Interview with **John Powis**
Date: November 4, 1988
Interviewer: Louis Massiah
Camera Rolls: 3062-3064
Sound Rolls: 329-330
Team: C

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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 #3062]
[sound roll #329]

00:00:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Scene twenty.

[slate]

00:00:17:00

Interviewer:

OK, in, in the mid '60s, in this period before the Ocean Hill-Brownsville experiment, who lived in Ocean Hill-Brownsville?

00:00:25:00

John Powis:

I got, I came to Ocean Hill-Brownsville in 1963. And the place was just teeming with people, and as I walked up and down the streets, the thing that I noticed most was that there were still a number of Jewish people living in the neighborhood. But, gradually, what was happening was large Black and Hispanic families were moving in to these tenements that had sixteen or twenty apartments, and whereas one or two Jewish people would live in an apartment, there was now eight or ten people living in each apartment, so the neighborhood was just teeming with people. I would say the neighborhood at that point was about 65 percent Black and about 35 percent Hispanic.

00:01:09:00

Interviewer:

OK. What was this, this increase in numbers, what was that doing to the schools? Ho—were they overcrowded?

00:01:15:00

John Powis:

That was the, the main reason that we started working with the schools, was that all the kids in Ocean Hill-Brownsville at that point were goin' to school on a half-day basis. They either went from eight o'clock to twelve o'clock or they went from twelve o'clock to four o'clock. And we started looking around the borough of Brooklyn for places where they could possibly go to school full-time. So, we looked for schools that were underutilized, and some of us were also interested at that point in integration, and it just happened that all the schools that were underutilized were in White areas, particularly in Bensonhurst and Bay Ridge and sections like that. So, the first thing that I ever did in schools was that we, we organized one summer, I guess it was the summer of '64, and we signed up seventeen hundred kids to go full-time in the schools in Brooklyn that were, were, that were underutilized.

00:02:10:00

Interviewer:

And what was the reception?

00:02:13:00

John Powis:

Well, the first day that we went it was just awful. I mean, the buses pulled in and the people were out there screaming and yelling and picketing and all kinds of stuff, that they didn't want these kids in their neighborhood. And it was very sad. It was a very sad type of thing, you know. And I have to say that, from the names for many of the people there, many of the people were Catholic people.

00:02:37:00

Interviewer:

Wha-what was the feeling about the quality of education in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, and the overcrowding and, and other factors about the actual teaching in that, in, in that time?

00:02:46:00

John Powis:

It was bad and it was, it was, it was chaotic because you had so many teachers assigned to each school, because they were on double session, they would teach either the morning or the afternoon session, not both. And it was, it was constantly in a state of flux, and the, the, the parents were, were almost desperate tryin' to figure out what to do with the education of their children. But it was, it was, it was a very bad scene.

00:03:11:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

And speed [unintelligible].

00:03:16:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:03:18:00

Interviewer:

OK, once again, what, what, what was the feeling in Ocean Hill-Brownsville about the quality of education?

00:03:25:00

John Powis:

The schools in Ocean Hill-Brownsville around 1964, '65 were really, really very desperately bad. And with the kids only going four hours a day, and with doubles, double groups of teachers in each of the schools, the best word I could give for it at that time was that the schools were chaotic. They really were, were bad, and the, and the parents knew it, and they knew it from the point of view of what results they were getting with kids going to high school.

00:03:55:00

Interviewer:

Could you talk about how the independent, about the takeover at 110 Livingston Street, how that independent school board came about? What, what, your efforts to, to, to bring the problems to the school board.

00:04:07:00

John Powis:

Well, first of all, the, the independent, there were two independent school boards. One was in Ocean Hill-Brownsville which developed from the fact that the schools in Ocean Hill-Brownsville were at the edge of a district that was called District 16, and they had no representation on what was called the school board at that time, which had very little power. So, it was almost a, a, a place where you could start doing something because they were not in any way represented by, by the school board. So, in Ocean Hill-Brownsville there was this independent school board for the schools above Eastern Parkway that was formed. There was also a citywide board called the People's Board of Education, and that developed one night at one of these hearings down at 110 Livingston Street, where parents were just teeming in there to testify and to do, and to speak about the situation of schools in the area, not just in Ocean Hill-Brownsville but around the city. And suddenly the members of the Board of Ed got up and walked off their platform and refused to hear any more. And the people who were there selected nine representatives, and I was one of them, and we went up and we took over the seats of the Board of Education, and we were there for forty-eight hours and people all during the day and all during the night, were coming down from all over parts of the city and, and testifying about how bad the schools were in their neighborhoods.

00:05:28:00

Interviewer:

OK. How did the coalition that formed the experiment in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, how did it come about? I mean, you've set it up with the parents, but bring in the Ford Foundation and he teachers' union. How did that come about?

00:05:38:00

John Powis:

It started with the ind—

00:05:40:00

Interviewer:

Could you just?

John Powis:

Right, I'm sorry about that again. OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

We have to change this, just a second.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Camera Crew Member #2:

We have thirty feet left.

John Powis:

Sorry about that.

Camera Crew Member #3:

That’s rollout, Paul?

John Powis:

I'm sorry, sorry about that. That's—

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK. Roll out for thirty, sixty-two.

[cut]

[camera roll #3063]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Four.

00:05:57:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:05:58:00

Interviewer:

OK. We, we were talking about the coalition that formed the experiment in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. How did they, how did that come about? How did they come together?

00:06:07:00

John Powis:

The coalition in Ocean Hill-Brownsville was formed, started with the independent school board. And the interesting thing about the independent school board was that it had no power, but that the parents began relating to it more than it did to the, to, to the regular school board from Bed-Stuy. So, as that was becoming obvious that, that there was a lot of parents relating to the independent school board, the next thing we know, the UFT started also coming to our meetings, the UFT representatives from the various schools. And, then all of a sudden, the, around the city there was all this turmoil around the schools, particularly up around 201 in Harlem, and also in Ocean Hill-Brownsville with this independent school board. The Ford Foundation then came along, together with Yeshiva College, and started talking about the possibility of funding something that could be a demonstration for decentralization of the schools in New York City.

00:07:11:00

Interviewer:

OK. H-h-how was Rhody McCoy selected? You talked before how this was the '60s and then that was part of the consciousness of the parents. How was Rhody McCoy selected, and why was he selected over other candidates?

00:07:25:00

John Powis:

The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Demonstration School District began with an election, and a very representative election. Much more so than twenty two percent of the parents in, in the community voted. After that, once that board was selected, the first job that they were supposed to do was to select what was called the unit administrator or superintendent for the eight schools. And the parents interviewed a number of people, both White and Black, and none of them seemed to be, they all seemed to be fairly good, including one who had been having a lotta meetings in the neighborhood, fella named Jack Bloomfield, who was the principal of IS 271. And then McCoy came in, I remember it was on a Saturday morning, and he just caught everybody's imagination immediately. I mean, he came in, he was talking the language that the parents were talking, he was talking about the involvement, that parents had to be involved in the education, that, that a whole new, whole new way of teaching had to, had to be done, and somehow or another it would have to involve parents in the community. And he talked about changes in the school, and I would say as soon as we heard of him, and as soon as we heard from him, for about forty-five minutes, there was no more doubt this man was gonna be selected.

00:08:44:00

Interviewer:

OK. Could you talk a little bit about the involvement of the teachers, I mean, in, in, in this co-community governing board? What was their role?

00:08:53:00

John Powis:

There was a teacher, there was a teacher representative for every school in the particular district, in the eight schools. So, besides havin' a parent representative and some community representatives, there was also a teacher representative from each of the schools. And they took part in the first number of meetings, including the meeting in which McCoy was selected.

00:09:15:00

Interviewer:

OK. How was McCoy treated by the other te—officials in, from the schools, mainly the principals? The Jack Bloomfield story about him not giving McCoy an office, could you talk a little bit about that?

00:09:28:00

John Powis:

McCoy was elected as the unit supervisor, or the superintendent, and right away I could see that we were in trouble. I mean, I think that was the crucial decision that was made in this whole Demonstration District. I think you had the, the, the idea that the Board of Education had, the idea that the union had, that the supervisors' union, which was a very powerful thing at that time, what they had in mind was a person who was gonna come from their ranks. And the person that they had in mind was Jack Bloomfield, who, by the way, was a very decent and good principal. Once McCoy was selected, forget it. At that point, the, the teachers' union began getting very fidgety about this, that, and the other thing. McCoy started looking immediately for an office, he was told by Donovan, Bernard Donovan, who was the superintendent of schools at that time, to get an office. He went to 271 to try to get an office and, of course, he was told he couldn't have an office, which is unheard of, because the superintendent is usually the person who makes all the decisions.

00:10:37:00

Interviewer:

OK. Could you just sa-say that story once again and just begin with, "McCoy was looking for an office," and then going to the principal of IS 271 and, and was refused? So, tell, tell me the story about McCoy looking for an office.

00:10:48:00

John Powis:

McCoy—school began and McCoy didn't have an office. So, he went to 271, and he wanted some, some room space in 271. And the principal, who was his subordinate, simply told him he wouldn't give him any office space. He then tried some of the other schools and he got the, the same, the same reception. He finally had to operate for more than seven or eight months in a storefront on Fulton Street. I mean a, a storefront that had no heat, a storefront that had no decent facilities. I mean, it was really, it was really a disgrace because any superintendent that was part of the system, who had been named a superintendent, would just walk into a school and immediately they would give him a, an office.

00:11:31:00

Interviewer:

OK. What role do you think race had to play in his treatment?

00:11:35:00

John Powis:

As far as I have always thought, as far as this ex—entire experiment, I believe that race was the bottom line, unfortunately. I think that everybody had the idea that somebody was going to be selected who was gonna be part, you've got to remember, at that time, there was no superintendent in the school system that was Black. There was maybe one or two Black principals. There were no Black assistant principals. Maybe, maybe a few here and there, but, all of a sudden, to have a superintendent who was Black, New York wasn't ready for that.

00:12:09:00

Interviewer:

OK. And, and what role in terms of the community did anti-Semitism play in the reception of, in the reaction to the teachers, do you think?

00:12:19:00

John Powis:

When we asked the teachers to transfer out of the district, and that was only after they had given us an awful year, the first year of the demonstration was really no demonstration because there was so much resistance from the teachers that very little happened. I mean, they just kept doing, suspending kids, sending them over to McCoy for suspense hearings. So, when we asked those teachers to transfer, there was no consideration on the part of the board, absolutely nothing to do with any kind of, of anti-Jew. Matter of fact, we never really knew or even, or even alluded to the fact of who was, who was Jewish and who wasn't. That had nothing to do with it at all.

00:12:58:00

Interviewer:

OK, I've asked that question out of turn. Describe that night in May '68 when the transfer decision was made, how it began, and it was an all-night meeting as I understand it. Just describe that meeting to us.

00:13:09:00

John Powis:

There was a school board meeting that took place, I guess it was around April of '68, and it was just our regular board meeting except that the, what was on the agenda was, what we, what we were gonna do with the teachers in the school that continued to, to scuttle the, the, the experiment. And McCoy had given us a recommendation that these were the teachers that he thought should be transferred, and we struggled with it and we, we met, I guess we met from about 7:30 p.m., and I guess by two in the morning we were still meeting. And then

some community people did come in and also supported the fact that what McCoy wanted to do and what the board wanted to do, and at that point we decided to make a, a decision. And that decision was simply to ask the superintendent of schools to transfer those teachers. That is a common practice all over the city. When, when there's problems with a teacher, the superintendent calls up the, the Board of Ed and the teacher's transferred. Now, true, it was thirteen teachers and that was a problem, but it was never meant to be the tremendous explosive thing that it became.

00:14:19:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

[cut]

00:14:22:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, mark.

[slate]

00:14:24:00

Interviewer:

OK. We're talking about the, the May '68 strike. What are your memories of that, and how were the schools kept open? You, you had mentioned parent involvement and Black teachers earlier. Could you talk about the May '68—

00:14:36:00

John Powis:

After the teachers were, were transferred, or we tried to transfer the teachers, the teachers' union pulled all the teachers out of the schools in May of 1968. And at first the thought was to just close down the schools. But then what we did was, all the parents who were involved in this program, we called upon parents to actually take over and run classes. And the parents really rose to the occasion. And it was absolutely unbelievable to think of just ordinary parents going to these classrooms and they would stay every afternoon and get their lesson plans and work for the next day, and that was being done by McCoy and his staff, and training, training the parents how to deal with the next day, and that's what they did. And as a result, all of our schools stayed open and we had two nice graduations in the junior high schools, and we got through till June pretty well.

00:15:30:00

Interviewer:

OK. What was the plan during that summer of '68? Donovan had said to keep the schools open. You knew there would be a strike in the fall.

00:15:38:00

John Powis:

During the summer of '68, it was not really clear what was going to happen, because I think that the Board of Ed and the mayor's office and the union and those people were hoping that there would be a solution to the problem during the summer. But there wasn't, and the summer kept going on and it got closer and closer to September, and the district then asked if we could hire new teachers. And, slightly to our surprise, the, Bernard Donovan told us that we could hire new teachers. And so, we put this big ad in *The New York Times* and asked all these young teachers that, that would wanna come into this district. And to our amazement, we had, the next day, 240 people come to the district office, coming from all parts of the country. And an interesting thing, 80 percent of them were, were, were, were Jewish teachers.

00:16:25:00

Interviewer:

OK. Could you talk a little bit about the scene outside of the schools during the strike that fall of '68? What did you see? Particular incidents that really come to mind.

00:16:36:00

John Powis:

During the strike of '68, what I remember most were the situations in front of 271. And I have to say that it's, I often think of this, I think of young children walking into the school very intent, very interested in going into school and being there and having their books and, and knowing, knowing what they were up to, parents being there—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

John Powis:

—and a tremendous amount of police. Particularly police.

00:17:05:00

Interviewer:

OK, we, we, we just rolled out. We're gonna have to…that was a wonderful beginning.

Camera Crew Member #2:

That was a rollout on thirty, sixty-three.

[cut]

[camera roll #3064]

00:17:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:17:15:00

Interviewer:

OK, it's the fall of '68. Are there particular scenes that come to mind when you think about the strikes during the fall of '68?

00:17:24:00

John Powis:

During the strike of 1968, during the fall, probably the place that I spent most of my time was in front of 271. And the scene that I remember there most, and I've often thought of it, is a scene of children coming to school with their books, very intent. And I think they also understood the politi—just what was all going on here. And they were really—you'd sometimes see kids hanging out in front of school, they were intent on going to school. And the parents, many times the parents were coming with them, supporting what was, what was happening with the district. And then, maybe about eight o'clock every morning, there would come these huge campus buses with all these teachers, and they're not only the teachers from 271 but from other s—schools. And most of them, all of them, as a matter of fact, were White teachers and they would come and they would stand out there picketing and yelling and shouting at the children, at the teachers who were going in. And I remember being out there one morning and I got an egg right on the top of my shoulder over here. And, but it

was, it was a, it was a scene that was, and also the amount of police that were there, all in helmets, I mean, and obviously there just to protect the teachers. I mean, they didn't have to protect anybody else. There was, there was no one else who needed any protection.

00:18:49:00

Interviewer:

What was going on in, inside the school at that time? Did you ever believe that you, you, you would win, that something would be a—what did, what did you think was going on when you went inside the school?

00:19:00:00

John Powis:

During the strike, every time I went into the schools, particularly 271 or IS55, I saw something that I thought was so spectacular that I still thought that we were gonna win this thing. I mean, I knew the odds were against us, but I think what really made it so difficult was the fact that something was happening in those schools. I mean, here you had mostly new teachers who was not supposed to have this tremendous experience and all this stuff, but you had schools that were completely orderly, where classes were going on. Where—and, and people were coming in from the State Office of Education, from the mayor's office, from the Board of Education, and they were seeing this and they were saying, like, You know, who's so stupid as to destroy this? And—

00:19:47:00

Interviewer:

The rally at City Hall that led to the march across the Brooklyn Bridge into 110 Livingston Street, could you talk us through that? What was the rally about at City Hall, and, and why the march across the bridge?

00:20:00:00

John Powis:

During the strike there was a number of rallies run by the union, by the UFT in front of, in front of City Hall. And there was a lotta teachers, of course, and a lot of people who took part in them. And so, we felt that somewhere along the line, we should have a march or we should have a demonstration in front of City Hall. So we met in front of City Hall, again never thinking that these many people from all over the city would, would convene with us. But there were literally thousands and thousands of people, all in front of City Hall. And it was about 4:30 or five o'clock in the afternoon and all of a sudden, almost spontaneously, we decided that we were gonna simply march across the Brooklyn Bridge. And I'll, I'll just never

forget it because we started marching and right in front of us was maybe fifty police, all the helmets and the sticks, the usual. But there was a Human Rights Commissioner in the city at that time, a fellow named William Booth, and he walked up to the police and he said a few things and they argued a little bit with him and they argued back and then all of a sudden we were allowed to go right the main road of the bridge. And thousands and thousands of people walked, and above us were all these helicopters from the different news services taking this live, because by that time I guess it was 5:30 p.m., 6 o'clock. We marched across the Brooklyn Bridge and our, our destination was really gonna be the Board of Education. That was gonna be the next place that we—but we never even stopped. So many people were there and so many people were marching and shouting and slogans, and people had their arms joined. It was, it was a different kinda march. The, the, the union demonstrations were very union orientated and had very professional looking signs and all this other kinda stuff. We just had people, regular, ordinary, community people. And instead of stopping at the Board of Ed, we started right down Fulton Street, right straight through Fulton Street, miles, a long walk from, from, from the bottom of the Brooklyn Bridge to Ocean Hill-Brownsville. And we marched right through Bed-Stuy and people on every corner were cheering, shouting. People in their windows shaking bells and all kinds of things. It was, it was, it was a real party night. And we came to 271, we had a beautiful demonstration there, and just a—actually went into the auditorium and we had like an assembly.

00:22:19:00

Interviewer:

Could you describe—

Camera Crew Member #3:

I'm gonna run outta tape.

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

[sound roll #330]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sound roll thirty—three thirty. Time code fourteen, seventeen.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:22:31:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

00:22:32:00

Interviewer:

OK. The teachers were asked, the ten teachers that were transferred were, were ordered by the school board to be reinstated. What was the effect when they were brought back into the schools?

00:22:45:00

John Powis:

The effect of the teachers returning to Ocean Hill-Brownsville on all three occasions which happened during the strike, created total chaos, within the schools mostly, because not only did they come back but with them came tremendous amounts of police, plain clothes and uniforms.

00:23:02:00

Interviewer:

Could you start that again and say the, the teachers that had been transferred, when they're reinstated.

00:23:06:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, hold it one second. [pause]

00:23:13:00

Interviewer:

OK. What was the effect of the transferred teachers when they were reinstated and, and brought back into the schools?

00:23:19:00

John Powis:

When the teachers that were transferred were ordered back into the schools, which happened three times, each time they came back with more people. First there were state people who were supposed to keep their eye on the situation. Then there was union people. Then there was Board of Ed people. Then there was people from the mayor's office, human rights. All of them were, were told to go in to-together with large numbers of police, both in uniform and in plain clothes. So the schools became, no one knew exactly who was who in the school. You couldn't really tell except that these ten teachers had to come back into those schools, and the result was just total chaos. All the, all the unity that was there before, all the education that was goin' on, everything just stopped. And then, of course, the teachers who were there were, felt bad because they had to accept the other teachers because not only did the ten come back, but then the other ones who wanted to come back came with them. And each class would have, like, two teachers, a union teacher and another teacher. And it was chaos. It was, it was total chaos.

00:24:25:00

Interviewer:

OK. What, what was meant by community control in Ocean Hill-Brownsville? What, what, what do you think people meant, people in the community meant when they said community control?

00:24:36:00

John Powis:

When people in Ocean Hill-Brownsville spoke of communi—community control, they were thinking of something with much more power than any local school board has now. They were talking about issues like being able to prepare the food for the children. They were talking about their own construction dollars. They were talking about selecting their own principals, assistant principals and teachers. They were also ta—talking about doing a certain amount of work with curriculum. But sometimes people get the confusion that, somehow or another, we wanted to write the curriculum. We didn't wanna write the curriculum by ourselves. We wanted to write curriculum maybe together with teachers or with people from colleges. So, a certain amount of control over curriculum that we would do with the teachers, selection of principals, assistant principals and teachers, some control over construction money and also the food enterprises of the school, so that the food will be more representative of the community where, where the schools are at.

00:25:31:00

Interviewer:

OK. Once again, could you talk about that night in May of '68 when the meeting was held to transfer the, the thirteen teachers and, and five principals?

00:25:43:00

John Powis:

In May the local board had its, its regular meeting. I guess we were having meetings at that point about every two weeks. And on the agenda that night, McCoy had put an item, the transfer of thirteen teachers and also some assistant principals, I guess there was five or six of them. We came into the meeting and of course the, the, the issue was such an important issue we spent an awful lot of time. We, we, we, we really labored over it. We knew that there was really no demonstration district going on because these folks were the ones, the main ones, who were causing us so much, so much sadness because of the way that they just weren't cooperating with the, with the experiment. But we spent a lotta time, we talked it out, we worked it out. We, we, we, we asked people from the community who came into the meeting, ***and we finally came to a conclusion that, so that we could have a, a demonstration district, this is like eight months after it had begun, that some of these people would have to be transferred, would have to go. But again, transferring teachers from one district to another, with the Board of Education, was something that was very ordinary. If a teacher was having problems, you would simply call up the Superintendent of Schools down at, at Livingston Street and the person would be transferred. No questions were asked. But when McCoy tried to do it, of course that created the, the scene of the century.***

00:27:04:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Mark.

[slate]

00:27:07:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

00:27:09:00

Interviewer:

OK. When the experiment was over, after all, all your labor and the labor of this entire community, was, was there any sense in you that there had been some sort of victory?

00:27:20:00

John Powis:

When the project was actually done away with, because that's what the legislature did, ***there was a lot of disappointment on the parts of all of us, and I think we felt extremely bad, we had put an awful lotta effort into this. But I think this was a, a period, the '60's was such an incredibly interesting period that I think we realized also that something really good had happened.*** I think parents had really once and for all said that, somehow or another, they had to have part of education. I think those young people who were in the schools at that time, they'll never be the same. They, they were, they, they certainly learned something about themselves, about things that they could do with themselves, by themselves. So I, I, I have often recollected on the whole experiment and said to myself, yes they iced it, but at the same time I think we accomplished a great deal. And I think if the schools, one of the reasons why I think that it was so good was that the schools are so much worse now, and the biggest part of the problem in the schools now is that the parents don't go near the schools.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

John Powis:

They're kept away from the schools.

00:28:25:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:28:29:00