

MOVEMENT BUILDING

INTERVIEW THREAD TWO: MOVEMENT BUILDING, CHICAGO

MARY LOU FINLEY

“There was a lot of disappointment from the summit. Okay, there was -- back up here. So out of this meeting came an agreement, which we've referred to as the Summit Agreement, still referred to as that. And it was, it said that all these changes would take place in a whole variety of institutions in Chicago that had to do with open housing issues. One thing to mention is that when Martin Luther King put the demands on the door of City Hall, they were not just about open housing, we called it an 'open city' and it had to do with -- mentioned police brutality, it talked about the welfare system and the changes that were needed there. We talked about economic opportunities. So, the original demands for the summer were much broader than those actually brought to the summit discussion, which were only around open housing. It was not really possible to get the realtors to say, 'We'll stop discriminating tomorrow.' That's what we wanted. They said, 'Well, we're going to think about this and we'll try to change the way we do things.' And I don't remember quite the exact wording, but we did not get a definitive statement from them that discrimination in housing will end in Chicago. And that was the main thing I think that was really distressing to people.

“The Chicago Housing Authority was supposed to do some things to integrate the housing that they had. There were a number of other city organizations. So, the agreement was disappointing in some ways and it was particularly, I think, disappointing to the younger staff because we were used to winning. You know, after the campaigns in the South, people thought, 'We have a big campaign. We're going to win.' And it wasn't really a very clear victory. And so- and we didn't get a national fair housing act out of it either, which was another kind of thing we might get out of it. So, between those two things, it was perceived as not really taking us forward very far. But I want to say that one of the things that did come out of it was an organization called the Leadership Council for Metropolitan Open Communities, kind of an awkward name, but this organization existed in Chicago for 40 years. It was supported by grants from the business community. And it really made all kinds of efforts to make housing more available.

“So, they ran what was known as the Gautreaux Program to move people out of public housing into, quote, 'opportunity neighborhoods,' that was run by the Leadership Council. They sued realtors when they discriminated. They provided free legal support. If you've got discriminated against, you could go to the Leadership Council and they would sue on your behalf, and so you didn't have to pay an attorney. And so, they were able to convince some landlords by suing them basically. That was one thing they did. They also started doing training for landlords and telling them, 'You know, you can't discriminate like you're used to doing anymore.' And they ran a whole training program for landlords and realtors. So- that- which looked like a feeble thing in the agreement. 'Okay, you're going to form this organization. It's going to keep working on this issue.' It didn't look like much at the time, but looking back on it, it actually was forty years of work and 40 years of commitment by leaders in Chicago to try to deal with the issues around housing desegregation.”

HARRY BELAFONTE

“I think Chicago was a—was a huge awakening for him. I'm not quite sure how he envisioned it, but he always saw the North and for those of us who lived in the North, as people who experienced -- whatever experiences we were having were lesser of all the evils, unless you know the South and what's going on in the South and what's going on in the South, you have no idea how bad the situation is because in the North, you're somewhat insulated.

“Well, that concept or that thought from his perspective was immediately changed when he met- when he encountered Chicago and Cicero [Illinois] and what he did. And in making the decision to move into Chicago, was he felt that very strongly that to begin to unearth the silent prejudices, the silent racism that so dominated the North, to rip that apart and to let the world see that the North was really not very much better than the South, if not even worse because it was hidden beneath this façade of the more democratic place to live. He felt that Chicago and what went on in the North was perhaps as significant if not more in many ways to what was the, again, extension coming from the Montgomery Movement up to this moment, that the bigger picture was really what was taking place in the places that didn't debate it much -- the North. What went on in New York and Chicago and then Detroit and all those places that- where there was racial seething, he, he had a lot of homework to do and he sure drove us all to look at things and to see things through prisms we'd not quite been challenged to do before.”