, because I don't know whether our returns are right or not. And he went to the Board of Elections, and sat down there, and sweated the whole thing through. And I think we knew about 11:30 p.m. that Stokes had won.

00:08:01:00

Interviewer:

OK, were you surprised by the White backlash on the ethnic community? Like, once Stokes had won the primary, the number of people that suddenly came out to, to, to vi-vigorously oppose Stokes, people that thought Locher might've won, win before. Were you surprised by that?

00:08:17:00

Geraldine Williams:

No, and I don't think it was that much of a backlash. They just, they weren't used to the idea of a Black mayor, and they didn't want one, but it wasn't too bad. We had friends on the west side, and people that worked on the west side for us, that were White.

00:08:32:00

Interviewer:

OK, can you talk a little bit about Stokes campaigning on the west Side? What kind of reception would he receive when he was campaigning on the west Side?

00:08:40:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, I only remember distinctly once. He went over there for a debate with Seth Taft at a high school on the west side, and it, you could feel the tension when you walked in there. I mean, that was sort of a hostile crowd, and there weren't too many Blacks. Blacks don't go on the west side too much, or didn't in those days. And Stokes got up and made his little speech, and he introduced racism into the speech, and I'll never forget Taft saying, Well, well, well. Look who has brought racism into the thing, and if you don't elect Carl Stokes, I guess you're a racist. And we were scared to death. [laughs] I mean, we wanted to get out of there, because you could, you could just feel the hostility of the people. And, and we wanted to kill Carl for, you know, making that, making the remarks that would bring on this remark from Seth, because that was his ve—shining hour. That was his best speech he'd ever made.

00:09:38:00

Interviewer:

Did, did you think that, at that, maybe the election had, had been lost?

00:09:41:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, we thought it had been shook up [laughs] I mean, no. We really didn't think it had been lost, but we thought that that was an error, that he shouldn't have done it. And, and when he showed up at headquarters the next day trying to explain why he had done it, nobody spoke to him. We just looked at him, and, [laughs] you know, we were disgusted. Everything had been going along so smoothly, and so beautifully, and everything else, and he's gonna get up here and throw a monkey wrench in the machinery. Ugh!

00:10:07:00

Interviewer:

Can, can you talk a little bit about the voter edu—voter education, and what you had to do after the primary? Because you were saying before—

00:10:12:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, you see, a lot of people had just registered, and they knew nothing whatsoever about voting. And—after *we had stressed so much that you must vote for Carl in the primary, and you won't get a second chance. Now, if you don't put him on the ballot, you can forget the whole deal. So, they went out and voted for him, I think that was October the 3rd. OK, we said, Now, we gotta get them back to the polls again November the 7th. So, we had telephone banks going, and we would call them, and we would visit them. We'd have the block captains go see them, the block supervisors, and they'd tell us, I already voted for him. We said, Oh, my God! We gotta do a voter education campaign. They said, Yes, but you just put him on the ticket. You've got to go back again and vote to be sure that he's the mayor. And that was a job*, because we had all these new registered voters that had never voted before, and we had a job on our hands. Of course, we had no trouble in with the Republicans. They all crossed over. Most of the Black ones, because you don't have to declare your politics in the, in the general. Just go in and mark your ballot for Stokes.

00:11:21:00

Interviewer:

OK, could you talk about the strategy of the block supervisors? How did they work?

00:11:25:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, at first we gave a, a large tea for Stokes, and we took the name—an-anytime that we'd give a gathering, we'd take the names of all the people that were there. Then, we'd break them down. It's the precincts and where they lived, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, and if they were interested enough to come out to a meeting to Stokes, we figured that they were interested enough to vote for him. Then we contacted all of the precinct committeemen from all, you know, our wards. We got the ward books and contacted all the precinct committeemen, especially in the Black wards, to see if they wouldn't vote for Stokes. And then, we decided that we took a crisscross directory along with our ward books to find out who was registered and who was not. We'd run their names simultaneously, and we'd find that, those that were not registered, send somebody out to register them. So we said, We'd better get this done block by block. So, that was the only way that we were gonna be assured that there would be sufficient turnout at the polls. *We knew we had the votes, but we had to get them out. It's one thing to have them, but to have them just sit there. So, we organized block by block.* Each block had a supervisor or a block captain, or two or three blocks would

have a supervisor, and then there would be a block captain on each block. And those block captains reported directly into the Stokes headquarters that was in their district. We had headquarters in the central area for about Wards 11-12. We had headquarters in the Glenville area for 24, 25, 27. We had Kinsman area, which was Ward 10.

00:13:05:00

Interviewer:

Oh, oh OK. Let's, let's just move forward—

Geraldine Williams:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

—a little bit. Towards the end of the election, and Taft is rising in the polls, did you ever, did you ever lose hope? Did you ever think that Stokes would not win, that, that somehow the White vote that you were counting on would, would all defect to, to Taft at this—?

00:13:22:00

Geraldine Williams:

No. I never did. I, I never really did. Although, election night—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Geraldine Williams:

—when we won, it sorta dawned on me, and I think I broke out crying. We have beat the machine, you know? We really beat the machine! It happened.

00:13:41:00

Interviewer::

OK, let's stop for a second.

Camera Crew Member #2:

[Inaudible].

Interviewer:

All right.

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #3041]

[sound roll #319]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

00:13:48:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark five.

[slate]

00:13:51:00

Interviewer:

OK, as the election drew nearer, and, and Taft was rising in, in the polls, did you ever lose faith? Did you ever believe that, that Stokes might not win?

00:14:01:00

Geraldine Williams:

No. Never did. Have complete confidence. We had worked so hard. It...we didn't see how he could lose, and if, if we had, if we could turn out seventy percent of our registered voters, we knew he'd win, because we didn't think that the other side would turn out over fifty percent. Our mission then was to get as many registered voters as we could to the polls, and we did, too. We got seventy-eight percent of them out.

00:14:27:00

Interviewer:

OK, you might just say about who you beat.

Geraldine Williams:

And, of course we beat Seth Taft. And I think it only dawned on me election night.

Camera Crew Member #1:

I'm sorry, I was zooming out. Could you...?

Interviewer:

Yeah, once again, you, you beat the machine.

00:14:40:00

Geraldine Williams:

Beat the machine!

00:14:42:00

Interviewer:

All right, once again. So, so, who was it that you beat?

00:14:44:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, we beat the machine! That dawned on me election night, and I think I broke down in tears and cried, because I said, You don't beat machines very often. And I had read about all the machines, the Daley machine, the Tammany machine, et cetera.

00:14:57:00

Interviewer:

OK, once again. The second debate, you were at John Marshall High School—

Geraldine Williams:

On the west side.

Interviewer:

—on the west side. Talk, talk us through that. I mean, what did, what did Stokes say?

00:15:06:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, there were very few Blacks over there to, to start out with. I think just a handful of us from the campaign, and Blacks didn't go on the west side too much. I mean, did, never did feel too welcome. And Stokes introduced the matter of race into the campaign, and I, I guess it took Seth quite by surprise. Then he said, Well, well, well. I guess if you don't vote for Carl Stokes, you're a racist. And our hearts just sank. Because that was his very best remark of the whole night, and I'm sure that by Carl introducing this into the campaign caught him by surprise, but he certainly rose to the occasion, you can believe that, and it scared us to death. And, and then you could just sort of feel the hostility, and we were very glad to get back to the east side and get out of that high school.

00:16:01:00

Interviewer:

What, what happened the next day?

00:16:03:00

Geraldine Williams:

Oh, the next day when Carl showed at the office nobody spoke to him, because [laughs] they thought he'd really torn his custom-made britches, you know what I mean? He shouldn't have done that, and he was trying to explain to us why he did. And he always has a reason for everything that he does. Nobody bought it, so we sort of boycotted him that day. We wouldn't speak to him, and it was all right after that. [laughs]

00:16:22:00

Interviewer:

After the election was over, and Stokes had won, what, what did you think that you would achieve? What did it, what did you think it would achieve, with the election of Carl Stokes?

00:16:31:00

Geraldine Williams:

Good government. [laughs] And everybody led us to believe it, and we could've achieved good government at that particular time. People were pouring money into here. Let's get what Cleveland now funds, and we thought that possibly he'd be able to attract a lot of federal

ga—grants that would do well in housing, and improve the police department. We just thought everything would be better.

00:16:53:00

Interviewer:

Did, was it particularly significant that, that, that this Black man had won the mayoral race? Did that seem like an important...?

00:17:00:00

Geraldine Williams:

Oh, yes! It was a first. I mean, it was quite important. *We had done something that hadn't been done in any place in the country before. And since folks laughed at us in '65, and we pulled it off in '67, I guess we felt pretty smug about it. And yeah, we, we, we were very happy about it. And we said, If it can be done here, it can be done other places.* And I've always felt that we started the trend. And I've always been very happy about that. Because after then, Black mayors jumped up all over. Bradley, in the large cities.

00:17:39:00

Interviewer:

Stop camera. And any, any other—

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

00:17:45:00

Camera Crew Member #2

Mark six.

[slate]

00:17:49:00

Interviewer:

Did you see a specific connection with this, with this campaign, with the civil rights movement, and...yeah?

00:17:55:00

Geraldine Williams:

Yes. Definitely, there was a connection with the civil rights movement. We got Blacks to register to vote, to take a part in government. We convinced them that if you don't speak out and ask for things, you're never gonna get them. You can't just sit there. Well, I think we, we taught them that their vote does mean something, that it counts. And in fact, proof of it, you put a Stokes name on the ballot twenty years later, you don't have to do a thing but put the name out there, and they will go out and vote Stokes. That's one lesson we taught 'em—

Interviewer:

OK, stop—

Geraldine Williams:

—and other Black candidates too.

00:18:31:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop camera. Just get an extra look at that, those buttons. I don't know if you can.

[beep]

Geraldine Williams:

[laughs]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

00:18:35:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Seven up.

[slate]

00:18:38:00

Interviewer:

OK, just remember you...to say first Black mayor in your—

Geraldine Williams:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

—response. What, was it significant that the first Black mayor was elected in this election?

00:18:46:00

Geraldine Williams:

Yes. Cleveland was the first city that had...metropolitan city, that had a Black mayor. I think it's very significant. We started the whole trend.

00:19:01:00

Interviewer:

OK. And—all right, let's stop. Stop camera, one second, I'm sorry.

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

00:19:09:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark eight.

[slate]

00:19:12:00

Interviewer:

Was it, was it enjoyable? Was it fun?

00:19:14:00

Geraldine Williams:

Oh, it was a lot of fun. We had never had the opportunity to really run a major campaign before. We'd always been campaign workers and everything, but to map out the strategy for it and so forth and so on, a lot of fun. And in 1965, of course, we didn't have any money whatsoever. So every time a newsman would come, especially from CBS, and want a bit of news, what's happening in the campaign today, this, that, and the other, we would beg buttons off of him. We'd get CBS. And I think Carl Rowan was coming out here at that particular time. He said, What are you doing with all those buttons? We said, Well, your buttons are, are our candidates initials, Carl B. Stokes. He said, You wouldn't! We said, But we are. [laughs] We're using them.

00:19:56:00

Interviewer:

We might, can you just hold that up a second?

00:19:59:00

Geraldine Williams:

That little one. Then, of course, we had money enough to buy buttons and things for the rest of the campaign, for '67.

00:20:07:00

Interviewer:

OK, and what, what, what is the card that you, that you have?

00:20:10:00

Geraldine Williams:

Oh, the card is our official block supervisor. We issues these to all the people that took care of all the people on their blocks. They, they...their job was to contact every voter on that block, and see that they got to the polls election day. The third, and again on the 7th of

November. October the 3rd and again on the 7th. They had to educate them too, that they had to go back. [laughs]

00:20:33:00

Interviewer:

[inaudible] button. OK, once again, why don't you point out the buttons. What, what are the buttons for?

00:20:38:00

Geraldine Williams:

Well, this is CBS. These are the buttons that we begged from CBS when we were broke. [laughs] And of course when we got money, we could buy buttons. "Stokes Believes." "Let's Do Cleveland Proud." "Carl Stokes Cares." "Stick with Stokes." And Hatcher came over to visit us during the campaign, and we exchanged buttons, so I got one of his little buttons too. He was running same time Carl was.

00:21:07:00

Interviewer:

OK. Stop the—do you need a?

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:21:30:00

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