

**Maya Miller and Operation Life Community Development Corporation
5-19-94**

We're talking about your work with Operation Life in Las Vegas. It's May 19, 1994. So, whatcha got there, Maya? (laughs)

Well, I have all this stuff and I thought that one thing we might sort of establish is who, what presidents were what in what years, because as we get into the 70s and 80s, it gets more confusing who was who. And it also became more important in relation to Operation Life, and I don't know, was Nixon in one and a half session, so he was 68-76, when was he impeached?

He left in '74. He was elected in '68, and re-elected in '72 and then he was impeached.

Then Carter was from '76 to '80, four years, and those are the important years for Operation Life, and this, for instance, is the 1981 refunding proposal, and this is the overall economic development plan, and that was one of the things you had to have. I think the thing to go from is Ruby's part in the Las Vegas Strip March, and the fact that they actually organized this welfare rights group into a corporation. But it wasn't until the Carter years that there really became funding for it. The first years of its being a corporation, which were the years that I was in Washington, and just before, while I was running and all. While I was running, by that time they already had the Cove, this hotel that was in the middle of the Westside of Las Vegas.

Was this Ruby had started a welfare rights organization?

Ruby hadn't started a welfare rights organization, that had been started by Rosy. But Ruby surfaced as the person who really could lead, and Rosy kept going, as you know. She's the one that would confront you with those searching questions, like, "Well, we're late today, Maya as usual, I'm going to go, I'm going to go, I'm not going to stay if we're going to start being on time." Meanwhile, Ruby wouldn't be there – I would be the only one being a compulsive on-timer myself. But Rosy had started it and Ruby had picked it up and Ruby had been the one that instigated the march on the Las Vegas Strip, had reached out to connect to the National Welfare Rights Organization, which was how they had that March on the Las Vegas Strip. Did we talk about George Wiley?

Yeah, we talked about how you first met him and how he was asking for your help with the March on the Strip, and how you connected with Ruby and the people in relation to that. Was Operation Life actually called that then, or did it evolve into an organization?

I guess it was called Operation Life in '72 when it got its incorporation. It says here that it was, "Operation Life Community Development Corporation" is a non-profit corporation formed in 1972 to improve the standard of living for the low-income community of Clark County", so it was called that. But all along the way in their operations during this decade, they had the help and support of Legal Services, particularly of Jack Anderson, who was a native, and also of Mahlon Brown, both of whom worked for Legal Services,

which were part of the War on Poverty programs, and so they helped them carry out ideas that would be gleams in the eye of Ruby, like for instance finding a center they could operate out of, because most of the women lived in the housing projects, and there just were no centers where they could function as an organization.

And so here was this big empty hotel about 6 or 7 stories high that had been built in the days Blacks couldn't have housing or go to the entertainments in the Strip itself, even if they were entertaining there, and so they had started developing a kind of Harlem entertainment world there on the West side. And the Cove was the one most recently built to house people, Blacks, and then almost as soon as it was built, it was non-functional because of the Civil Rights Act, which made it so they had to be admitted to the Strip. Nobody would go to the West side for fun games if they could go to the Strip, and so it very soon became a drag on the market, and reverted to First Western Bank. And it was rather the imaginative coalition of Ruby and Jack Anderson putting it to the bank officers that they would be better off, the bank would, having it used even rent-free, than having it stand empty. It had some value, but it was really in disrepair and had been vandalized, there was broken glass everywhere. There were things left from the olden days, like a big poster of Sammy Davis, Jr. and the cutlery and plates and dishes they had used in the restaurant. But by the time I connected with it, I never saw any of those good parts about it, it all just looked like this terribly misused building, but it had possibilities.

What Operation Life did was to use the first two floors of that, even in the coldest winter Las Vegas had had in 25 years and without heat. The women who took the different jobs that came along in the operation, worked in these really cold little offices with maybe one little electric heater going. And then in summer, of course, it was unmercifully hot, but it has a place. In thinking about what it all meant, I have to think that the community development corporation is really an economic model that is a corporate model, it is the free enterprise system at work. What happened when Carter came into office was there was more money put into this mode of trying to get people out of poverty, but it started in the areas where the community would be burned out, and it became obvious that the people that had the buildings, like AT&T, had a big building in the middle of Chicago's burned out area, that they would be better off in it than if it were all owned by outsiders.

Well what were some of these jobs that the women were doing? I was just looking at this one from 1979, were there some of the people that were employed by the community development corp? There was a WIC (Women Infants Children) Clinic, a solar energy advisor, a secretarial pool.

Uh huh, there was a credit union, and a low-income employment agency, and an anti-crime one, and a day-care center and a weatherization program. That's what's interesting about a corporation that was organized to be run by welfare mothers, and one of the first sort of fights we had on the board was a proposal, because we were always devising proposals for businesses, that was what we were supposed to do, we weren't supposed to be thinking of services like childcare and health care, we were supposed to be thinking business. So in the process of one of the early businesses we were proposing, I can remember saying that I thought we absolutely had to factor in child-care into our cost of

business, as we were doing our projections. And Joe Neal absolutely balked at that, he said it was ridiculous, and of course he'd always had somebody taking care of his kids. It seemed to me the total anomaly to the notion that you could have an organization run by and for welfare women, who, by definition, were single parents with children and not have child-care in cost of business. And considering that now there is really more and more talk about the necessity of ordinary corporations having child care, What we did for day care in the beginning was really a clever device. There were all these houses that were vacant in the community, many of them had been purchased with nothing down for a few dollars a month by the non-commissioned force at Nellis Airbase, and then when part of that shut down they would leave, and they would have so little vested in the building, there was so little call for them that they couldn't sell the, they just moved out. So what we did was to take on two or three of these from the city for either no rent or very low rent, and make them into a child care center. That was very inventive, because there were back yards, and they were always in disrepair. But it was a way of getting space that wasn't there before. But I thought we really should talk about how Ruby got the moxie to raise the funding for all of this.

Yeah let's do that. And also, I'd like you to just say, how did you connect with this organization?

Well, when I was in Washington, one of the things I did was to bring Ruby back, pay for her coming back to DV and staying at the Tabard and lobbying with me on welfare. And in the process of doing that she had this wonderful way of slipping around and into various offices, like the Department of Commerce and the Dept of Labor and others that weren't just welfare. And in the course of that she really began to get more and more acquainted with how these community development corporations were going to work, and I remember going to meet her one evening at a grant meeting in the Washington Hilton Hotel, of CDCs over the country. I don't know how many there were, maybe 30 or something, and they all had to come out of poor communities, but they all were men, the directors of them. There were Native American men, Eskimo men, Hispanic men, black men, white men from Appalachia. But whatever they were, there were no CDCs that were run by a woman. And so that seemed like a real oversight to me, and a real women's issue. But all of this assumption that business can only be carried on by men, who, all they needed was some help and some capital. The Hispanic men from Los Angeles, who had a big and successful CDC, would come to meetings, I remember, and in this sort of cadre they'd rent a car, and there would always be about six of them, well dressed and coming into the room, they were formidable (laughs).

The ones from Harlem, that was an old one. They had on their board (what you were supposed to do with your board was have a combination of over half recipients, people who were poor and from the community. And then the other half was supposed to represent the power structure. And so in Harlem, they had David Rockefeller on there. There was a lot of focus for a while put on, and a lot of money put into the Community Development Corporations, especially under Carter, and one of the things that had led up to Ruby's success was the interesting thing that we all did for the Democratic nomination that year. And we all decided that Josephine Gonzales and our friends who were involved

in women's issues, that we would do what the labor movement had done in relation to the national Democratic Convention, and that was, we would just get ourselves there, we would make sure we were a dominant presence there, that women did, and there was all this sort of mathematical arrangement with trying to follow the edict that the '72 convention had put into place of, it was almost kind of quotas, you had to have so many women and so many minorities, and so what we did was to really get the layout of how many you have to have, and then figure out who we wanted to be for. We would not fault one another for being for another candidate, because they all sort of looked alike. For instance, Josephine Gonzales was for Senator Church, and Ruby was for Carter. She got connected with him down in North Carolina when she went down there and at the convention. She really liked him. And I was for Jerry Brown.

And we all got ourselves to the convention that way and we had a chance to make ha in the convention, and that was the convention that I worked with Harriet, to wrest way from Jim Santini the chairmanship of the delegation, which is a nothing of a job. It gives you the right to give away the free tickets every morning, but it also gives you the right to make the announcement of what your state vote is for, and that is the one that is to be picked up on television. So when I went to Jim Santini, I had heard that he was trying to get the support of people like Josephine Gonzales, so I thought I better get on the stick, and get to him directly. And I told him I was thinking of running, and he said he was thinking of running too, and I said I knew that, that he'd importuned a friend of mine. But I thought that he ought to remember that women were over half the population, and that it was high time that they be represented. By this time over half the delegation was women, and that was really momentous that we had managed to get ourselves by this system that we engaged in by just figuring out how we could win. Then I thought he'd capitulate, and I'm sure he thought I would. And then the night before the decision was to be made in Governor O'Callahan's office, I stayed with Harriet, and we ate cokes and donuts at her house, and chased the votes of the delegates. At that time she ran Gov. Mike O'Callahan's office in Las Vegas., and Mike did not really like Jim Santini, so that made it easier for her to help me, but he didn't have strong feelings about me, nor did he consider me a real threat, but we did have a sort of a jolly women's Democratic convention that time in New York, the Big Apple.

Yes. And Herb Tobman, we managed to wrangle him a spot, he really wanted to go in the worst way. I can remember his taking us all out for dinner at some swank place, You never got anything to eat until like one o'clock in the morning. But Carter's having won, and already set it up for Ruby to go and ask for money and get it from the Administration when they took over. It was an incredible process that Ruby had to get her board all lined up and there were all kinds of bureaucratic requirements for all these reports and plans, and board set-ups and one of the things that happened on the board was that she really wanted me to be the chair, and I thought that was very ridiculous and told the women at the first meeting we had that I was dubious about it, that I thought it was really strange to have a rich, northern, white woman chair this group that was basically a poor black women's organization, but they were all insistent, and Ruby felt that it would be a help in connecting them with Washington. And since they felt that way, I acceded and was the chair for almost ten years. And for awhile we had Harry Reid on our board, and Rene

Diamond was always one of the stalwarts, and then of course Marty was both the attorney for the organization and the parliamentarian of the group. She basically helped to get the agenda together. Father Vitale was on it, Harriet Trudell and Lena Tatem, and Bertha Lawson, Liola Harris, a lot of the women who did the march on the Las Vegas Strip.

Well, here's a brochure for Operation Life which kind of goes through some of the things it did. WIC food for women and children, EPSDT (Early Periodic Screening for Disease Treatment and Prevention), health screening for youngsters, public branch library, health access and referral, food, co-op, employment training, child care, LEAA community anti-crime project, is that Legal Services?

Well, it was a specific one that connected with the criminal department.

Community press, minority youth enterprise, summer lunch program, swimming recreation, advocacy counseling and then looking forward to doing some other things. This was 1978.

Well, I think they redid the pool the year I ran, '74 they got some money. Jim Joyce helped on that and never got over congratulating himself about that and got the pool going. And the idea was that you would train young men from the community to run it and to keep it clean and all of that, but needless to say, an old swimming pool in a building that hasn't been lived in for years, is not the kind of place to train some people to keep the pH level proper and the Health Department very rapidly shut it down. It was a great idea, it was just a wonderful idea, because it was right in the middle of the community. One of the interesting thing I noted in looking through the proposals was that the endorsements they got. They got them from the Welfare Department, from the State, and then from practically all the delegation, and from people like Paul Laxalt, in the early Reagan years, those, of course were really useful endorsements, and well, even '74, all through that time was when he was senator. Ruby was able to get from them approvals and I don't know how hard they worked helping to get the money, but she didn't ever eliminate somebody just because they were in a different party or something. She was a really savvy political person, and the document that really kind of rounds up what I thought about the whole enterprise, because it was so bureaucratic, there was so much stuff you had to do. We must have had six different plans for rehabbing the Cove to make it into something and that all depended on what was popular this year in the way of constituents. One year we did a whole thing for the disabled and another a whole hotel that would be living quarters for the elderly.

So there was this need out there. And depending on what seemed too be the current rage in terms of funding.

And so incredibly expensive to rehab. All the estimates were well over a million dollars, and we would have person after person from Washington come out and advise us. And Ruby was always suspicious of them, and with good reason I think, because they basically liked the junket, you know, they loved coming to Las Vegas and playing. But they were experts on creative financing (laughs), or planning, or the architecture or

whatever, and more money was spent on advising us than you could believe. You always had a sort of hope that this would do it. And then it just took so long that by the time you got around to it, that world of funding would have passed.

And so was there ever a chunk of funding that the feds put in? You were going for Federal funding?

Sometimes we would go for private/public combinations, joint ventures. What we did that was really valuable, I think, was what was called in-fill housing and we did it with some joint venturing with a California developer outfit. But that was a program that allowed very low interest housing buys in areas that were which were on the skids were where there were empty lots around the area could go downhill fast if it weren't upgraded. And this would allow for the purchase of those lots and the subsidizing of the people who would buy them. Operation Life did the building of them. They also built a really nice, what's called the Ruby Duncan Manor, which is a one story group of apartment mainly for elderly and disabled, and I think those are still lived in. That was a project that panned out, and ultimately the clinic panned out, the whole building of the clinic, which was built with Fleischman money. Because Fleischman was dividing up its capital at the end of its life, and offered to have us put in a request for half a million dollars, and we got that and used it to build a clinic.

We also go a matching amount from ATW, so there were really solid accomplishments, the library was really good for awhile, and the City divided it wanted it someplace else, and they wiped it out. But there was always a sense that of paranoia about the city, as though they were really not wanting to have us succeeded. n part of it is, I think, understandable, if you stand there in the community, you realized you're very close to downtown, the center of Las Vegas, separated by the freeway, the way freeways have been used to separate poor communities from the rest. But nonetheless very close, just go under the underpass of the freeway, and you're at Fremont. Ruby's fears were always that the city wanted to condemn the building, and she ultimately thought that they burned the Cove themselves in order to make it useless, so that they could take over the land. The idea was that that land, which is on a kind of a rise, and sort of look over the city from that area, and especially from the area that was right behind the Cove.

Do you think that's true? Because we've been there a lot in the past couple of years, and the sit that used to be the Cove is just a vacant lot.

Who knows? I don't. I'm always leery of those conspiracy theories, but it's not impossible. During that period Ruby was actively being sued by the State. In a couple of years, I was noting, they brought a suit against her in connection with the early periodic screening and diagnostic treatment program, where the rules and regulations are so complex, and they change so often, that it's virtually impossible to keep up with it. What they sued her for, was having these little sign-offs, signed off by the nurse instead of the doctor, or the doctor rather than the nurse, one or the other. And it had changed in the last little while, but nonetheless they set her up for welfare fraud because of that. And that suit was the state's and George Miller, who was the head of the welfare departments and

all the human resources in the state. That was his really cruel tool, and I wasn't there for any of the cases, but Renee Diamond has said that it was just – she went faithfully for the trials -- but they would put Ruby up there and ask her these convoluted questions about when she had signed, was this her signature, had she signed this on June 23. You know, these things that you couldn't possibly remember and that you so easily could get yourself trapped by. He (George Miller) was the one who had, for Governor O'Callahan, done the cutting off of the grants that occasioned the March on the Strip. And I can remember Renee saying that Ruby had just that terrible green look that fear gives you, but it didn't really matter, the winning or the losing of this, as much as that they just stop it.

When was that, towards the end?

'76 and '77. But it wasn't concluded, the case hung they couldn't prove that she'd done it. But it also was not finished, and because it wasn't finished, there was a whole bunch of money that came through the state that we couldn't apply for. All of the Title XX money, the money that's in that social service outfit, was outside our ability to get because of this case. Finally, Harriet and I brought it up in the board meeting and we were assigned the job of going to Bryan, who was then Attorney General, and getting him to finish the case, just dismiss it, which he finally did.

Was that a case that was sort of obviously and well known to be political?

Well, it wasn't a well-known case. It really was a terrible sort of way of getting at, and it shows you how easy it is to get tripped up, both with your bookkeeping and with all these things. Actually, Early Periodic Screening, probably the reason George Miller wanted to get at it was, we were very successful, Operation Life was, in reaching out and getting to the people that qualified. We were doing what the program was designed for, but usually people don't know about it. It's a program for essentially giving pediatric care to poor women, and it works hand in hand with WIC.

But WIC was a separate thing that we did. It was our most successful, and it should have been, because we really were instrumental, I was, and Barbara Bodie was a big one, in getting the WIC program through Congress. I was at the hearing the day it actually got through the Senate, which was the crucial place, and Hubert Humphrey was on the panel and Robert Dole, who was right on this because it's food and the state produces food (laughs). The program was put through, with kind of the assumption that the money would go to either universities and hospitals, and where the recipients would get the benefits, but all the wisdoms about the understanding about what nutrition would come from the hospitals or universities. So one of my missions during that time was to have a program that was run by women the way private women have the opportunity to go to their own pediatrician and figuring out what they want, that for the early periodic screening, but again for the WIC program, the same thing. The early Periodic Screening had money in it for outreach, so that Operation Life was able to hire a number of women to get out into the community and do the outreach, and that really bugged George Miller.

But you can see in these reports that the WIC program was consistently two and a half million dollars worth of food that we got into the community. I think they still do that.

Was it one of the first in the country to be a successful, community run, federal program?

Right, it was. Because it was run by women who were recipients, it was even more of a model. And Ruby did a lot of talking at conferences about this, and how you get it started, both the Early Periodic Screening and the WIC, how you set it up, and what you have to do administratively, and all of that. What you have to say about the whole CDC, apart from the awful part of it which had to do with the business of having businesses, Ruby always wanted to have a fat women's dress business, she had it clearly in mind what she wanted to do, and some of the other women wanted to have a pie concession, and food things they could do, and dress making. But none of those was big enough thinking for the jokers in Washington, who wanted to see us do something really big. That was the bizarrest part of the whole thing for me was being pressured at the very end of the Carter Administration, so it must have been '79, being pressured to come east with Ruby for a meeting with the top dog, who was a Japanese man from Salt Lake City, and a real klutz. And we were brought back there, and he finally went around the group and described the kind of hotel casino he had in mind having us run. And I finally said, "You know the day we invest in the Alladin is the day I cease being chair. But this is Ruby's outfit." Ruby was always up for anything, and she'd say Yes, it's OK with her. Anything goes that she could do it.

Why did you say NO?

This was a hotel that had been closed and become the hiding place of one of the hoods that was on the blacklist of Nevada, really a mafia person. And I didn't think that Ruby had the slightest ability to keep on top of the finances that would go into running a casino-hotel. Casino-hotels at that time were under fire for the kick-backs, the counts that they made, the skimming. And the idea of using War on Poverty money to underwrite a shell of an organization... And so Harry Reid, who had been on our board, when I came back from that meeting, I went and made an appointment directly with him, I talked with Marty, and I went and saw him, and I told him what this guy was pressing Ruby to do. And I said I really want you to come to the meeting where this is proposed, he was the head of the Gaming Commission at that time. And he said right away, "Yes, that hotel-casino. You could buy it for \$2 million, it wouldn't be an impossible thing for you to do." He thought it would be disastrous. He understood exactly my anxieties about it, because it's one thing to... She'd just been over the coals for Early Periodic Screening and the kinds of things they could do to her once she entered that arena, were just (laughs). I think this guy just wanted his hands on it. He had been out, he had spent time, this guy from Washington, at that hotel, which was just sort of empty, it wasn't functioning then, but it could've been, it wasn't like the Cove. It wasn't a total shambles. Anyway, that was pretty upsetting.

Thinking of the work that was done then and the work that everybody is proposing now, are CDCs no longer a vehicle?

I don't know. I think there must be some places. But the money just started falling away in the 80s. But the thing that was so obvious was that Ruby had to continue the services, that's what I said to this guy in Washington. It doesn't matter what business you put up, you will provide hopefully some jobs with those. But there are still services that have to be carried on, and those services are best carried on by the community itself. And she was always faithful to that. She would pick up on any new money that would come along, like the LEAA money, that was anti-crime money. But also, she really did know how to produce for things like WIC and the health care.

What do you think was accomplished, in retrospect?

Well, at the end of that period, the national CDC commissioned an independent review of seven of them, and Operation Life was one of them that they chose. I went down to visit with the woman who had done the overview and made the final report and had a very interesting time with her. This document, which starts out, "What's the significance of Operation Life and Ruby Duncan?" in a sentence, that was a question she had put to me too. She wanted to hear from me what I thought the overall value of it was, so I wrote out this and this is something that should have helped me to look at this period, because it is a very thoughtful analysis which basically reminds us that what we're dealing with is the base of poverty in America, and the inability of the economic system to provide enough jobs that pay enough to take care of children. That was like 17 years ago – '79, when I wrote this, and we're still wrestling with it, and we don't define it in terms of the economy itself. One of the ways that the Carter Administration was full of, and that we were really interested in, was getting non-traditional jobs, because we recognized that many of them were jobs women could do. Maybe outdoor jobs, or construction jobs. Because many of them were passed along from father to son and uncle to nephew, and were part of the labor unions own internal grasp on jobs, and that did not include women, and it included having women at home taking care of the kids. Those jobs very often were rarely in an order that would make it possible for women to take care of their children, to raise their children. But when you think of the numbers – I run into an article every once in awhile, maybe by Ellen Goodman, that says, "Where are the five and a half million jobs for women that they'll get after they go through this training?" And I think the truth of the matter is society doesn't have those jobs, and the CDC was one more sort of ineffectual way of trying to get them. It wasn't designed for women in the first place. It was designed for the poverty communities.

I think its theory was if you just could train everybody to be business people, that everybody could make it. But I don't think that's true of the economy as a whole, because I think we haven't assigned values to jobs which women are doing now – taking care of children, taking care of old people, taking care of the disabled, cleaning houses. And somehow we haven't quantified a whole batch of jobs that would fill needs, that women could do. Nor have we figured out how to make it so that those could be part time when kids are young. Because there's such a movement in a woman's life when she starts raising her kids. The best of all possible things, it seems to me, would be to work it out so that there were part-time jobs and support to keep a woman taking care of her kids, and

after a period of time moving into full-time work, and maybe the present welfare reform is trying to do some of that. I don't know.

Well it must be that there is still an ability to put money through that mechanism. I think for the women involved in all ways, like including Marty and Renee and me, but mainly for the women in the community, it was both satisfying some real needs through the WIC program, and through the Early Periodic Screening, and through the food stamps. And when you realize what an ingrained part of the system they are now, you realize that that was a major breakthrough for answering the poverty problem. But it was exciting for a lot of us to see somebody like Ruby able to manage this whole thing and be able to bring in this money. This woman that I was telling you about that did the appraisal -- you have to realize that in the course of three years they brought in over seven million dollars of capital investment into the community and over two and a half million a year in food and health services, and that's amazing.

Do you think that that example really resonated through a lot of the women?

Well, I think in a way it did and yet there's so much always going on of jealousies and internal suspicions, and then there was, Ruby was always very alert to the drug problem. And it did rise up within her own ranks in the WIC and she just really took things in hand and fired the people involved. But that causes repercussions, and it's a poor community and Blacks are still subject to the economic fallout of history. And Black women who are taking care of children are at the bottom of that. But they also are the survivors and that's what is really exciting and inspiring.

What eventually happened to Ruby?

Actually, what happened was that the funding was pulled away, or was diverted to more bureaucratic places, like to the local OEO (Office of Economic Opportunity), and the Cove buned. And then Ruby herself there was a recurrence of this back problem of hers that really seriously affected her, and she's still in the process of working through that, I think she's had her seconde major operation. The last time Jack Anderson was over, when I was down there, we went and looked at a couple of the places she had in mind, introduced us to one of the women that she wanted as a partner.

That's a great story, the whole thing.

It was a book to me, because how would I ever have known anything about people like that unless I'd make that connection through the League of Women Voters...

But that was also good because you knew something about business yourself.

Well, I had a sense of what was going on...and I was that my final resignation from the board came not until 1990. I found myself not wanting to desert her when she was fighting these last fights, not having those funds come through, and having to cut back on staff. Finally her staff was just one person, her secretary and it's so forlorn.