

Interview with **Unita Blackwell**

Date: August 10, 1989

Interviewer: Judy Richardson

Camera Rolls: 1130-1132

Sound Rolls: 160

Team: A

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in *bold italics* was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize*.

[camera roll #1130]

[sound roll #160]

00:00:12:00

Interviewer:

—'cause that's a little tacky.

Unita Blackwell:

Mm-hmm. Yeah, that's true.

00:00:17:00

Camera crew member #1:

And then we'll [inaudible] mark it. Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

This is take one.

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

Interviewer:

OK?

Camera crew member #2:

Set.

00:00:28:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let me ask you, what was it like, at first? This is about being elected mayor. What was it like that first day when you woke up that morning and you realized that you were mayor in the middle of, of what, of a White community that usually had plow—power?

00:00:46:00

Unita Blackwell:

I think that the feeling of being a mayor, I guess, you can't, you—just really, I can't give it a good description, but you felt elated, yet you know you had a lot of work to do. And if I succeed, we as a people, Black people especially, succeed. If I fail—I think that that's one of the, the feelings that I had—if I fail, then it's another strike that, that—against us. And, but it was, it was a good, elated feeling, but those was my, my concerns, that, that we have to make it. And we didn't have anything in, in the town that towns needs, like water and sewage, and all of these kinds of things. And I knew that that was the first job, was to put together the infrastructure to bring to that rural town the things that it needed.

00:02:15:00

Interviewer:

And in the sense of power that, suddenly, you as a Black mayor had power that previously had been held by Whites, how did that feel, in terms of being able to do certain things?

00:02:26:00

Unita Blackwell:

Well, I think it—that at, at first it have to grow on you that, that you, that this has really happened, that you have that power to, to do some things. Coming through the civil

right movement, I had learned about what, what you could do, but for me to be in this position was a, a, a, a different feeling to, to know that I had the reign to go and, and get this done. I was always the advocator of making sure that other folks got it done, but now, as we say, I was the power at City Hall. We used to say, Well, what can you do with City Hall? And so we'd protest against it or whatever, but I, I am now City Hall, so what, what, what, what will I do with this, this power?

00:03:42:00

Interviewer:

How did you feel personally? I mean, did you feel very responsible? Or how—what was the sense of power that you felt?

00:03:49:00

Unita Blackwell:

Well, it, it's a sense of responsibility that you, that I felt that, that I had to deliver. I guess, what I, I, what I had taken on was a community that, that I felt that hadn't had anything developed in it, and it hadn't. I mean, we, we didn't have anything. And, and somehow, with the skills and things that I had learned over the years of where to go, where to, where to try to find people to help me develop Morrisville, I was just hoping and, and praying that, that, that I could pull it all together. And, and, and that's a strange feeling, you know, that—and so I'd call upon friends and organizations and people that I had worked with, and folks that I've known and say, you know, We got to find a way to, to get some of the things for, for this community.

00:05:06:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop for a minute.

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

OK, perfect. Let me just say also—

[cut]

00:05:13:00

Camera crew member #2:

Speed.

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:05:18:00

Interviewer:

OK. So it's, it's 1984, and you're standing up at the podium at the Democratic National Convention. What did you feel like, having been an MFDP delegate before fighting all these people before? How did you feel?

00:05:36:00

Unita Blackwell:

In 1964, I went to Atlantic City, New Jersey, challenging the regular Democratic Party, and we couldn't get in. It was a long process there of trying to get people to know that we had been denied the democratic process within our state. By Nineteen and Eighty-Four, I was asked to speak in the National Democratic Convention in San Francisco. That was a, a feeling of—I felt, I don't know what I'm gonna do or what I'm gonna say, and I tried not to get emotional about it, but that was a feeling that it was worth all of it that we had been through, that we made it thusly far. I can remember a woman told me one time when I was running for justice of the peace, and I say I lost it by six votes, which they—that wasn't true, they took it, in '67. And she said, Well, the reason I won't vote for you is because they gonna kill you. The Whites had told her that they were gonna kill me. And she thought she was saving my life. And when I stood in that podium 20 years later, that I was still living, that feeling that I was standing there for this woman to understand that she had a right to register, to vote for whomever she wanted to, and that we as a people was gonna live. Jesse Jackson spoke before me, prime time of course, but CNN picked me up and several stations in our area. People did see me late at night. And some of them that know me know that, and maybe I'm doing it now, I felt tears because Fannie Lou Hamer should have been standing there. She was standing there in us, in me, in Jesse, all of us. Because in 1964, she testified. Chaney, Schwerner died in my state, Mississippi, for the right for me to stand there at the podium. That's what I felt, that I was standing there for all who had died, all who will live, all for the generation to come.

[beep]

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

00:09:52:00

Unita Blackwell:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Unita Blackwell:

I've got to do better.

00:09:55:00

Interviewer:

OK. [laughs]

[cut]

[camera roll 1131]

00:09:58:00

Unita Blackwell:

I know'd I was too happy this morning. [laughs]

Interviewer:

That's— [laughs]

Camera crew member #2:

Take three.

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

Unita Blackwell:

Y'all ask some of the tough questions.

Interviewer:

Yeah, but you did just what we needed. Are we rolling?

00:10:15:00

Camera crew member #2:

All set.

00:10:16:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's talk about the cost. Given the cost that you just talked about, where did you personally find the courage to keep going through it?

00:10:35:00

Unita Blackwell:

The question of where do you find the courage to keep going, I guess sometime you, you, you don't know. But I, I, I wanna put it that I know that when I got involved in, in the civil right movement, that I used to have a saying and that nothing from nothing leaves nothing. And we didn't have nothing, and so what was we gonna lose by trying to get something? And so I was about as low in terms of—economically, we didn't have a right to register to vote, we wasn't citizens, or any of these things. So what else can you do but go up? If you try to, to do some of these things and try to help the next generation, which I had my son to look—I wanted him to, to come up in a society that he would have the opportunities to be whatever he wanted to be. As well so as myself. So what else do you live for except for your family, your neighbors, your friends, the world? And so you, you get the—at least I felt that I did, to keep going is, is that every time I look at that and, and, and, and move through another era, because I've been through, from the era of the '60s, late '60s, to the '70s and the '80s, and now I'm headed into the '90s. You do what you have to do to make it better for all people.

00:12:57:00

Interviewer:

And how do you do that, given all you know about those who have fallen on the way? I mean, how do you see yourself through that?

00:13:06:00

Unita Blackwell:

Well, I've, I've personally have had, had to pray. As Fannie Lou Hamer used to tell me, I had to learn how to love even the enemy. It's a difference between loving and, and letting somebody walk on you. We used to talk about that we were gonna send these White people home that had kept us down all these years. We was gonna un-elect them because they were sick, and when a person's sick, they needs to go home and lay down. And that was a loving way of getting rid of some of the disease that America had. And I, I think I learned to love in the midst of conflict and chaos. And I was trained by my mother what was right and what was wrong. But when you get into the eyes and look into the eyes of hate and conflict, you have to learn these things deep down inside for yourself. And, and I guess it's a gift. I'll, I just choose to say it's a gift from God that I had the strength to continue. And I learned it from a lot of people around me with the determination. The groups that I worked with in the earliest part of my civil right days was a bunch of students, young people. I was 10 years older than most of them. Sometime we would figure out—you know, I was looking at these young students educated, laying their lives on the line. And that gave me strength during that period of, of the early part of my learning, what is my political rights? What is my rights as a human being?

00:15:42:00

Interviewer:

Let me ask you, because you mentioned the students. What would you tell to young people? What would you say to young people? How would you explain the movement for those who don't really understand it now, those young people? What, what did the movement do?

Unita Blackwell:

For the young people, that, that we all was together.

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, I, I said this wrong. How would you explain to young people what the movement did?

00:16:11:00

Unita Blackwell:

Well, I can say to young peoples today the, the, the period, the era, we call the era, people talk about the era of the civil right movement. It was a era to break open and, and start a process, which I say to young people today that they are able to be—go to colleges, universities, different places that at that time, in my state, you, you, you couldn't do it. It was a lot of people like Merritt [sic] and the rest of them, you know, you had to have the guards and everybody around, they brought out the troops, the Klans would move. It just, it was a, a time to get the process to where it is today, where they can choose. And I think the young people have to understand that movement was a process, where that they could choose where they wanted to go to school, where that they had a right to vote or not to vote. It wasn't that you couldn't vote because at that time we couldn't. We wasn't allowed to. You, you, your life was on the line if you would talk about even registering. Your life was on the—the, the things that they take for granted, I say young people take for granted now, is, is just like a everyday occurrence, that they can get up in the morning and get in a car, or walk, or whatever without always an incident. It was always an incident. You did not look a White person in the eye. You had to have your head bowed. You didn't meet a White person coming down the streets in a car better than theirs. Don't you—it's soon to be taken away from you, or they'd push you on the side or whatever. Things you take for granted that you can just go up and says, Give me some gas. You couldn't do that. You had to stand back if a White person was there, then you had to stand back and wait till the White person get their gas, and then you had to, you know, be in this submissive situation of, Please, sir, could I have some gas, sir? You know? They don't even do that. The young people take it for granted. Hello, how you doing? Yes, no. And walk in, you know. And I see them. They just walk in and out. And, and it's just fabulous to see it, you know, that the feeling of freedom. That feeling of freedom that the young people have now is what the young people before in the '60s fit for, died for, that they may have a right to continue. So we are now in a computer age, and our young people have a chance. We still got problems.

00:19:40:00

Interviewer:

Let's cut for a second. Thank you. Yeah, before we move to the problems.

[cut]

00:19:47:00

Camera crew member #2:

This is take four. Marker.

[slate]

00:19:51:00

Interviewer:

OK, in terms of the war on poverty, how, what did the war on poverty do for you in terms of that, that sense of being a citizen?

00:20:01:00

Unita Blackwell:

The war on poverty for us in, in the State of Mississippi, and especially for me, was a stepping stone for us to learn about how to be a citizen. Because now that we were trying to move out from being registered to vote, all this was happening at, at the same time. We got involved in training programs, and that was part of the, the program of, of CDGM.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

OK, cut please. OK, we're gonna—

[cut]

[camera roll #1132]

00:21:05:00

Camera crew member #2:

This is take five. Marker.

[slate]

00:21:10:00

Interviewer:

OK, give me a sense of that, that feeling that you get of finally being a citizen and realizing that it—what you're involved in is not just White folks' business now, that you have some control?

00:21:22:00

Unita Blackwell:

One of the feelings of—that happened for, for, for me, and I guess for, for others also, the war on poverty situation is when we came into training sessions and learning now that we are newly franchised citizens, some of us was ready to, to vote. Others, the passing of the Civil Right Bill 1965 that we had moved into, telling people that they don't have to do all these interpretations of the constitution anymore, and all of that, those victories that we came through. But what is we gonna do with it? And with our newly—thing that we had come into. And then that's when, that we had to learn, what, what do a board of supervisor do? What do city councils do? What do mayors do? We never bothered with that before because that was, that was White folks' business. You know, they was the only one that was in charge. And some people said, Well, did you learn that in school? Well, I'm sure it went by us, you know, in, in some places you saw the government was this and that kind of thing. But it wasn't ever spelled out that the way that we were trained, what it is that these people do, and what it is that, that we could plan our own lives to help develop things to better our everyday living conditions. And, and this was really exciting, you know, to, to be in this position of learning that. I never knew that the board of supervisors could do the things they could do. I never knew what mayors could do. I read it when we were going to school, you know, there's, there's a mayor, this is the local government, bloom, bloom, bloom. But it did not say that you could make sure that the people in your community, you know, would have adequate food or you would try to get up and, and, and do these kinds of things. You would find that we should have healthcare. We would try to get these things. We, we would cooperate with the state government, the local government, bringing all these forces together to meet the needs of the people.

00:24:30:00

Interviewer:

Cut just a second. That's it. If you could give me that—

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

—because that's perfect. Yes. OK, we're ready.

00:24:41:00

Camera crew member #1:

Speed.

Camera crew member #2:

This is take six. Marker.

[slate]

00:24:47:00

Interviewer:

OK, if you could give me a sense again of what it's like to suddenly be doing things that you had always assumed only White people could do, in the sense that made you feel like you were finally a citizen?

00:25:01:00

Unita Blackwell:

Well, we learned to find out what it is that White people always did and, and we didn't know, or what they should have been doing. And we went through training sessions, and, and the war on poverty, you know, was part of that process of getting us through that. And it just made us feel like, you know, that we was really citizens.

00:25:34:00

Interviewer:

And could you do one more time without even mentioning war on poverty, and just talk about—you could do even a little longer than that with a sense of, of going through that, that you had again assumed what only White people did and then that end piece.

00:25:52:00

Unita Blackwell:

All right. Well, you know, one of the things that, that I think we learned from coming out of the, that era, the movement, into another era of getting to be in training and learning what it is that, that we are to do which only White people did, and that was that run offices and, and be elected to a different offices. And, and mayors and, and board of supervisors and school boards and all these things that we was not on. And this really made us feel, me personally, that I am a citizen.

00:26:42:00

Interviewer:

Cut. You can cut there.

[cut]

00:26:49:00

Camera crew member #2:

Take seven. Marker.

[slate]

00:26:53:00

Interviewer:

Why did, why did Black folks leave the South and go north?

00:27:00:00

Unita Blackwell:

I think the reason why that Black folks left the South and, and went north is due to mechanization, a lot of it, and brutality, violence, all of these things that was going on in the South. And they thought it was better in, in, in, in the North. People would come back with—in a car or tell them how great is up here and, you know, and say all those kinds of things. But some of us, you know, maybe was waiting for the relative to tell us to come, or could we go and stay with them, or whatever. And then we found out that some of the cars was rented for that weekend. We found out that they stayed in little small apartments, and so, they weren't much better off. And quite naturally, some people made it, but for those of us who stayed, I feel that you can't run away from institutionalized racism. Some places is worsers than others. We faced much more violence in, in, in the South, I suppose, in some areas, but I'd like to say that it was good for us to face it honestly. We always knew where we stood in the South. We met the Klans or whatever head-on. It wasn't polished that things was better. We didn't walk around in the illusion that things was better. Up North, I think they did. I think that's one of the reason why it was more of rebellions—some people call it riot, I call it rebellion stages—in the North than it was in the South. The South was activists moving, protesting, so on. In the North, it was more of the rebellious, called rioting, and so forth because of the, this illusion. We know what we had to do. They was frustrated and wasn't too sure. And the anger come out in, in different ways.

00:30:02:00

Camera crew member #2:

Keep rolling. Unita, what do you think about America?

00:30:09:00

Unita Blackwell:

I think that America is my home and my folks has worked generations and generations. Sweat, blood, and tears has molded this country. I know we all come from our different motherlands by generations and generations so back. Mine's was Africa. But this is my home because this is all I know, and Mississippi is my home. I love Mississippi. And I feel that we have to develop our country into what we want it to be, and that's what I think about America.

00:31:38:00

Camera crew member #2:

Cut, cut [inaudible]

Interviewer:

Thank you.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:31:46:00

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