

SOHP Series: Long Civil Rights Movement

Transcript—Benetha Ellis

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Interviewer: David Cline

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David Cline (DC): Good morning, this is David Cline in Louisville on May the 11th with Benetha Ellis. And, we're just going to do quick background and then launch into talking about Park Duvalle. So, where were you born and when?

Benetha Ellis (BE): I was born in Louisville, KY, June 26, 1936.

DC: Okay, and your children?

BE: I have three children.

DC: Their names?

BE: The oldest is Vanessa, Loveta, and Troy.

DC: And when were they born?

BE: Vanessa was born in 6-2-59, Loveta was born in 1-11-64, and Troy was born in 7-19-65.

DC: And you went to schools here in Louisville?

BE: I went to schools here in Louisville. S. E. Taylor Elementary.

[Phone rings.]

BE: Madison Junior High, and I graduated from Central High School.

DC: Class of?

BE: 1954.

DC: Occupational experience?

BE: Laundry; worked for city/county government—Community Action Agency and city/county government.

DC: Okay, so now we'll launch right into this, because you told me the last time I was with you about working in Park Duvalle, so I just wanted to get really the story of that. I think you mentioned that was part of an anti-poverty program?

BE: Mm-hmmm, Community Action Agency.

DC: So if you could just tell me about what that agency was and how you came to work with them.

BE: It was supposed to have been an agency to help people out of poverty. It was an antipoverty agency. I started out as a neighborhood worker, working in the neighborhoods, Frank Clay was my supervisor. And we would go into the neighborhood and talk to the residents, see what they wanted, see what they needed, and at that time they had two housing projects: Cotter and Lang Homes and Southwick. We would just go out into the neighborhood to organize the neighborhoods, get them involved in the meetings and let them know what services that was over at the center.

DC: And this was funded by. . . how was this funded?

BE: It was a federal funded—I think it was the Johnson administration, didn't he start the poverty program?

DC: Mm hmm. And then administered locally?

BE: By Community Action. Through the city. Some kind of way, the city was the financial--.

DC: Okay. And where were the offices?

BE: The Park Duvalle offices? They were in the complexes in Park Duvalle. In the Cotter Homes.

DC: Oh, really? So you were right in the Homes.

BE: The Cotter Homes project. Mm hmmm.

DC: And how did you come to work for them?

BE: We had heard about it, I had heard about it, and they weren't really organizing. That was when Harvey Sloan first came here, and he was trying to open up a health center over there. So they opened up a health center on one side, a neighborhood service center on the other. And I heard it through the grapevine, I went and applied, and I was hired.

DC: So that was one question I had was about the relationship between the health center and the neighborhood center, trying to get that straight. So, they were opened at the same time?

BE: No, the service center was first, and during the opening of the service center is when they were implementing to open up the health center.

DC: So the service center was first, and that was through the anti-poverty program?

BE: That was through the anti-poverty program and they had a neighborhood board made up of Cotter and Lang Home residents that was supposed to have been formulating that effort.

DC: And were they? [Laughs]

BE: They were very aggressive. There was some ladies in there that was very very very aggressive. So, I think they were, I think they listened to them, yeah.

DC: But without professional organizers right away.

BE: No, they did not have--, they may have had a few on their board. I can't think of who they were at that time.

DC: This would have been about--, do you know what the date was?

BE: It had to have been about '67, '68.

DC: So, not long after they organized, you came to work with them?

BE: Mm hmmm, I came to work with Community Action.

DC: And what were the issues that the neighborhoods were bringing to you when you first started?

BE: Basically the same: health care (they didn't have any health care facilities that were close to them); jobs; I think the food stamp program started about then. Just the same poverty issues that they have now.

DC: And so, can you describe to me what a meeting would be like, or how it--, I'm sure they probably happened in various ways but what were those--?

BE: Like I said, they had some pretty aggressive women on those meetings, and a man, a Mr. John Thompson and his wife, Vernice Hunter, Margaret Young. There were a lot of aggressive residents. And a lot of 'em were kind of volatile, because they wanted to be heard, and they were kind of leery of "outsiders," as they called it, coming in and telling them what they wanted to do, what they wanted to put in their neighborhoods, because they wanted to implement it in their own way, knowing what was really needed. The meetings were interesting. They were very interesting. We couldn't wait to get to them.

DC: How often would you--?

BE: I think they were monthly.

DC: And, would there be a facilitator, or was that something that you, as the community organizer, would do?

BE: No, no, no, there would be a facilitator, a chairman, a chairperson, of that neighborhood board. And then they had two boards, a service center board and a health center board.

DC: So can you tell me a little more about what a meeting would be like? You said it was interesting, I'm sure people had lots of opinions.

BE: Oh yeah, they did, like I said. It could get out of hand sometimes. Because the residents on that board would not let anybody come and dictate to them. And they were very aggressive. They were kind of heated most of the time, but eventually they would kind of soothe it out and they would kind of get down to business. The first meeting I went to was in the Lang Homes, because they didn't have a facility in the service center. And eventually, when they would calm down, they finally got to the point where they organized enough to have the board a little more "professional," and they moved to the service center—they moved to the health center.

DC: Did the two work together, the health center and the service center, or were they separate?

BE: They were separate.

DC: You said you were one of seven organizers?

BE: I was one of seven.

DC: All for Park Duvalle or for various neighborhoods?

BE: That was for the entire Park Duvalle area.

DC: And then were there other community action agency programs in other neighborhoods?

BE: In other neighborhoods, yes.

DC: And did you all ever get together to talk about issues city-wide?

BE: They had their board, the larger board, over all of the service centers. That's—when they would get together, sometimes we would go to those meetings. But they were basically—they were supposed to have some residents, professionals, ministers, and different aspects of the community were supposed to serve on those boards.

DC: Tell me about your day-to-day work then, what it involved.

BE: Each one of us would have our own specific area that we would work in. And we would go out every day into those areas that we were assigned to, knock on doors, talk to residents, like I said, try to get them organized, let them know that we were over there, let them know what services we had, and see what kind of problems they had, or what kind of help they needed. And a lot of times we would transport residents to the center, to give them the kind of help--. Downstairs, they finally got a day-care center, and we were just helping any way we could.

DC: So there was the day-care center. What other services?

BE: There was a food-stamp office, there was a jobs program, social workers, which they were in the food-stamp office, and then there was the neighborhood workers. There was a youth program, and there was a senior citizens program, but that came out of the seven workers.

DC: What do you mean, it came out of the seven workers?

BE: One worker may have been assigned to work with senior citizens, and one worker may have been assigned to work with the youth, and the others would work with the neighborhoods.

DC: And you were neighborhood.

BE: I was neighborhood.

DC: I'm sure you got to know people very well.

BE: Oh, God, it was great.

DC: You mentioned their being aggressive and worrying about outsiders coming in and dictating to them what should be done in their neighborhood. Did they embrace you or did they see you as an outsider?

BE: At first they did. The first board meeting we went to, they raised holy cane. "Where did they come from?" Because, I lived in the Park Duvalle area, but I didn't live in the Cotter and Lang homes. So therefore, at that time, I was considered an outsider. It was quite a few of us that were considered "outsiders."

DC: Now was that just because you didn't live right there, or was there sort of a class issue because you didn't live in the homes or--?

BE: It was just that I didn't live in those two complexes.

DC: And those were large, right? Do you remember about how many residents?

BE: Both of them were very large.

DC: So in terms of number of clients that you saw, how many would you estimate?

BE: You mean in my area, a day? I think we had a quota, and I'm not sure what the quota was. But I'm almost sure we had a quota to visit so many a day.

DC: Can you just sort of describe the area to me? I mean, what was it like there, in terms of economic conditions, for one thing, and then in relation to other parts of Louisville?

BE: You mean like the Park Duvalle area?

DC: Yeah, that neighborhood.

BE: Not only the projects. They were poor, but they were proud and they were clean, for the most part. They had minimum wage jobs, a lot of them had two-parent homes, they kind of looked out for each other. They were proud people. It was kind of a joy working with them. We had fun.

DC: What was fun about it?

BE: Because you met a lot of people and you formed a lot of friendships and that's where the United Black Protective Parents came out of me having relationships with those ladies and parents and things down there. And a lot of them had your views. They knew what your thoughts were, and they knew how you were, so they would trust you. And they would tell you things that they wouldn't tell anybody else. It was a great relationship.

DC: And did you feel you were able to meet their needs?

BE: No. It wasn't designed to in the first place. It wasn't designed to help people out of poverty.

DC: What do you think it was designed to do?

BE: I think it was political. It looked good on paper. I just don't think it was designed to help people. It was designed to fail. I think that was, I think it was hype.

DC: Is that something that you came to believe over time, or were you worried from the beginning?

BE: No, that was something that we came to believe over time. Because we really thought we were going in there and boom, we were going to make a difference, and we were going to do this and it didn't happen.

DC: So, what were the road blocks that you ran into?

BE: The road blocks were basically political. 'Cause I mean, look at it now. What are they doing? It was political. And if you—like one-- I got fired a couple of times. I was the center supervisor. Most of the guys that were there, they, while they were there, they got their college degrees, and one of them was a lawyer, he ended up being a judge, and

then one of them opened his own real estate business and they did lift themselves up and out of poverty. But I became center supervisor.

DC: These were residents you were talking about, or these were organizers?

BE: These were organizers. They brought all of the neighborhoods--I don't know whether I can mention the company--but these, they looked like funny papers, and they brought them to us to pass out in the neighborhood. And my staff came to me and said, "Why are we passing these out? These are commercial. And why are we promoting this company, and passing these papers out, when we should be out here helping people, telling people what services and doing what we're supposed to do?" So me, being me, I said, "Well, we don't have to pass them out." And they wrote a letter to the director, who was downtown, telling him that we didn't feel we should have to pass these papers out and we wrote the reasons why and the staff signed and I signed at the top that I agreed with them. I got fired. The rest of the centers, they hid their papers. They stashed theirs away. So, didn't anything happen to them. But our staff was pretty vocal. We had Carol Thomas, I don't know if you knew her, she worked closely with us, her and Anne Braden, Mattie Mathis, Edna Lee, and they all felt the same way. This lady Birdie Davis. And they all felt the same way, that it was a waste of taxpayers time to pass these papers out promoting this company. So, that's why I said that it really wasn't—it had no affect on people being in poverty. Because half the people, if you pass them out, they weren't going to read them no way, they'd throw them away.

DC: But you got rehired?

BE: Yes.

DC: [Laughing] How did that happen?

BE: Well, I think I got fired about twice. The last time, I didn't go back. One time, we even, they fired the director of Community Action (CAA), and we all protested, and we just went to the main office and ushered everybody out and put chains on the door, and then we left there, and went down to Park Duvalle, and put everybody out and put chains on that door. So, if there was no programs going on, then no one could go in. Because we were protesting--. They fired the director, John Johnson, I forgot why they fired him.

DC: And you all supported him?

BE: We supported him, because he—I think he's with the National NAACP now, I think—but we felt that they were treating him unfairly because he was really for the people and the program. So, we just chained the doors and locked everybody out. That didn't go around too well. That all made the papers. So they said, "Well, this group is getting a little too bold, and we need to do something about them." And I know the politicians was talking. I don't think I got fired, did I get fired for that? I don't think I got fired for that, because I stayed there until after the bussing came up.

DC: So you were there for a while.

BE: Yes.

DC: So, bussing is '75, so you were there until '75, or past that?

BE: I was there past '75. I was there until I decided that—was that when I was going to run for office? I think it may have been. And then they said, "No, I believe she's getting too big, now." And then I didn't like politics anyway.

DC: You ran for which office?

BE: I ran for school board, then I ran for alderman.

DC: So, you were there for almost ten years?

BE: Yeah.

DC: And, how did you see things change over that ten years?

BE: I saw them getting more political. They got more political. And they started sending down memorandums where more like a dictator, as to what you could say, what you couldn't say, what you could do, what you couldn't do, and it had nothing to do with the poverty program. Nothing. So everybody was disgruntled about that. But, you know, most of the people, they needed the job. And I did too, really.

DC: What would you estimate was the unemployment within the Homes?

BE: It was high. It was very high. 'Cause they weren't giving people jobs. Although there was a state employment office that was there.

DC: That was on site as well?

BE: Mm hmm. Yeah, Reverend Nealer.

DC: And did you work closely with that office or did they work on their own?

BE: No, we worked closely with them. Those that was in that building, the state agencies, I mean, you know, they had their own agenda, but there was no conflict. We all kind of worked together when we could.

DC: So, physically the building is half health center half service center? Are they two different buildings or is it one?

BE: It was kind of two different buildings. The Service Center was on one end, and the health center was on the other. You had to go--. They were connected, 'cause you could go through the hall to get from one to the other.

DC: Is there now another community center as well?

BE: I think so. I don't know whether that's Neighborhood Place? I know they have one over at the school, Duvalle School, that they call "Neighborhood Place."

DC: Right, Ujima. That's the old school building.

BE: I don't know whether they do the same thing. I know Community Action is still on 3rd Street, I think.

DC: I'm going over there to talk to people too, so.

BE: Sterling Neal?

DC: I'm going to go talk to Sterling Neal, and I met with Georgia Eugene last time I was in town, but she was there over that community center.

BE: Over Park Duvalle?

DC: Yeah.

BE: When?

DC: I don't know the exact dates.

BE: Georgia Eugene has never been over Park Duvalle that I can remember.

DC: Really?

BE: No, not that I remember.

DC: I thought she was over that—what used to be the school.

BE: Oh, she was over that Duvalle school, yes. I thought you mean Community Action.

DC: No, I meant—I get confused as to what they're called.

BE: Yeah, this was later on when she was over there. This hasn't been too long ago. She came from the school board. And this hasn't been too long ago that she was over there. Sterling Neal had an office, Stop Dope Now, when we were at Park Duvalle. Sterling and I worked closely together, too.

DC: While we're on the subject, is there anyone else from those days who's still around, like Sterling Neal, that you would recommend that I get in touch with?

BE: I think Georgia Eugene lived in Cotter Homes at that time. Yeah, she lived there when I was there. There's Mattie Mathis--.

DC: I'm speaking to her next week.

BE: Are you really? She's a trip.

DC: She was an organizer also?

BE: Mm hmm.

DC: I hadn't realized that.

BE: Yeah, a very outspoken organizer. There was a Jackie Garner. Her name is not Garner now, and I can't remember what her name is, but I'm sure Mattie would. Jackie Garner, she was in the neighborhood. She was one of those first they met during when I was a neighborhood worker. Who else was around? There was a guy named Marion Bethel? Sterling would know where he was. I think there was--Melvin Bethel.

DC: Where there folks like Jackie Garner who were residents of the homes who then became activists or got very involved?

BE: Involved, but not paid. Jackie did. There were a lot of them. I can't think of their names right now. They were just always there. They were there in the walk-outs and the chains, chaining the buildings, and--. I'm trying to think of who was over in the Cotter homes. The ones I can think of that was in Soutwick, they're deceased. But Anne [Braden] was a tremendous help with us during all of that. Anne was right there with us, right there.

DC: In what ways?

BE: She was just supportive, mostly in the background. Anne was not a dictator. She was just always in the background. You know that you could depend on her for anything. If you needed her advice, she was there to give it to you. If you needed any kind of paperwork done or any outside typing that you didn't want anybody to know about, you could give it to her, and she would get it done for you. She's just always been there. And Carol Thomas. I think Mattie said she had just heard from Carol and I think Carol is in North Carolina somewhere. She was a great organizer. She was a neighborhood worker, too. There was a girl named Jackie Crest; she came from St. Williams. I think it was a Catholic church on Oak Street. Jackie Crest came from there, but I think she's deceased. And there were a lot of white persons that were really supportive of us, too. Suzie Post.

DC: But the agency itself, and the organizers, were all African-American?

BE: Carol wasn't. Jackie wasn't. But Jackie worked with St. William's. I think Carol was about the only white that we worked with.

DC: And the Community Action Agency administrators were black?

BE: Yeah. They had quite a few whites up there. But as far as in the neighborhoods--. They had some whites in the other neighborhoods. 'Cause they had the service centers everywhere. Sylvania, Park Hill—They had a lot of them. And they had whites in there. But as far as down in Park Duvalle, at the service center, I can't think of any but one that worked while I was there, that was Carol.

DC: Did you feel that there were issues that were specific to the Park Duvalle neighborhood, or were there the same issues in other neighborhoods?

BE: Jobs, 'cause those people, they really wanted jobs. I think that would have been the main one. Jobs and health care.

DC: And there was the job placement agency. Was there job training?

BE: They said they did. I think Reverend Neale's department was supposed to have given job training. Now I don't know how they did it, what they did. I know we would send people down there and they would come back disappointed and disgusted, saying, "Well, they ain't doing nothing for me," so I don't know whether they didn't have what they wanted or they didn't have anything at all or anything, I don't know. And we were supposed to, Community Action was supposed to get jobs for people, but they didn't. It was just the political—I mean a political organization, and it's political now. They have it just like they want it now. They pass out federal money for LG&N, that's about all I know they do.

DC: What's that?

BE: Help people with gas bills, and that's all I know they do, I don't know what else they do. And you never hear anything about them, you never hear anybody talking about them, they just supply salaries for some people. And those people are hand-picked by politicians. So, they don't do nothing. They don't do anything.

DC: This was a fairly-- The way you describe the neighborhood it sounds like there was a lot of strength and cohesion, and that persisted over time. You mentioned that in '75 when the bussing decision came down, that the friends that you had developed in the homes and who you worked with were who you turned to.

BE: Those were the people that came and formed the parent group, for the most part. Eventually, they came from everywhere. But for the most part, the first meeting, were from those two complexes.

DC: And did they bring that to you as an issue, or how did that emerge?

BE: I think we all just came together on our own. It wasn't any one person.

DC: So, in terms of being an activist, and sort of charting your involvement, how would you do that? Would you take it from that neighborhood activism and then into United Black Protective Parents? Just in terms of describing your journey.

BE: From the neighborhood to the Black Protective Parents?

DC: I'm just trying to get a sense of how you saw yourself as an activist.

BE: I didn't see myself as an activist, no. I just saw myself as trying to see what they were doing to our children. But the parent group came out of Cotter and Lang Homes. Our first meeting was over there, and I think it drew attention because there were so many of them. We would have packed meetings. I think we just did what we thought we had to do. I don't think any of us called ourselves activists. I think that's just a word, I don't know, where'd that word come from? No, I don't think we called ourselves that. We just called ourselves parents and we had to do what we had to do.

DC: Now did those of you who are involved in United Black Protective Parents work on other issues as well?

BE: Sure. We still had our jobs. At first, we figured that was a part of Community Action. Because that's what Community Action was supposed to do: organize. We were supposed to organize the residents to help themselves. And then that was just a part, because I was still working there at that time, as a center supervisor.

DC: So you considered that part of your job, the United Black Protective Parents.

BE: Sure, until I think we just got a little too big for them. Then they started picking us off.

DC: You mentioned that last time, I remember, but can you tell me a little more about what you mean by that?

BE: Picking us off? They started giving them jobs. The Board of Education. Georgia Eugene was the one, she was working at the Board of Education, she started picking the parents off. And you can't blame them. They hadn't had jobs before, not like that. I don't know what they were paying, but they were steady jobs. And when they started giving them jobs, they started diminishing our force. And then they started--. They gave us an office. The ministers, I think the ministers gave us an office. But the main thing is they started getting jobs. And you can't fight the system you work for. You can't voice your opinion against the system you work for.

DC: So when you said the ministers gave you an office, you mean an office for United Black Protective Parents?

BE: Mm hmm, mm hmm.

DC: And so, you felt that really was political, and the city was sort of undermining you?

BE: Sure, sure. And they do it all the time, they're still doing it. But there is no one to do it to now, I guess, because nobody is saying anything. That's why they blocked Broadway and all that off. 'Cause no one is speaking out.

DC: Did they approach you with an offer?

BE: No, no. I could have worked for the Board, but I didn't want to. I didn't want any other job. Because I knew how it was. No, I wasn't approached.

DC: So when did you stop working for Community Action?

BE: I think I got fired, but I forget what I got fired for. Why did I get fired? And then, when I got fired, another group gave me a job. And I didn't do anything but sit and look out the window all day, but they thought they were doing me a favor, because they kept income coming in, although it was very small. I started working for the county.

DC: What did you do for the county?

BE: It was—what was the name of that program? Inmate grievance. Where you were supposed to go into the jail and talk to the inmates and see what they needed, but I never went. It was just the black guys, in fact Gerald Neal, who is a state legislator or senator, whatever he is now, he was over that, and they said well, "Come on, we'll give you a job. We ain't going to let them just throw you out to the wolves." So I worked for them for a while.

DC: That's-- Gerald Neal is Sterling Neal's brother? And then, from there?

BE: What did I do after that? I think I went to the city. I worked for the city sanitation department. And I was an inspector. And then from there, I think Lois Morris gave me a job. She was an alderwoman. I worked for her, then I went to the coroner's office. I left the coroner's office, and then I went to the city, I think.

DC: Is that where you finished up?

BE: Yeah. When the city merged with the county, I went to air pollution. I was a supervisor. That's where I retired from. I said I'm tired of running and jumping around now. I've got to raise my kids, so.

DC: So you've had a long career in various parts of the city and county.

BE: Oh, yeah, definitely.

DC: What do you see as still the most pressing concerns in Park Duvalle?

BE: With the new houses and the new apartments, I don't know. On the surface, everything seems to be fine. Because everybody's in a new complex and the ones I talk to, they love it, and they like where they live. It's obvious you gotta have a job, you have to have a job to get there, and I don't know whether they have Section 8 or not. I'm sure there are some Section 8's down there.

DC: What happened to the folks who didn't have jobs?

BE: They are down here with us. They sent them down here with us without any training or anything. And we have to fight to keep our property up.

DC: What do you mean by "down here with us?" Just to another neighborhood?

BE: Yeah, they just spread them out, like they did when they tore down Clarksdale, they just spread em all out everywhere.

DC: In section 8 housing.

BE: Yes. Which, I guess that's a good thing, 'cause everybody needs some help. But you just don't--. Some of them need training. How to keep their property up.

DC: And you think that's not happening?

BE: No, definitely, no it's not.

DC: How about other services, the kinds of services that you offered back then, are they still in place?

BE: Like I said, I don't know what Community Action does except help people with their gas bills. That's all I know. Now, they may be doing something else, I don't know. But as far as what I can see, and what I hear, and what I read, that's all they have money for.

I think when that Community Development block grant money comes in, that's what they use. I don't know what they do. I really don't.

DC: So the new Duvalle development, what do they call it, the "Village at Park Duvalle"? Do you think it's a good thing? Or do you see a down side to it?

BE: I think it was a good thing, as far as the image and the looks. Because there were a lot of drugs and things over there. My brother got killed over there. There was a lot of drug activity over there. But they just moved it into the other neighborhoods. But I think it's a good thing. I mean, I go through there, it's okay. It looks okay. And you don't hear or see too much negativity about it over there. And I think they screen the people.

DC: Does it remind you of what it was when you first got there?

BE: No. Nothing like it. Totally different.

DC: In terms of how you described the Cotter and Lang Homes, for example, with people having a lot of pride—is that different?

BE: As far as I know, I'm sure they have pride, because a lot of them are home owners over there. And, I don't know whether they have the cohesiveness that they had at the Cotter and Lang homes, and the togetherness, the communities. I mean, they were poor, but they were proud. I don't know whether that's still over there. I know they have, I've read where they have some kind of association over there and somebody told me it wasn't very well attended, so I don't know. I really don't.

DC: So, when you first joined them in '67 or so, the major issues were jobs, health care, and poverty. And the major issues now in 2006, would be--?

BE: Jobs, health care, and poverty. Nothing's changed. No. Now, over there, I'm not saying--. I don't know how they're living over there. But it seems to be working. But I know the issues are still the same in the community.

DC: In the larger, Louisville community.

BE: Yeah.

DC: What neighborhoods now would you consider to be the worst off in terms of poverty?

BE: They're in pockets. The entire city, there are pockets. They still have Park Hill, which is a housing project; Shepherd Square, which is a housing project. I would say they're about the worst. But there are pockets all over. We have it down here.

DC: Are there leaders that have emerged in the community?

BE: No, no. There are no leaders. Well, the mayor and the county, they think they're leaders, but they're the ones that they picked for us. We don't have any leaders. That's why we're in the shape we're in.

DC: No one has really emerged in the community?

BE: No, no.

DC: Any of the ministers, or how do you feel about it?

BE: No. They didn't then, they don't now. Now they have a few coming out, but there's no togetherness. Everybody seems to have their own agenda. They're into their own little world. Their own little—what you call it, “safe place”?—the new word for the ministers. All of them have a multipurpose center and ain't nobody in them.

DC: [Laughs.]

BE: They're empty. With federal money, most of them were built. But there's no one in them. You don't see any value. You've just got these big buildings that look good. Nothing's going on. If it ain't for money, nothing's going on. St. Stephen's Baptist Church is about the only one that has a multipurpose building that's fully utilized. But that ain't free. They're not doing nothing. It's sad, really. It's sad that we're so behind. I don't know about other cities, but I know Louisville is about ten years behind. And they, I was just reading this new thing about Tavis Smiley? And he's saying the same thing. It's true. I guess when Martin Luther King died, the dream died. Everybody--. And some people that could make the difference, they ain't gonna make the difference. They're not going to do it. Because they got two-car garage and two pennies. Long as they have that, and they're comfortable, "I got mine, you get yours." And that's Louisville.

DC: That's interesting. So, what you were describing as community togetherness that you experienced in the late 60's in Cotter and Lang, is that gone?

BE: It's gone. It's been gone. It's not here. Because the few that could have been potential leaders, like I said, they got two-car garages and two pennies they can rub together, so what do they care about somebody being in poverty? You know, it's go along to get along. Or get along to go along, whichever way it goes. So, it's kind of sad.

DC: So the other issue I told you I'm going to be doing some research on in the next couple of weeks is talking to folks who live around Rubbertown and that area—does that strike you as one of the pressing issues in Louisville right now?

BE: You know, I worked for air pollution. I know what's going on. It's been down there for years. I used to inspect and take samples of that stuff down there. They've been

polluting for years. And they're not gonna—those big companies [telephone rings]—they're not gonna stop those big companies from polluting. It's going on, it's been going. [Conversation about the phone] Yeah, they've been polluting down there, I worked for air pollution for 10 years. And I used to take samples of that stuff. I've taken samples where it would eat the paint off people's car. Take the paint off their houses. And I had some friends that died down there, that worked in those facilities. I used to do asbestos inspections down there. It's been there. And they talk about they have new air pollution control equipment. They are always having malfunctions. But they have—I don't know whether they've eliminated it or not but if you call in your malfunction, then that makes it legitimate. So they have what they call a malfunction log. And I've been telling people, "Y'all need to get that malfunction log, see how many malfunctions they've had."

DC: They call them in, but nothing happens.

BE: No, no.

DC: Does that just discourage you, or does that make you think, "Okay, this is something we need to really push on," or--?

BE: Oh, it needs to be pushed on, that's definite, but it discouraged the workers that was working that was always going out there and seeing the damage that it was doing. And, I mean it's way out: LG&E Cain Run, LG&E Mill Creek, DuPont, BF Goodrich, American Synthetic Rubber. I've been in all those plants, and all of them have been polluting. Borden Chemical. Yeah, they've always done that. And the powers that be know they're doing it. And they'll slap them on the hand and they'll say they're getting a little piece of equipment, but they don't do it. Anytime two or three 'o clock in the

morning if you are going on 264, you'll see it. 'Cause that's when they're doing their most damage. Two and three and four o'clock in the morning.

DC: Is it mostly black neighborhoods around the plants or is it, it varies?

BE: No, it varies. Campground Road and Riverside, and all out there—it varies. They're white, mostly.

DC: And have they organized around this?

BE: They used to. They were trying to organize, but I don't know what happened. But this little new group they got now, they're not doing anything. I think all of them are jockeying for recognition.

DC: React, is that the group? Reverend Coleman?

BE: I don't think Reverend Coleman is--.

DC: Yeah, I don't think he is part of it.

BE: It's Anita Gadsen and--. They don't do nothing. They're not going to do anything.

DC: So you think they're just jockeying for what?

BE: Recognition, and one of them is Gerald Neal's niece [Eboni Cochran], and she's getting ready to run for office. The sincerity, I don't know whether it's there or not. I'm not in their heads, but I'm not seeing it. React, STAR all of them. And I know Art Williams [at Air Pollution Control], the director is going to do whatever he can do to keep himself out there and keep his image good and keep in with the politicians 'cause I worked with them.

DC: I'm sorry, his name?

BE: Art Williams, the director of Air Pollution Control District. And he hasn't been there the whole time. I worked under Bob Arthur, John Trout, Bill Sexton, Art Williams—I worked under four directors at Air Pollution.

DC: I was planning on trying to get in touch with him.

BE: Who, Art Williams?

DC: Yeah.

BE: Well, carry your television camera 'cause he'll give you a nice interview. Prick. He's an attorney. He came out of a law firm, 'cause I've even been in his office where they had an asbestos episode. That was years ago. He just wants to maintain his position. He ain't going to do nothing. But tell people what they want to hear. So, good luck on your interview.

DC: [Laughs.] Anyone who would really tell me the truth?

BE: At Air pollution? They better not! No, 'cause they're not going to let you talk to them, for one thing. Air pollution has a—what do you call it? Gag rule? It's not out in the open, but it's a gag rule. They better not talk to you. But no, I don't know anybody at Air Pollution that will tell you the truth. 'Cause the last time I saw someone that I know worked there, she said nothing has changed. Art Williams is going to tell you enough so he'll look good with the politicians. Good luck!

DC: Sounds like a lot of politics.

BE: Well, sure it is. 100 percent politics.

DC: How about over as I'm doing more on the Park Duvalle neighborhood story, anybody else that comes to mind, again? I know you thought of some names, but--.

Sterling Neal, I'll definitely try and get a hold of. Anyone at the Health Center?

BE: Tom Moffett. He's treasurer of the Alliance. I think he's in the finance department. He would be about the best one that I would know that you could talk to. I was surprised; he called me the other day, wanted me to go to the Alliance meeting. But I was surprised he was still at Park Duvalle. Tom has been there forever.

DC: Any of those former residents that you worked with that you might recommend I get in touch with?

BE: Just Jackie Garner. And she's not a Garner.

DC: And you think Mattie Mathis will know how do get in touch with her?

BE: Yeah, Mattie would know, I would hope. Betty Bryant, I don't know where she is. I don't have any number on her. She was one. I think she lives in Park Duvalle now. But I don't know how to get in touch with her. Those are about the only two that come to mind right now, is Betty and Jackie. They were very active. And they lived in the neighborhood.

DC: Now, are you still active?

BE: No, politics just turned me completely off. It's too dirty, underhanded, hypocritical. Louisville is—if your family tree doesn't go back to doctors, lawyers, or even though they might have been drunks or pimps or whores, then they don't recognize you. They don't care what they did, as long as they got "doctor" or something by their name or "lawyer" or something by their name. If you don't, they don't even look at you. I don't like politics in Louisville. I know it's dirty everywhere, but the politics in Louisville are very dirty and very petty. So, I just didn't feel like being scrutinized. I don't mind the scrutinizing, but the harshness of it. I wouldn't put my family through that.

DC: Was that as a result of the races that you were in?

BE: Yeah, but see when they opened up my closet doors, I was going to open up theirs. 'Cause like I said, when you open up mine, I'm going to open up yours. They have politicians up there right now that they have hand-picked, if you opened up their closets, you would be surprised at what would fall out of them. It was just too dirty. And I don't think it should be that way. And then they money that you have to raise, why? They called me to work on the polls. One hundred and fifteen dollars. It's better than a half-pint of whiskey and a box of chicken, but I still didn't do it. I'll vote, and I'll express my opinion about my vote, but I don't want to get involved. Art Williams asked me, when he first came to Air Pollution, he wanted me to run against Paul Baker, who was the 12th Ward alderman at that time, because they didn't definitely like him, and I didn't particularly care for him, 'cause they were all crooked. And I told him no, I wasn't going to do that. He said it would be well-financed. And I wouldn't do it. I told him, I don't even like politics. After that, it was downhill with him, too. So, he offered me that, but I didn't want to do it. All the politicians are hand-picked. It's according to how comfortable they are with them, or where their genes are. Cheryl Bryant's grandmother was an activist, supposed to have been, her father was a doctor—he was a pervert—half of them drunks and everything else, and that's who we've got running our city. Sad. The elite, supposed to be, the elite crowd. You got to have some linkage. And my father was just a roofer and my mother was a housewife, so, they didn't have it.

DC: What do you wish you could have gotten done?

BE: I wish the people could—and I think they do—but I think they just feel like it's helpless, like there's nothing they can do about the phoniness and the compromises that go along in the city. And to see that together, there's a whole lot that the black

community could do. Things would not happen that's been happening around here if we would get together. We could get together, eradicate—If there are dope houses in my neighborhood, they don't last long, because we're not going to tolerate it, because we've been here too long. If we could come together—but we have so much division. Back with them two pennies and two car garages. The Urban League, they don't do nothing.

DC: So at a neighborhood level, as far as the drug houses, you can deal with that, but. . .

BE: Sure, I go to the neighborhood meetings, when they have meetings, to discuss specific issues, I go. And some of the residents around here go. But most of them feel like, "Aw, they aren't going to do anything anyway." And that's sad, that you have, "Oh, I don't go out; I don't even go out of my house; I'm not going out there." How are you going to be a prisoner in your own home? That's crazy. But they just feel like there's nothing they can do. Like it's hopeless. "They're going to do what they want to do anyway." And that's what they say. Well sure they are, if we let them.

DC: What are relations like with the police?

BE: They don't like them, they don't trust them. Because they're trying to build this bridge now, but it's too late because—and I'm not saying that some of the things the police do are wrong, because that's what police do, it's police. But I think some of it could be handled better. If a man is running, why are you going to shoot him in the back? You know, right around this neighborhood, on the next street over, we've had about three killings. I'm not going to say it's justified; I think if you are dealing drugs, you got to know the chance you're taking. Because something's going to happen.

DC: Has the violence gone up, or is it about them same as it's been?

BE: It's about the same. In some sense it's kind of—it's still there, but it's not in your face like it used to be. They're still out here on these corners and things. But you know when you get caught—and the police know, they should know, that's what they do—when you get caught, don't cry. There's no communication between the police and residents. They don't like them, they don't trust them. I think they're having a meeting tonight with the candidates, and I may go.

DC: What election is happening?

BE: I think these guys are running for Ann Northrup's seat. And they're having a forum down here at the Yearlings Club at 6:00 tonight. And I think I'll go. And if you want to go see your community leaders, you go there. It would be interesting. It's down there about 45th and Broadway just before you get to southwestern parkway. Straight down Broadway. It would be.

DC: And there will be questions from the audience?

BE: I think they did say there would be questions from the audience. I don't know who the coordinator is. A lot of times they don't let you answer questions, they don't let you ask questions, I mean. It's crazy. I think they are four candidates. One of them they say is crazy, but I like him better than I like any of the rest of them. His name is Berl Farnsley. I think his father was the mayor at one time.

DC: What position is this for? Is this an alderman position?

BE: No, Ann Northrup, she's a Republican senator. One guy, John Yarmouth, he had a newspaper, a weekly—*Leo* or something like that. I don't know anything about the other two.

DC: Are the candidates white or black or?

BE: They're white.

DC: They're all white?

BE: They're all white.

DC: And the neighbors I'll see tonight will be mostly. . .

BE: Black. And you'll see. It's terrible. I'm not just making it up. It's actually a reality.
6:00.

DC: I'll be there.

BE: I'll be there too. I just thought of it as I was talking to you.

DC: Anything I didn't bring up this time that I should have brought up either about just general Louisville issues or specifically in that Duvalle neighborhood?

BE: I think the job thing is what bothers me most, because the young people around here—Louisville does not embrace young black college graduates. If you're not somebody's daughter or somebody's son, your chances of getting a decent job around here are like nil and none. Most black graduates have to go out of the state of Kentucky to get a decent job and I think that's terrible. I think Louisville should embrace their own. But they don't. They do not embrace their own, they do not encourage black college kid in these positions. I heard Ernie Fletcher said something about, "Jobs for geeks." What is that? How does that sound? What is a geek? The mindset in Louisville—they're small-minded, and it's scary.

DC: Are there more black kids graduating from college?

BE: Sure.

DC: So there's been some improvement.

BE: Well, I think they've always graduated from college, but you'd be surprised, they aren't here. They have to go elsewhere to get a decent job. 'Cause they feel like they spent all their time and money going to college, they're not going to work for no minimum wage. I don't blame them.

DC: Do you think that's related to the leadership question, too, in terms of where the next generation of leaders is going to come from?

BE: Sure. And right now, running for office in this primary election, if somebody's a politician's daughter, son, niece, nephew, or a judge, "my father was a judge," or something like that—those are the ones running for office. Like I said that [Democratic senatorial primary candidate] Berl Farnsley, his father was the mayor. That John Yarmouth, I think he's from an elite family. They don't listen to grassroots people, they don't have a clue. They don't want to listen to them. Because they have their know-it-all, they know what we need.

DC: You've described the work you've done as this kind of grassroots work.

BE: 'Cause I'm a grassroots person. Very much so.

DC: In any of the work that you've done over the years, have you had allies at all within the political system, or been able to get money from them? What's the relationship been?

BE: There is no relationship. I've had a few of them come, not knowing that they weren't elite, "Why don't you run for office? We need you. We need you in office." "No you don't. You're not going to pick me apart like a chicken, honey, no." The *Courier-Journal* endorsed me in one of their races, and they said that I had morals and I ran on principle. And then one guy said like that was a bad thing.

DC: [laughs]

BE: So I said, "okay. I see." So I had to be hard core -- no morals and no principles.

That's politics. They don't have any morals, they don't have any principles. They don't care who you are. So I don't want to get in that jungle.

DC: This is depressing.

BE: It can be. But you know what, it is what it is. But you don't let it depress you, because you know that you got to do what you got to do.

DC: So what are your sources of strength?

BE: My family, I pray a lot, my friends, my church, and I just do what I have to do. I don't need no politician to tell me what's right or wrong. And evidently, it's obvious, he don't know. And I don't work for anybody anymore. I don't guess they can bother my retirement, so I'm not in anybody's pocket. I'm a free spirit; I can say what I want to say.

DC: Let me ask you just one last question. I just want to get your take on this project that I'm doing, and this idea that I told you about, the way we're sort of talking about this is this long civil rights movement, what came earlier and what came later. Do you think we're right?

BE: In documenting it?

DC: Yeah, or do you think that idea is right that it's a longer movement?

BE: Sure it is.

DC: Do you see it as all connected?

BE: What you mean longer movement?

DC: Well, in terms of there were issues in black struggle much earlier, and the sixties is the civil rights period, but then aren't there issues that continue?

BE: There are, nothing has changed. I think it needs to be documented, I don't know who's going to see it or who's going to be looking at it, but it is something that needs to be addressed, because we are no better off than we were in the 50's and 60's. We are no better off. We're still being contained like cattle. We're still in poverty. We still don't have the jobs. The politicians are corrupt to the core. They're more corrupt now than they've ever been. Nothing has changed. And I think what you're doing is a good thing. But I don't know who's going to see it or how you're going to get it out there, but it needs to be gotten out there. Because most politicians, they're not going to listen to me anyway. Who am I? What do I know? They're not going to listen to me. They didn't listen to Ann [Braden]. She "didn't know what she was talking about." But they were all out there when she died. "Oh yeah, she was good woman." No no no, that's not how they perceived Ann at first. When we first started working with Ann, they talked with us and said that Ann was a communist, and I'm saying well, "What's a communist?" And when I found out what a communist was, I said well, "what's the difference?" What is the difference between a communist and the United States right now, I don't see the difference. "We can't work with her. You don't have any business working with Ann. Because Ann is this and Ann is that." I said, "Honey, I've talked to Ann, and I've asked Ann, 'What is a communist,' and she told me. And I'm saying, I don't see any difference. Dictators, we've got them. Oppressors, we've got them. So whatever we have to do, Ann, come on, let's finish doing our job.

Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed. There is still the phoniness, the pettiness. I call our black politicians "the petty politicians" and they are very petty, very

territorial, very elitist. And I think what you're doing, if it's gotten to the right people, whether it will do any good or not, I don't know, but at least it's out there.

DC: And that's the idea, is that it leaves a record.

BE: And I see where it's going to be at the University of Louisville. I was at a forum on bussing at the University of Louisville. Anne Braden, Georgia Powell, Suzie wasn't there. The attendance wasn't like it should have been. They had some photos that were really great from back in the day. But you think these people around here care? Back with the two car garage -- they don't care. And it's sad. "I got mine, you get yours." That's how they feel. Especially the black politicians. They need to be run out of town. Back to what you ask me, and I don't know whether I've really answered it, but I think it is a good thing. And I feel good about you being here, and I'm honored that you even thought to come to me. I'm honored. And I really, really thank you. At least somebody's listening. And most of those other people you talk to, I'm sure they'll have enough to tell you, too. Now, I don't know about Sterling, 'cause he might be on another playing field now, but he used to be very very active.

DC: Yeah, I'm really interested in hearing about it. Because I know his story coming out of Black Power organizations. . .

BE: Yeah, Stop Dope Now. He was very active, very radical.

DC: Well, I can't thank you enough.

BE: No, I can't thank you.

DC: And I'll see you tonight. I wouldn't pass that up.

END