

Interview with **Ed Gardner**

Date: June 1, 1989

Interviewer: Madison Davis Lacy, Jr.

Camera Rolls: 1098-1099

Sound Rolls: 145

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 Ed Gardner, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on June 1, 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 #1098]

[sound roll #145]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:00:14:00

Interviewer:

You told me you were inspired when you started your business way back in 1964, and you were a schoolteacher then. Tell me that story. How'd you get into that?

00:00:23:00

Ed Gardner:

Well, you know, when you've got a wife and four kids, you're making, making ten thousand dollars a year, you wonder how you're gonna make it to send those kids through college and so forth. And we just felt that we to do something else beside just become a—not that it wasn't a good job as a teacher, assistant principal, but the dollars were not there. Addition to that, that was the time of Dr. Martin Luther King struggle in the South, and we felt so

inspired that, particularly those young Black youngsters who were giving up their lives, many cases, and Whites too, suffering, so that we could probably have a better life for all of Black Americans throughout the nation. So, we just kinda felt that, maybe, we could do more than just being a schoolteacher, and we felt that w—our best chance was to go into business. I was not a picketer, I was not a marcher, but I felt that I could somehow, I was not even that I felt that I could build a major corporation supplying jobs for hundreds of people. I was just that naive, you know? And so, I was selling haircare products outta back of my car, up and down 47th Street, 63rd Street, making twenty-five percent profit on a part-time basis. So, I was thinking I could make one of these products. So, I started going down the basement, stirring in my pot there with some wax and petroleum on a hotplate, and I got a product looked pretty good. I said, Guys, this is a good product, I think I can sell it to beauticians. Took it to a beautician, said, Mr. Gardner, wherever you got that product from, don't ever bring it back here again. It was just that bad, but again, I wanted to build a major Black biz. I went back and started stirring the pot again. No chemistry background, no business training, but I wanted to be an entrepreneur and a businessperson. So, we finally improved the product to get back, she says, That's great. Leave it just like it is. Don't change it. And from that point on, we started building the impressive, multi-million-dollar SoftSheen products company, but it was all based upon the fact that we wanted to do more of what Dr. King was talking about. He says he opened those door. Who's going to walk through there? We had to have businesses to supply jobs. So, we want to supply those jobs, and that's why SoftSheen was built from the very beginning.

00:02:26:00

Interviewer:

All right. Now—stop down a sec.

[cut]

00:02:29:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:02:30:00

Interviewer:

All right. Coming now to, I think it's around 1982. You're sitting in your office, and you're called upon by Renault Robinson. What, what happened? What did you guys talk about?

00:02:39:00

Ed Gardner:

Well, you know, when Renault Robinson called me, he was, as far as I was concerned, a very active person in politics and social movement. A former policeman, been an officer with the city of Chicago, but somehow survived, and was still a major political leader in the city of Chicago. Renault called me. He says, Ed, we, we need some help with the political campaign, so I said, Well, come on by. I thought it was a donation, which we were probably going to do, and he came by and explained very clearly to us that our problem was voter registration. Blacks are not registered. And so, my son Gary and my daughter, they were here, and they said, Well, dad, why don't we devote our last quarter of advertisement, instead of using it to advertise SoftSheen, use it to get Blacks to register and vote? And, that was a lot of money. That was about a quarter of a million dollars we allocated for advertisement that period of time. So, we just decided that, let's go with it. And what we did was to dedicate not only the dollars but the time and the creativity of our marketing [background noise] department, advertisement department, to really get involved behind voter registration. And, Renault was surprised that we want to do this, but we knew things were not going to change in Chicago unless we got Blacks registered. If you're not registered, you cannot vote, so don't tell me about how you don't like Jane Byrne or Mayor Daley, unless you are registered to vote. We felt that we could do the creative job in alerting and alarming the Black community as to their responsibility to become registered voters, and we had the equipment to do it, plus we had the dollars. At that time, we'd been in business since 1964 to present time. We were probably a successful Black business built on dollars from the Black community. We felt, Here's our chance to return those dollars and do an enormous thing as far as making life better for Black Chicagoans, but Blacks all around the nation, to take this as impetus and a, and a movement in the right direction for the future.

00:04:33:00

Interviewer:

So, now, the voter registration drive starts a—has its impetus. How did, how did people, say the middle class and other parts of the business community respond to this? 'Cause this was like a first, wasn't it?

00:04:46:00

Ed Gardner:

Yeah, I'll tell you about one thing we did, you know? My son said, Look, let's not say that SoftSheen is behind this. *We ran radio commercials for two or three weeks, "Come alive, October 5."* Real sharp commercials that would alert and really get our Black community behind it, and they kept saying, Well, we're—who's paying for all these? It was minute spots. I'm like, 14 and 15 spots a day. *But also, once we advertised on a, on a station, we had the station also match our spots. So, we had a large number of spots running every day, but we had that power, and that strength as a major advertiser to get them to do this.* So, while we

didn't say it was, SoftSheen was behind it, and finally one of the disc jockeys said, Look. This has gone on long enough. We're gonna say SoftSheen is putting up the dollars for this commercial. We didn't mind, but we felt that, we didn't want people to say, Well, here, SoftSheen's using it for some type of advertisement ploy to help them sell products. We want to be known as a company that was gonna try to increase voter registration in the city of Chicago in the Black community. There's no reason for us to be here and not take part in helping to run this city. And if you've got a quarter of a million Blacks not even registered, then don't tell me about Jane Byrne or Richard Daley, or anybody else, until we do our job. So, we felt that the registration job had to be done. We did it, and we had the, not only the dollars but most important, most important we had the minds. We had the sharp, creative Black minds who came through Black colleges, because of what Dr. King did in that period of time, whose parents had the dollars to send them through school because of what Dr. King did, all of this was made possible because of Dr. King, who was started back in 1960, well, 19, yeah, '64, when we were just getting SoftSheen started.

00:06:38:00

Interviewer:

Now, you said also, you told me once that, that you had meetings here on your company grounds—

Ed Gardner:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

—of people who wanted to be involved. Tell, tell me how—

00:06:47:00

Ed Gardner:

Well, you keep in mind we were never involved in politics. We knew nothing about the Democratic party, or the various segments of it, or strength of the, of the Black politician. We heard their names, but we didn't know who were the power, movers and shakers in the community. So, you say, You went into that arena? SoftSheen products company, but we wanted to get folks registered. Now, that was a difficult period of time, because Operation PUSH had been registering folks for some time. Now, you know, this idea of, of SoftSheen becoming the, the lead segment of voter registration was really started by our community, I mean, by our business, and that was by my son Gary and our advertising department brainstorm advertisements, which my daughter runs, and our marketing department. They wanted to do this project. They did not want to become part of PUSH's program. And, we met Reverend Jackson. We told him that, Reverend Jackson, we know Operation PUSH has a voter registration jive, but drive, but our folks at SoftSheen, we want to do this our way. We

feel we have the expertise and the dollars, and we wanna control the situation, so he understood. I dunno whether he liked it or not. He probably preferred us being in Operation PUSH, but he accepted that, and we began to hold meetings here on our grounds, on SoftSheen products company, and we brought business leaders from all over the city, who had never before met with this young, upstart SoftSheen products company, to get involved in politics, but they respected us. They respected our leadership, and for the first time, they were not so much in competition. You weren't competing with PUSH versus a West Side politician, so forth. You had this, this new leadership developing, and they all rallied around us, and they just did a marvelous job of helping to make that, that whole drive successful. We put the dollars. We put the creativity, but the little people got out there, and, and did the street work that had to take place for registration to be successful.

00:08:45:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's stop down.

[cut]

00:08:46:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:08:48:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about the little people and how you—things were organized and rolling before the October 5 date.

00:08:53:00

Ed Gardner:

Well, you know, you keep in mind that SoftSheen products company was the major corporation at that time involved in voter registration, but the work, the masses were done by the little people throughout the city of Chicago. Those are the ones who put up the streamers

and stickers throughout the city. They passed out the buttons. They kept shouting, "Come alive October 5!" Remember one time, I walked into a gas station. And, I wanted some gas. I paid for my gas, and a fellow said, this fellow could hardly speak his name, you know? It wasn't the sharpest fellow in the world, but he said, last thing he said, Have you registered to vote? Now, you know, to me, when I, when I have reached the, the person who we think is insignificant in this city, and voting is important to him, to mean that we were extremely successful. And that's what you had happen. Now, certainly, the middle class Blacks and, and the smaller businesses, they got involved, too. But, it—they got involved after the momentum started going, and the momentum was really done by the masses of Black Chicagoans who did not have those big dollars. They only had the numbers and desire to change things in this city. And that was so rewarding—

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Ed Gardner:

—I think that one night, or the night of the registration was finally finishing, and we knew we had gotten the numbers in. I went by Operation PUSH. I was by myself driving my car. It must've been about ten o'clock at night I got by there, and I walked into PUSH, and I just wanted to thank them for all of their help they gave our folks in the, in helping to get with the registration as successful. And they were surprised to see me, at that time of night, driving around. I think it was around, yeah. It was at PUSH, around 48th, over, over there kinda—not, not that, well, not the worst part, but kinda the place where you think twice before walking into an area say nine, ten o'clock at night by yourself. And so, when I got there, they were pleased to see me, and I thanked them, and so forth. And they said, Look, we don't wantchu going back to your car by yourself, Mr. Gardner. And they gave me an escort back to my car. Which showed this togetherness. They respect—to hear this Black businessman. Not only has he put his dollars in, here he comes by, by himself, on voter registration day, and, and to thank us for, and we appreciate, and we'll respect him for that.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Ed Gardner:

So, it was a community that really respected everyone that was involved.

00:11:11:00

Interviewer:

We got rollout.

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

You got rollout. We may have to get that answer again. I wanted, huh?

Camera crew member #2:

You can [inaudible]—

[cut]

[camera roll #1099]

[bad take]

00:11:19:00

Camera crew member #2:

Marker?

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:11:22:00

Interviewer:

Tell me that story about how you went to PUSH that night.

Ed Gardner:

Well, you know, we had—

Camera crew member #1:

Sorry. I'm sorry. I have a jam.

00:11:26:00

Interviewer:

You got a jam. All right, we'll do it again.

Camera crew member #1:

Let's go.

[cut]

00:11:31:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:11:34:00

Interviewer:

OK, give me that story again, how you went to Operation PUSH.

00:11:36:00

Ed Gardner:

OK, well, you know the, the theme of the voter registration campaign was, "Come alive October 5," and that was the big date. If we could register those two hundred fifty thousand new Black voters, that told us we had a chance at becoming, having a Black mayor for the first time. So, on that night, we had on 47th and King Drive, an outlet where we had something like forty telephones, and those folks, the little people now, are manning those phones all day long. And I walk in. Those phones were just ringing like the dickens, and, and I said, Well, guys, looks like we're gonna have a victory. So, that night, I came back to see just how things were going. I went into Operation PUSH around ten o'clock at night, and they were surprised to see me. Here's Ed Gardner, now. This fellow owned this multi-million-dollar company. Now, he's come, taken the time out at ten o'clock at night to come by and see how we're doing, and to thank us. I walked in. I, I thanked them for all the support Operation PUSH had given us, and all the people who support the program very beginning, and they were just surprised, first, to see me. And they said, Did you come by yourself? I said Yeah, I drove. And they said—well, they seemed to be very apprehensive about me being

there at that time of night by myself. So, when I left, they said, Mr. Gardner, we're gonna walk you back out to your car. Thanks for coming. But, it showed how we were really together as a family and very much concerned about one another.

00:12:54:00

Interviewer:

Now, what did the middle class effort, both in terms of money and what effort mean to this campaign?

00:12:59:00

Ed Gardner:

Well, it was, you know, it was very important, because once the, the campaign, we had the folks register to vote. That wasn't all. You still had to vote. And so, it meant we had to have a body of particular Black businessman who had the dollars. Not big dollars like we had, but they could bring in those ten, and fifteen, and twenty thousand dollars. They formed a committee, and we met nightly, and sometime we said, Look. We gotta advertise. Where are the dollars coming from? Somehow we managed to get those dollars to pay for the advertisement. It got to the point that, one time, Well, look. We don't have enough money to do this right. We tried to raise something like two hundred, no, a million two hundred fifty thousand dollars. We didn't have it, so what had to happen? Some of us had to sign notes. Myself, Jo—George Johnson, John Johnson, so forth. We signed notes for over fifty, sixty, and a hundred thousand dollars, to be sure that the monies were there to do the advertisement. The banks would loan the money. They said, Ed, look. In case this thing goes down, we wanna hold you responsible for paying a hundred thousand dollars back to our bank. So, we all signed notes. Businesses like ours, even smaller businesses, signed off on that note. And here's where you had the Black folks with money coming together. And keep in mind, now. These are businesses that got started here in this city, from the dollars from this community. So, we're putting those dollars right back into a worthwhile cause.

00:14:25:00

Interviewer:

At what moment did you actually know that it, that, that electing a Black mayor was doable?

00:14:32:00

Ed Gardner:

Well, I, I think once we had them register, that was the, the final, that was the signal, but really, it didn't take place until that victory day, because you still had Jane Byrne pretty strong, you know, in there, and Richard Daley pretty strong in there, but, but we kinda felt

that, once we had the numbers, we had a chance at winning, and we did everything that should have been done to alert folks to vote. And we found we're getting something like eighty and ninety percent turnout in various precincts. We knew we had a chance to win, and that night, when I walked down to the hotel, where the victory party was, got out of my car, and I saw Black folks parking their car all up and down the outer drive. Now, you never seen anybody park their car on the outer drive. When I walked to this hotel, I said, Uh-oh. Something's going on. When I saw us lined up on both sides of the outer drive, cars parked, and the police were just as courteous to us. Good evening, Mr. Gardner. As we walked in, you know, and I walked into this hotel, and it was just throngs of people, you know? And they were just so excited. You could, you could hardly even squeeze through, you know. But, they were so happy, and they were so pleased. They knew those folks were responsible for it. They didn't know Ed Gardner four months before. They knew all the haircare company, but they knew Ed Gardner when I walked in that hall, because of our contribution, the leadership role we played in getting the folks registered to vote. It was, I think, one of the most exciting periods in the history of the city of Chicago, for any White or Black community.

00:16:08:00

Interviewer:

What, what does it all mean? I mean, you know—since you've been, you were inspired by Dr. King, and got Harold Washington elected, a Black mayor in Chicago, which a lot of people thought was impossible. Tell me something about the legacy of this and the meaning for young people.

00:16:23:00

Ed Gardner:

Well, you know, I, I think the election of Harold Washington was the result of a product produced by Martin Luther King back in the 1960s, in '63-'64. He was really responsible for our company. Now, if it hadn't been the motivation, and the desire, and, and the dedication that particularly young southern Black folks showed to us in the North, that they made so many sacrifices under Dr. King's leadership. If they can do this, why aren't we doing more? And so, we built that business so that we would be in position when the time came to elect a Black mayor of the city of Chicago. We had the millions of dollars. We had the strong Black minds who knew how to market, and, and sell products, and know how to market and sell a candidate, too. And, this all took place because, I say, of what Dr. King started back in 1960s.

00:17:19:00

Interviewer:

You're also an admirer of Paul Robeson, too, aren't you?

Ed Gardner:

Certainly.

Interviewer:

Why?

Ed Gardner:

Well, you know, Paul Robeson I, I—

Camera crew member #1:

Excuse me. I'm s—can, can you ask that again? I, I [inaudible].

Interviewer:

Paul—

Camera crew member #1:

Go ahead.

Interviewer:

—tell me why you admire Paul Robeson.

00:17:31:00

Ed Gardner:

Paul Robeson, to me, was one of America's greatest heroes. America must look to this person to ask them why, no matter how well—how badly, he was mistreated by America, and he was mistreated in a, in the worst form you could possibly ask a person to be mistreated. We mistreated Paul Robeson, when I say, when I say we, I mean America did that. Here is a man, a scholar, an athlete, an artist, respected throughout the world. Yet, America didn't respect him, and yet he still clung to the feeling that this is a great nation. And, we felt that very little has been said in the past about Paul Robeson's dedication to what America's all about. And, he took the side, he took the heat. Many, many years ago, when it wasn't fashionable to do it, and he made the sacrifices. And great a person as he was, yet America did not respect him. So, I think when you see what we see down the hall, and you walk in SoftSheen Products, his, his picture. His salutatorian speech, there. Those were all things which we want White and Black folks who come to this company to read, and know, and to respect that great American.

00:18:46:00

Interviewer:

Stop down.

[cut]

00:18:48:00

Camera crew member #1:

And mark.

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:18:51:00

Interviewer:

You got involved in politics. Why and how?

00:18:54:00

Ed Gardner:

You know, we were not a political company. In fact, we were just another Chicagoan who felt we were being mistreated. I say we, the Black community. And when Jane Byrne took Blacks off the school board, off CHA board, we said, Well gosh. How can we stop this? We must be able to do something, and, and only thing we knew to do was what we had the capability of doing, that is how to market and sell a product. And we knew how to market and sell a candidate for mayor. That's what we tried to do.

00:19:22:00

Interviewer:

Gonna stop there.

[cut]

00:19:25:00

Camera crew member #1:

Hit it.

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:19:27:00

Interviewer:

OK. Renault Robinson came to see you asking for a donation for something, and that turned into the voter registration. How did that happen?

00:19:32:00

Ed Gardner:

Yeah, you know, Renault as far as I was concerned, was a, a major political figure in the city of Chicago. Well known, well respected, a tremendous leader. And he said, Ed, we need us some donations. I'll be by to see you. ***And, I had never had a conversation with Renault Robinson before, so, he came by, and he explained the whole problem. He said, You know, we're not gonna do anything to change this city, because we're not registered. Two hundred fifty thousand Black Chicagoans need to be registered. What can we do about it? My son and daughter Terry said, and they said, Well, look, dad. Why don't we allocate our last quarter advertisement dollars to voter registration in this city?*** Now, that means we wouldn't advertise SoftSheen products, but we would have the dollars to get behind voter registration. In addition to the dollars, we'd have the creative minds, minds that were nurtured in the Black colleges and so forth, that got the start in our, in our campaign led by Dr. King. They now are turning things back over to the city of Chicago to help make things better, because of the training they got in our Black colleges, and now they have the dollars and the minds to do that with. So, we felt that, here was an opportunity not only to use our dollars, but use our brilliant minds that were developed by the Black community to make things better in this city, by learning and doing the voter registration. Now, keep in mind, we were not politicians at all. But, we knew how to sell a product, and we felt we knew how to sell voter registration to this city, and the strong campaign put by—through by advertising, marketing department, and my son's leadership, and my daughter's leadership, they really aroused this city to the importance of becoming a voter. And you had to be a voter. You had to become a registered voter. This was what we did on that drive, which was called, "Come alive, October 5."

Interviewer:

[laughs]

Ed Gardner:

Now, at that time, when it was all over, we had two hundred fifty thousand new registered voters in the city of Chicago, and that was strength. Believe me.

00:21:27:00

Interviewer:

Was there any opposition, resistance among the Black middle class to this effort?

00:21:32:00

Ed Gardner:

Well, you know, the, the Black middle class was not in opposition, but they were—some of them were a little slow in coming around. Those who had been aligned, the political ones, I'm primarily, who had been aligned with the previous administrations, they didn't believe that we could do it. They didn't think that we had the, the dollars to, to, to register that many voters or the creativity to know how to do it. So, they were surprised when we did it. And, there were some reluctant politicians who were a little slow in coming around, but the middle class Black community, with a few dollars, they came by much faster, because they were really not aligned, but once the little people got the excitement going in this city, and they were the masses, then those with the dollars soon began to follow, and it is just one of the most exciting periods in history of the city of Chicago.

00:22:21:00

Interviewer:

Thank you.

Camera crew member #1:

K.

[cut]

00:22:23:00

Interviewer:

Great.

Camera crew member #2:

[inaudible]

Camera crew member #1:

Great answer.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:22:28:00

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