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Rev. James Netters, Memphis City Council Member, 1968

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Carolyn Yellin- This is tape 2 reverend James L. Netters recorded June 5th 1968, room 504 city hall. Interviewers Joan Beifus and Carolyn Yellin.

(Tape Break)

Joan Beifuss- So then you were at Clayborne Temple then what did you do after the Clayborne Temple period of time?

James L. Netters- I sort of milled around through the area where a lot of the tear gas had been thrown and several cases of police brutality were cited and I had a chance to talk to two or three other people. One man that had been beaten real badly. I recognized him as one of the (muffled) in my district.

Carolyn Yellin- Could you give us his name?

James L. Netters- No I don't remember his name right now.

Carolyn Yellin- You just recognized him.

James L. Netters- Yes and he talked with me and he told me what had happened. I offered to get him home but two friends were helping him home ok. There were a lot of young people milling around who were threatening to do what did follow and that was burn and wreck buildings and so those that I knew I talked to them and asked them to go on to leave and they would be given instructions on what to do later. Some of them took my advice and went on others just sort of ignored it, they didn't respond violently in any way but they just listened and didn't move on.

Carolyn Yellin- This was a spontaneous reaction on their part.

James L. Netters- Yeah.

Carolyn Yellin- As you encountered it, they just felt this way as a result of the events?

James L. Netters- Yes they were mad. Everybody was either hurt or mad or scared.

Carolyn Yellin- How did you feel?

James L. Netters- It was an emotional in every way, just emotional. By that point I had reached a point of numbness, I really had no feelings that I can recall. The motions the whole ordeal had become one that well I don't know how to explain it really, but I had no feeling of hurt, I had no feeling of anger I was just more or less looking of the right thing to do and how to quell things down. I have a tendency when I am in severe problems or troubled moments to escape with all my personal feelings, this is one of the psychological traits I developed. So I had reached a point of no fear for myself no hate or anger, but just seeking the next thing to do, care for those who were hurt and injured and to try to keep down unnecessary outbreaks of violence if possible.

Carolyn Yellin- But one thing you felt at that moment even that Dr. King should not return to Memphis.

James L. Netters- Yes for his safety and for what it would possibly do for his future plans and I knew he was planning this mass march in Washington and I felt that in this case it was peculiar to any that he had been involved in the past.

Carolyn Yellin- There was a difference here?

James L. Netters- It was definitely a different thing and all of his other ordeal or encounters of violence he had been the object of white hate or racism. Here the whites stayed away except for the ones that participated in the march. There was no violence imposed on anybody as such all of the violence erupted out of the negro group itself and this has never been the case in any of his activities before he was always the object. Now he was definitely identified with the violence that projected so this created quite a bit.

Carolyn Yellin- And the initial violence was unquestionably and no one has ever disputed that the initial violence was the breaking of the windows and any response of police that has since been labeled brutality was a response to that.

James L. Netters- Response to that, I was looking at it, the police did not provoke any of the initial violence, neither was there any threats hurled from any whites, there was nothing imposed by the white community which set off this violence on this day. It was purely erected out of negro initiated.

Joan Beifuss- Did you see any of the march leaders immediately let's say at Clayborne Temple, because you had talked to say Jim Lawson?

James L. Netters- I was with Jim Lawson for about an hour afterwards and I met with him at the corner of Vance and 4th street. He was there trying to get some of the kids to leave the area, he had a megaphone. And I assisted him in trying to clear the area and with the two of us together we did get quite a bit of response, they were moving out as we asked them to do so.

Carolyn Yellin- Using bullhorns?

James L. Netters- Yes.

Joan Beifuss- What kind of shape was he in at that point, could you tell at all?

James L. Netters- Well to me he looked very tired and weary because he was awfully disappointed after that, the outbreak and the eruption of the march. Because he had one of the spearheaded the trend to bring King here.

Carolyn Yellin- You think he felt this sense of responsibility for having brought King here?

James L. Netters- At this point yes, I am sure he did because in many of his expressions he related this.

Carolyn Yellin- But did you say anything about your feeling then that you thought..

James L. Netters- No I think we all just withheld our personal feelings, we didn't want to blame anyone or say anything to any to incriminate the others. We knew at this point whereas we had many differences, I have differed with him in many instances but here all of our differences were put to pass and we seemed to have a mutual responsibility of trying to do the things at hand and that was clear the area for the safety of all of those involved.

Carolyn Yellin- Now during that next week, the week between, that march and the assassination, and this was a period when the curfew was imposed. Did you have any personal reaction to that? Or any personal experiences during that period?

James L. Netters- No, you must remember that my position on my council made my whole activity a bit unique to the other leaders. For it was understood that I would not be in a lot of the meetings because of my activity with the council. When they were meeting elsewhere and making plans to redo the whole thing, I was behind closed doors with the council in some committee meeting and this is where most of my time was spent for the next week.

Joan Beifuss- Did the negro leadership people like Lawson and COME people did they understand your position?

James L. Netters- I don't know I had very little communication with them from time to time.

Joan Beifuss- Let me go back one more time to that Thursday, were you anywhere in the area where Larry Payne was killed?

James L. Netters- No I was not near that area at all.

Joan Beifuss- Ok now would you, can you say anything about the rioting that followed that night was your assessment now that it was serious rioting or that it was a small scale sporadic thing? If one can (muffled).

James L. Netters- I didn't well equate that with being small but it was certainly serious but as far as any organized area that they would just destroy blocks at a time this was (muffled) it would have to be termed sporadic because there was no pattern to it, there seemed to be one or two areas where there was definitely a grudge in the area. For instance in my neighborhood the grocery store was burned about three times, on three different nights or occasions.

Carolyn Yellin- Is this a grocery store owned by a white owner?

James L. Netters- Yes he has been out there for years and a very close friend to many of the negroes.

Joan Beifuss- Did you speak with him during this period and try to say something that would help them..

James L. Netters- What do you say?

Joan Beifuss- What did he say?

James L. Netters- He just said that he didn't understand it. He said I just don't understand it. And things were just so heavy and so tense at the time and persons who you know were suffering this kind of abuse and you had nothing consoling to say to them, and you knew that you should have and I (muffled) some of them to tell you the truth.

Carolyn Yellin- I want to move on, I want to move on and not take too much time but I do want to get to the night, to the day of the assassination. Where you first heard of this and what happened with you?

James L. Netters- Well the day the news came over the radio that Martin Luther King had been shot I was in the Claridge Hotel with about 5 other fellow councilmen. And the union or rather the mediator who had been assigned by the mayor to work with the union leaders and other leaders to work out the clutterances of bargaining.

Joan Beifuss- Frank Miles?

James L. Netters- Frank Miles. We were there with him and we were at that moment planning (muffled) terms by which we could work out an agreement with the union. He was trying to get the council, as many as 7 members on the council to commit themselves to an agreement that he had a planned proposal that he was planning to present to the union and the civil rights leaders. And we had agreed to have a sandwich and he was back in the room again and the, I heard it over the radio something about King I just barely heard it, the radio was in the next room. And I said it sound like I heard something about King getting hurt.

Carolyn Yellin- You were still with the other people?

James L. Netters- Yes we were in the room together it was a suite and we were sitting in the living area. So I rushed in the room to the radio and then they repeated again that King has been shot and he is (muffled) and that he was being rushed to the hospital. I said again, oh my god this is the end, this is it. There is no use talking anymore, all hell is going to break loose now and then the other group came in to the radio and got the details on where he was going and what not. So we decided to come over to city hall and talk with the mayor to see what moves he was going to make and since we were right across the street (muffled) council members were with us and suggested that we came over there. So we went over and went to the mayor's chamber and there we sat and talked for a moment and then we heard that King was dead. Well I ma not usually emotional to the point that I break down out of the ordinary. But I admit that day I broke down without restraint and actually the

mayor and all of the (muffled) there were attempting to console us. Fred Davis and I were together in this.

Carolyn Yellin- What was the mayor's reaction to the news?

James L. Netters- I actually saw the mayor cry and I don't think he would like me to say this but I actually saw him wipe a tear. And I guess...

Carolyn Yellin- Did he say anything that you recall?

James L. Netters- He said that he was sorry that it had to happen like this. But he hoped that in some way that I could understand that he had take some stand in (muffled) that I was oppose to that I possibly wouldn't understand but he was hoping at this time that I would understand his position. With these words he tried to console me. Well I guess I broke down even more so and I repeated something like if they had only listened when I tried to tell them over and over and over again that this wouldn't be (muffled). Now whatever happens I hope that we all live to see it. I guess that was (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- When you said we all live you were including everyone in that room.

James L. Netters- Everyone in that room.

Carolyn Yellin- You had a real sense of....

James L. Netters- I knew the nature that was in the making for all of us. I called home and suggested that my family leave home temporarily until I was able to get there, I didn't know what would be the response of the community toward them and I didn't know what violent actions might erupt so I asked them to go out to my mother's and stay out there until around 10 or 11:00. And I, my mother kept the kids and so my wife and I went home. We never stayed any night away from home during all the riots.

Carolyn Yellin- Until the night of the assassination.

James L. Netters- That was the night of the assassination.

Carolyn Yellin- Oh you stayed at home, even that night.

James L. Netters- Even that night but we took the kids away and we went home later about 11 or 12:00. Even though the curfew was on I still (muffled).

Carolyn Yellin- Well we are nearing the end here could you say reverend Netters that the city has changed as a result of this?

James L. Netters- Yes the city has changed in many ways. We may not be able to evaluate the depths of the change and the real meaning of it for some time to come but the things that have happened here in our city will never be forgotten. They have made some bloody pages of history and I think they have affected us all, I think the negro has been affected in a peculiar way of recognizing some kind of

responsibility that he has not recognized before and I know the white man has recognized that he has long forsaken brother needs him and I believe he has awakened to that fact.

Carolyn Yellin- Even on this day that Robert Kennedy may lie dying can you still say that you have hope?

James L. Netters- Yes. I have hope.

Carolyn Yellin- Hope that we overcome violence in our communities in our nation?

James L. Netters- I guess this is my spiritual feeling that I...(Tape End)