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Howard F. Harris: Well, I came to Tampa in 1930, the fall of 1930. I came here to teach science at Booker Washington High School. At the time, I believe Booker Washington had approximately 500 students and a faculty of between twenty-two and twenty-seven. It was the only junior high school and only senior high school in town for blacks, because its classes ran from the seventh grade through the twelfth grade. I worked there for five years during the beginnings and through the middle of the Depression; after that I went to Bradenton and taught, and was assistant principal in Bradenton for another five years. I had graduated from Atlanta University back in 1929 and had had one year of teaching experience before then. So during my earlier years I was involved in teaching.

During the war years, the beginning of 1941, I went to Boston and worked in war industry there during World War II, but I returned to Tampa in 1947, and have been here ever since.

Fred Beaton: Okay, Mr. Harris, what were the conditions of blacks in the 1930s in Tampa?

HH: I think it would be honest to say that segregation was pretty much an accepted way of life. There were a number of differentials. For instance I remember that while at Booker Washington as the head of the science department, I was paid a hundred dollars a month. The heads of the science departments at Plant [High School] and Hillsborough [High School] were being paid \$155.00 and \$165.00 a month. That was something—and I think really had not begun to be questioned until just about the time that I came to Tampa.

It was within two or three years after that that Mr. Edward Davis—and I'm sure that you have interviewed him, because he was one of the prime movers in the fight for equal salaries for teachers. Another person who was on the faculty at Booker Washington—and who, incidentally, was a colleague, a fellow alumni from Atlanta University—was Ms.

Hilda Turner, who is also retired, and I'm sure you've interviewed her. If you haven't you need to, because she was the one who permitted herself to be used as the plaintiff in the court suit on salary equalization.

As I say, in 1930 I think it was probably was not even a question—it was pretty much accepted that your black teachers were paid less than your white teachers, and the ferment began, I'd say, within that two or three or four years between 1930 and 1934, thirty-five [1935].

FB: Okay, Mr. Harris, you say you return to Tampa in 1940?

HH: Yes.

FB: Okay. What profession did you go into; did you go back into education or what?

HH: No. I returned in 1947, the fall of forty-seven [1947] and for a year I worked in—my wife and my sister-in-law and I had a restaurant, the Rogers Dinning Room on Central Avenue. And I did some substitute teaching. But in January of forty-nine [1949], I began working the public housing sector as a manager of the College Hill Homes Housing Projects. I stayed there until sixty-seven [1967], came into the central office in sixty-seven [1967] as a administrative assistant or assistant to the executive director, and in sixty-nine [1969] became the executive director of the Tampa Housing Authority. I remained there until I retired in February of seventy-seven [1977].

FB: Okay, Mr. Harris, was there any problem with your ascending duty to the executive director?

HH: Ah yes—again, I think it's fairly honest to say that during the first years that I worked at College Hill Homes that I had no inkling or indication that I ever was going to ascend to the position of executive director; it just wasn't one of those things. Now I think—and this is speculation, but I think that my coming into the central office was originally intended as a kind of "this is our prize Nigger" type thing. That the board—and if you remember, we had passage of sixty-four [1964] Civil Rights Act and so forth, and I think until that time there were no blacks in the central office of the Housing Authority. Until that time, the Housing Authority had had a fairly rigid policy of segregation both of its employees and of its residents, and there were a few questions being asked that indicated that you might possibly withhold some federal funds and that sort of thing.

I think really that my going into the central office was politically motivated. And I really believe that at the time, it was sort of anticipated that I would sit there and be visible, and not do a hell of a lot, but be visible. Now fortunately during that time the former executive director of the Housing Authority had retired and they had (inaudible). I was about to say that fortunately at this time, a man whom I considered a tremendous individual, Mr. J. L. [Junie Lee] Young, Junior, had recently been elected the executive director. Mr. Young was a excellent administrator; he had been an interim Mayor of the City of Tampa and had been a member of the board of commissioners of the Housing

Authority, and he apparently saw some capabilities in me that he could use. As a result, I got invaluable training under him and I got a chance to show my capabilities, also.

Unfortunately, after about a year Mr. Young was hospitalized from February until August, and during the period that he was hospitalized I served as his alter ego. He passed away in August—he died—and at that time it became necessary to elect somebody else, or appoint somebody else. In spite of the fact that I had served during that period, I was not appointed to the position. I had no quarrel with the person who was appointed, let me make that clear, because Mrs. [Daisy] Dooner, the woman who was appointed, was a longtime Housing Authority employee. She was a very competent person, and I did not in any way get involved in any "I should have had," "Why did you get it," "I didn't get it," "I'm not going to work with you," and that sort of thing.

Now, there was at the time—there were a number of directors, black, in public housing in other parts of the country, but in the southeastern region—that is, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Alabama, Mississippi and so forth—there were no black directors of Housing Authorities. That has changed since then, and there are several; the director of the New Orleans Housing Authority is a black man, the director of the Louisville Housing Authority is a black man. I just give those as a couple of examples. But at any rate, when Mrs. Dooner resigned in March of 1969, the board then did elect or select me as the director.

FB: Okay, Mr. Harris, the first time you wasn't elected, were there any direct confrontation between the Housing Authority and say the NAACP or Tampa Urban League, or any other organization in your behalf?

HH: Well I think there was a—I don't know whether you would call it confrontation but I think there were certainly—well, at one time—this was late after Mrs. Dooner had indicated that she was going to resign. I think there were picket lines and that sort of thing just prior to the actual selection; the Urban League and the NAACP, the newspapers, the mayor. I got a great deal of favorable publicity, ya know, and favorable news coverage, let's say that help to generate the final decision.

FB: Okay. Do you consider your appointment as executive director as a direct result of your own work, or as the direct result of, say, the commissioners, or what part?

HH: Well, of course the commissioners are the ones who had to make the decision. I'm sure the commissioners were under a considerable amount of pressure because they were getting it from as you say, the Urban League, from the NAACP, from other black and other white organizations and influential people. The mayor himself, Mayor [Dick] Greco, was on record and strongly urging that I be appointed. I think I was capable, so I think it may have been a combination of the two things.

FB: Okay. Mr. Harris, when you got elected or appointed as executive director, was there any animosity between the deputy director with the lower echelon type of officials, or did you have to clean house or what?

HH: No. Strangely enough, the man who served as the assistant or the deputy director initially was white; he was about sixty-seven or sixty-eight years old, not really very capable, but intensely loyal. I think if I had asked him to buy me a pack of Camel cigarettes, and to buy them from the drugstore on the left hand corner of this end of Dale Mabry [Highway] of the Gandy Bridge, it wouldn't have dawned on him to buy them anywhere else. He would have gone and gotten those cigarettes from that particular place. So I didn't have that problem with him.

Now the board at the time that I was appointed did appoint another man as deputy director, and eventually I did have to terminate him, on the basis of—well, I don't really think it was a racial thing. He was young, he was an excellent carpenter and cabinet maker. He was what'll I say a "diamond in the rough;" there was very little in the way of culture and that sort of thing. He was uncouth and vulgar and profane, and I did get rid of him.

FB: Now, did you have any problems say, dismissing or firing, or anything, or did you have to meet any type of guidelines set by the commission?

HH: About this same time—and I hope I'm not rambling to much but I want to give a little background. Shortly, during the period when I was being—during this transition period, even shortly before Mr. Young's death, we had as an agency been seeking some federal funds for modernization. Now, many of the developments were built well—North Boulevard homes were built in 1930-1940, the wiring was inadequate. It might have been fine for those years when the only thing you used electricity for was water, was lighting. You didn't even have electric refrigerators in the apartments at that time, but it was woefully inadequate when you bring in the toaster and TV, and maybe the air conditioner and this, that, and the other.

So we had applied for modernization funds, and the catch thing in the modernization fund was that you had to improve—and change—your management style somewhat, meaning that you—even some of the what had formerly been accepted practices, you turn somebody's lights off when they didn't pay rent. We had to agree not to do that. The lease had to be revised so that you protected not only the rights of the Housing Authority, but you protected the rights of the tenants. We had to establish what they would not allow us to establish earlier, and that was some kind of social service activity. We had always done it, but we had had to try to cover that position by calling it something else.

So anyway one of the things that they said is that you must have a community service activity. You must have a community services director, and this can't be just somebody that you picked up off the streets who has worked as an LPN [licensed practical nurse] somewhere or something, it has to be someone that meets the minimum qualifications. The minimum qualifications were a master's degree in social work and at least five years of experience.

So we advertised for the position, and we got several applicants. Mrs. Dooner, before she

retired—now, this was my immediate predecessor—had ask for board assistance in helping to fill that particular position. And a personnel committee of the board had interviewed a number of people, and Mrs. Marjorie Guest was one of the applicants and one of the persons that was interviewed. The Board Personnel Committee—[speaking to another person] Come in, Mr. Hargrett, come in.

Mrs. Guest—the community service director was hired actually by the board and they did not hire Mrs. Guest. They hired a man who was much less qualified, but who was white. Mrs. Guest filed a charge of discrimination, and the whole thing was investigated and so forth and it was determined that the board had to declare the position vacant and re-advertise, rehire, and then after re-advertising, hire the person most qualified. Now in addition, the hiring investigators indicated that the board had not followed the Housing Authority's policy, in that they had—the board itself had made the selection rather than having the director make the selection.

Okay, so we did declare the position vacant and we re-advertised, and again Mrs. Guest, on paper certainly, had by far the highest qualifications of any of the applicants. This time we did go by the book, and I made the appointment. There were on the parts of board members some negative feelings that we had appointed a person who had had the (inaudible) to haul them into accounting for having over looked them in the first place. And the very next meeting after that the authority to hiring and firing at that level was removed, a kind of a slap on the wrist, and that created some problems for a number of folks for quite some time. It did, really.

FB: Okay, Mr. Harris, what was the relationship between the unions and say, management?

HH: There was no union at the time that I went into the position. Two unions came in and had an election, and the labor of Local 1207 won out in the election. We then worked with Mr. Gross and his white organizer—I guess; I don't know what exactly his title was—and with Mr. Hines, who was the business agent for the local union. I guess our first union contract was in 1972, generally speaking, and then it was renewed a couple of times since then.

Generally speaking our relationship with the union was good. There were some personality flashes. My relationship with a particular member of the union, the secretary/treasurer, Mr. Gilder, was not good, and it finally had deteriorated to the point where I simply wouldn't even try to communicate with him because we just weren't communicating. But that was not as far as the union itself was concerned. I think that the union has been helpful in helping to get for the employees some benefits that they might not otherwise have gotten.

FB: Mr. Harris, can you give us a history or the background of the Tenant Association, and where it came about and the importance of the Tenant Association?

HH: About this same time, and this goes back to the—around 1968 and early sixty-nine

[1969] and so forth. I was saying that some of the things that we had to get done in order to get the modernization money were being done. It was about that same time that the Tenant Associations got started. Now we had generally as individual projects—groups of tenants who met and had a club that did this thing, that thing and the other thing—but no real organization. So what was done was, as a part of the community service thing, the setting up of a executive committee of the Tenant Association. We had elections at each of the projects—in fact, I believe the first election actually we had hired the use of the official voting booths to have the election of two people from each location. The executive committee was composed of some twenty or twenty-five people so elected. They got a charter and that sort of thing, and we set up meetings once a month with top management and the Tenant Association.

FB: Was this a powerful organization?

HH: Powerful, yeah. I think it was quite influential. I think it's still quite—

Side 1 ends; side 2 begins.

HH: Finally after they had gotten a budget of something like \$15,000 a year, which the Housing Authority made available to the Tenant Association for its usage. An office space was set up for the volunteer organization of the Association. I understand that now there has been set up in the North Boulevard project a two bedroom apartment that has been furnished almost totally with things gotten from Goodwill, or from other sources that have been rejuvenated and so forth, as a motivator to prospective tenants and to people who already live there to show that, hey, this is what you can do if you make the most optimum use of what you got. You don't have to have \$10,000 worth of furniture to have a neat, clean, attractive apartment.

FB: Okay, Mr. Harris, in the last year or so the federal government has come up with all type of guidelines and policies for the tenants. Can you elaborate on some of those guidelines?

HH: Well, I think the pendulum is sort of swinging back the other way now. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, and then three or four years later there were all these various kind of things, like I have already described. The social thing—we had to revise our application; you couldn't ask to see a marriage license, you couldn't—There were so many things that—I'd say that housing became extremely—because of the requirements of the federal government, became extremely permissive during a period here of four, five or six years, extremely permissive.

A part of it may be attributed to the fact that when [George W.] Romney was secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development¹, at one time I think he was held captive in his own office by protest groups for some time. Of course, all of this was during the height of various protest movements, anyway. I think that while the rights of tenants are still being protected, and rightly so, I think that it's becoming—as I say, the

¹ 1969-1973.

pendulum's swinging back a little the other way so that there isn't the almost chaotic conditions that were required at one time by the federal government.

There's a whole lot of different instances like that. I remember one time they came through with a thing that practically bankrupted every Housing Authority in the country. Their motives was good, but when you ended up with—at one time we had 892 families who were paying less than \$10.00 a month in rent, and we were having light bills that were averaging \$35 and \$40 a month—I mean \$35 and \$40 per family. We had 161 families who not only didn't pay anything—didn't pay anything at all, I mean zero, zip—but in addition to that, we owed them money because this thing went into effect say in March, and the directive came out in February and said it must be retroactive to November. So you end up—here's a person who has paid you \$32.00 a month for rent for four months and suddenly he doesn't owe you any monthly rent, and you got to give back to him this three or four months rent. Man, it was chaotic there for a while. And as I say, the motives were good but it was fiscally irresponsible.

FB: I think in the last year—it might be the last eight months—there has been some type of guideline that the tenant must show his income.

HH: Well, he's always been required to show income, as it has always been necessary to verify income because the rent he was paid was tied in to what income he had. In other words, you might have two people living side by side in the identical apartment and one would pay \$15.00 a month rent and one would pay \$70.00 a month rent simply because the income of the two families were different. So there's nothing new about that. Now, there has been a move afoot to make sure that you have a diversity of families, so that you don't have everybody at the lowest rung on the economic ladder, but you had some who were middle income or at least low middle income families, presumably to serve as role models for some of the families who at the low end of the scale.

I think the—I can't speak too well for the last eight or nine months because I've been out of it since the first of February of last year, but I could sense even then that there was a kind of tightening up on the requirements for admission to public housing, because while public housing in the forties [1940's] was looked upon more as a stepping stone to home ownership and that sort of thing, I think in the late sixties [1960's] and seventies [1970's] became more and more a housing of last resort. You began to build homes or apartments for senior citizens who more than likely aren't going to move anywhere else, but are going to stay right there. Your percentage of welfare families was increasing dramatically. I think now there is a tendency to reverse that trend and have some (inaudible) and have a better economic mix. And I think then probably is—I know this family way down here on the lower end of the income ladder doesn't see it that way, but I think it's probably mixed for a more viable authority and more viable project to have this.

FB: Okay, last two questions. What do you see as the future of blacks in housing particularly in Tampa?

HH: Well, I don't think there's going to be any, but a very little—if any—more of the

public housing of the kind that we know about. That is, the huge 500 or 600 unit projects that were built in the forties [1940's] and the fifties [1950's]. I think other housing, other types of housing, is going to be the way to go. I think Section 8, for an example, is going to increase and improve. You know, public housing in Tampa now has almost about 4,800 traditional project type housing, but it also has about 1,000—which would be close to one fifth of that number—of Section 8 families, who are living and disbursed throughout the community. And probably very few people know that they are "low income families," other than the landlords, the Housing Authority, and the tenants themselves. I think that's probably the way most of it is going to be from now on.

I don't think public housing in Tampa has quite the negative image that it has in some other places. I know that it—you know, there's many of—black families particularly and I'm sure the same thing is true of whites, because at one time you did have segregated projects—but there's many black families in Tampa today that lived as either as a child or as a young adult in public housing in Tampa, and do not necessary feel ashamed of having done so. In the forties [1940's] when the North Boulevard Homes was first opened up, North Boulevard Homes provided the best possible housing available to blacks in Tampa at the time. And I'd say that quite a large number of your present Tampa leaders lived in public housing at one time or another. I did. I don't consider myself a present Tampa leader, but it helped the heck out of me.

FB: Okay, Mr. Harris, last question. What type of contribution do you think you have made to Tampa, the housing community, and say the employees—what I mean by employees, the old employees, otherwise probably wouldn't even gotten on to Tampa Housing Authority?

HH: I certainly hope that there are many more blacks in the central office than there were when I first went there, because as I said, I was the only black. I think central office now is about 50/50. There are black department heads as well as white department heads. There's a black assistant in the department, I know that.

I'm not going to take full responsibility for it, because I think there were a number of things that we were responsible for, but I know that salaries are considerably higher now than they were. I can remember the time when nobody—and this wasn't ten years ago when there wasn't but \$10,000 salaries in the entire organization, except that of the executive director, and I know that we've had inflation factor in. We've had a number of other things, but there must be a half a dozen jobs there now that are over \$20,000 and there are a whole lot at fourteen, fifteen, sixteen thousand dollar jobs; surely I had something to do with that.

I like to believe that I have had some influence for good on a lot of people. I hope I did. I look around now and I see some of the people who were students of mine, for example, when I first came to Tampa, and I tell somebody who some of them are and they hardly want to believe it but I say, "Oh, yeah, Dr. Sheehy, he was in twelfth grade when I first came to Tampa; I used to teach him." Or if somebody say, "Mr. Archie is here; he's retired from the school system as a principal," "Yeah, I remember when Archie was in

twelfth grade also; I use to teach him. He played football; he was a pretty good quarterback." I think that I had some influence on people, maybe not as much as some other people have.

FB: What part did politics play in say, influencing how—was the commission—did the commission bear pressure on you for the things that they wanted?

HH: The commission—well, they were political individuals naturally, because they were appointed by the mayor and they were confirmed by City Council. They did not get any pay, they didn't even—well, after Julia, they didn't even get the nominal \$20-\$25 or whatever for attending board meetings or anything like that.

We had a couple of audits that were critical of a couple things that we had done. For example, we had had some bank funds deposited in banks with which the commissioners had interest, and the audit finding was that—not necessarily that there was a conflict of interest, but it was certainly that we had not made our investments in the place where we could have gotten the largest amount of interest. So we got the money out of there fast, and put it in other types of investments.

Now occasionally—and we did have surplus money, you know; residual receipts that were left over at the end of the year. We at one time had considerable saved money. So we would have to—if we didn't have use for it immediately, we were duty bound to invest it, and while we were limited in the number of types of things we could invest it in, we couldn't invest it in a casino type thing; we couldn't go to the dog track and try to invest it, but those things where we could invest like certificates of deposits with the bank or treasury bills or what have you. We were required to shop around and find out who could give us the best rate of return on our money. Now in any case the bank had to put up collateral to cover the amount of money that we had invested and it's surprising that even for a short term we could get as much of a difference of a spread of a whole percentage between banks, because they...some of them had special reasons for wanting to do business.

I think after the—I think the board members tried to keep their noses clean, I'll put it that way. And I can't—I don't think that there were any cases of raw favoritism toward this supplier as opposed to that supplier if his product was not as good, or this one getting a contract instead of another one getting a contract because he was a brother-in-law of the board member. If any of that happen, it would have—it was enough under the table where even I didn't know it, let's put that way.

end of interview