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Interview with James W. Compton

Date: 27 August 2010

Location: UIC Library, Chicago, IL.

Present: James Compton, Dr. David W. Veenstra, and Jason Marcus Waak

Jason Marcus Waak: It is 27 August 2010, a Friday. We're sitting with James Compton. Mr. Compton, if you could just state your name, for the record. Then just give us a little bit of background, as far as your place of birth, where you grew up, and your education.

James Compton: My name is James W. Compton. I was born and raised in Aurora, Illinois. I spent the bulk of my adult life, however, in the city of Chicago. I also spent time in New York and Atlanta, Georgia.

JMW: Could you talk about what took you to New York and Atlanta and out of Chicago, if you want to go chronologically? But basically, go up until the time when you basically met Richard J. Daley, and how you got to know him.

JC: I left Aurora after completing high school at East Aurora High School. I attended Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. I spent some time in France as an exchange student—I was studying French language, French culture, and French literature. Then I spent some time in Binghamton, New York, as the founding executive of what is called the Broome County Urban League. I served primarily in three cities: Endicott, Johnson City, and Binghamton. And I believe that the Binghamton County Urban League is still in existence.

JMW: Was it your work with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and coming to Chicago that you came to know Richard J. Daley?

JC: Well certainly I knew of him by reputation, having grown up and lived in Aurora. He was certainly one of the more noted and more powerful figures of any city in the United States. He had a very huge and larger-than-life reputation. So it was not hard to know of

him and who he was. Then, after I became the president of the Chicago Urban League, I came to meet him and know him on a personal basis.

JMW: Go ahead, Dave.

Dr. David W. Veenstra: Yes. I'm missing a little bit of the chronology here. You were at Morehouse in the late fifties and in the early sixties.

JC: It was the fifties and sixties, yes.

DWV: Then you went from Atlanta to New York.

JC: I went from Atlanta to France, then back to Atlanta, then to Chicago, then to New York, and then back to Chicago.

DWV: Okay. When did you come back to Chicago the first time?

JC: I came back to Chicago the first time in 1961, I guess it was.

DWV: That was 1961. You stayed for...?

JC: I left in 1969.

DWV: Okay. Dr. King was right in the center of that. You worked with him in 1966. Is that correct?

JC: Yes, I was a part of the Freedom Movement at that time.

DWV: Could you talk at all about that?

JC: Well, at that time, I was both a public school teacher, and then became a staff member of the Chicago Urban League. If I'm not mistaken, Dr. King's movement came here around 1966 or 1967. Of course, he was assassinated in 1968. Then I was here during the Democratic National Convention, which became a well-known episode with the marchers and the protesters. So I witnessed all of that. I did participate in some of the school marches. Those were led by Albert Raby. If I recall, Dick Gregory participated in some of that, during that period.

Then I worked as a staff member during the Freedom Movement for the Chicago Urban League. I participated, from time to time, in some of the marches that took place. The culmination of it led to the creation of the Leadership Council of Metropolitan Open Communities—I think that was the name of it. Yes, it was the Leadership Council of Metropolitan Open Communities. [Leadership Council for Metropolitan Open Communities]

DWV: Okay. So you were quite involved then during the Freedom Movement here in the sixties.

JC: Yes.

DWV: You were interacting some with Dr. King.

JC: As I said on the phone, I was not a leader—I was a staffer. I served in that role, although I did have the opportunity, from time to time, to witness some of the policy and strategy meetings. But I was not a participant in those meetings—I was more of an observer. I did whatever I was told, as a staff person. I did sundry activities, I did research, I drove people from here to there, and whatever I was called upon to do.

DWV: What was the attitude, in those meetings and in those groups, towards the mayor during that time? I mean, there was redlining occurring. There were some pretty serious protests against the Daley administration, and against Chicago in general.

JC: Well, the organizations in Chicago that were established and were for equal treatment, fair housing, jobs, and non-discriminatory opportunities weren't making a great deal of headway or a great deal of progress. They came to realize that. The leadership, at that time, of the T.W.O., the Urban League, and others, were able to convince Dr. King to bring his movement to Chicago. Up until that time, all of the efforts by Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Council Conference had been southern based. So, the first real foray of efforts in the North were in Chicago.

It's been stated—Dr. King has been quoted, Andrew Young has been quoted, and others have been quoted—It may have been the toughest campaign or civil rights effort that they had ever experienced. It was different from the South. They had different expectations and different anticipations. They may have not thought or believed that it would be as difficult here as it turned out to be, in terms of opposition and organization. It was a rough period.

There was one lasting thing—it no longer exists, but I guess it existed for some twenty plus years—and that was the creation of the Leadership Council for Urban Communities. I think Ed Holmgren was the first executive of that. Then Kale Williams, whom I got to know quite well and worked for many with him, served on that board as an officer of the board of the Leadership Council. I served with Tom Ayers, Jim O'Connor, Billy Berry, and others. That was one of the tangible residuals and things that came out of the Freedom Movement. That was based upon weeks of negotiations and discussions, and the mayor finally agreed to that.

JMW: During this period, what areas did you feel that you were getting good support from the city? And in what areas were they somewhat resistant of?

JC: You mean during that particular period?

JMW: Yes.

JC: Well, we didn't make much headway in terms of open housing. It certainly remained segregated. If I recall, around 1956 when Bill Berry first came to Chicago, he labeled

Chicago as the most segregated large city in the United States. It was to remain so for decades. It was still very much racially segregated, although certainly not to the degree that it once was. And it's probably not the most segregated city in the United States any longer. Washington, D.C. and some others probably have that now.

JMW: Can you give any instances of interactions with Richard J. Daley where he was willing to come to the table and listen to you and what the exchanges were? The record seems to show, or at least today, that he's portrayed as heartless, and in some cases, a racist. But in some of these interviews, we're hearing of how supportive he was in things like education, etc. We're just trying to get a perspective.

JC: In my experiences with the man, I never saw him as a racist. I saw him as a man running a big city. He was trying to develop and build a city with many of the issues coming from various directions that one has to deal with. This city was segregated along racial and ethnic lines. People felt very possessive of their particular enclaves. He had a very strong labor organization here, which was discriminatory in many ways, particularly, but not limited to, the construction industry and the building trades. We had tried to deal with them for decades, and continue to try to make inroads in that area. Years later, after I became the executive director, I was appointed by the mayor to an entity called the School Board Nominating Commission. I think there were maybe four non-permanent members and five permanent members. Anyway, I was one of the permanent members. I knew of his commitment to education, and his participation that included him, regarding the Chicago public schools. That was in terms of both the quality of education and the segregated school system, which was obviously an outgrowth of the housing and real estate patterns and industry at that time.

DWV: Let's make a distinction with the Urban League. You were a staffer in the sixties with the freedom movements and were a public school teacher. When did you transition to the Chicago Urban League?

JC: You're saying when did I transition to them?

DWV: Yes. You became the president of the Chicago Urban League in 1978.

JC: I became the executive director in 1972. I became the president and CEO in 1978. I left in October of 2006 as the president and CEO.

DWV: Okay. When did you join the Chicago Urban League? Was that in 1972?

JC: I joined the Chicago Urban League in 1965. I was a staffer during the time of the Freedom Movement. I left here in 1969. I then came back in 1972.

DWV: When was your first direct interaction with the mayor?

JC: My first real interaction with the mayor would have been after I became the president. So that would have been sometime after 1972, up until his death. He died in, what, 1977?

JMW: It was 1976.

DWV: What were your impressions of him during that time?

JC: Well, I saw a man—a mayor who, over time, began to lose the broader popularity that he once enjoyed as a mayor. Certainly that became true within the African American community, as the African American community was seeking more opportunities across the board, and more positive response out of government. Some of that was an outgrowth of the Freedom Movement, and some of it was the nature of the times—what was going on here and throughout the world.

All of the ire in the African American community against the city was not all against the mayor. A lot of it was against black aldermen, who many of the black citizens didn't feel were being responsive, and weren't delivering for their communities and neighborhoods what they saw going on elsewhere in terms of opportunities, job, and certainly business contracts. So there was a group of aldermen during that period that

were called the “Silent Six”—They were labeled the “Silent Six.” Much of the anger and frustration in the African American community was directed towards them. It was felt that even though they were elected by black folk, they weren’t delivered from black folk.

JMW: The Silent Six, were they part of the machine within the machine, sort of the black political machine in the Daley machine?

JC: Oh yes. There was no question about it. I don’t know of the exact years that these things were taking place—but then, you began to have some that were beginning to articulate the disenchantment and disagreements. I remember Richard Newhouse became state senator. I guess he ran for mayor at one point in time. And there were a few others that began to become visible in the expression of the disagreement. For a long time, all of this was underneath the surface.

No one, particularly in the African American community, dared challenge much. But as time evolved, and Dr. King had been here and gone, even though there had not been that much as a tangible and positive result, people began to open up more and began to express disenchantment. Then there were a sprinkling of white allies in organizations who joined in that.

JMW: How would you say that Mayor Richard J. Daley has been inaccurately portrayed as far as being the mayor, whether it be racial politics, or the broader politics across the board? With Mike Royko and the rest of the world, looking at the body of literature in what’s been said, what needs to be put out there to kind of right the record, in your mind?

JC: What kind of what?

JMW: What are your thoughts that might balance the record, with what’s been written and how Richard J. Daley has been portrayed previously? Is there anything that you think needs to be stated for the record or corrected, from what we’ve seen in the past?

JC: There's nothing that readily comes to mind. Chicago, for African Americans, was certainly a monumental leap from having come out of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and the South. That's why they came. The Chicago Defender was a major force in that migration, in terms of advocating the African American movement from the south. And even though there wasn't equal opportunity, there was opportunity. It was not equal opportunity, but there was opportunity in the various industries.

It was also true that African Americans found advancement to be quite difficult. Things moved in kind of a progression, whether you're talking about school teachers, policemen, firemen. And as far as governmental apparatus, there was the Chicago Transit. Today, of course, African Americans are throughout these systems and run them from time to time. Up until a certain point in time, that certainly was not the case. It was not to be the case.

JMW: How had the city changed between 1969 when you left for New York, and when you came back in 1972? Was there any noticeable change?

JC: No. Except, while I was gone, I think they had been through some challenges regarding the building trades and the construction industry. I think, during the period when I was gone, that began to evolve. Then of course, when I got here, I got immersed in that, particularly when they were building the First National Bank, CAN, Montgomery Ward, and Standard Oil of Indiana, which has had several name changes since then. So I think during the time I was gone, the movement towards opening up the trades had just begun. Then I guess you also had the Vietnam protest.

JMW: Where would you say that Richard J. Daley was a friend of Black Chicago? In what areas was he a friend of African Americans in Chicago? Maybe education? What areas?

JC: Well, I think he fought for education. I think he did do that. I don't think he challenged the real estate industry to any degree. I think with the creation of high-rise public housing—although I never had this conversation with him—he probably felt that

they were some kind of relief from the ghettos, the tenements, and the deteriorated, dilapidated housing. Many of the black folk were forced into them. They felt that the creation of Robert Taylor, the Dearborn Homes, and the rest of them, was an advancement—which of course, as you looked at it over time, it was not a good strategy. It put mostly poor undereducated people into these enclaves, which contributed to a lot of maladies that we later saw. That, of course, resulted in the Gautreaux case, with the Judge Austin decision regarding public housing, and ultimately the dismantling of it, which I had advocated during my time. In so doing, they didn't know that in that process, much of this was after him. They were not realizing that the execution of that was being poorly done as it was and has been.

JMW: Dave, do you have anything?

DWV: Yes, I have quite a bit. I think the public housing thing, especially the high rises, have come up in a number of interviews. And what we've heard several times, I think—correct me if I'm wrong—is that the mayor was not very pleased with them from the beginning due to many of the problems that you've said—for example, the concentration of people in this area. The mayor was a big advocate of single family homes. You saw a lot of that in neighborhoods, with the support that he gave. Yes, the housing was certainly a problem. I want to shift a little bit into the Chicago Urban League questions or comments. You said you advocated early to get rid of the high-rise housing (JC nods yes). How did you do that? Was that at the mayor's level? What level was that at?

JC: It was at any level that we could get a forum (DWV and JMW laugh). It was with research, with forum, with speeches, with letters to the editor, and with any means that we could get that message out. That's what we did. I would say that for a period, we might have been the most visible and the most vocal advocate for the dismantling of them. But again, some folk saw the creation of those brand new, high-rise buildings as being far better from whence they had come. And if you had seen some of those homes of which they came out of and their neighborhoods, a lot of that looked reminiscent of what you'd see in the South. I mean, that from those broken down homes and those

deteriorated neighborhoods. And I don't know—I'm trying to think of some of the players from that time. If I'm not mistaken, there was a lady named Elizabeth Wood, but I don't think that she advocated necessarily for the high-rise construction. You know, public housing operated differently in different situations. Ida B. Wells operated pretty well. Some of the most distinguished African American citizens came out of Ida B. Wells. It was not a high-rise, stigmatized type of environment.

DWV: What were the key strategies you adopted, or approaches you had, with the Chicago Urban League? What did you make the top priorities with the Chicago Urban League?

JC: Well, I would say that during my tenure, education was always the top priority. That was the most consistent theme running through my tenure and terms there. It was always with the belief that people got educated. Then they had the ability to think independently and creatively, they had the ability to distinguish between options, they were better prepared for job opportunities and better livelihood, they were better prepared for advancement, and they could even create their own businesses and enterprises. It was always a constant with education, for the many years that I was there. And it would be today, if I was still there. But certainly, we had to take into consideration employment, jobs, unemployment, skilled training, housing, segregation, and discrimination.

DWV: Why wasn't UIC more popular with the African American community?

JC: I would say much of it might have been with the leadership of the university. Some of the chancellors—from my thinking and viewpoint—were better than others. I had a very good relationship with James Stukel. I've got a memory lapse on the lady.

JMW: Was it Sylvia Manning?

JC: Yes, it was Sylvia Manning. I did not have a positive relationship with one of her predecessors—I don't know if it was a predecessor of Stukel. It was Broski.

JMW: Yes. Broski fell in between the two of them.

JC: It was not good. We had problems and difficulties at many a meeting, with him and other community and political leaders. The university was what we felt had problems. So I think that it was an uneven type of leadership. I didn't see myself or the university as playing a significant kind of leadership role in the city, in that it was, and is, a public university. It's not the University of Chicago, which is another issue.

DWV: Yes. I can certainly attest to that. What did you want from the university with the Chicago Urban League? Did you want more African American students?

JC: We certainly wanted more students and more graduates. There was a problem with the medical students and the failings of them. The Chicago Urban League felt that there was an aura of discrimination within the school, and I think, based upon the sundried meetings that were held, there was some truth to that. I think that there's been some improvement over time. The student enrollment is probably still too low. The graduation rate is probably too low. With the African American males, it's probably way too low. Some of the other schools seemed to have been able to address these issues a bit more forthrightly and in a more positive manner with various types of programs and with outreach, and with the interactions with the community and the community leadership. I guess it's from the perspective that here is a school in the city that is surrounded by African American communities—We would wish, hope, and believe that the record would have been more positive with them.

DWV: Yes, I agree. You said the record. I guess I want to slip that just slightly. Was the expectation, especially in some of the early years at UIC—say from 1965 to 1975 or so—was the expectation that UIC would provide the answers to education for the African American community? As you said, UIC was surrounded by African American communities—it was a public institution in the city, and it was built on the promise that this would be the institution of higher education for the city's young people.

JC: And going back to Mayor Richard J. Daley, I think he saw that too, I believe.

JMW: Well, he called it his greatest contribution to the life of the city.

JC: Yes. I don't think we were looking for another creation of the University of Chicago. This was to be different—to serve first generation college students. And over time, it may prove to be that, hopefully, over time.

JMW: We'll talk about the urban health program in a moment. On the east side of campus, or what is called Circle Campus, there was something called the Education Assistance Program. I just wondered if you were aware of that, or if you had any interactions with James Griggs and that operation.

JC: I knew James Griggs. I don't recall what our relationship was with that, the Chicago Urban League, or what. I know we interacted off and on with various programs within the university, like Great Cities. I think that these interactions probably progressed or didn't progress based upon who we were dealing with at any given point in time, as opposed to an institutional kind of relationship. Some of that became personal. If we could interact with someone with a positive way, we did. And if that wasn't the case, we didn't.

JMW: Well, the university went to, not completely to open admission, but pretty close in the period from 1972 to 1975. It seemed to take a real hit, at least from what I've heard within the African American community, in the sense that a lot of students were admitted. Then, without a chance of succeeding, they ended up leaving with debt and without a college degree. Warren Cheston was the chancellor at the time. It was his attempt to solve or to answer the urban mission that's been attached to the campus—whatever that may actually mean. I just wondered if you remembered any dealings with Chancellor Cheston and the whole idea of the mission.

JC: No, I can't say that I do remember, to be honest. He's not one who readily comes to my mind. But you know, our concentration was basically K through twelve in the public schools. But then, that expanded as far as the system, to the Catholic system, with the creation about twenty-five years or so ago of the Big Shoulders of the Chicago Archdiocese, which was created by Cardinal Bernadine. Some of the corporate leadership of the City of Chicago identified with it. I identified with it. He was one of the founders of that. But our emphasis was K through eight. Then, of course, a little later was added preschool.

JMW: Can you talk about your involvement with the Urban Health Program on the medical center side, and how you came to be involved with that?

JC: Well, I guess, if I recollect, it grew out of disagreements with the university. Then we got legislative involvement—we got some legislative enactment that would direct the university to do certain things. Out of it came the Urban Health program. Earl Neal, if I'm not mistaken, was the first chairman, who was an alumnus of the U of I. He came out of the law school, I believe. He was a very close and dear friend. He asked me to serve. I was willing to do so, thinking it was appropriate and necessary, since we had been complaining and advocating for change, so that when these opportunities came to be, we were involved in trying to implement it. We just thought that it was necessary that we do so. I guess I got an award here, maybe three years ago, for a service I had rendered. When they described it, I had forgotten about it (JC and DWV laugh). But I was hoping you'd find it in that presentation I did (JC points at JMW) five years ago.

JMW: Dave, I'm pretty much done. Do you have anything?

DWV: How much time do we have left on the tape?

JMW: We've got about five minutes.

DWV: Okay. There was a shift in the Chicago Urban League while you were there and were in charge. The shift was towards a little bit more research-oriented and certainly more public policy advocating. Would you describe that as accurate during your tenure?

JC: Yes. That was pretty accurate. That was my intent—to be able to articulate based on facts, information, and irrefutable evidence. So we did quite a bit of what I call public policy research. It was not research to be stored on the shelf or in a library, never to be utilized. Then, it was to use that in our advocacy, in our program development, and in education of leadership and our constituent groups. It was having people as well informed as we could possibly get them, and well informed as they had the capacity to absorb. And the interesting thing was this—I don't recall us getting much pushback on our research. Now, we got pushback in trying to execute it, but we didn't get much pushback on the evidence and the factual information. With a lot of the research, we had academicians and scholars review it and critique it from various places. If I knew someone at the U of I, the University of Chicago, Roosevelt, or DePaul, it didn't really matter. I'd say, "Take a look at this." Then we had a research advisory committee. My first one was chaired by Bill Wilson, who was then at the University of Chicago. Then we had another professor at the University of Chicago who succeeded him. We had professors from the University of Illinois at Chicago and various other places. And we had some non-academics. But yes, that was our *modus operandi*. That was our methodology. We always wanted to start with factual information, however we got it. We never got any serious pushback on the research. Now, we got pushback as result of trying to get something done with it, but public policy advocacy was it. Of course, education was one of the primary subjects, whether it was overcrowded schools, segregated patterns, discrimination in hiring, discrimination in promotions, discrimination in operations, or whatever. I really pushed our public policy advocacy, as opposed to social service—although we did social service. But even in social service, I always asked our people to document what was going on. That could also be utilized for testimonies and in our pronouncements at speeches and in forums, or whatever.

DWV: Yes. That meshes quite well with it.

JMW: Are there any final thoughts that you want to leave us with, as far as Richard J. Daley, his legacy, or your own personal dealings?

JC: No. I appreciate this opportunity. Michael Daley, as you might know, asked me to do this. And I was very willing to do it. He and I served together on some boards years ago. I always had a very good relationship with him. I've had a good personal relationship with all of the Daleys that I've ever known, whether it was Richard J., Richard M., Michael, Bill, John, and to a more limited degree, Mrs. Daley.

JMW: Okay. Well, thanks for coming in. We appreciate it, and Michael does. So thank you for your time.

*****END OF INTERVIEW*****