

Interview with **Ethel Mae Matthews**

Date: February 23, 1989

Interviewer: Jackie Shearer

Camera Rolls: 4087-4091

Sound Rolls: 436-438

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.

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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 #4087]

[sound roll #436]

00:00:12:00

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Oops. Second sticks.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jane.

00:00:21:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, Mrs. Matthews, let's begin at the beginning. How long have you been poor?

00:00:28:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

All my life. [laughs] But I don't consider I'm poor.

Interviewer:

Keep going.

Ethel Mae Matthews:

I am rich in many ways. Not with money but with courage, with strength, with faith, with independence, and my belief in God. So that make me very rich and I don't even consider myself poor.

00:00:55:00

Interviewer:

Well, where did you come up?

00:00:57:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

I were born and reared in the country on a farm to two sharecroppers. My mother was a Black woman. My father was an American Cherokee Indian. And my father and mother worked on the farm sharecropping. And it was very, very hard. I went to school but when the cotton got ready to be chopped and to be picked, I had to come out of school. And when you get ready to go back to school, you'll be so far behind and you don't know where you stopped. Now, a lot of peoples, you know, they criticize a lot of peoples for not knowing how to read and write. But they have to take under consideration that everybody couldn't go to school because if your parents were sharecroppers, you had to come out of school and help harvest the farm. And it's, to me, you know, we shouldn't have to be criticized because we don't know how to read and write. Some of us. You know, we called it illiteracy and we just looked at one race of illiteracy. But you have to understand there are some poor White peoples is more illiterate than you are. But we just point and look at one race of peoples and that's poor Blacks. But if you go down the line, you can name a lot of races who are illiterate. Now, I stopped school and when I was in the sixth grade. Not because I wanted to but because I got in trouble. And when I mean in trouble, not going to prison. But I got in trouble. I got pregnant at twelve and I married at twelve. And I became a mother before I got thirteen years old and that's why I stopped going to school. But I moved to Atlanta in 1950. And Father Austin Ford, he had an adult school for adults who wanted to go to school so I started going back to school at night. And I went to school and I learnt that, that I left off in the country. And I graduated and I got my GED. And I'm very proud because that night when we had commencement, and I walked down the aisle with my long white dress on to receive my diploma, my children was sitting out in the audience. I had five children. They was sitting out in the audience and I was grinning worse than they were. And they was sitting there, you know, and clapping, saying, That's my mother. That's my mother. She's getting her diploma

tonight. And that's made me very happy. And my motto is this: You can be anybody you wanna be. You can do anything that you take out to do. With God in front, you can do these things. And I don't let nobody, as I told you the other day when you talked to me, I don't let nobody, I mean nobody, tell me what I can't do or what I can do because I'm like this. I'm a strong believer in God. I believe if I put him in front, I can do anything that I take to do. Now along when I first started this work, it was hard. Very, very hard—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Ethel Mae Matthews:

—because we got criticized—

00:04:26:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry.

Camera Crew Member #1:

It just ran out.

Interviewer:

I think we ran out of film right then, so—

Camera Crew Member #2:

I changed the second one. We'll change the—

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #4088]

[sound roll #437]

00:04:34:00

Camera Crew Member #1

[inaudible] [laughs] I'm sorry.

[slate]

00:04:40:00

Interviewer:

OK, now I want you to think about 1973. Maynard Jackson was running for mayor of Atlanta and Ethel Mae Matthews was running for city council of Atlanta. Why were you running for city council? What was your platform?

00:04:56:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

To bring about a change for all poor peoples regardless of race, creed, or color. And I wanted to be, at that time, I wanted to be a councilwoman to represent my peoples, which is poor peoples. Someone that is worse off than I am. That's why I ran to be councilwoman at that time. But I was denied by a two-pound judge here in Atlanta because at that time, I was a welfare mother and I didn't have five-hundred dollars to pay to be put on the ballot. And I was denied of my rights to be put on the ballot because I was poor, I was a welfare mother, and I was Black. And the two-pound judge denied me. So, at that time, we had a welfare rights lawyer, who was working with us, Mr. Fred Le Clercq. And so, he was at the court with me, at that time. And so, when the judge said that I couldn't be put on the ballot, you know, because I didn't have the five-hundred dollars. And Mr. Fred Le Clercq asked me were I willing [background noise] fight to go to Washington, D.C. I told him yes.

00:06:11:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. Can you just hold on a second? I want to check with you two.

Cameraman:

Let's cut and take.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:06:21:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, Mrs. Matthews, I'd like you to tell me the story of your run for city council in '73.

00:06:28:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Well, I decided I wanted to run again. So, I went down because, you know, I thought the law still stood. But when I got down there, they said, No. It says five-hundred dollars. I said, I don't have five-hundred dollars. And so he looked at me and said, If you're so concerned about your peoples, as you call them, if you're so concerned about them, and you want to help them, say you go out and solicit 2,000 signatures. So, we came back to the man's house and we sit down, and we scrapped out our, you know, strategy of what we was going to do. And so, when I went back two weeks from there, when we went back down, and I had 25,000 signatures. And so, he counted them, and then he looked up at me, and smiled, and he said, You didn't need but twelve hundred. And to me that was a slap in the face, but I controlled myself, because they do not want poor peoples running for office. And then if you do run, they will tell you that if you quit fighting against us and come on over on our side and fight for us, we'll put you on an office. But I never—I knew not, I didn't want to go in an office like that. I wanted to go in on my own honesty. That's the way I wanted to go in, where I could help my people. And they knew if I went in the office, things were gonna—were not going to never be the same no more. I don't know how long they would have let me stayed in office. But if I'd have gotten in there, things wouldn't have never been the same no more. Because I wanted to help my peoples change the way things were, and make it better for poor peoples, who was worse off than I was.

00:08:18:00

Interviewer:

Why did you think it was important for a poor person to run for elected office?

00:08:24:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Because you know the plight of the other poor person. You know the plight of him. But I feel that if you don't have to live like a poor person, you don't know the plight of another poor person. You don't know it. But if you have to live it from day to day, week to week, month to month, you know what it is to be poor. You know what it is to not have money to pay your

bills. Not have money to pay your house rent. Not have money to pay, you know, your light bill, your gas bill, your water bill. You know how it is. And so, that's why I think it need to be some poor peoples in office who know the sympathy of the next poor person. That's why I wanted to run.

00:09:20:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, when Maynard Jackson won election, there was a Black mayor in the city for the first time.

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Did that make a difference to you and to poor people in Atlanta?

00:09:32:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Yes. It made, *it made, it really made a difference because that's the first Black mayor we had. And that's what we was working hard for: to bring a Black person in office, you know, that knew some of the plight of the poor peoples.* And Maynard Jackson was good. He was good and he did what he could. And you had to understand. I don't care who you get in office, they going to make you promises. All kinds of promises. They going to do this for you. They going to do that for you. But when they get in there, it's so much they can do for you. And some of them don't do nothing for you. But it was a channel to us who were poor who needed somebody, felt our sympathy. That's why we worked hard to get him elected.

00:10:24:00

Interviewer:

And then once he was elected, not just him as a person but his administration, the people who worked under him, did you feel that, as a poor person, you had more access to downtown?

00:10:37:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Yes. We did have more access. We could go down and his aides and things would see us coming. And we got there, they would make us welcome to go in and talk to him. But it's, it's

not like that now. And that's, you know, and that's why we say that we had, when Maynard Jackson was in office and when his administration was going on, we had access to a lot of things that we don't have access to now.

00:11:08:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, give me a sense of did the lives of poor people change? Say, when Jackson took office in '74 and then when he left office in, whenever it was, '80, '81, in that space of time did the lives of poor people change?

00:11:26:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Some. Some. Because when Maynard was in there, he had jobs for uneducated peoples, you know. And peoples had, who had never did no work, didn't know how to do no work, he had jobs, you know. They were little jobs like sweeping the streets but that was a job. It was a job, you know. And it didn't call for you to be educated, to be done went to college, to have two or three degrees, and five or six diplomas sitting up on your wall, or hanging up, you know, catching dust. But it was a job, you know. Womens, and young womens, middle aged womens would have jobs sweeping the street, picking up paper, and all of that. And they had somethin-somethin' to help themselves with. But since then the streets don't get swept. There's nobody out there to sweep the street. Nobody out there to pick up paper. And you know money's green. Ain't never seen no White money, no blue money, no Black money, no gray money. Money's green, you know. If you make an honest living, money is green, and you can go to the store and spend it.

00:12:33:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, talking about sweeping the streets, when the sanitation workers went on strike in 1977, did you support what they were about?

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Yes, I did. We did.

Interviewer:

Could you talk about that strike?

00:12:46:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Well, when the sanitation peoples went on strike, we felt that by them being poor and had, you know, that's what you call the sanitation. That job, to me, is a very low-class job. And we felt that by them having that kind of job and then everything, we felt that it was our duty to support them. We weren't going against Maynard by supporting them. But we was lending them our support so they could get more for what they did, and where they could live better. And we offered change, you know. If it take demonstrating, protesting, sitting in, singing in, praying in, and sometimes doing a little cursing in, that's what we all about, see. That's what we all about. Bringing about a change. Now, some changes has come but not all of the changes that we would like to see.

00:13:44:00

Interviewer:

Now, you told me a story when we talked on the phone about your four-year-old granddaughter holding up a sign.

00:13:51:20

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Yes.

00:13:52:15

Interviewer:

And about how it wound up with you taking your granddaughter to jail and being happy to go to jail. Can you tell us that story?

00:13:58:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Yes. You know, a lot of us who were able to work, and who could work, and who wanted to work, well they built the World Congress downtown, you know? They built the World Congress downtown and they didn't give too many poor peoples jobs. And we felt that poor peoples needed jobs too. If it wasn't making up cement, you know, and toting bricks, and things like that. So, Father Austin Ford, and Reverend Joseph Boone, and a lot of us, and a lot of our organization, Welfare Rights Organization, we went downtown. We called first and asked if, you know, the manager of World Congress, could we come down, and talk to him about some jobs, and he said, Yes. But when we got downtown [laughs] he was nowhere to be found. So, we sent, you know, some of his peoples, his employees what worked there, sent them downstairs to tell them that we had arrived. He sent word back that he would be up in

fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes, he never did get there. So, we waited, we waited, we waited. And he never did get there. And so, all of a sudden, all of us had a sit-in. We sit in, and we went to singing, we went to praying. And all of a sudden, we looked around, there were state troopers, there were policemen, there were detectives, there were the fire peoples, and everybody like we had murdered somebody.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Ethel Mae Matthews:

And they came in, you know, we was kneeled down on our knees.

00:15:33:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. [Velcro rips] We are going to have to pick that up, because we ran out of film.

[cut]

[camera roll #4089]

Camera Crew Member #1:

—Up. Sound, four, three, seven continues. Matthews interview continues.

00:15:42:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:15:45:00

Interviewer:

OK, Mrs. Matthews, I'd like you to pick up where you talk about how you looked up and you saw all these, you know, police and whatnot.

Ethel Mae Matthews:

As I said, we was, you know, some of the senior citizens.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Can we start from the beginning asking, "As I said?" Without saying, "As I said?"

Interviewer:

Well, I know but we'll be able to cut in a little bit so OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Can?

Interviewer:

Yeah, you can begin.

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Before you say start, can I say something?

Interviewer:

Sure. OK, you want to cut?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yeah.

[cut]

00:16:11:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

[inaudible]

00:16:18:00

Interviewer:

OK, are you ready? So, you were saying that you looked up and...OK.

00:16:21:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Yeah. We looked up, and we saw all of these policemen, all these state troopers, the FBIs, the detectives. They came in and they locked the door, locked all the doors up on us. And they came and told Reverend Boone that he would have to stop praying. So Reverend Boone, he continued to pray. Father Ford, he continued to pray. And we continued to sing. We continued to sing and clap our hands, you know. And we were just going on like we was in church. But they stayed there with us, had us all hemmed in. And they stayed there with us, and when, when Reverend Boone got through praying, then they came up to him and said, You all are under arrest. And Reverend Boone said, What have we done? He said, You down here disturbing the peace. And Reverend Boone said, Well, we were trying to get the manager's attention. He said, He promised to come up here and talk to us. So, we're down here trying to get some jobs for the ones who are able to work. But still he say, You all are under arrest and you are going to jail. And they had ten paddy wagons out there waiting on us. And my little four-year-old granddaughter was with me. Because I exposed my grandchildren to what's going on. So, when they get up, they'll know what the struggle is all about. So, I the only one had a grandbaby there. So, they took us all to jail. And they herded us out, unlocked the doors, and herded us out of the building to the paddy wagon. They put so many of us in one paddy wagon. Put so many of us in another paddy wagon. And so, all of us got in the paddy wagon. And when the policemen was driving the paddy wagon, we was just singing and clapping our hands, and we was happy. And he stopped the paddy wagon at the side of the street, we thought he was going to say, Well, y'all can get out and go home. But he didn't say that. He looked back at us, he say, What kind of peoples are you all? What kind of peoples are you? And we say, What? He say, I have never carried a happier bunch of womens to jail like you all before! Said, what you so happy about? I said, Well, one thing about it, I said, you're taking us to jail. I said, We don't have nothing to eat at home. I said, When we get locked up, we will have a good dinner and a good supper. And he shook his head, you know. And he started, you know, the paddy wagon off again. And we just had the most fun, and we was happy. He took us all to jail. Now, our welfare right lawyer's name is Hames, Margie Hames. So, we had to stay out there all the evening, but she came, and she bond us out. And so, they pretend like they was going to send us to prison. But they didn't send us to prison, I don't know what she did, but our trial didn't come up. So, my grand, little granddaughter, she was four years old. And at that time, they was trying to take her away from me. And the policeman had her head and I had her feets. And we was pulling, pulling, pulling. But I was stronger than he was, so I jerked hi—her away from him. Because I knew, if they had had a took her, they would have carried her to juveniles saying that I didn't have no business with her, you know, in a demonstration in the first place. But I didn't let him take

her. So, we went on to jail. They were, had us all in jail, and we were locked up all the evening. But we got out. But that didn't dim our spirit. We kept on marching, we kept on protesting, you know, for the rights of all peoples.

00:19:51:00

Interviewer:

What were you fighting for? Not just then, but in general?

00:19:55:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

We were fighting for dignity, respect, and, and a better way of life, and more money for welfare recipients to live on. More money for the welfare mothers to get their children school clothes and things like that. We were also fighting for credit. Some of us got it and some of us didn't get it. And so, that's what we were fighting for. And we was fighting for them to put a handle to our name, you know. Because it had been down through the years, you know, Sue, Ann, you know, Annie, Aunt, Aunt, and all of that stuff. But, you know, down here in the South, you worked for White peoples and they got a little girl. When she turned 10, the mother'd take you off in a corner. I know what I'm talking about because that's what she did for me. She said, So-and-so done turn ten years old, now you have to call her Miss. And so, we decided we would fight for some of that, too. That we wanted a handle to our name. And we thought, and when we got that handle to our name. I tell you, you might think, you know, that Mrs. Matthews is this and that. I do not answer nobody when they call my house and say, Can I speak to Ethel, or this? I say, Who, what Ethel do you want? Well, Ethel Mae Matthews. I say, I don't know Ethel Mae Matthews. I say, I know Mrs. Matthews. Because that's what everybody know me by, Mrs. Matthews. So, that's what we was fighting for.

00:21:16:00

Interviewer:

Now, Atlanta has a reputation for being an excellent place to live for Black people. What do you say?

00:21:25:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

It's an excellent place for some Black peoples. It is. It's excellent place for some Black people. But not for all Black peoples, it's not an excellent place to live. Because if it was an excellent place to live, they would give some people some job. All those people who sleep on the street, who eat out the garbage can. It would be a better place. Yes, if you're bright, the Nilla wafer color like I told you the other day. If you have a Nilla wafer color. You know

what a Nilla wafer is, don't you? Those kind of colored peoples? What look like they're White. They is half and half. [car passes] If you're the, if you're that color and you got long hair, sure. It's good for you. It's good for you. You can come here and get a job. But if you've been here all your life, uh-uh. If you're Black, uh-uh. You can't get a job. So, no houses to live in. You got oodles and oodles and hundreds and hundreds of houses in the public houses, boarded up. Nobody, you know, got nowhere to live. But everybody, they say, Atlanta's this. Atlanta's too busy to hate. That's the word here. Atlanta's too busy to hate. I don't say that. Atlanta is not too busy to hate. Because if it was too busy to hate, you wouldn't have little children going to bed crying for food every night. You wouldn't have little children getting up in the morning crying for bread. You wouldn't have people staying in the shelter have to get out, get up every morning and get out before seven o'clock. And that's what you have to do if you go to the shelter. And the mothers' whole families, mothers and children living in shelters, they're afraid to go to sleep. Afraid they're going to get raped. And a lot of them have got raped in the shelter. Yes, we need shelters. But we don't need a permanent shelter. We need shelters for peoples who are down and out for two or three weeks or two or three days. But we need some of the boards took off the windows of these vacant houses, these vacant buildings, you know? We got skyscrapers. We got domes being, going to be built. We got all of that. But when it come down to a poor human being, the peoples don't have nothing downtown for nobody. And, and, and, and it's frustrating when you got peoples who can help. And you go to them, they be like they don't know what you're talking about. And they look at you like you're a dirt. And they look at you and pretend that they don't know what you're talking about. And then when you go downtown, you have to act like you're crazy to get any attention. And that's what they label you at, of. Those are crazy people. Here come those old crazy, hair-raising people. That's what they say about you. That's the only way you can get attention now downtown, you know. You got to go there. If you go to city hall, you can't get in to see Mayor Andy Young because one of his aides is going to meet you and go, He's not in town. Nine out of ten he not.

00:24:24:00

Interviewer:

OK, now remember, we're stuck back in 1974. Andy Young still a minister. He's not Mayor. But now I want to ask you another question.

00:24:31:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

That's what make it so bad. He a minister.

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

00:24:35:00

Interviewer:

I want to ask you about in 1979, you led a fight against Mayor Jackson's desire to increase the sales tax. Could you tell us about that?

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Yes, we did. We led a fight to oppose it and we did win. We did. It, it, it didn't, you know, it didn't come about.

Interviewer:

What were you fighting for?

00:25:02:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

To keep the sales tax down. We didn't need it because we were poor, and, and we couldn't pay it. We was already paying four cents on the dollar. And we felt that one more penny would be bad on us. And one more penny would have been bad. But it came up, I think, three years later. And the same peoples who helped us to fight it get it knocked out, the same peoples who went up three years before, three years later, they wasn't with us.

00:25:32:00

Interviewer:

OK, I'm sorry. Can you stop for a minute? I want to see, is that someone at the door?

[cut]

00:25:34:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:25:39:00

Interviewer:

OK, so, Mrs. Matthews, can you tell us about a time when you would go downtown to visit some of the city council people [car passes] and find them less than helpful?

00:25:49:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Well, we would go down, and committees and things like that fighting for, you know, for more money and houses, and stuff like that. And they would tell us, We don't have the money to do this. We don't have the money to do that. And then we would say that, You do have it. You have money for this, and you have money. But we don't have money for that. And then, you know, we get in a conformation [sic] back and forth, and stuff like that. Ira Jackson, Q.V. William, and John Calhoun. So now, Q.V. is dead, and Calhoun is dead, too, so Ira Jackson is still here.

00:26:24:00

Interviewer:

OK. Got that? OK. Is that pretty much a rollout?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Yeah, OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #4090]

[sound roll #438]

00:26:32:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Rolling. Starting.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

00:26:47:00

Interviewer:

[truck drives by] I'm just going to wait for this truck. OK, so, you're in D.C. for this National Welfare Rights Conference and then you went over to Resurrection City. I want you to paint us a picture of the first time you went to Resurrection City. What did it look like? What kinds of people were there? What did it sound like?

00:27:11:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

[laughs] We was already, you know, we went to Washington D.C., to have a NORW conference. And we was there for two weeks. And we'd have our conference every morning and then we would go to Resurrection City to participate in Resurrection City. Well, the first day I went over there, it looked like a little chicken coop to me sitting in a mud puddle, you know. Because it was rained the whole week up there. It's rained the whole two weeks that we was up there. And it rained on Resurrection City. So, when we went over, we'd go there every day to participate in, you know, Dr. King's preaching, and his programs and, and, you know, talking about poor peoples, and everything. But we would have to—we who wore pants, we'd have to pull off our shoes and rolled our pants' legs up. The ones who wore dresses and skirts would have to pull their dresses, you know, skirts, above the knee because Resurrection City was sitting right in a mud puddle. And that's, that's what Resurrection City said it was all about. And peoples, I can't name all the race of peoples there. There was so many peoples there. You know, all nationality of peoples. And it seemed like everybody was there for the same cause and the same cause was bringing about a change for all poor peoples, regardless of race, creed or color, you know. And it was good. It was real good because Dr. King, you know, he told us all about racism, discrimination, and all about that stuff.

00:28:49:00

Interviewer:

So, the, the rain and the mud didn't dampen people's spirit?

00:28:52:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

No, uh-uh. It didn't dampen nobody's spirit. It didn't dampen nobody's spirit. And then we would march in the rain. We would protest in the rain. And that's the first time I had ever gotten into—that stuff what they throw at you to break up protesters and marches?

Interviewer:

Tear gas.

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Tear gas. That's the first time that I had ever had any tear gas thrown on me. We had to march down through town, you know. There's hundreds and hundreds of people. And then we went up to the park to have a big, you know, speak out. And so, the polices didn't want us to go there. We went anyway, so they got tear gas and sprayed on all of us. And that's the first time I'd ever witnessed anything like that. But the next day we, after we got through with our business, the next day we do the same thing. Go back to Resurrection City, pull our shoes off, and wade the mud to go back into Resurrection City. And that's what we did for two weeks.

00:29:49:00

Interviewer:

What was Resurrection City trying to accomplish?

00:29:52:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Resurrection City, to me, was trying to bring peoples of all nationalities together to let them know that one problem was everybody's problem. And, and, Dr. King was teaching that, you know, that everybody was somebody. That just because you was Black and poor, or poor and White, or poor and what's another nationality, that didn't mean you wasn't nobody. And he was teaching us, you know, to have faith, have courage, and hold up our head, and not bend our backs and let nobody ride ours backs. And he told us, he's teaching us, that as long as we had a straightened up back, couldn't nobody ride it. Except when we bent over, you know, we was giving peoples a chance to jump on our back and ride. And that's the kind of stuff he was telling us about, you know. And, and telling us to not to be violent, you know, not to be violent. And he was saying that, you know, if somebody come and slap you on one side of the cheek, you turn the other side to him, which ain't too many peoples are going to do that and which too many peoples didn't do it at that time either, you know. And that's, them are the kind of things he was teaching, you know. Non-violent, non-violent that was his thing. He teach you not to be non-violent. But he also taught you about independency, you know, and about your rights, you know. He taught us about that, courage, and faith, and depending on God. Then he also taught us that, you know, we had the problems and God had the answers, if we would, you know, believe in what, you know, in God.

00:31:37:00

Interviewer:

And now what about Reverend Jesse Jackson? Did you ever take part in any demonstration led by him?

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Now, I've took parts in meetings in, in, at King's, you know. Every January, you know, he would come and take a part. But I wasn't able to take a part this January and last January because I was sick.

Interviewer:

Oh, no, I'm sorry. I meant back in Resurrection City.

00:31:56:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Oh, yes, uh-huh. He led, he led some of the marches in Resurrection City. And he was with us one day when the polices, you know, sprayed us with tear gas.

00:32:08:00

Interviewer:

And do you remember ever hearing Reverend Jackson preach or, or speak at Resurrection City?

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Mm-hmm, he spoke too.

Interviewer:

And what'd he say?

00:32:19:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Well, he was, he was basically the same thing that King was saying. Jesse Jackson was saying them too, you know. He was telling them, Just because you was born in poverty, you don't have to live in poverty. And that, that was some of his speaking activity, you know. And just, like, you don't. Just because you're born in poverty, you don't have to live in it. You're born in it. Poverty don't be born in you. You're born in poverty, but poverty don't be born in you. And I just think, you know, my philosophy is this: if you want to be somebody,

you can be somebody, you know. It's up to you to be what you want to be. It's up to you. If you don't want to be nothing, you don't be nothing but don't try to hinder me from being somebody. But you can be anybody you want to be. With God in front, you can be anybody.

00:33:12:00

Interviewer:

OK, now answer me this: was Resurrection City a failure in your opinion?

00:33:19:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

To my opinion, it wasn't. But we didn't stay up there at the time but two weeks. And when we left, it wasn't a failure because it drew so many nationalities of people, of different faiths, you know, different belief, different colors, you know. It, it just drew peoples from all across the world, you know. You know, everybody didn't have the same belief in this, you know, same faith but they was there. All of us was on one accord. We was there and all of us was on one accord. That's the good part about it. Wasn't nobody there against nobody. Wasn't nobody there talking about when they're trying to put one another down and, you know, it did. But everybody what was there for two weeks, that I participated, you know, we was all on one accord.

00:34:04:00

Interviewer:

Now, I also want to have you remember, we're still in 1968, right?

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Mm-hmm

Interviewer:

Dr. King has been assassinated. Resurrection City was mud bound and then they finally tore it apart.

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Yes.

Interviewer:

I'm wondering, did you feel discouraged? Did you feel like giving up? Did you think that things were over?

00:34:26:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

When Resurrection City was coming up? No. But I have, it wasn't—I have, have gotten discouraged and have been discouraged but it wasn't about Resurrection City. It was about things that happening here in Atlanta. See? Because I just, don't participated in Resurrection City for two weeks. But I've been here since 1950 in Atlanta. And I thought when I came, you know, that things was, well a lot of things I found out since I been here from 1950 to up in now, it wasn't what I thought, you know. But see, we have come a long ways, but we still got a long ways to go. And right now, but I don't suppose to say nothing about the '80s though. [laughs]

Interviewer:

[laughs]

Ethel Mae Matthews:

But, you know, right now, it's a lot of racism, discrimination. It's a lot of that's going on right now. And it's not just going, you know, a lot of peoples, you know, they got a thing about, Some White peoples do this to you. Some White peoples do that. Uh-uh. I have to say that your own kind, your own race, they would, they will discriminate against you a little worse than the other race will, you know. And don't ask me why. I don't know. But it's sad. It's, it's sad when your own color who has been poor just like you or worse than you, and God give 'em a chance to get a good job, stick a pencil behind the ear. You can't go nowhere and talk to them either. And so, I don't see it that way, you know. I never was taught. My parents didn't teach me what my Black brother and sister would do to me. They taught me the other way that what some mean White people would do to me. They never did sit down and tell me that, Ethel Mae, your Black brother, your sister, would do this to you, do that. But they would tell me, say, Now, some mean White folk, like the Ku Klux Klans and all of that, they will do it to you. You see, I'd rather for this young man to spit in my face, and for you, or him to spit in my face because I was taught. That's how I was taught. But see, it's just an uphill struggle if you are poor, and if you're working with poor peoples, and trying make a difference for poor people. It's a uphill struggle. I don't care who you are, you know. If you're poor, you're just poor, you know. And, and I don't work for just one race of peoples. I work for all poor peoples regardless of race, creed or color. I would like to see a change for everybody. And a lot of us, you know, we go around and say, Oh, it's nobody hungry. Yes, it is. And some peoples who God done blessed, get up, and say, Oh, I done made it. I done made it.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Ethel Mae Matthews:

But you know what I say? Ain't none of us made it till everybody done made it. When everybody be made it, we, all of us, you know, we made it then.

00:37:44:00

Interviewer:

That was a rollout?

Camera Crew Member #2:

[Velcro rips] Yes.

Interviewer:

Yeah, OK. Great—

[cut]

[camera roll #4091]

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

[inaudible] seventeen. Sticks. Is that any light?

00:37:52:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Nope. Second sticks.

[slate]

Interviewer:

[door opens] OK. I'm wondering about that door back there.

00:38:04:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

Camera Crew Member #2

I don't see anybody.

00:38:06:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, we're back in Resurrection City and you said something before about how you felt that Resurrection City opened up people's eyes. Could you say that again?

00:38:19:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

[car passes] Well, I felt like by Resurrection City being there, it opened up a lot of people's eyes that at that time, you know, they didn't feel, they didn't feel the way they did before they came to Resurrection City. But after they came to Resurrection City and they was taught [car passes] about racism, discrimination, violent, and all of that, and hungry peoples, and poor peoples, and how they being, you know, being mistreated, police brutality, and all of that. It opened up a lot of people's eyes, and they were just, you know, thinking differently. Then they went to feeling different toward each other.

00:39:01:00

Interviewer:

And now, you also said something about how you felt that some people fell by the wayside after Resurrection City, after all the disappointments of 1968. I wonder if you could speak on that.

00:39:16:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Well, after Dr. King got assassinated, you know, it just seemed like a lot of peoples just gave up and just fell by the wayside because they felt that by him being gone, you know, that they didn't see no point in going on, you know. They just felt that if they went on, you know, that it wouldn't do no good. Some of them, not all of them. And a lot of peoples who, who were with Dr. King, yes, they fell by the wayside because they gave up first, you know, and, and Reverend Abernathy, Hosea Williams, and just a lot of them. But Representative Tyrone Brook, he kept on. And I could name two or three more kept on.

00:40:19:00

Interviewer:

What about you?

00:40:20:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

I kept on. And I will continue to keep on as long as breath is in my body because, see, I got a lot of grandchildren, other, other members, sisters, my other sisters and brothers, they got a lot of children and grandchildren. One day, we going to have to give up and see childrens of the future are going to be the future of the world. And that's why I let her, that's why I exposed mine because, you know, when they get out there, they'll know what they're going to face. And you do face a lot of problem. Because when I first started this work, I was harassed. I got a lot of threatening letters, which I kept. I got about this many, like two dozen, which I keeps, [car passes] threatening me that I was making problems, you know, that I was opening up people's eyes, and I shouldn't do that, and I shouldn't do this. And they was telling me they were going to bomb my house. I lived up there on [unintelligible]. They was going to bomb my house. They were going to kill my children. Some would call and ask me, Where do I want my body shipped? And all that kind of stuff. Trying to discourage me. But the more they did that, the more determined I got and the more strong I got because I believed in God and I know he would take care of me. Now some of the places that I go in now, when I first started this work, a lot of doors were slammed in my face. I couldn't go in there. A lot of doors were slammed in my face. And I'm not just talking about certain door. Just a lot of them were slammed in my face. But now, a lot of the doors were slammed in my face, when I go now, they open up to me and I can walk in. And that's why when I look back over all of the frustration, all of the temptation, all of the confusion, all of the hurts, all of the tears, [truck passes] all of the loss, and all of the pain, when I look back, I say it was worth it. It was worth it.

00:42:31:00

Interviewer:

Now, when, as you think of how you have refused to give up, does your memory of Dr. King and his preaching have anything to do with that, do you think?

00:42:41:00

Ethel Mae Matthews:

Mm-hmm, yeah. And, and, when I, when I went to Washington, D.C. for the first time for the Welfare Rights Conference, two weeks conference, that's changing my whole life because I heard something I had never heard before. I never thought—you see, when I come from the

country, I come from Atlanta in 1950, and my father wasn't allowed to talk about poverty. All I heard him, my father talked about at night was how early he had to get up the next morning to catch Mr. Charlie's mule and go to the field. And I went to Washington, D.C., I heard some things I had never heard before because I didn't know Black peoples had a right at that time. I didn't know we had a right. And I was just, like, going to school. Those two weeks was just like going to school. I got educated. And they said we had a right. And ever since then, I come back, I taught my peoples that they had a right. And I tell them, Look, we don't have money, but we have a right. And that's the best thing in the world. All of us need money but there is some things money won't buy. That is happiness, love, health. But we need money to live on. But that's why I came back, and I taught my peoples that they had a right, just as much right as anybody else had. And I come back and told them that a man, a handle would be put on their names and that's what they did.

00:44:16:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:44:22:00

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