

Interview with **Ellen Jackson**

Date: March 9, 1989

Interviewer: Jacqueline Shearer

Camera Rolls: 4099-4105

Sound Rolls: 442-444

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.

### Preferred Citation

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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 #4099]

[sound roll #442]

[slate]

00:00:22:00

Interviewer:

With all the pressing concerns facing Blacks in Boston in the 1970s, why this, why this focus on education?

00:00:32:00

Ellen Jackson:

The focus on education in the '70s really was because of the fact that there had been no real effort made by the elected officials to bring what we would consider equitable, equitable resources to the Black community. And I think that many tries and many strategies had been used to no avail. And finally the last recourse was to try the one entity within the United States that people always turned to, and that was the court. I think that we felt that it was time to bring it to the attention of the federal government through the courts to see if they could remedy these inequities. And therefore, the suit was brought, and of course won by the plaintiffs by the NAACP of Boston. It started a real revolution in education in Boston in many ways, many ways. I mean by that that there was concern within the Black community as to whether or not we would just be playing numerical games, and that is just putting children into a school to balance a school, desegregate or if you will integrate a situation, a

school. Was it going to change the quality of education? Was it going to bring more administrators, Black administrators? Because if you remember, one of the other concerns as well was the lack of Black administrators within the structure, the Boston public school structure. And those who were capable and qualified to be superintendents and be principals had not been promoted in years, so there was a dual concern that impacted on the quality of education for Black children. And that, that issue was trying to be addressed through, we thought best through the courts.

00:02:31:00

Interviewer:

Now, you told me a story about your son and problems that he had at school and problems that you had in trying to confront them. Could you tell us that story?

00:02:39:00

Ellen Jackson:

One of my concerns as a parent early on was that I felt I was a good parent, and I felt my husband was a good father and a good support person...partner in terms of where we thought our children should be and how. We would like to assist our children through their early days in education and in culture. And because I had five children and three of them happened to be just a year apart, I was able, I was home quite a lot. And I was able to spend a lot of time with them, hopefully helping them with their home lessons, exposing them, again, to some cultural events that were taking place at that time. Elma Lewis was very active. Even my boys took lessons from Elma. But I had one son, Darrel, who had—I don't wanna use his name. OK?

Interviewer:

OK. Then—

Ellen Jackson:

I would prefer not.

00:03:31:00

Interviewer:

—why don't you just pick up with...

[Crosstalk]

00:03:33:00

Ellen Jackson:

I had one son, I have two boys and three girls. I had one son who was having a difficult time in school. But the issue, which was, which was shocking for me was how I found out about it. I would go to the parent teachers association meetings. We were living in the same community. The meetings were normally in the middle of the day, two o'clock in the day. There weren't many Black parents who were able to go to those meet-meetings. Nothing much happened at those meetings because people were not elected so to speak, but they were selected either by several teachers and/or by the principal of a particular school. And they more or less had the control of the meeting, and the discussion, and what was going to come up like a book fair. I attended those meetings. I would attend the meetings in terms of finding out how well my child was doing. Each time I would go to school, I was told how wonderful he was, what a nice young man, quiet, honest, and, and obedient. I mean, that was a big, big word in those days. And I would thank the teacher. But each time I would go, there was a different teacher, and the teachers seemed to be getting younger and had less to tell me about my child. I mean, we'd stand in a line. Actually stand in a line and wait. And if you were lucky, you may get five minutes. If you got five minutes, that meant there wasn't too much to tell you except that he was a good kid, and he minds his business, and he's obedient. Then came the report card. And I was...I remember report cards used to come out right after Thanksgiving. And I remember as a child myself, I would be nervous about getting through Thanksgiving but worried about what would happen at Christmastime when that report card would be coming out. Da...my son brought his report card home, and almost in every subject he was failing. In a conduct and attitude, it was A. But everything else was D or C-. And I think he even had an E. I was devastated, and of course he was devastated. I immediately went up to school the very next day, and I confronted his teacher. And she kind of looked at me in a, you know, a very, very sad way and said to me...she was a very young teacher. I think she was a student teacher. And she said, Mrs. Jackson, I don't know what to tell you. She said, I have a class of fifty-five kids. She said, I cannot spend time with one individual or even groups of individuals. We have little time to spend with children who need extra help, and we certainly don't have time to spend with even those who may be gifted children. I can only suggest to you, she said, that you take your child out of here if you can afford it and put him in a private school. I said, Why am I just finding this out? I have helped him with schoolwork. I have...we bought encyclopedias. We had them. Appropriate magazines lying around the house. We would read with him. We would talk with him. And she just held her hands up in frustration. She said, It's overcrowded. And as I said again, we don't have time to spend with individual children. Well, that incensed me. And from there, I happened to be with other parents who were going through the same thing. And when we would through the classrooms and into the school, we would find that kids were sitting in auditoriums which were divided by curtains. They were sitting in basements. They were sitting in nurse's quarters, in the hallways. And it was very difficult for any child, whether he was gifted or, you know, average, to really grasp any kind of intellectual or educational opportunity that was being afforded him. So, we decided that we would take our case to the school committee, and we did. We petitioned because we thought maybe if they understood where we thought they had the best interest of, of our children at heart that the education at this point, leave the rest to us. Remember now, we weren't asking them to, to do all those other

things, the cultural things. We were gonna take care of those. But we wanted them to be educated, so we petitioned. A group of parents petitioned the Boston School Committee to ask them to, again, to look at other alternatives to at least decrease the number of children that were in a classroom. And there were portable classrooms in other districts, but it wasn't for the fact of, of decreasing the numbers. Because those classrooms only had fourteen, to fifteen, to twenty-one children in them. It was to make sure that they did not have to leave their community and venture into a minority community so to speak. They refused to put portable classrooms up. They said it was too expensive. Then we went back. We petitioned there were several schools that were owned by the Jewish community, the Shivas that were owned by the Jewish community still in this area that had been vacated and abandoned. And we thought that maybe they would rehabilitate those for us and that they could buy them at a nominal fee. They refused to do that. We were left no choice because we had no voice within at that time, we had no voice and representative within the Boston, on the Boston School Committee. We had no voice in city hall, so we decided to take it somewhere we felt people did have a voice and had an impact on their representatives. So, we went to various communities within the Boston school system like even parts of lower Dorchester, Mattapan believe it or not, Roslindale, Hyde Park, West Roxbury, Charlestown at the first event. We did try East Boston but getting through the tunnel was just too, too much. Back Bay. And we thought where people had their children in school and they had space, they had rows and rows of, of vacant seats, they had classrooms that were unused. They had facilities that were much cleaner, much quieter. They had books. They had even paper. They had pencils. They had things that our kids thought were alien. That maybe if we sat there, we would in a sense draw attention but disrupt in a nonviolent way, disrupt by just having our children sit in those classrooms, that they would get back to those people who represented them at school committee and in city hall. Say, Look, we don't want them over here. Do something about what's happening in their community. Fix it up. Do what you have to do. Because you won't get our vote the next time. And we knew how powerful the vote was. And, you know, get them settled and get them out of here. Well, when Black parents accompanied their kids to school back there in 1968, '67, and saw these buildings and saw the, the classrooms, and saw the conditions, they didn't wanna go back then. They said, We're not going back until we have what they have here. And that in a sense was my beginning as a parent. I had been involved quite often in previous years as a student and an activist in the NAACP and other youth groups. But as a parent in my concern, it emanated from the concern that I had about my children and what was happening to them in the '60s.

00:10:53:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut.

[cut]

[camera roll #4100]

00:10:57:00

[slate]

[recordist error]

00:11:04:00

Interviewer:

Over the summer of 1974, what was the mood in the Black community in terms of, of, of upcoming school deseg?

00:11:14:00

Ellen Jackson:

***The mood was one of confusion, concern, and fear because the elected officials in that...during that summer of 1974 after the order had been given by Judge Garrity were very often making statements that this would not happen.*** And statements were coming out of certain segments of Boston, specifically out of South Boston, indicating that these students were not going to be welcomed into the schools. They would do anything that they had to do to keep students from entering the schools in South Boston. We attempted at Freedom House over the summer months to try to allay some of the fears that parents had. We attended most of the meetings that the mayor, Kevin White, called at the Parkman House in the carriage room of various people, community agencies, the justice department, the police department, the fire department, school officials, and a few representatives to see how we could coalesce and work on, you know, disseminating the appropriate and accurate information to parents. Well, we even talked with the publishers of the major newspapers in the city and asked them if they would devote a special time and space to sharing with parents what they could expect, where they should go if they had questions. Again, it didn't happen in our community in a fashion that our parents and other concerned people could grasp. So, what we started having were nightly meetings with various principals. And particularly we had a meeting with the, the principal of South Boston High, Mr. Reid, at that time and asked him to come over, and we would just have a kind of, of question and answer period of what parents could expect, and what kind of commitment he was prepared to make. And it worked out all right, the first session. Basically because there weren't many parents. It was an evening meeting, and we tried to take into consideration and be sensitive to working parents. And we had it. And we also, also the idea that they had to go home and feed the children and do a lot of other kinds of things they had no time to do during the day. We come from a working community. So, it was an early meeting, and many parents did not show. Not too many parents showed. But it, it was clear that Mr. Reid was attempting in his own way to allay again the fears that parents may have whose children might end up in his particular school. We then talked to him about an idea of breaking bread together. We thought about bringing some of the parents over from South Boston who had never been to Roxbury, to Freedom House on a Sunday afternoon to have some kind of repast with us. And believe it or not, there must have been about fifteen to twenty parents who showed up, and there were about fifteen to twenty parents who kind of

came to the forefront and began to be spokespersons for the rest of the parents. And they sat down together, and they talked. And it was a great afternoon, but that was the only afternoon we had like that because he was warned by the representatives out of South Boston that he should not encourage this kinda dialogue and that he was not to come to Roxbury and talk about children and the educational program at South Boston High School. And we were very disappointed. And in fact at one point, Mr. Reid just stopped accepting our calls. And we really did not hear that from him. But we found out what happened to him because he was immediately not long after we entered South Boston High, he was immediately removed from, from that school. By and large, parents didn't know what geo codes were. They didn't know where these streets, where the kids were supposed to go to catch the bus. They weren't sure how the kids were going to get to school – if it was a bus, if it was going to be a taxi, if it was going to be one of the longer station wagons. They didn't know if they, the children had handicaps, what was going to happen to those particular children, how they were going to get to school. If they were a special needs student, were they to go to the same school to report to the same teacher? There was a lot of confusion. Mothers worked. What time were they going to get back into the community? Where were they supposed to go? Who was going to be there to meet them? There was a lot of concern. So, we attempted to work with the school department in making sure that for each school there were pick up spots, and spots, and times, and people there to, to accompany the children, to wait with the children when the buses came and to make sure that the children were there on time. And if not to encourage the bus driver to wait just a few minutes because a kid may be a little late. We then began to set up what we called, and develop with the help of the New England Telephone Company what was called the hotline. In the beginning of the hotline at Freedom House, at the institute, was to in a sense answer any of the questions that parents had. And it was staffed by people from various believe it or not agencies, various universities, various companies. We developed, my staff and I, we developed a kind of a manual. And we put it together for emergency numbers. We told parents about giving the children emergency numbers, pinning them on them inside their clothes or somewhere. We also made it clear that they could come and pick up this book. We tried to tell them even the bus numbers that their children would be boarding. We tried to answer and assure them that there would be plenty of people around. Many people volunteered during that time to assist parents and students during that first day of school, first week of school that is. We kept the hotline going two—almost twenty-four hours a day. People would come in in shifts—

00:17:20:00

Camera Crew Member #1

[coughs]

Interviewer:

Excuse me.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Tail slate. Tail slate.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK. OK—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Camera Crew Member #1:

—just a—ah!

Interviewer:

Do you want to get some water?

Camera Crew Member #1:

I'm sorry.

Camera Crew Member #2:

This is [inaudible]—

[cut]

[camera roll #4101]

00:17:31:00

[slate]

00:17:39:00

Interviewer:

So, tell us about Freedom House as the Black Pentagon—

Ellen Jackson:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

—and the preparations—

Ellen Jackson:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

—that you instituted to ensure a peaceful school opening.

00:17:47:00

Ellen Jackson:

***One of the objectives during that period over the summer was to assure that there would be, there would be a peaceful transition and that we would commit ourselves to do that.***

And many organizations came through the door to Freedom House...representatives that is, to talk about how they could assist. And it was a period while all of this confusion and concern was going on outside, there was a period of positive, a feeling of positiveness in terms of the people of, of, of fulfilling something and, and, and supporting something that was good in terms of our babies, in terms of our children. They used to call—the Globe dubbed the Freedom House Institute on Schools and Education as the Black Pentagon. All types of people were seen coming in and out of the place during that period. Parents still calling, other officials calling to, to, to donate their time, their staff time, to help us in any way we could to make sure that that first day of school was one that Boston would not have to feel badly about in terms of violence. Security...in that vein, the, the police department set up a, a whole command office in, in, in the building so that they could be on call or dispatch as fast as possible people that needed to be at certain locations, at certain schools, at certain street corners. The fire department because there were a lot of bomb scares. There were a lot of things that we had to take special caution and be very careful about. They set up a command post. The justice department had their people, the community relations people. The FBI was in and out of there. So, we certainly I think earned the name of the Black Pentagon in a sense. All kinds of meetings, all types of, night, times of night. Many of us did not get home until early in the morning to change clothes and get back to Freedom House to be there when those buses would roll. The men in the community came together in many of the meetings and took on the responsibility of more or less going up and down some of the streets, the major thoroughfares within the community, and talking to the young men who were unfortunately not working. Who were more or less just hanging around. Soliciting their help and their understanding of what was going to happen in September. And we said to them, or they said to them that is that it was very important that they help us in some ways.



And one of the most important ways that they could help us was to make sure that they did not harm or harass the young White students that were going to be coming into Roxbury because their brothers and sisters were possibly going to be in some very un—inhabitable areas and some areas where there could be a problem. And in a sense, we felt that they were hostages. That they would be hostages until they came home. So, while they were out of their community trying to get an education, we asked them to help them by just staying away. By just taking their little beefs or their little extra generous laughter somewhere away from the school environment so that we could get these White kids out. You know, a lot of White kids did not come into Roxbury, but I want you to know also that they did help. They helped at the end of school. They would stay in groups of four to make sure there were no problems until those buses pulled off. The mornings, there would be older men, sometimes senior citizens, men who were not working anymore who would just stand there and greet the children when they got off the buses. I remember this vividly around the Martin Luther King School and specifically around the Jeremiah A. Burke High School. But it was I thought, again, a commitment and a community coming together for a common goal, for a common purpose. And that was, again, to protect and also give an opportunity to our kids to...for our kids to get some kind of hopefully quality education in a place that wasn't quite near home. So, in many ways, it was, it was a community pulling together. And there was difference of thoughts and opinions going on at this time. Everyone did not agree with this particular strategy. They did not agree with Judge Garrity's order. They did not agree with Freedom House's stance of support. They didn't agree with the NAACP. And they wanted to know why is it our kids are always going out of the community and particularly the babies. Why is it that our kids have to leave home? We believe in education. We believe that for Black people that is one step on the ladder, one rung of the ladder for us to make it in this so-called world. To be able to give back and to contribute to your community. But it's always us as the victim. And they saw their kids the victims. They saw, and they expressed this in many ways. But they said, OK, we're gonna give you another chance. We've been giving you chances before. We're gonna allow you one more time to take our kids and put them out there. But sometimes they'd say, We'd like to see some of you parents and others who are advocating this kind of strategy to go and feel what our kids have to, to go through, to be part of that. And we did have a chance to do that, which I will talk about later. But the point is that all was not unified in our community. There was disagreement. There was discussion however with that disagreement. And I think that everyone in a sense, however, recognized that we had to take this step. We had to take another chance to make sure or to hopefully allow our children, again, to have a better education certainly from what they were getting here than what they were getting here in the community at that given time.

00:23:40:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, can you describe where were you on the first day of school in '74, and what happened?

00:23:49:00

Ellen Jackson:

I have to think for a minute where I was on the first day of school. I was in many places in my head, [laughs] but I guess that morning, on the first day of school, we had put car phones, we took the, we incurred a lot of personal expense. The group of us that made up the Freedom House Coalition as the group was called. We put car phones, put phones in our cars, and we, we leased beepers. And we had all kinds of 24-hour numbers for ourselves and for other key people in the city to get to, through, including, including the mayor, including the governor, including the police commissioner, and others. And the superintendent of schools at that time and all of these people. And other volunteers who said, Call me any time of night if you need me. So, the first day of school, I think I was out in the streets at five o'clock in the morning. I know I was. And we were riding around in the cars just spot checking to make sure that things were going OK. And there were many people out, riding around, doing the same thing. But there were many, many parents standing with their children waiting for the buses to come. There were representatives of the Department of Justice there. And from that, after the buses rolled, everything seemed to go off fairly well that morning. We went back to Freedom House to man the phones, to be there. And of course there were all kinds of media there, printed and electronic, and, and others there to hear, because they knew that the first information was gonna come through our hotline. We had printed up cards, which we gave, and we just sent out and disseminated all over the place that said, For information, is your child in school, et cetera, et cetera, call this number. Someone will be able to assist you or come to Freedom House. And so we just kind of waited and hoped that the children were going to be admitted into the schools, registered, and sit down, and open up a book, and get started. Get going with what this was supposed to be all about...education. So, the first morning after riding around into west, we did not venture that morning over to South Boston. We rode around around Hyde Park, west Roxbury. We rode over to the Columbia Point, what was Bayside Mall, the...watched the buses pull off. That was kind of central point for many of the students who were going into South Boston to meet, to get off one bus and get on the buses that would take them into South Boston. And we met to talk about the meetings that we would have at the end of the day. The idea was that people who were, were assisting us would come back and debrief us as to how the day went so that we can improve on the next day, and we would talk about minor incidents that would happen. We were prepared to talk about minor incidents that might have happened and how that could be alleviated. And we would make sure there was a representative the first few weeks, the commissioners themselves were there. Members from the mayor's staff were there to be debriefed as to how they could beef up their end and also what kind of information we needed to have so that we could assure parents or alert parents to what they may want to do differently as they sent their child out the next morning. And if there was a problem, we hoped that it would be handled in between four o'clock that afternoon when the buses would bring the kids back into Roxbury and the next morning when the students would board the buses to go back out. And we did that every day for quite a long time.

00:27:34:00

Interviewer:

OK. But now staying back on the first—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

—day, what happened that afternoon?

00:27:40:00

Ellen Jackson:

Well, [laughs] it went smoothly that morning on that first day. But later in the afternoon, we received a, a call. I don't recall exactly how we got the message that there had been a bus coming down of little children, of elementary school children, down the hill out of South Boston that had been stoned. And it was on the radio station, and people were coming in. And at first we didn't want to believe it because it just didn't seem like it would happen after the morning had gone so smoothly. Later, about a half an hour later, we received the official call from city hall that it had happened from one of our, our—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Ellen Jackson:

—associates. Parents started calling us, and screaming, and concerned, and crying—

00:28:25:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. We, we rolled out—

Camera Crew Member #2:

That's a rollout.

Interviewer:

—we have to—

[cut]

[camera roll #4102]

[sound roll #443]

[slate]

Interviewer:

I'll wait for you to yell when you [unintelligible]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK just [inaudible] gonna pick it up now.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

00:28:45:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:28:45:00

Interviewer:

OK, thanks. So, let's begin with—

Elle Jackson:

Mm.

Interviewer:

—you were talking—

Elle Jackson:

Mm. Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

—about parents were calling.

00:28:50:00

Ellen Jackson:

There...parents were calling because they said, calling Freedom House and asking for me because I was the director. They'd say, you know, We hea...we got some news that the kids are coming down, and the buses are being pelted, and, and rocks are being thrown. Bottles are being thrown at some of the younger kids. And my kid's on that bus. You know, I wanna know. Do you know? Have you heard anything? And at that point, I had not heard anything. And I said, No. I said, you know, Don't get alarmed. Don't leave your job. Because some of these people were at work. And they said, Well, I am alarmed. I, I am concerned. I'm at work. You know, what are you gonna do? Can you find out? I'll call you back. Well, the phones, the hotline started ringing. And a few minutes later, official word came in that two of the buses coming from the elementary schools had been pelted and had been stoned. And they were coming directly to Freedom House. The word was from the command post, if you will, from the police, Bring those buses. Do not stop at any stops. We want to see these children. There was Red Cross there also at Freedom House. We want to make sure they're all right, and we want to talk with them chil...the children. Well, just then also we turned on the radio, and it was on the radio, and that they were not going to drop the children off at their stops near their homes. They were taking them directly to Freedom House. Well, the shot of the informal network in our community talking about the drums beating, the word went around the community. And people were incensed. They were angry. And they started coming to Freedom House and forming little groups, walking up the pathway to Freedom House, demanding to know what had happened. And once the kids came, everybody just broke out in tears and started crying. The kids were crying. They had glass in their hair. They were, you know, scared. And they were shivering, crying, talking about they wanted to go home. We tried to gently usher them into the auditorium and wipe off the little bit of bruises that they had, small bruises, and the dirt, and take, pick the glass out of their hair. And then we were calling parents based on the numbers we had to come up to, to Freedom House. When the parents got there, they were as angry with me as anyone, as I would have been if it had been my own child. And it short of—sort of took me back to the days when we had problems in the '60s when my kids were in school. And they said, We gave you, you know, we gave you another chance. You know, what, you know, you listened to the mayor, and look what happened. And my kid's not going back tomorrow. I'm, I'm letting him be, or her subject to this anymore. You know, to hell with it. I mean, basically parents said, To hell with it. I'm not gonna do this anymore. You know, we, we trusted you. And that hurt, 'cause I know they did, and I knew where they were coming from. I could feel that pain myself. And that feeling of trust because I had trusted some other people who had promised me that this was not going to happen. So, what they asked, they asked us to do, we talked with the parents. We asked them to give us another chance, to get to the, the officials, and to talk with them. And, and they said, You can't just talk anymore. You gotta demand for us. You gotta have them demonstrate how they're gonna make sure that this day never happens again. I went upstairs to Otto Snowden's office with two other people, and I dialed, [clears throat] picked up the phone. And of course Kevin White immediately was on the phone. And he said, Ellen, I know. I know what happened. And I said, You have got to come out here and

talk. He said, Well, I can't come right now. I said, Well, you've got to come. I said, Because we're not gonna have any parents tomorrow. You know, I made a promise, and you made a promise. We've got to do this. We've got to dialogue. We've got to talk. We've gotta have some assurances. And he said, OK, I'll be out there around six o'clock. We hung the phone up. We sat down and decided on how we were gonna hold this meeting, and what we were gonna ask him, and what could we really gain from this session with him. Not knowing at that point that parents knew that he was going to come at that, at six o'clock. What we thought was going to be just the parents of those children who were on the buses, and some community people, and some other people, but that was going to be a very small meeting. And we, I don't know, naïvely maybe thought we would be able to convince them through the mayor that this and the police commission, this was not going to happen. And that they would share with them the strategies that they would use to assure them and ensure that this would not happen. Well, it didn't turn out like that. At 4:30 p.m., and that was just a short half an hour after we called him, the hall began to fill up with all types of people from all over. Parents, agency people, students, just concerned residents. And they were in a tither. It seemed eternity, [laughs] an eternity before the mayor came. It seemed like it was, six o'clock would never come. And I remember standing in Otto's office watching him get out the car with his jacket thrown over his shoulder. He couldn't see the parking lot and see the many cars that were there. And George Regan, his press person, special assistant was with him. And they were just sauntering up the driveway. And I said, Oh my Lord, this man has no idea what's gonna happen or what's gonna, this is gonna turn out to be. Nor did I at that point. So, he came in the door, and I said, You know, we've got an auditorium full of people, angry parents. And I don't know what we're gonna, we can't promise them anything anymore. My own credit-credibility is on the line. I'm raised, born and raised in this community. I'm gonna be here, Kevin, when you go back to Beacon Hill. And I'm gonna die here possibly. And these are my, my people. These are my neighbors. So I don't know if I can assure them. I'm gonna need you to tell them something. So, let's step into the lounge area and talk. And we wanna talk to you only. And there were two other people besides Regan. But Regan stands out in my mind because he was gonna what we call bogart his way into the meeting. And I said, I'm sorry. You're press, and we're not allowing any press in this meeting. Well, I have to stay with the mayor. I said, You don't have to stay in the, the mayor is perfectly safe in this room. In fact, he's safer than our kids were this morning in South Boston High School. I said, So, you're going to wait out here. And he still was going to walk past me. And I remember two young men sided up to him on his side, but Kevin had the sense and the wherewithal to turn around and tell him, Wait outside. We went in the room, and I said, You put us in a hell of a position. You know, these kids were hurt. You should have been here and seen them, but you said you couldn't make it. But you had to see with your eyes. And you'll understand the anger and the frustration that the parents and we all are feeling right now. So, be prepared. Don't come up with one of those pat speeches. You've got to hear these parents. Kevin and I, I think, were very close, but I don't think he really even believed me then until he stepped out of that lounge, and went downstairs into that auditorium, and proceeded to walk up to the front, and to go up onto that stage. And before he could even speak, parents were standing up and saying, We've been betrayed again. We've been betrayed again. We put our kids out here, and we take chances with our kids. We didn't wanna do it. But you promised us. What are you gonna do for us now, Kevin? It was a difficult time to calm the audience down. When he heard many of the

comments, and many of the accusations, and many of the allegations, and many of the, the, much of the anger, and the rage, and the frustration from the parents, they said, We're not going. He turned around, and he said, Wait a minute. Give me...he pleaded. He pleaded and said, Give me one more chance. Give me one, let your kids get on those buses tomorrow. He said, I promise you this will never happen again. There was a pause in the room, and you could feel the silence. People were fighting with themselves, their conscience, whether or not they should allow their kids to go, should they take this chance, how could they be sure, was it his word should they trust again. When that silence came, someone from the Bay State side, Columbia Point Project yelled, No, we're not gonna have it. We're gonna have our own people there. If it's gonna go, if it's going to, to be like this, we're gonna send our own people on these buses. He frankly was lucky to get out of there with his jacket [laughs] and with his skin that night. I'm telling you. I frankly was lucky because I had to come up and try. They said, Ellen, shut up. We don't wanna hear you from tonight. You know, we really don't want, we wanna hear what the man who runs the city has to say. And I could understand that. And I went upstairs, and I did my own little praying. And I hoped that everything was going to be all right. We didn't know how many kids were going to turn out that next, that day. But we met all night long, and we decided then that we'd have to really form groups to go over, follow the buses over the next morning to South Boston. And we did over to actually the, the Bayside Mall. And that we possibly will have to, would have to start on a regular basis from that day on to have people in a sense just watching and monitoring what was happening as the buses went up the hill. I remember we stated that to the police commissioner, and he said, Well, we don't want it, we're not gonna be responsible. I said, You haven't been responsible for us to now, so, you know, we'll take the responsibility on our own. We'll be responsible for ourselves. And at the same time, we've got to be responsible for our kids. And these were all of our kids. We may not be their biological parents, but they're our children. We've encouraged these people to participate in this process, and therefore we have a responsibility. And we did. And we met over at the mall the next morning. I think we beat the buses over there. And we waited until the kids went up and got off. I don't know frankly what he said to his police forces. I don't know what kinds of meetings were held in South Boston, but there were some people, like Tracy Amalfitano, who decried that action that day, whose home was brou— was, was bombed, whose car was bombed in South Boston. Lives and still lives in South Boston. There were others in that community who rallied, you know, with us and made it clear that this kind of violence against young people, babies, was not going to be tolerated and not going to be condoned. But that was the night that changed the—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Ellen Jackson:

—whole idea that this was goin' to be an easy, easy process. It was clear it was not.

00:39:33:00

Interviewer:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, that's a rollout.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

[cut]

[camera roll #4103]

[slate]

00:39:45:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK Jackie.

00:39:46:00

Interviewer:

OK, so you could tell us again about how that night changed.

00:39:51:00

Ellen Jackson:

That night, the first day of school, the end of the day, changed the whole atmosphere, the whole feeling about how we were going to have to pursue, and progress, and, and move on from that point on. What we had hoped would be a peaceful transition into desegregation of the Boston public schools was in a sense dashed by the happenings of that afternoon. And we realized then that we had our work cut out for us.

00:40:22:00

Interviewer:



Good. OK. Now, let me ask you about the meeting on October 11th that Kevin White called at city hall that Erwin Canham moderated between five Board people and five Black people. And remember what Pixie said about the Haitian guy and what she said to Mrs. Cass.

Ellen Jackson:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

OK?

00:40:41:00

Ellen Jackson:

We received, several of us received including Dr. Haynes, Michael Haynes, of Twelfth Baptist Church, and Mrs. Cass, Pat Jones, and myself, and Sandy Young received these very, very mysterious calls. [laughs] I couldn't imagine what was going to come out of this conversation, but I had to make sure that I was by myself when I talked to this young man and no one else was in, within earshot of our telephone conversation. And then he shared with me the invitation extended by the mayor, Kevin White, to attend a luncheon at city hall where we would hopefully come together with five people from South Boston to talk about our concern and to make a joint statement around violence. That while we may differ about integration, desegregation, and even the strategy to effect that we were all against violence. And I thought that was a lofty goal, and I thought it was an important statement because I truly believed that that was important and still do. So, I accepted the invitation to join with other friends in the Black community to attend this, this luncheon. When we got there, there was a little bit of a conversation going on before we sat down and before Kevin White and Erwin Canham from the *Christian Science Monitor* came in, and we were certainly standing with our own folks so to speak. You know, there was no collegiality, if you will, in that room at that point. And he had his own staff. That is Kevin had his own staff people trying to make us feel comfortable. Finally we were asked to be seating in two round tables. And we did, and we were integrated so to speak in terms of the seating arrangement. And Kevin, again, stated what the objective of the meeting was, hopefully that we would be prepared at the end of the meeting to sign a statement which would be released to the press that we joined together if in nothing else but to ask for peace in the city and to condone the violence. That was fine. But there was some concerns. And first of all, the first concern from, from most of the Black attendees was the fact that we had not had any disruption in our community. We had taken care even after the very first day of school would happen. There was no reaction to that. There was no bother, no one bothered the youngsters when they came in the next day to Roxbury and to Dor...north Dorchester. There was no rock throwing and no bother of those students getting on or off those buses. So, in a sense we had to clear the air that both communities were participating in some kind of violent act because we were not. And after we articulated that concern and, and, and so in our minds cleared the racket or got the racket cleared, we then started talking about the responsibility of those people in the room. Did they

best represent the feelings of the people in their communities? We felt clearly that we did because we had enough meetings that went on within our community, and we were sent forth with a message most of the time. You know what happens to the messenger. [laughs] But anyway. We were sent forth with the message. Pixie Palladino began to talk about, I think maybe Dr. Haynes started talking about the, the terrible violence with the young Haitian man and how it was just unprovoked, and it was unfair that we could not walk in various parts of the city without being harmed. That every day we saw bill collectors. We saw our postmen. We saw all kinds of businesspeople walk in and out of the Black community. And in most instances, if there was a lot of crime, it, or violence, it was Black on Black. It was not that they were being attacked during this very volatile time in period of desegregation. However, this young man certainly from another country, not knowing in a sense what was going on, what of all this commotion was about, going about his work to be attacked in the vicious way that he was attacked was not in the spirit that we could enter an agreement with or even to make a statement about until we had admitted or they had admitted that they would take some control or take some responsibility if you will for the kinds of actions that seemingly were coming from their part of the, of the town. Well, Pixie decided that since he didn't understand English, and he didn't under, know where he was going, and he had no business over there that he got just what he deserved. That was a little hard for a lot of us to take. It was very hard for a lot of us to take. And we co...sort of, you know, dialogued back and forth, and disagreed about that feeling, and equal access on the streets or ac-access to the streets to walk, and to work, and to move around freely in the city of Boston where we all paid taxes, by the way. And, and we made that very clear. Then she said, Well, it's like name calling. And, you know, you just sometimes have to understand some people are different than others. You know, Ellen, you know, it's like, you know, someone calling you a nigger. You, you know, we've been, we've known each other. We dealt with each other in the state department of education. You know, I don't have any problems with you, but some of those niggers, you know, just get on my nerves. Well, Mrs. Cass then said, Well, you know in her very calm and soothing voice and very, very positive say, You know my dear, this is a problem for us. You think that you can call, sit here and ask us to join in a statement of peace when in fact you have no respect for us. And that's shown by the way you talk about us, how you describe us. And she said, in a way in moving her hand, you know, like, Shut up, old lady. You know, she didn't use exactly that word, but, You're out of touch. You don't know what's going, this is the new wave. You know, and furthermore, I'm not talking to you furthermore. I'm not really talking to you, Is what she said. I'm talking to Ellen. And when she said that, I just, I don't know what happened. I just jumped up. I felt like my ears were going to pop. And I said, There is no way that I can sit here. And I turned to Kevin White, and I said, I am not goin' to be party to this. First of all, if this woman cannot respect a senior citizen and a matriarch of our community, a leader of the Black community not just here in Boston but nationwide, she cannot have respect for our babies. And that's what we're all about. I cannot in good consciousness sit here and have her disrespect Mrs. Cass because when she does that, she truly is disrespecting me. She is disrespecting other people. And she's certainly disrespecting those children. I'm not going to be party to any, any joint venture to sign a statement. And I got up, and I walked out of the room. She was calling, Oh, Ellen, come back. Come back. And, and Mike Haynes got up and Pat Jones got up, and Mrs. Ca=Cass, the lady she was, she sat for a minute. And we got up. And Art Jackson, who was then on Kevin White's staff, asked us if we would step into a side room for a moment

because there was a lot of press outside. And I really wasn't in the mood for even talking to them. It wasn't about getting press for this, inkies you call it. It was about a feeling that this was just not going to work. And we had to take a stand, and we had to demonstrate that by saying, We're not gonna have you disrespect the young children, and you're not certainly going to disrespect the seniors in our community. So, no statement was forthcoming, and the meeting ended abruptly. The mayor tried to, you know, get us back into the room. And I said, No, I'm not going back into that room. I will never, talk about never. But that one time I meant never sit in the room with this woman again. I had had my previous experiences, as I said earlier, with her. And so this was, you know, typical of her. And I just felt that she was just vicious, and the venom that came out of her and the hatred, I mean, it was in her face. And she thought, actually, you know, when I think about it now, she...it was funny to her. This was not serious. It was like, you know, Let me see how far I can irk them. How, how far can I take this? 'Cause, I, I know I can get away with this. It was almost like a joke to her, and that, that was very sad and truly very frightening.

00:49:02:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, I'd like you to flash forward to December 11th. Michael Faith, a White boy, was stabbed at Southie. A mob gathered outside. There was concern about getting the kids out. Can you tell us about the decoy action that you used? And I also remember how impressive it was to me to hear that in the buses, you could feel the crowd—

Ellen Jackson:

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Interviewer:

—rocking them back and forth.

00:49:27:00

Ellen Jackson:

We were doing a routine check. I learned a lot of the phrase, the phrases hanging out with the police during those days. [laughs] We were doing a routine check of schools. But there had, we were riding around with the then superintendent and command officer for district B, Leroy Chase. We were riding around with him that morning, one morning on December 11th. And while we were in the car just driving around the different schools, we got a call that there had been a breakout at, well, we call it the school broke. And it was at Roslindale High. And that we should proceed immediately up there, and we did. And just as we got there, Lena, that was near Lena Parks area and zone. Many of Lena Parks' staff under the direction of Pat Jones were there. And I remember just as we stepped out the car, there was,

you know, fighting going on, and adults were being pushed. And I remember Doris Davis was just going over a fence, and someone else was lying on the ground, and kids—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Ellen Jackson:

—were running everywhere. Black and White kids—

00:50:35:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. We'll—

Ellen Jackson:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

—have to pick that up again.

Camera Crew Member #2:

That was a runout?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, that's a runout.

[cut]

[camera roll #4104]

00:50:41:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:50:43:00

Interviewer:

OK, so you were at Roslindale High.

00:50:50:00

Ellen Jackson:

We were at, at Roslindale High. And...

00:50:53:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. Could you begin again?

00:50:54:00

Ellen Jackson:

Certainly. We were Roslindale High, and we were just concerned about what we saw, and that was a total mass confusion. Kids were running. Black kids were running to try and get on the buses, and White kids were running around, trying to get away from the area where the fighting was going on. Adults were trying to separate kids. And after a while, and the tactical police force was there. And then the, the, there was some other, Boston police there, and MDC police. And they were able to separate. And for some of the other activities that were happening throughout the city, that was what we would call a mild skirmish. We got back, but one interesting thing happened while we were there was we were pulling up Cummins Highway, and we had an inch...the cruiser, the command car into it because the kids were running across the street. Now, on the side of the Boston police car it says in big, bold, blue letters, "Boston Police." I mean you know it's a blue and white. And also it says, "Commander." And I'll never forget, and it just dawned on me, there were two White girls going across. And they were scared. I mean, in their small way, they were scared. So, the car was moving, and they just spit right on the windshield and wouldn't move, and just stood there. And there were two, big Boston policeman looking at them, and they would never pulled them at, here is the commander, and they never pulled them out...so, that's the, the kind of, of, of fervor that was being expressed. You know, hatred, and fear, and all of that all rolled up in one makes a terrible bomb in a sense. And Superintendent Chase said to us, This happens all the time. You know, I'm, I'm kinda used to it. And I wasn't, frankly. But, you know, there is the days by that I possibly would have not paid much attention, but I didn't expect to this in '74. But at any rate, by the time we finally moved around, they, you know,

moved them, the children. And we got out, and the action took place. And then we got back in the car. And he was going to drop us back at Freedom House. So, we turned the car around. We came back down Washington Street, through Roslindale Square. And all of a sudden, a code message came over, and he says something back. And we didn't think much of it. And we noticed however we, we weren't heading back toward Freedom House on the East side, but we were keeping down Washington Street towards Forest Hills. And when we got to Forest Hills, in a sense, two other crews pulled up to us, and he got out of the car. And he said, I'm sorry. He said, I can't take you back. He said, We've had a terrible incident happen at South Boston High, and we're going to have to go over that way. But I'll let you off at Bayside Mall. So, we said, OK, what happened? And he didn't say anything while we were driving along. Then the radio said that, the police radio said something that the child, the young man had been stabbed. It was confirmed he had been stabbed, and we said, Oh my God. Our first thought for any child, but first of all, our thought was it was one of our kids. And then we realized that it wasn't one of the Black students. And we said, Oh, God, what is going to happen? So, the sirens went on, and we went. And we been through many of those kinds of rides where the wheels never hit the ground. And we went off, and we got over to Bayside Mall, got out the car. And by this time, a large gathering of folks had come together. Police, the tactical police force was there, and the MDC, and the state police. Everyone was out there. And parents had begun to come to the mall and were asking how are they gonna get the kids out of there, why weren't the buses up at, at the school. And they weren't getting any answers. But in fairness, at that point, it was discussion about the best way to get those kids out. Because what was happening up at the school, at South Boston—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Ellen Jackson:

—High, was a very, very dangerous situation—

00:55:01:00

Interviewer:

We have to [unintelligible]

Camera Crew Member #2:

We got rollout—

[cut]

[camera roll #4105]

[sound roll #444]

[slate]

00:55:10:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:55:12:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, you're at Bayside Mall.

00:55:15:00

Ellen Jackson:

We were at Bayside Mall, trying to find out from the officials there what they were going to do, how they were going to do it. And that is to get the young people out of South Boston High. And basically what was happening at that point up at the high school was that the word had gotten out in that community, the South Boston community...that a young man had been stabbed by a Black youngster. And of course this was something that in any community was a tragedy. And they didn't know how badly he had been stabbed, and what the condition, his condition was. And people, the word of mouth had gotten around, and people were getting together, [clears throat] concerned whose child it was. Was it mine, who, my neighbors, whoever. And no, no one was able to give out any information. Meanwhile inside the building, there was chaos—chaos and havoc wreaking because the kids were fighting, and they were scared. And they didn't know if there was gonna be some kind of retaliation. And so the, the first command, what we understood, the order, was to keep all the stu-students in the classrooms. Well, the White kids started walking out, and the police let them. Because remember, that school was under receivership. So, they let them walk out. In fact I think maybe it was best that they did in hindsight. So, there were no fighting, there was no more fighting going on within the building. Down at the mall, we're worried because we don't know why they're not moving in. We, we expected to see the motorcycles. We expected to see whatever...security go up and, and take these kids out of the school. Well, that's because we, again, did not know how serious the mob had got outside. And they were angry. And they were going to attack the school. They were going to, to try to break into the school. Meanwhile, they were suggesting inside that they should put all the youngsters together in one classroom. And something terrible was happening in pe...with people at that time. And I mean throughout this whole thing. But people really reared their ugly racist heads. And, and, and, and, and when the teachers and the teachers' aides that would come on, who came on the bus with the students would try to go from one classroom to another as they thought the noise and people were coming closer, at least from, from their vantage point, the doors were being locked on them. They couldn't...all Boston schools have these connecting doors like

homes. You know, from one room to another. They couldn't get through. And each exit that they thought they could get out, the, the doors were being locked. And allegedly the doors were being locked by the custodians. And that was a dreadful thing to hear because the teachers were panicking, and they couldn't help but panic. And their panic was of course being expressed to the children. Meanwhile we're screaming. I mean we were literally screaming at the police down there. We were talking to di Grazia. We were talking to Mickey Roache, who was then the head of the tactical police force. Joe Jordan actually was there, the pol—tactical police force. And we wanted to know, we demanded to know what they were going to do. And they kept going off in little huddles, and they were talking. And they would come back. And they seemed to be, be just too calm for us. And people were asking us, Ellen, what, what's gonna happen? What are we gonna do? And more people were coming, and there some militant groups that had formed during that period who as, you know, expressed their concern. And they, you know, were being very vocal about how they thought it should be handled. And we didn't know what to do. We were really very frustrated and concerned about how this was going to work out. Then finally after some dialogue, which seemed like forever, a few of us were asked to come to the side of one of the buses to talk to Joe Jordan and to a few other people. And we did. And the plan was that some of us would go up on the bus, and this was going to be, there would be these four to five buses that would be going up the hill. And three of those buses were going to be decoy buses. We were going to, we were asked to...we, we volunteered to go up, and we weren't asked to do it. But we said, You're darn right. Here was our chance to prove to the parents and demonstrators. They had said to us some time early back, maybe it was the first day of school, You need to put in a position. You're sending our kids out there. You need to find out what those kids are going through. So, some of us said yes. And I remember, 'cause I was the only woman. At first they, they said I couldn't go. And I said, You're all going, I'm going. You know, I'm going. That's all [laughs] there is to it. I don't think anybody is gonna be able to stop me. So, we got on the bus, and we tried to joke. We were lying on the floor. Percy Wilson, who was the head of Multi-Service saying, God, I thought I had left these days in Mississippi. I didn't think I would be into this kinda situation again. And we were nervous. ***Frankly, we were scared. But we went out, and we got closer to the school. We, we could hear the noise, and it was like a hollow feeling when you go up that hill.*** Any time there's a noise, it seems like it goes back to the water, and it's just very echoey. And we could hear the yelling, and you could hear the sirens and things. And the idea and the objective was that we were supposed to dense it up in the seats. After a while, they took the bus around. There was a circle, and the bus was going to go. And then we would sit up in the seats. And for five minutes while wes...it, it would seem as though the students were being put on the buses. They were being put on these other two buses, and they were told to lie on the floor. And our bus came around the regular route, and they had mapped out. All this time, we thought they were being very nonchalant and uncaring about this whole situation at the mall. They were planning a strategy, a very good strategy so that we came around the front part of the building where the, the people and the mob in a sense, crazy mob was, and they could see us. And we were crouching, so we would look like students. We weren't sitting straight up so they could see that we were so called adults. And while we were trying to distract them, hopefully distracting them, the two buses with the students would take another route and, and get down the hill. When we came around that corner, first of all, just a few minutes before then, Louise Day Hicks had mounted the stairs of the school. And she was really attempting to ask the



people to be patient, to be careful, and to not do anything that they would be sorry for. They weren't paying...all the years that they paid that lady some mind and wouldn't move without her, and, and supported and respected her, you know where I stand posture, they did not care. They were out for blood that day. They were out to kill, and hurt, and maim somebody. Because although there were a lot of parents who were concerned about their kids and angry, there were a lot of other types of people out there, too, who didn't care about Black kids, who didn't care about White kids, didn't care about anybody, was just there to stir up trouble. And it was very clear that they were egging the mob on. I mean, they were shouting, and they were screaming. They were shouting at her, Get down. I think she even got pelted with an orange, or an apple, or something. And finally the police told her she was not helping, that she had to get down off the stairs. But they didn't listen to her. They weren't listening to anybody. When we started down that hill, I tell you, they rushed the police, passed the police, and started rocking that bus, those buses. I know they rocked the one I was on. And as we were going down, they started throwing everything they could get in their hands. Not rocks. They looked like boulders. It seemed like some one would have to pick, take two hands and throw these things into the wo...into the bus. And we finally got down the hill. And when we got down the hill, it was complete science. Complete silence on the bus. And I think a lot of us started crying out of fear, and anger, and hurt. And it, it was a real traumatic time [laughs] when I think about it. And then we started laughing, 'cause we started picking glass out of each other's, someone would lean and say, You got all this glass in your hair. You know? Are you OK? Yeah, we're OK. And people were cheering, and shouting, had hugging us. And, you know, my, one of my kids was there and said, Mummy, you shouldn't have gone up the hill. You know, that was very dangerous. And somebody said, You know you're not gonna stop EJ from doing what she wants to do. And we kind laughed and joked about it at that point. But it was, it was a frightening thing. And, I mean for us. So, it was, it was even more frightening reflecting on it because we thought of what could have happened to those kids. Because here we were adults, and we were scared to death. And I know those kids would have been petrified. That was another day that I'll never forget.

01:04:21:00

Interviewer:

Now, I want you to think and tell me why education, why is education important enough for Black kids that you went through all this.

01:04:32:00

Ellen Jackson:

I think throughout history, it's the one, I don't wanna call it out of poverty and ignorance. But it was the one entity within this country that has always been highly touted as a way that you can be somebody. That you can contribute. That you can be recognized and that you also can teach others and bring others along with you. It's supposed to be a way for you to join the main economic stream of United States of America. And it's supposed to be a way that you, as I said, give back. I think though for Black people, it's always been an acceptable,

respectable way to be again somebody. It's our way, and we've been told this, and we believe it, that if we are not to be considered second class citizens, and we're not to be considered chattel or whatever that we must gain an education in order to survive if nothing else but to also be able to make significant contributions to our country. I think also that it's a way in. It's not a way out for Black people. It's a way into these areas. It's a way, again, to come back, and revitalize, and to have a renaissance—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Ellen Jackson:

—of sorts within our own communities and neighborhoods, to bring new vision and new hope to others. Because we're very proud of people in our community who go off and do things. We're proud as any other people are to call them our home people, to call them our, our neighbors, and to call them our own. It's very important to us. And I think that with all of that, we see ourselves as major contributors to the society, to the future of this world. And in our way, education is the first step, step to do that.

01:06:31:00

Interviewer:

OK. Thank you. We got that?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes, we got it.

Interviewer:

OK.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

This is room tone. Starting now. End of room tone. Ellen Jackson interview.

Ellen Jackson:

Like a moment of silent prayer there. [laughs]

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

[cut]

[end of interview]

01:06:51:00

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