

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JOELLA EDWARDS INTERVIEW  
*OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**Joella Edwards**  
**Classmate, Punahou School**  
**May 21, 2019**  
**Interviewed by: Peter Kunhardt**  
**Total Running Time: 19 minutes and 8 seconds**

START TC: 01:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Joella Edwards

Classmate, Punahou School

## **Meeting Obama in 5th grade**

01:00:12:12

JOELLA EDWARDS:

When he first came into my school, when Barry first came, I was excited, for me, being a little girl, I hadn't been there from first grade to fifth grade, I had been by myself, and when I say by myself, I mean being the only little Black girl there. And yes, I had friends and everything, but still being the only little Black girl and being teased all the time was very difficult for me. So, when I saw him, I thought, he is just like me, but he's a guy. But he's the same color skin, so maybe we can be allies and we can work together, and they won't

1

tease me as much, and maybe they'll stop because they will see somebody else, and it just got worse.

01:00:49:10

JOELLA EDWARDS:

I do remember times when I would try to think that maybe we could work together on something, but he would get- I- to me, I think, when kids- when you have boys and girls - looking at it back in hindsight- you have boys-boys will be boys kind of thing - and if you go more with the boys you can outdo the girls. So that's what I saw him start to do, whereas I kept being by myself, but at the same time kids would say, the minute we ended up being together, kids would say "Joelle and Barry sitting in a tree" or "Joelle and Barry this" and it was kind of hard because I didn't want to be associated with him as a girlfriend. I just wanted us to work together to be accepted by the other kids, you know, so that the teasing would stop.

### **Experience at school as she got older**

01:01:39:11

JOELLA EDWARDS:

I would go home crying every single day begging my parents to let me leave Punahou. The older we got, the worse it got. There were times when we- as we got older in PE class, there were classes we had to take, dance classes, so we'd learn how to foxtrot and all these little dances that you had to learn. And people, again, would try to put us together. There was always somebody

trying to put me with Barry. Somebody trying to put Barry with me. The older we got, the teasing just- it got worse because you learn more. The older- you learn more, you learn more, to say more, you learn more words, Olopop, Opopollo, I mean, and of course the n-word.

01:02:11:19

JOELLA EDWARDS:

When we got older, and I think it was because we have the Punahou carnival every year, which is like the kickoff to the carnival season in Hawaii, and it starts in February- the beginning of February and it's a big deal, and kids literally, that's a time when, you know, just like asking somebody to prom, you ask somebody to the Punahou carnival, and kids would do that. Oh, they were horrible, every year every year, "Joella's going to ask Barry" or "Barry is going-" you know, it was back and forth, and it was a constant thing. So the more- if he stayed away from me, if we stayed away from each other, then maybe that would stop. Sot it was never- there was always a, you know- It was a push and pull thing - If I go too close to him, we're going to be teased, if I stay back from him, I'm going to be teased - so it was either way, I was at a loss. There were situations that he could have come to my defense. Did he? I would say no. Again, there's that boy girl- um I'm a boy you're a girl. If I hang with the boys- I won't be a jock, If I'm with- If I, you know, you are a girl, you're just a girl. So, and it was harder back then in the 60's and 70's, now that things are much different now, as much as they should be. But it was a lot harder.

**Impact of her negative school experience**

01:03:17:20

JOELLA EDWARDS:

I didn't like my own skin. I didn't like the person I was, I didn't like anything about me and I didn't even know much about Black folks in-in- at all. I remember someone saying to me "what's up my sister?" back then when I was a little girl and I was like "I'm not your sister, I have a brother. What are you talking about? Sister?" I didn't know. Being in Hawaii, I didn't know. And I wasn't around Black kids, I wasn't around others, except for if we went to Thanksgiving or Christmas with my cousins so, it just made it hard. I'm that little girl that they tormented, and they treated so poorly. But I'm a big girl now, and I got a lot of strength from it, but am I still upset? Yes. Am I still angry with some people? Yes. And do I wish they would say something, apologize, change things? Yes, I do, but basic personalities never change. I don't know that he shrugs it off, and I say I don't know that he shrugs it off because, you wouldn't put it in a book if it didn't affect you. You wouldn't have wrote about me and the things that happened if it didn't affect you. No, it affected him. He wouldn't have been a constitutional lawyer; he wouldn't be president. It affected him. I think it just affected him in a way where he said it's the positive things that he can do for it, that's what I think. But no, it affected him. How could it not? It affects- Anything that happens to people, when you're little, you'd be lying if you said something didn't affect you. So

yes, it affects you, and I know it affects him, like I've said before, you know, when I write, or when I say things, he's been included.

**Finding a mentor**

01:05:06:13

JOELLA EDWARDS:

Franklin Marshall Davis, who I did not know as a little girl, and we used to go down to Waikiki and he used to give really good advice, just talk. As I got older, again this was as I got older, as I was learning more about the Black community, about things having to do— because in school we weren't taught—we were taught very little. I knew about Harriet Tubman. I knew about a few people, but I really didn't know my own heritage, my own anything and again like I said, I didn't like myself and I didn't like Black people. And he'd just give us these stories and he'd tell us a whole— wisdom, and just, you know, hang in there, in his words, in his way to be able to make it through life. And it was just nice to sit there and listen to him talk.

**Obama's father's visit to the school**

01:05:51:06

JOELLA EDWARDS:

I remember that Barry told people that his dad was a king and that his dad was a prince, or important, you know? And as a child, of course some of us

would embellish some stories, like kids do, because you want to feel accepted again.

01:06:05:18

JOELLA EDWARDS:

And then when Barry's dad came, it was a time when all parents had to come to the school. We- not- I might not say, maybe not all parents came, but I know my parents did, it was the sharing time, and Punahou is very big on that. Of the parents being just as involved in the students. You know, know what most parents did. So his dad came, and we all sat there and listened to what he had to say, and I think at that time, for me, looking over at Barry, and knowing that, again, thinking- me thinking that this is going to help solve some of the problems, and I can't say- I couldn't say racial problems then because I didn't know as a little kid that these were racial problems that we were having. But um, that maybe this would solve things and no, still. Maybe for a time, for a moment, just, I think, for the other kids to see that this- that he had someone darker in his family than just the white people they were seeing, but did it change anything? I don't think so, I don't think so.

### **Singing in school with Obama**

01:07:07:09

JOELLA EDWARDS:

Growing up we all had to- we would go to church, we had a little chapel I should say, we had this chapel and we had to wear these white robes and

they would have these big red bows. And each class would have to sing or do a little chapel part, and we would do that, and through the years, those of us who went on to sing in choir, because I was in the ninth-grade choir, so those of us who went on to sing in choir kept singing. So, when people say, they thought, well, “We didn’t know this president sang” well you didn’t look into him growing up, and his youth to see that he is a man of a lot of things.

***Dreams from My Father***

01:07:44:16

JOELLA EDWARDS:

When his book first came out, “Dreams from My Father,” and when he was a senator, I remember, you know I have a lot of family ties here in Washington D.C., and I remember family members would call my dad, and I remember my uncle Bill met him and said “Oh this man’s going to be president one day, and I would sit there and roll my eyes and grit my teeth and be like, “No. Let’s not do this.”

01:08:07:04

JOELLA EDWARDS:

He- he named me Coretta in “Dreams from My Father,” which I thought was really interesting, and people use to say, “why Coretta?” and I would say, “I don’t know, you need to ask him, maybe because two T’s and two L’s?” Joella, Coretta that’s- you know. And some people would compare it to Coretta Scott King, and I’d say you can’t compare Joella to Coretta, maybe that was a

thought in his head or something, but we're not even close to the same people. When that book came out in Hawaii, it brought back a lot of memories, and people would call my parents and say "you see your daughter and you know that's your daughter" and we'd laugh and it was little jokes. When he became president that book actually became... it turned my life upside down it turned my life, my family's life upside down. I was called crazy names by just about everybody on Fox News, and I said, again, I said instead of you people calling me a name or saying something about me or writing about me in a book, why not call me and talk to me? I'm on Twitter, you busted me out on Twitter. Nobody would do that, nobody would come to me and I, you know, and it got to the point where I said "are you not coming at me because you know I'll be coming at you afterwards? Because you know I have something to say? Because you know- you're scared of the truth?"

01:09:12:02

JOELLA EDWARDS:

But I knew that one day- I used to sit up there and say it, I even said this on Twitter I said, "one day someone is going to listen and somebody's going to hear my side of the story, they're going to hear that there is a real person, real people that were in his live and other classmates! Hey guys! I got a whole 300 and something classmates that we all grew up together, too. Now people will know, no he was actually there to put a lei around the White House and get you guys right. And, you know, now people will know the truth, that no,



I'm not just a character, everybody in that book we're not character's we are real people.

**First hearing about the 'Birther Movement'**

01:09:44:19

JOELLA EDWARDS:

I don't remember hearing specific "the birther movement." I heard, birther this and I kept saying, "what's birther?" to people like, "what is this birther stuff?" and they were oh birther- people didn't know at first, birther birther, I'm like "what is this stuff about? What is this tea party stuff about?" Well, you know, because "Barack Obama wasn't born in Hawaii" what do you mean he wasn't born in Hawaii? Again, for me, it drove me insane because that was not true. Why- How- How did you st- how did it even start?

**Trump and 'Birtherism'**

01:10:20:17

JOELLA EDWARDS:

The more he would talk- he makes me so angry, like he makes me really angry because he is such a liar. Like he's- 'cause he started all that stuff, he made- that's- and to be honest he's part of what made my life hell. I was getting followed from people on Twitter from Trump this and Trump that. No, he's, all the things he said, and he just did it out of jealousy, I think he just did it out of- and just continued to do it- So that he could do what he's doing

now. Ruin our country as far as I'm concerned. But um no, the more he did stuff, the- the- the correspondence dinner, when Barry busted out the birth certificate and stuff, I kind of wish he had done a little more, only because it made him, you could see at that point it made Trump feel some type of way, he got butt hurt by it, but his lies, to this day- Like I said, I really believe I got suspended from Twitter because of me telling the truth on Twitter and calling out the birther lies, and Trump's people and all his little minions finding people on Twitter to not put out the truth, and I truly believe that that is what is happening now, still, that he is still trying to get people to not believe in this, well no, this is the truth, so stop. And because he did it constantly, and like I said, I got suspended permanently now from Twitter over me saying, "this birther stuff, this stuff- this is true, this is true, this is true" but yet I get suspended.

**Obama's 2004 DNC speech**

01:11:45:11

JOELLA EDWARDS:

I remember a friend of mine calling me and saying "Girl, that's your classmate! Oh my gosh!" and going- I mean, this girl went crazy, and my son and I were talking about her earlier today as a matter of fact. And she went crazy, and she was actually from Chicago, which is why she went nuts, saying "he's going to be our president, he's going to be our president one day" and I wasn't as political at all.

01:12:07:23

JOELLA EDWARDS:

In fact, I've never been political until he became president and I got attacked. That's when I became political was when I got attacked on Twitter. Um, but yeah that- that's- Yeah. I think, even for myself, then I knew that he was- he was on his way. I listened to my uncle, my uncle said, "I believe he will be pre-" when my uncle called- my Uncle Bill called my dad and said he had met Barry in his chambers, when he was a senator ,and said, "I met your classmate," he called me. "I met Joella's classmate" and my dad said, "Oh, you met Barry?" and Bill said. "Yeah, he's going to be president one day," and sure enough, and I wish my Uncle Bill had been alive to see that.

### **Campaigning for Obama**

01:12:50:02

JOELLA EDWARDS:

Yes, I actively campaigned for Barack Obama, yes, I voted for Barack Obama, yes, I stood in line for Barack Obama, yes. I was on the Obama bandwagon.  
Ha-ha.

### **Election night 2008**

01:13:04:13

JOELLA EDWARDS:

I was elated. I- my daughter has a picture of me when he won. I- I was beside myself, like I can't tell you how excited I was. Barack Obama, Barry, no matter what, just the fact that this man, and his wife, and his children were going to be in the White House? Oh, I was- I was excited. A Black woman in America? I was excited. Yes, I was happy! Yes, I was extremely excited. Yeah, I think America needs more diversity, America needs- and the thing is, I'm going to be honest too, I didn't just see him as a Black man, I saw him as a local boy from Hawaii, I saw him as the man coming to put a lei around the White House, like that's how we are in Hawaii, open arms, you know, diversity.

### **How Obama navigated race**

01:13:50:23

JOELLA EDWARDS:

I didn't feel like he dealt with racism enough, I felt as though, again, he dealt with it, but I wanted him to go deeper because of what happened to us when he was younger. There were several times when I said "can you just tell people; just tell people you were bullied. You know, did you not say it because you were embarrassed to say it? Did you not say it because you didn't want to bring it up?"

01:14:14:02

JOELLA EDWARDS:

But I used to sit there, and I remember there was only one time he was sitting there, and he said something, like "Yes, finally he's saying something!" But it

12

wasn't, to me, it wasn't enough. You have to say more. And I don't think, not just me, me just being Coretta in the book, no. Me being a Black person in America, I felt that maybe you could have said just a little more because there were some people out there that just really felt that, you know, again, your America's first Black president, so just, show a little bit more that you're Black. But then again, it's hard when I know what he went through, I know how hard it was for me to just say, "hey!" and at the same time, you want to be diverse to everybody, you want to be— because that's how we grew up. I don't care, white yellow pink green it doesn't matter. You can be evil, nasty, an asshole, you can be that no matter what color you are. So that's not what matters to me, and I know that's not what matters to Barry, and, you know, other people.

01:15:07:04

JOELLA EDWARDS:

Definitely, I felt he had to walk a fine line. Which I thought was ridiculous. He was trea— the way he was treated. Scrutinized for every little thing he did, every little move he made, every little person's name he mentioned to do anything, people acted as though "oh, that's not good enough" or "oh that's too good" or "he's too good" and no, he was just trying to do— really, I really felt like he was just trying to be diverse for America. He really was, I don't know why people couldn't see that. it was for everybody. And that's why I'm kind of torn because I get where it's hard to just say "I'm Black, and yet I want to talk for blacks or to Black people, but at the same time I'm the president,

13

and it's kind of difficult," I get where they could be, you know, where it was hard for him. I get it at the same time, but yet I kind of wish that he just said just a little bit more, just a little bit.

**Relationship between Obama and Trump presidencies**

01:16:10:17

JOELLA EDWARDS:

I think that that's part of it, because I truly believe that if people had known, and listened, and stopped that birther – can I say birther bullshit? Because that's what I used to call it. Hashtag birther bullshit. If people would have listened and stopped that, if that would have been nipped, I do believe that Trump wouldn't be – because that, I'm in South Carolina. In the dirty south, listening to people before Trump was elected. "Well no, uh uh I'ma vote for Trump because of this and this and this because this and this, and well no, Barry, no, I'm Black, but he didn't do enough for me, nope, nope." And that was– they were saying wait a minute, no because he's not from the U.S. anyway, and you know, that birther stuff. They were believing it!

01:16:47:16

JOELLA EDWARDS:

And I would sit there and say, how? I'm from Hawaii, trust me, no, that's not true he' from Hawaii really is. It didn't matter, I was a liar, like I lost a lawsuit in Florida over me being called a liar because of the lies that were going on about him. So, no, I believed that if people knew that this was not a lie, that

yes, he's really from Hawaii and yes, we all really grew up there yes, it would have stopped some of the crap. Yes, definitely.

**Obama's influence on her life**

01:17:18:08

JOELLA EDWARDS:

Positive. Definitely. I mean, yeah you have the little negative, but the negative is from what we dealt with as children. Again, I had to find a way through everything that happened, to find me again. I had to find me then, I had to find me again, and yet I had to find me again through this journey, and I have found another me through this journey that Barry took. And I'm like, you took me on your journey with you. But it's made me a better person, it made me know more about myself, it made me know more about my family. It made me know more about my ancestry.

**Trump presidency**

01:18:02:19

JOELLA EDWARDS:

I used to be more hopeful when Barry was in office, because I knew that- in fact, we used to say, "Oh, if he could only have a little bit more time in office, I think we could break through all these." I think now with Trump in office, it's taken us backwards, and into a worse place, places we don't even need to be, for no reason, because again, it goes back, when I say the birther bullshit, it

goes back to that. Had you believed in that you would not have voted this way, you would have not gone this way, you would have said “you know what, there’s some truth in all this” and it would put us a whole lot forward. With this, and the race relations, it’s throwing us completely back, completely backwards, and I think it all needs to stop. And that’s why I think the truth, having the truth about your 44<sup>th</sup> president, might make you look at 45 a little different, and make the rest of America move on from this, and go forward instead of backwards.

01:18:55:10

JOELLA EDWARDS:

I truly believe, and I think that we can– I think we can get our country on a better path we were on instead of all this crap we’re on now if people open their eyes to truth instead of the lies.

END TC: 01:19:08:21