Interview with **Georgia Ayers**
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Interviewer: James A. DeVinney
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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 #1001]
[sound roll #114]

[slate]

[00:00:17]
Interviewer:

[inaudible]

00:00:19:00
Georgia Ayers:

Yes, I remember.

00:00:23:00

Interviewer:

We hear a lot from others about Overtown, and they say it was a marvelous place. How do you, how do you remember it?

Georgia Ayers: I remember Overtown as being my world, whatever fun or whatever I anticipated as enjoying life. I'd look to Overtown. That's all Blacks had here in Dade County was the Ritz Theater, the—well, you had three choices: the Ritz, the Harlem, or the Modern Theater; and on Saturdays, you would leave one and go to the other theater to enjoy whatever life had to offer. Of course, I was—in my younger years, I couldn't take in the

Nightbeat, Clyde Killens or the Mary Elizabeth Hotel, but when I got older, that's where I went for entertainment. We looked forward to going Overtown, because I had grew up in an outlying area, a little subdivision—but when we got ready for what's happening, we went to Overtown.

00:01:19:00

Interviewer:

What happened to it?

00:01:21:00

Georgia Ayers:

I'll tell you a little story that I heard Governor Graham say after the 1980 disturbances, when he made a speech to the Black Lawyers Association, and I was really flabbergasted when I heard these words coming out of his mouth. He said, and I quote, "Like Georgia Ayers said, urban renewal killed Overtown," and that's exactly what happened—but I can recall years ago when I said, to the system here, that the Whites really want Overtown because it's just a stone-throw from Flagler Street, and they wanted to expand. And I said, Eventually, the Whites are going to do to Overtown what they did to the subdivision where I grew up, that they will eventually get it. Now, they're to Northwest Eighth Street, and I think the only thing that's keeping them back is you have the Baptist church, the Mount Zion Baptist Church, and you have Greater Bethel Church, which is the church that I grew up in the early '30s. They have those two monuments to Blacks there, and they just don't know how to confront the system or to confront the Black community to go further north, to expand the downtown area. They have taken everything but the, up to those two churches. They've taken the Mary Elizabeth, the Sir John, the old Nightbeat—which was part of the Sir John Hotel. They have the Carver Hotel, which was—in my opinion, should have not been taken away from Blacks, [car horn in background] but that's just a building standing there. That's, it's nothing there. Urban renewal and the need for Whites to expand—and I'll go further than that, since the Latin populations in Dade County—they are looking to expand downtown for the, say, South American businesses to come into the county. And I resented—but being a poor Black, was nothing I could do about it but try and roll with the punches and try to make this community better for everybody since it's here; you can't change it. So I remember the old slogan that… "God, grant me the serenity," [laughs], "To accept the change for whatever it may be," and that's the way I try to deal with—but I don't like it.

00:03:30:00

Interviewer:

What was it like when they drove the I-95 through Overtown?

00:03:33:00

Georgia Ayers:

Well, it was terrible. It, to—and what happened to those that lived in Overtown was the second coming of the White establishment and replacing Blacks for growth for Whites. I don't want to go back, but we were displaced. And when I say, we, my neighborhood was the first displacement of Black people some 40 years ago, and the—fortunately, for Overtown, they did have places for them to go. They did give them some sort of subsidies so that they can find other housing. They did replace those persons who didn't have a place to stay in what we called emergency centers, emergency housing centers, but it wasn't quite a surprise to me, because I'd lived through it from the subdivision—colored subdivision where I came from. The system itself perpetuates on displacing Blacks. It's common knowledge anywhere you go in the United States. They say that we're going to do urban renewal, we're going to make things better for you. But I don't know of anyone that can make things better for Black folk when they rebuild it. They rebuild it so the Blacks that were living there don't have the economic push, the economic know-withal to get back into that same area. If a man is on, and most—this is what's in Overtown. Most of those people are living on the, the subsidized income or on, they're retired and they have their old retirement checks coming in, and their retirement checks cannot, certainly, pay for the housing that's being replaced over there when the monthly payments are five to six-hundred dollars per month, when that's all that that person is getting in in his monthly check. So they can't say that they're replacing or they're building up Overtown for the replacement of these people. They don't—the two don't jive.

00:05:20:00

Interviewer:

Good.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Stopping down.

[cut]

[slate]

[camera roll #1067]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

Interviewer:

Georgia, tell me about how your family was affected directly by the I-95 building.

00:05:32:00

Georgia Ayers:

The downtown establishment decided that they wanted to make commuting for the haves that live in the south and the north end more convenient for the haves to come downtown, so they decided to build what we called I-95 or the expressway, and by doing so, they—in order to get downtown, they had to come through Overtown. So, that mean, and this is—I'll tell you what we said, the niggas had to go. So they came out and talked to all of the property owners and told them by eminent domain, this property is needed to build this expressway. You know, growth is coming on, and sometimes, some people lose, and invariably, it's Blacks that lose. Few Whites were displaced, too, but Overtown was destroyed because of urban renewal and because of the expressway. My mother-in-law, well, matter of fact, my husband was born in Overtown on Second Avenue and Seventh Street and now, Second Avenue, Second Street is really downtown. That's where—right across the street from where the post office is, but as I said, my mother-in-law, just on this past Saturday, because she's older now and she's senile, she doesn't like where she is; she thinks that she's living elsewhere. She told my husband she wants to go home. She wants to go to her house on Sixth Court. Well, the expressway now covers Sixth Court, so in her life, my father-in-law worked for the railroad company all those years to build that house for them, but because, as I said, the downtown establishment and the powers-to-be felt that they needed a quicker way for the haves to get downtown, they decided to displace my entire husband, my husband's entire family, because all of his family members had to be removed, and he was born in Overtown for the 95 expressway.

[00:07:26:00]

Interviewer:

Let's just [unintelligible] a second. Let's talk about [buzzer sounds] that period in 1980, the time that Mr. McDuffie was killed.

Georgia Ayers:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

How did you feel when those, those men were acquitted, and where were you and what happened?

[00:07:40:00]

Georgia Ayers:

I was angry as hell [laughs]. I was at home and we were expecting the acquittal to come back because the trial was over. My children are not that keen about me and what I do, because I do speak out, and what comes up most of the time will come out [clears throat]. And we were waiting for the verdict, and my children, well, my baby daughter took my car and left the house with it, so [clears throat] when the verdict came back I had—there were—I have a lot of friends in both the City of Miami Police Department and Metro Police Department, and someone called me and say, Georgia, we're looking for you, you know. They're asking where are you. We're downtown at the Justice Building. I said, Doggone it! My daughter took my car and left, and I know why she did that—to keep me from coming there. So I called my nephew and he came to pick me up, and as soon as I got downtown in front of the Metro building—the police station, rather—which is on 14th Street, I met Mama Range—that's Athalie Range—and she said, Georgia, we need a bullhorn, because we are losing control over the crowd. But at that moment, very seriously, I was frightened. Someone had thrown a rock and it'd broken the door leading into the police headquarters, and I saw cars parked in strategic places with their trunks up, and I say, This is strange. All of these cars are breaking down in these areas? These people should have known better. That moment, I didn't think what was happening. Those people came downtown prepared with Molotov cocktail bombs in the trunks of their cars. They came to destroy. It was a rumor that this was going to happen, but I said, oh, probably this would not happen—not another 1968. Well, this was more planned than '68 was, and while I stood there evaluating what I thought I saw, but then I realized, oh, this not what I think I see; this is happening. We are losing today. This Saturday is going to explode. And sure enough, I went inside the police station. I told the White officer that was sitting there, I think it's best that you get off the desk and let some Blacks come there. And about that same moment, a White City of Miami police officer came by in a car. He was terrified of me. Fear was all in his face, and instead of stopping, he put his foot on the gas tank and ran over a Black person. And then, pandemonium broke lose. All was lost. There was no coming back. They just had to deal with it, which, you know, we dealt with it for about four or five days. We lost 18 people, 19 with the death of McDuffie, during that civil disorder. That's—I never want to go through anything like that again.

00:10:31:00

Interviewer:

Stop? OK.

[cut]

[slate]

Interviewer:

Tell me something about the media coverage of the trial of McDuffie. What was your response or reaction to that?

00:10:42:00

Georgia Ayers:

My response was anger. So was every—every other American should have been angry to stand and see White police officers describing, in detail, the brutal way that they beat McDuffie until they just beat him to unconsciousness, and then to turn around and lie about it then on the trial, on your—on the media, which was, in a way, was good, because we knew what happened, but in a way, it was bad, because Blacks registered in their minds what the cops had done to McDuffie. And then, for the racist people in Tampa to exonerate that man leaves one to just dislike the criminal justice system in its entirety—and to dislike Whites. How can a White person in their own mind just exonerate police officers who stood up and said, yes, we beat him this. Yes, my partner did this, and then lie about it? People have not forgotten that. The McDuffie incident will be in the hearts and minds of people throughout the world, because the coverage of McDuffie's riot went everywhere. They haven't forgotten it. They haven't forgotten it now, and if anything else were to come up, they still—They will never forget that. Incidentally, the officer—and I take pride in doing this—Charles Veverka, that brought it on—he was the officer that pulled McDuffie off of the motorbike. He will never ever work for a police department in Dade County. I saw fit, I saw to that. He will never. Matter fact, I'm hap—that's one time I'm pleased with the media, because it's recorded in our local papers here that I said that I was vindictive, and that's the one time that I'm glad I was vindictive. I got back at him—and I'm happy of it.

00:12:30:00

Interviewer:

Back again to the rally that night, were there any White people there?

00:12:33:00

Georgia Ayers:

At the rally?

00:12:34:00

Interviewer:

Yeah.

00:12:35:00

Georgia Ayers:

Of course! At McDuffie's rally?

00:12:36:00

Interviewer:

Yes.

00:12:37:00

Georgia Ayers:

Oh, yes. One media person was there from the Miami Herald, this poor, little, beautiful White girl. I kept telling her, sweetheart—she was came, some came from Miami Beach. Some came from all over Dade County. Whites, liberal-minded Whites—everybody, after viewing what happened on the screen, the police officers going into detail with a, a Kel-Lite, how they kicked the, and, and broke up the motorbike to make it appear that McDuffie was in a, in an accident. All of those people, if you have any heart whatsoever, you would denounce anything like that, so the Whites came to support the cause of poor people, Black people. But in the heat of a riot, where there's Ku Klux Klans against White or Blacks against—Ku Klux Klans against Blacks, or White—Blacks against White, when a race riot comes in, I don't care if a White is my best friend. I will tell him, you take cover for right now, because you may be my best friend, but other Blacks don't see you. All they see is a White man, and you are not safe, and this same Miami Herald reporter, I tried to tell her, sweetheart, you need to leave and go back, because you are in trouble. Oh, no! I came all the way over here and I'm marching, and furthermore, I'm covering the story. I said, honey, the hell with the story right now. You better get your butt from out of here right now. To make a long story short, she was so glad when I carried her into the sanctuary of Dade County Jail to save her life.

Interviewer:

Did you, did, did you, do you remember something about—oh, cut. Sorry.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Stop.

[cut]

[slate]

00:14:12:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

Interviewer:

OK, tell me that heated battle story.

00:14:15:00

Georgia Ayers:

Well, it's common knowledge here in, in Miami—when it gets to dealing with the police, most people will call on me. Senator Carrie Meek, who's our first Black senator in the state of Florida, and Bea Hines, who is one of our leading Miami Herald reporters, decided that they would write [unintelligible] with Senator Meek rode with me, and Bea Hines said she would follow so that when she got through, she can get back to the Herald with her story. We went up into an area where I saw the police really reacting with some Black youth. Impulsively, I move, and when we stopped, there was really a huge crowd. And Bea said to me—well, she'd gotten out of her car and came to the car where Senator Meek and I were, and she said, Georgia, I don't—Senator Meek said, Georgia, I don't think you should get involved, and Bea said, Georgia, no. I mean, you just don't walk into the [unintelligible] plaza. Listen, let me tell you all this one damn thing, if you can't stand the heat, get out of my kitchen, because I'm going there, and I went into the crowd where the scuffle was going on. And one of the police attempted to grab me, and I let him—well, I didn't touch him physically, but my mouth gave him a mouthful, and he goes back to the police radio and radios, say, we have Georgia Ayers out here. She's a shit-stirrer," and I went on down to the police station and they called him in and they called me in, and I told them, yes, but you all stir up more shit than I do. If the policemen hadn't killed that young man, we would not be out here right now stirring shit.

Interviewer:

Cut. Stop now.

[cut]

[slate]

[camera roll #1068]

00:15:42:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark.

Interviewer:

OK, can you tell me about the prosecution of the McDuffie murderers? Did the state's attorney's office get involved in that case?

00:15:53:00

Georgia Ayers:

Not in my opinion, they didn't. As a matter of fact, I just spoke with the prosecutor George Yoss on—yesterday. We were in court together, and George presented the facts as they were given to him from the A form. You have to remember that the first introduction of anything into the criminalist—criminal justice system comes from the A form—that is, the arrest form. And if you recall—you're not from Miami, but if you recall that it was White police officers themselves, some of the hierarchy that brought to the fact that something was wrong with the A form, the medical examiner's office and the lieutenants and captains got together, and they said that McDuffie's death, there's something wrong with it. And it was the police department themselves that brought out the fact that he was murdered. It wasn't an automobile accident or a motorcycle accident as the police officers tried to make it. The state attorney's office gets its reports from that A form. From that point on, they go back and investigate what actually happened. It wasn't the state attorney's fault. It was the White racism in Tampa, Florida that exonerated the McDuffie killers. I feel that way about it as a person that works with the courts every day. Now, some Blacks [car noises in background] may not feel that way. They think maybe the state attorney's office…but the state presented what they got from the A form and after they went back and investigated that case. I do know that Janet Reno is one of the most honorable state attorneys that will ever be anywhere in the world. She is that kind of person, and I do know that she goes to the fullest extent to prosecute any case that comes before her, but you have to remember, Janet Reno—if it were left up to her, the case would not have gone to Tampa. It would have been tried here. But you have to remember also that it is up to the attorney—that's for the defense to move a change of venue as he sees would be best for his client. So you have two factions there, the defense side and the state side. The third faction, and the final faction, that comes into the—the judge didn't hear the case. He heard it, but it wasn't up to him to say, guilty, or, not guilty. It was White racism that prevails throughout the nation when a White police officer kills a Black. They put it to the point where it was justifiable homicide.

00:18:23:00

Interviewer:

Let's go now to the aftermath. You were on something called the Dade County Revitalization Board?

00:18:29:00

Georgia Ayers:

Yes. The Dade C—well, it's—see, after the disturbances, our governor decided he would put together a group of citizens to deal with the aftermath of the riots and to come up with an economic base giving, they put some monies, $100,000 out to those persons who can qualify to come up with some—to build up Dade County economically, and there were 11 persons appointed to that board: six Blacks and five Whites. It was a try, but nothing, it didn't materialize as what we had hoped it to be there by four of those CDCs still standing. They, each of those CDCs were given $100,000 seed money to build an economic base in the county—in the city, rather—and only about four of them—because $100,000 drop in the bucket to talk about building up the community where millions [buzzer in background] were lost during the riots, and you're going to give a person $100,000. That's not even a drop in the bucket.

00:19:34:00

Interviewer:

But the literature suggested there was a lot—millions—poured into this community.

00:19:39:00

Georgia Ayers:

I don't know where the hell it went. You tell me where did it go. It certainly didn't reach the level. I know, because I served, I was the governor's appointee to all 11 boards, and I'd like to know where—well, there were two. In all fairness, there were two. One in particular, I know the director was tried—well, convicted and went to jail for misappropriation, but that was less than $500,000 that he was tried for. And if millions came into Dade County, I don't know where it went, and I was the governor's appointee to all 11 of those CDCs, and if it went, Blacks didn't get it.

00:20:18:00

Interviewer:

OK. Go back, now, and tell me that chain story again.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

Stop now.

[cut]

[slate]

00:20:23:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

Interviewer:

All right, now. Give me the chain story.

Georgia Ayers: Well, the rally that we had in front of the Justice Building—supposedly to have had around the Justice Building—got out of hand, because as I told you, Blacks came prepared to burn. They were angry because of the police officers being exonerated, and they didn't want to kill, so they burned. At one point I confronted the, some police officers. I said, I hear those guys are going over there to get the State Building. The cops said, let it burn. I ma—, I don't care about that. Then, at that moment, I saw this *Miami Herald* reporter come up, and she was complaining about her chain. Somebody had snatched her chain. I said, sweetheart, you worried about a damn chain? You better worry about your life. Who care about a chain? But, I'm trying to find a police officer to tell them! I said [laughs], you better get your ass out of here, baby, because the chain is secondary. And, well, I'm not going anywhere. To make a long story short, I finally escorted her into the Dade County Jail, because that was the safest place to be, in the Dade County Jail. We had to go there because we couldn't get out of the area. The police had cordoned off the area because they had broken the window in the police station, and that's co—I mean, that's defiance of the law when you attack the police station, so they called in police officers from the other municipalities, and they just blocked off that entire area. And I had to stay in the jail myself, oh, for about five or six hours, because police were shooting at everything that moved. At that point, they bombed, firebombed the Graham building, which was named after governor Bob Graham. It's a state building. There were some cars that had the county tag on them under the expressway. They torched them and every car that looked like it might have been an official car. Anything to do with the system, they were burned. And when we were given clearance to go home, that same White child [laughs] 'cause she was a child to me that I tried to get to leave early, I had to take her home [laughs].

00:22:20:00

Interviewer:

Take me back now to the Overtown—people who were left there. Take me back to Overtown, the people who were left there. The academics called them the underclass. [traffic noise in background] What do you—

Georgia Ayers: The underclass? The system—if they're underclass, it's what the system perceive them to be. They are human beings. They are people that need a place to

eat, live, and sleep just like everybody else. They have grown all over town because the system has not provided for them a better way of life. They didn't kill Overtown. Urban renewal killed Overtown. Those families are living on their properties that, most of it has been condemned, and the system is just sitting there, waiting for them to lose it so they can lap it up and build apartments the way they're doing over there right now. I passed there yesterday and saw the space there where the Mary Elizabeth used to be, and it grieves me to see. They said they're pulling—putting in an apartment there, and those apartments, I guarantee you the rent will be at least $700 per month to stay there. Those people live in Overtown, don't get that amount of money to pay for rent, so they don't care about those people. If the system could take all of those folk from Overtown and put them in the wilderness someplace, they will build for them out there—but they got people like myself and other community people here who will die before we see them taking Overtown without a good fight.

00:23:40:00

Interviewer:

That's the price we have to pay for integration.

00:23:42:00

Georgia Ayers:

That's the—you know what? What integration? You still seeing Blacks living in a general location. We don't have integration. We have the desire to move, if we had the money to move other places, and what will happen is you'll have the same White flight. And the other thing that's happening in Dade County now, Blacks used to be the minority. Blacks are no longer minorities in Dade County. Anglo-Whites are the minority in Dade County. Dade County is a Latin community controlled by Latins.

00:24:13:00

Interviewer:

How do most Blacks feel about the Latin presence?

00:24:13:00

Georgia Ayers:

Just like the Whites feel about it. I don't hate anyone, but I do know that Latins own this community. I do know that Latins control it. If you go downtown right now and you hear an Anglo voice, it's shocking. Oh! You mean you people are still around? And that's what some of the Whites are saying. They may not say it openly, but that's what they've said to me. Some of my good White friends, like, some of my best friends are White. That's the old

cliché. Whites used to say, well, my best friends are Black. Whites dislike the fact that they cannot go downtown and confront a salesperson in the store and, me no speakey English. They got to call someone to interpret what—they say that, but they don't—they feel it, but they don't want to come out and openly say it. I'm saying it, because it's the truth. I still love everybody. Some of my best friends are White. Some of my best friends are Black. Some of my worst enemies are White. Some of my worst enemies are Black, Latin, and whatever. I love people, but the facts of life is that's what's happening in Dade County and across the nation today.

00:25:11:00

Interviewer:

Well, now, what do you hope for your community? How's it going to, how's it going to survive as a minority community?

00:25:15:00

Georgia Ayers:

All of my life, sir—I'm 60 years old—I have been fighting for survival against racism, oppression, economically and every other way. I am fighting for a better way of life for my children. I understand now, for a fact, that my children don't have to drink at the Black fountains as I did. When they go downtown, they don't have to go in the back and sit in the back to try on a pair of shoes. They don't have to buy a hat and take it home because they cannot try it on. We have integration as far as the White man says is there. My thing is to take what you have, make something of it, and never be satisfied.

00:25:51:00

Interviewer:

Stop.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Stopping down.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:25:58:00