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Speller, Kathryn

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Transcriber: Angela Y. Dugan

BP: Today is September 23, 2006. The Bronx African American History - -there's always a delay on this tape - -The Bronx African American History Project is interviewing Ms. Kathryn Speller. Ms. Speller, for the record, if you could please say and spell your first and last name.

KS: Kathryn Speller. K-A-T-H-R-Y-N. Speller. S-P-E-L-L-E-R.

BP: Excellent. And your date of birth please?

KS: June the 6th, 1932.

BP: When and where were you born Ms. Speller?

KS: I was born in 1932. I was born in New York, and I'm told that I was born on what they used to call welfare island. Because in those days Blacks didn't have, even in Harlem access to hospitals and different things like that. So I was born on welfare island.

BP: And is welfare island now - -is it Randall's Island or --?

KS: I really don't know. I don't know which one of those islands it was, but they used to call it welfare island because that was where at one time when you had tuberculosis and stuff and there were hospitals there. And that's where you would go - -in 1932 in the beginning you just weren't [unclear] to the neighborhood. The hospitals, if you didn't have hospitalization.

BP: I'd like if we could speak about your parents for a little bit. What are their names and where are they from?

KS: My mother is from Lugolf, South Carolina. My dad, my father, I never knew. I know nothing about my father or my father's family.

BP: And your mother's name?

KS: Pearl Stewart.

BP: Pearl Stewart.

KS: Yes.

BP: Did you have any siblings?

KS: No I'm the only child.

BP: What type of work did your mother do when you were growing up?

KS: When I was a young girl, my mom used to do domestic work. The area that I now live in the Bronx - -the Morris Heights section of the area is what it's called. It was prominently a wealthy area. I always remember coming up with her and going with her to do her domestication and at that time when you were a domestic worker - -I'd see my mom on her hands and knees scrubbing the floors. It wasn't mops and stuff like that - -the domesticators, this is how they would have to do different things. And then later on, she came from that and she went into the factory and that's where she retired from. She worked in clothing. She was what you called an examiner which was that she would examine the clothes that were going out in the line - -and it amazes me because she could look at - -like if it was flowers or striped or something like that, she could see the crookedness in it and she would be able to tell them, and they could take that line away. The whole line and she would save them a lot of money. And the seconds would be that if she wanted it, she used to bring it home and give it to me because it was expensive clothes. And I could never see where the flower - -she could look at something and say, listen that plaid there is - -that's a second, that's not really an original. O that's the work she did until she retired.

BP: What is her date of birth?

KS: 1912. She's 94 years old.

BP: Was she born in - -oh she's from South Carolina.

KS: She was in South Carolina, but in those days like, you remember people came up from the South. Like my grandparents and my family followed their trail of jobs. My grandfather laid the highways, my uncles laid the railroad tracks that you see coming up from the South. So as their work, instead of staying away from their families the way they would stay away from their families, like 3 or 4 months out the year and then be home, they started coming up. They brought their families up. So my mom was raised and had got her education, and that's where I was conceived in New Rochelle. New Rochelle is where my mom's family came to live. And then after I was conceived she came to New York.

BP: Where did you grow up? In Harlem?

KS: I grew up in Harlem on Edgecomb Avenue. Sugar Hill. [laughter]

BP: What are some of your earliest memories of Harlem?

KS: It just was great. Actually I was supposed - -a lot of us talk about it, those of us that's alive now, that we were supposed to be poor children, but we never knew we were poor. We never heard the word poor. And everyone's family was either like I say, a domestic worker, the women, part-time, and the men were chauffeurs or a chef or something like that. But it never was a big time job like sanitation or anything like that, unless you were light of color. Then you would say you were Italian or something like that because in those days those weren't the jobs. Those weren't the jobs for you before the war. Oh Harlem is great to me. The church is open 24/7. And that wasn't just in Harlem. That was in the Bronx and all over. You had your after-school programs. Actually what's going on now, latch-key child, they called it latch-key child. And we were latch. We were a generation of latch-key children because we would have our keys to go in. But we would know, we would either do out homework or either we would go

to the nearest church. The church was always open for you to go and that's where you did your homework with your friends. Maybe that was an after-school program in those days. What they're doing now, it's nothing really changed, it's just other names. But it just wasn't as many people, and it took a village to raise a family and so everybody raised you in your neighborhood.

BP: Which church - -did you and your mother attend church?

KS: My mother was Methodist. I went to Baptist church when I was a child coming up.

BP: Which one?

KS: It was called Macedonia. It was right across the street from me. The church was something we all went to. That's where the boys were. The boys came because that's where the girls were. And actually we went to church because when we went to school, they had religious instruction every Thursday. Religious instruction was a subject. That meant that you went to a church and you learned about the Lord. And maybe that's why so many of us as African-Americans broke away from our faith as Baptist or Methodist and became Catholics and different things because you studied and you went to different churches. Every church was open. And even in the Bronx, that was just something that was. That was a subject, religious instruction every Thursday.

BP: Where did you go to school?

KS: I went to the old P.S. 5. That building is no longer there on Edgecomb Avenue. Then I went to 136, Harriet Beecher Stowe, but they call it now Thurmond Marshall. Then I went to the Old Commerce High School, way before the Lincoln Center was ever built. The old -
-Commerce yes. I think the old building behind Lincoln Center is still there, or they're getting ready to tear it down. It used to be an old, you had an old building and a new building of
Commerce High School on [unclear]

BP: So you actually went to high school outside of the neighborhood.

KS: Yes, well everybody. When you went to high school, and some of us went to Stiff. Some people went to Cooper and those were mixed schools where it was African-Americans and Whites. But you mostly went to school in Harlem, and then you began to go and mingle. See because Harlem in those days, just like here, but there were just areas that you couldn't live in. But even as a child coming up, I would travel, come to the Bronx to visit different people.

BP: Who would you come visit in the Bronx?

KS: I would visit with my girlfriends. I would visit their parents, not their parents, but their cousins and different things like that and their cousins lived around Forest Avenue. Where the Forest projects are now, that was all two-family, wooden frame houses. Forest, Fox all those areas - -that whole area where they have the projects. Those were like little wooden frame, two family houses. You would walk in the hall, and you could go to the apartment through this door, either walk further down the hall, and then there was another, but I guess they were called railroad flats. And that's where a lot of Blacks that wanted to come to live in the Bronx, because Black people - -in those days they called us Negroes. Negroes when they came here, came up North. Some went to Harlem, some went to the Bronx, some went to Brooklyn, and some went to Queens. So they scattered themselves all over. So I would come there to visit. And as I look at it as I'm getting older, I just wonder - -because those people owned that property, they weren't renting. And as I look now and I think about it sometimes, what did they get when they wanted to build Forest projects. I often wondered if anybody would look into that. What did - -were they given anything for their little home that they may have bought for a hundred or two or three hundred dollars. Who's to say the price in those days, but that was a lot even before the second World War.

BP: So were these friends of your mother?

KS: Just friends that I was raised with, girlfriends.

BP: How did you meet them?

KS: Through school - -

BP: Okay.

KS: And through your neighborhood you meet.

BP: So there was a lot of movement between the Bronx and Harlem and people were --?

KS: Well we would, when we would have - -they would be, when I was going to school, you were born in the days of the Palladium, then some schools would have as they would call their little dance, do the swing and stuff like that at a after-school. Or maybe on Friday they'd have a little dance, and people would come from afar because in those days that would be the thing - -like our kids, I guess do today. Like the Bronx is going to take the floor, or people from Queens, or the people from the East Side, they're going to take it. So it was always, if you even went to a dance here up in the Bronx, they kind of knew you came from what they call the city. They call, oh yes, those are the ones from the city. Because everybody had their own little different steps that they would do. So we were a still [unclear] borough. We could travel as far as Brooklyn because it was safe. No one had to worry about anything, and you use public transportation because there was nothing else to use. There wasn't a cab running around and all kinds of things like that, so you would take the old trains, cold in the winter, hot in the summer with the little ceiling fan going in the summer. And I was also born in the trolley days. The trolley, I think, came away from about 19 - -might have been 1940. The cross-town trolleys coming from Manhattan. If we were coming to the Bronx we'd take the trolley from that se bus that goes over, we would take the trolley over.

BP: The Palladium, where was that located?

KS: That was like downtown. Across from - -that was across from Charlie Park - -I can't --

BP: All the way downtown?

KS: yes all the way downtown, and that came around your junior high and high school days that you were old enough.

BP: Oh wow.

KS: You went through change. Life wasn't like it is now. You didn't just become an adult or a teenager.

BP: Right.

KS: You had place. You couldn't be with the - -they wouldn't even want to be with you.

They'd tell you go with your little crowd now. That's how life was.

BP: So were there any other clubs or dance places that you would go as a teenager where you would meet people from other parts of the city? The Palladium is one.

KS: We would go to the Palladium. We would come up here and we would go to Hunts Point.

BP: Hunts Point Palace?

KS: Yes because by the time we were in high school, that was the jazz era for us, other than the other little groups like the Chi-Lites and different things like that, so we would come to Hunts Point.

BP: Were these dances, were they African-American and White and Puerto Rican, or was it only

--

KS: The Palladium, when we went down there, it was a mixture of Blacks and Puerto Ricans.

Cubans were very big when I was - -and Puerto Ricans were here, but Cubans were big and people used to unite together. We came up - -my era was, actually White people didn't want to be with you. See I came up in the era where on Broadway, when I was coming up. Black people

couldn't even go into restaurants downtown. Mayor LaGuardia passed the law that they are to wait on Negroes, that's what they used to call - -I used to sign my paper Black when they say nationality. I never said I was Negro even. I was always Black. I'm Black now. I'm a Black woman of African-American descent. I'm a Black-American of African descent. That's just how I feel. But there were different places that you just couldn't go. Even coming up here, you would go, because Arthur Avenue wasn't the first Italian section. The Italian section I could remember started at 149th Street in Morris, way before they built that big complex where Lincoln is. And you still have some Italians living in those wooden frame houses, I think at 52^{nds} Street or something like that, all of that was the Italian neighborhood that I can remember.

BP: And so you say there were some places you could not live, or some places you could not go.

KS: oh when I came up here to the Bronx to finally find a place, it was hard.

BP: What year was that?

KS: the first place I moved to in the Bronx, oh God I can't remember, I lived at 346 - -it's not even here now, 346 East 139th Street. That was in the Mott Haven side between Alexander and Willis Avenue. Now over there were a lot of Irish and I think German Jews.

BP: That was the first place you found an apartment.

KS: yes, it was a railroad flat, 346. Walk-up railroad flat.

BP: This is the 1950's or?

KS: Well my kids were teenagers then to it had to be - -I move din this house that I'm in now in 1968, and so I was living - -and I lived ten years where I was living at and then we moved here to 92. So if you take '68 back, it might have been in the 50's, because my kids went to school - -they didn't all go to school here. They began at 175, and then they called integration.

Integration was where your kids were allowed to go to what they called the better schools. So

me myself, I didn't want them still to go to school in Harlem. If you're saying this is integration, then I began to let my kids go to school with the White kids. Not in my neighborhood, with the White kids. They had to go to school and get the same education with the White kids. So I can't remember the name of the school, but it was over near Lehman College. It was a public school there near Lehman College. Actually when I was - -right -

Princess Okieme (PO): I know what you're talking - -it's right next to, I think it's the Armeey.

That area.

KS: Right.

PO: That school's still there.

KS: Yes. We used to have to take turns, that was my daughter Denise. My oldest girl, she's 54, she went to that school. And I can remember they were picketing, the White people that lived in the area up there because that meant that some of their kids maybe had to be transported out.

Not transported but -

BP: Yes.

KS: And they just didn't want their kids with the mixture. No we're talking about - -she went there and then she went to John Peter Tethard, was first built John Peter Tethard High School, up there. I think its 147 or 1 something. She went there, and then they went to Taft.

BP: So this was in the late 1950's - -was when you first moved to the Bronx.

KS: To the Bronx yes.

BP: To 139th Street. So now that area was racially mixed?

KS: The Bronx was racially mixed, but it was still just a little tension.

BP: What were some examples - -well first you said you had a difficult time finding an apartment in the Bronx.

KS: Well I found that I had a difficult time finding an apartment in the section here where I live now because - -

BP: And Morris Heights –

KS: yes you have the Jewish community that was all there. All around that park that they're tearing down for the Yankee Stadium. You would go there, they will tell you in that section there that it was hard to get an apartment there. Then finally they had to break down.

BP: So around the Grand Concourse?

KS: Oh yes, it was hard getting apartments there too.

BP: Do you have any specific memories of --

KS: Just people that I know. Friends of mine that applied. It was just hard getting an apartment up the Bronx all around Mosholu, and different places like that.

BP: What were some of the things that they were told when they would go and try to get an apartment?

KS: They would - -it would just be said there's no apartments or no apartments available when you knew that they were.

BP: When you eventually moved into 139th Street between Alexander and Willis, how did people get along in that neighborhood?

KS: Well it was pretty good because it was a lot of African-Americans living there because those weren't the best apartments in the world. The majority of those apartments were what you would call railroad flats.

BP: Could you describe what a railroad flat was?

KS: A railroad flat is what they call railroad flats - -you would walk into a building - -you would walk into my living room and you could look down- -there wasn't any separation of room.

Everything was down, a room here, a room there, and a room in the back, which had a door to it, is they always called those railroad flats when I was a child coming up. When you could look through the whole house, you stay in one room and you could just look through the whole house. The kitchen is there, the bathroom is there, everything is on one line, so they always used to call that railroad flats.

BP: How long - -what type of work were you doing as a young adult when you first moved to the Bronx? So I guess you're about in your mid-20's right now?

KS: Well I would say in my mid-20's because I had the kids.

BP: How many children did you have?

KS: I have five kids. I have two kids that weren't mine because I was married twice. Then with my second husband, I had a - -which is Pat, we had Pat. And then he had two boys. And I wasn't going to go into anything and not take them, bring us together as a family. And they were live 5 and 6. Then come in to blend in with the family. So then I just say I had five kids. We all just - -it was hard in the beginning, but to make them each blend in but then, depends on the adult of how you do things. The love that you show and they know their loved. So those are my boys. [laughs]

BP: What type of work did you do as a young woman?

KS: I just work really off and on. I'm a product of what they call the welfare system at that tie, they used to call it home relieve because I had a child out of wedlock and I was on welfare. They used to call it home relieve. But then they used to train you, so I always did secretarial work. But I was an off and on worker because I was attitude prone. I wasn't a lover of White people - -going seeing my mother and going through a lot of racism - -when people say that they come from the South and people don't realize that there was racism right here in the North. Big

racism. Because here, when I would go to my mother to work. I have to go in the back entrance. We're in New York right here. We didn't walk through a front door. We didn't walk through the entrance. You go through the servant's entrance. That's where the grocery people went. You didn't walk through a lobby. To get to these apartments to do your work or deliver your groceries like you do now. They had a server's entrance where you go, you go through the back, and when you come up, you come up in a pantry. So when I go with my mother, they wouldn't want me walking around the house. I had to sit in the pantry. So if they go out, then my mother would say come on you can walk around, don't touch anything. So I grew up in the rigid North. It wasn't easy. There were place son 125th Street, restaurants that I didn't get to eat in until I was 26, 27, or 28 years old and I lived in Harlem.

BP: Would it be - -was it - -would it be - -how did they enforce the racial segregation. Was it just something that people knew not to go in there?

KS: Well you knew not to go. That was the norm. And you learned that from the South. It was just places that you couldn't go in. Even when you went downtown for instance, they'd walk around you fifty times. They ignore you if you're sitting near to the table. That was their way of [unclear] some people would leave, but the Mayor LaGuardia had passed through and Child's Restaurant used to be one.

BP: Child's?

KS: Yes because I did hairdress - -I used to work in a White hairdresser. Like be the maid, wipe up stuff and the hair, do the little dyes, go to the store. That was your big money because they're rich. They stay in there all day to get dyed. Get the hair done, get the pedicure, everything. So they're eating. So you would pick the ones that will give you the big tip when you go get them

coffee, or you go get them a sandwich or something like that. They tip you each time, they'd give you 3 or 4 dollars and you keep that.

BP: Where did you do this work?

KS: On 99th Street.

BP: On the East Side or West Side?

KS: On the West Side. Then I worked for Spotless Cleaners, if you're old enough to remember Spotless Cleaners that used to be around. They used to do things a little cheaper than everybody else, and I worked for them.

BP: This is as a teenager or as a young woman? Out of high school?

KS: No right when I lived in 346, each of these jobs yes.

BP: So some - -you would have some of these jobs, but then as your children came you would collect public assistance - -

KS: No I had public assistance in the beginning, but then this was later on that I had these jobs.

BP: I'm just curious, you mentioned the phrase attitude prone.

KS: Yes.

BP: What does that mean?

KS: Well I guess, in the beginning being raised in such a racist society where you were treated - -and with Blacks, I say attitude prone - -with White people, I didn't particularly care for them.

And I never, never talked back or anything like that. Say for instance when you worked in the factory, because I worked in a factory, the way they would speak to you. They would never have the courtesy to say Miss- -they would say hey you, and I would never answer when I worked in the factory. And they would come and say I was talking to you, and I would say I don't think so because you didn't call my name. So I was always told I had an attitude, a bad attitude, so I

would [unclear]. I wouldn't cater. I never just gave in to what they wanted, I can't. I'm Miss, I'm not hey you. I'm not answering you. You're not talking to me. Others would jump. They needed their job, I needed mine too but I never was a person like that so that's why I say I might have been attitude prone maybe because I just wasn't going to do it.

PO: [unclear].

KS: Yes.

PO: Do you still have that same resentment towards White people?

KS: I don't have a resentment. I don't have a resentment now towards them. I used to teach my children, just like I'm doing, never drop your eyes. Listen to what they're saying to you carefully. Never drop your eyes, I don't care how it is, and when you don't know give them - -ask them. Because I found out that you beat them with intelligence more than you beat them with being [unclear], and I never worked that way. I never was a talk-back person, naturally, I never. I fought them on their own turf. I never used bad words to them. They don't even know I have an attitude. I'm arrogant because I'm doing what I'm doing right now. I'm looking you in the eye and saying pardon me. Did you need so-and-so? So that to them is arrogant. Even still today, that's arrogant to them. When they can make you drop your eyes or become humble, but arrogance is when you can challenge them on their own turf, with their own English language [laughs] that they speak.

BP: Where was the factory where you worked? Was it in Manhattan?

KS: Yes I worked in Manhattan, but then I used to work up here on Gun Hill Road because the Bronx was manufacturing both. It had a lot of different factories here and this is where you would come when downtown wasn't acceptable. So I worked here and I can't remember, Brian, where but it was waaaaay up. And it was an Army. They had like an Army contract. So I

worked for them and we used to make the - -you know when the soldiers would get those different ribbons, the different colored ribbons? I used to work on the machine that you would kick and put that thing around and make the buttons that would go on the jackets –

BP: Jackets –

KS: and stuff like that. So I worked up there. I worked there for about - -I worked there for about three or four years and I had to stop because then I began to create problems with my stomach from that machine, because that machine was kind of - -I wasn't bigger than a minute, but I used to work that machine and they [unclear] because I could do it fast. So I had to leave there, then I worked on 34th Street, right on down toward 9th Avenue. I worked on an assembly line. Like you would put things on an assembly line. You would put things into those little cases, and then after that I just got tired of factory work.

BP: So this was the later 1940's or 50's?

KS: Yes.

BP: This is after you graduated from high school?

KS: After my kids. Remember I told you I have my little boy –

BP: Yes.

KS: You didn't stay on welfare. You had to get off, and then they would subsidize you with your little rent, and stuff like that.

BP: Did you ever face problems at work where you were fired because of being attitude prone?

KS: Attitude, yes. They would say - -now I had a job one time, and I know I probably can't say this on camera, that I worked in the factory where you had the Jewish supervisors who would have feely hands. So when I worked –

BP: They would - -

KS: Actually when they pass by you they [motions] –

BP: To the women.

KS: Yes, they did to the Black women, the men wouldn't say anything. They would lose their job. They had to be humble. The White man was a trip. So they did it to me one day and I turned around and I just said it out loud. I don't mind you doing that, but I need an apartment, a lavish apartment, and you can come and you can do that anytime you feel like it. But I'm not going to work for you and you do this to me too. So he turned beet red. Next day when I came in my card was turned over. When it's turned over that means - -so when I walked in I said I see my card is turned - -I went into the office, that means that you go into the office. And you go into the office and they say, well we don't need you right now. Work is slow, and this and that. Don't call, they say I'll call you. I said don't call me, I'll call you and I just walked out because I knew what that meant. Then you would have some when I worked- -but I didn't get fired for saying it. When I went for the factory where I was telling you with the Army contract, they would hold a meeting and tell you when to go to the bathroom. It has a - -the big bosses would come down. The big Jewish bosses would come and tell you that it's been told that people are going to the bathroom too much and there has to be a certain schedule. So I say, I was arrogant. I raised my hand and I asked them do they have a doctor's degree because some people may have a medical disorder, so how can you just stand there and tell people how they're supposed to go to the bathroom. Are you a doctor? Do you know? So that's what I mean when I say I was arrogant because of the things that these people would put you through because they knew - -these are little things, but they were little things that just made me bitter and bitter and bitter.

BP: Were there ever any attempts to organize the workers or any unions at all at any of these places?

KS: No. I began a union when I worked for the Health Department.

BP: When did you begin working for the Health Department?

KS: Right when I moved up here. So I would say I started working for the Health Department maybe in the 79's. In the days of Lindsey.

BP: Okay.

KS: When Lindsey started the man power and he got all these jobs for the addicts and the criminals, which was minority that was coming out. So I worked for the Health Department, and the Department of Heath and Pest Control, and I went out in the field one day and saw how these guys cleaned these lots. They still have pest control that goes out and cleans lots and stuff like that. And all of these were ex-addicts that had come home and been out of prison. They didn't have any sick days. They didn't have shoes on or anything like that. They didn't have but 75, 85 dollars a week they were working for. I became a union rep. That was before Stanley Hills. Do you remember him? That was the big man with the union. He was just an organizer, and they were beginning to organize. I became their organizer.

BP: For the Health Department - -

KS: For the Heath Department of Pest Control. For the division that I worked for, yes.

BP: For the -

KS: The workers.

BP: For the people who had a substance abuse problem -

KS: Yes.

BP: That came to work doing the field -

KS: Yes, yes. They were all ex-con [unclear], some of them were. So I did that. It was quite an experience because you would sit around the table and negotiate with the Lindsey Administration by union contracts. This is like what they do now when you need a raise.

BP: Was this in the Bronx?

KS: Yes.

BP: Okay. What were some of the things you remember seeing when you would go into the field and –

KS: Just to me it was unfair that a man just didn't have a day off, and no sick day that he could say that he's sick. Because in those days - -unions just began really in the 70's mostly. This really began to –unclear]. And that was fascinating because I'm a union rep for all these big ex-convicts. Some of them were murderers, ex-murderers that had served their time and everything and they would put their faith in me. And the funny little thing about it that it was there 346 East 139th Street, and we were right in between the projects and the thing so when I would come to make my report, I'm so little, they would all lift me up and put me one of those - - you know how in the parks they have those little tables.

BP: Yes.

KS: They'd lift me up and put me on a table so I could give them a report - -and give them a big report. These are all [unclear] that woman doesn't know what she's talking about. It makes me sick getting up there talking to her. They hung in there and they got that money. And there was a club on Morris Avenue, and I remember this day that they got retroactive money and everything, and some of those guys moved in on Valentine when Twin Parks was first built, the Duplex Apartments. Some of them bought cars, they bought new clothes. They were able to uplift, because now they were making a decent salary and they became civil service employees.

And all that day we were muddling around. You're going to get your hair done? No I'm not going to get my hair done why? Well we're having a little affair at the little place that we hang out. So I said well I don't think - -oh yes you're going to go. We're going to come get you. And that was those guys that had all gotten together and when I got there, they were all dressed so fine and their wives to tell me - -that was their thank you thing to me, but I was doing what I did.

BP: How long did you work for the Health Department?

KS: When they had the big major layoff. When the city had the first big major city layoff.

Which was what? 70? Can you remember? You're a young boy huh? They had this big - -that was just before Bean came. When Bean came in [crosstalk]. Yes that big layoff they had where they never thought anybody would be laid off, and that was when I was laid off.

BP: What did you do after you were laid off?

KS: Well first I collected my unemployment. [laughs] And then I worked for the Morris Heights Neighborhood Improvement Association on Grand Avenue. That's when I began to become more political in the Bronx. Morris Heights.

BP: The Morris Heights Neighborhood –

KS and BP: Improvement Association.

KS: And that's the group that started when not-for-profits first began in the 70's when the Bronx was burning- - you know burn-out area. Because that's where I lived. My area was burned out. Not my house, but I watched a lot of my friends have to leave their apartment buildings because places the landlords weren't taking care. That was like the destruction.

BP: Maybe we can speak about that for a little bit. What was that experience like?

KS: To watch your place deteriorate around you, it was devastating just to see what was happening, and that landlords were allowed to get away with what they were getting away with.

BP: Could you describe the typical degeneration of a building. What would happen to it over time?

KS: Well they wouldn't take care of it. It's like how they're doing now. The apartment with no heat, no hot water. You can go in there, they wouldn't pay their electrical, their ConEdison bill for the whole [unclear], elevators not working. Then the general thing of the apartment. Then you remember that they started with that arson. They were really arresting some of the landlords because they found that those fires were really arsons. If they couldn't get them out one way, they get them out another way. They burn them out, so they would hire people to burn them out.

BP: And your building on 139th Street was okay. They didn't burn that down?

KS: Well they tore that down eventually. I had moved. By the time - -I was with the Health Department by that time I had moved and bought my own home.

BP: To Morris Heights.

KS: Because I moved from that area because of fire.

BP: You left 139th Street because of fires.

KS: Because of fires around, and I had been in a fire a long time ago with my kids. And I hear too many areas with fire injuries. I'm ready to go because I've been through fires so I don't –

BP: So in the Morris Heights section of the Bronx, where exactly do you live in that neighborhood?

KS: I live around Featherbed University and McCombs Road. That's where the Jews all lived, and they all left when they built –

BP: Co-op City.

KS: Yes. The area was beautiful.

BP: So is this where you live now? 9 –

KS: 92 West –

BP: 92 West 174th Street.

KS: Since 1968.

BP: Since 1968 you lived there.

KS: Raised my kids there, and my grandkids.

BP: That's a home that you and your family owned?

KS: Yes.

BP: What was it like moving into that neighborhood? Was it –

KS: I never cared because my attitude has always been, I don't want my son or daughter to marry your children and I don't want to go in your house. I just want to be a neighbor. If I'm able to afford to live someplace, I just want to be able to live there. That's always been my attitude. I don't want to invade your home. We can say good morning, but I'm not a problem to have in your area. So it wasn't - -and then there were Black professionals there. People who worked for the Park Department, nurses from Bellevue - -people who moved to the Bronx and different sections they moved to when they moved to the Bronx intermingling, they were professionals. They wanted a better life for their children, and a good education. So that's why they moved.

BP: So was the neighborhood predominantly Black when you moved there?

KS: No it was Jewish.

BP: It was Jewish.

KS: It was Jewish and Black, and Hispanic. Working class.

BP: had it stayed like that?

KS: No after the Jews left it just burned down. And now it's mostly - -it's an immigrant community. It's a poor community because the voting structure in my little area is not that good. Some of us that's left that's still political to the point of getting signatures and going to the different meetings and things like that, when we die off, I really don't know what's going to happen to the area. Because they have to learn to simulate that voting is important and we all have to learn that, and as you're seeing and if you studying - -and I think that's what's happening, why the young people stay on my people - -issue of someone teaching their children. I was taught by Jews when I was going to school. I didn't learn my Black history. I learned that in the library, Countie Cullen, but I got a good education. They taught me grammar. They taught me how to write correctly. I got science. I got biology. It's about the basics. They don't teach civics in school, so they don't know history. They don't know governmental studies. So maybe this is the reason why in minority areas, they don't feel as if these things are important, and particularly voting. They don't know what we went through to get the vote. So in this area that I live in, and it's majority Dominican - -the schools are so overcrowded. You have young parents that - -their on welfare. Their not looking towards the future, so it's kind of hard to watch.

BP: When you first moved to Morris Heights, how long was it before it became most predominantly Black and Hispanic?

KS: After the Jews left.

BP: How long was that?

KS: Well whenever there was - -whenever Co-Op City - -I can't remember. When Co-op City was built, they left.

BP: Okay.

KS: That's why in the area you have a lot of Jewish synagogues that are buildings because they were there.

BP: And the fires that were spreading around 139th Street and - -I can't remember what that neighborhood is called.

KS: That's the Mott Haven.

BP: Right. So as the fire is spreading around Mott Haven, are they also coming up to Morris Heights as well?

KS: Well that was just like - -see those fires that were in Mott Haven, it wasn't so much that - -and it wasn't like it was burning out or burning down, it was just the point that those buildings were really old.

BP: Right.

KS: A lot of electrical fires and it wasn't an intentional thing. It was just that it was really old buildings.

[END OF SIDE A, BEGINNING OF SIDE B]

KS: When the Blacks moved in, the Jews moved out. They knew, because they go. And I have to say - -I mean I hate to see them - -and I know they're pricing them out in Harlem, but I don't know why, and if someone could answer this question for me. Why is it when Whites move out of a community - -you see Tracy Towers, that was predominantly White. When they move, a building deteriorates. They don't take care of it in the same manner--I'm talking the management, the people who own the property--when it's just Blacks and Hispanics living. Why? What's the difference if I'm paying my rent? Why can't I continue to get the same care as everybody else? Now it's just predominant. It's just that people are just greedy. We know now in this century that these landlords just want money. They don't care about anything. And

the law doesn't care about anything because half of them are corrupt. But in the days in the beginning, if I moved - -if we - -say it's three of us, three Black families living and the rest of the apartment building is all White families. You can walk the hallways and it's clean. Everything is just kept up so nice, but we all - -we're working class, we're not scroungy people. And they move out, even some more good, decent people of color and Hispanics move in, and we pay our rent. We do the same thing that the Whites were doing, but the maintenance of the building just begins to deteriorate. Why? We do like them. We keep our Tenant Association going. We do the same identical thing. Why? Why don't they give us the same care of our property and we're paying our rent. What is it that - -but then buildings - -the minute two White families or three White families move in, that building turns around. The care comes back, the whole the [unclear]. Why? I just want to know if someone could explain to me why. I always ask that question because I'm watching. See I'm living in this century so I'm watching different things. What's the difference? I'm not talking about if I'm going to tear down your building and my kids play in the hall, and you come in and you try to take care of the ten, eleventh, twelfth time. I'm talking about the same caliber. I'm working, I take care of your property, but you don't give me the maintenance that you give somebody else. But then the minute they move in - -look at Harlem. I have a girlfriend that lives in Comden on Calvin Avenue. Her building started deteriorating in a very nice section. Three White families moved in, they joined the Tenant Association. The police captain started coming to the meetings. [laughs] Everything's starting to - -when they would send for them. Now the building is on the up level, but why? These people wanted the same thing. The police captain never came when they invited him to their tenant meeting before. Why? But I'm just saying. I often ask what's the difference. Why? Nobody can answer my question.

BP: The Morris Heights Neighborhood Improvement Association, how did you come to be involved in that?

KS: I got that job like a [unclear]. I was a receptionist because I knew Betty Terrell, she was the executive director, and her secretary was leaving so she knew I was out of work. So she asked me to, and I had to get my resume. And because I was able to get it because any job that people went to be interviewed for, that was the understanding, and I forgot what they called us - -that anybody that had been in that layoff, they get the first preference if they're qualified in that city layoff. So that's how I got that job.

BP: And what type of work did you –

KS: Answering - -answer the phone, do typing, filing and stuff like that.

BP: What did the Morris Heights Improvement Association, what did they do?

KS: They organized buildings. They went out and did education to tenants because at that time the Bronx was deteriorating. Then they also got Ted Jefferson, remember I told you the Bronx Shepard, he used to work for Morris Heights. He had come on board and he had been in the HPD Program and he worked with HPD to go in, and that time it was the Minor Repair Program. And the buildings that they would organize would be buildings where the landlords walked off. They just walked off and left their buildings and so these people had no type of way of taking care of their buildings. And Morris Heights taught - -and some of the people got their own buildings. In their own way they became like co-ops. In those days you didn't know that that was the way they bought - -they had the responsibility of their buildings, housing development funds where they maintain their building over their rent. And they would interview their tenants and stuff like that.

BP: Now did you eventually move out of the secretarial work and become more of an organizer with the group?

KS: No.

BP: Oh you didn't, you stayed in that position.

KS: Yes, I stayed.

BP: How long did you work for them?

KS: Oh God I don't know how long. Might have been three or four years, then I worked for the community board.

BP: Which community board was that?

KS: Five where I lived.

BP: And what did you do with Community Board Five?

KS: Same thing.

BP: Same thing. For how long?

KS: And then - -I worked for the board up until 19 - -I think I came out of there in 1992 or 1993 or 1994, something like that. 1992 I retired.

BP: And that was it, you retired.

KS: yes but now I work for City Sense Advice Board. I really left there blind because I can't take the politics of what goes on. I just can't. I mean I needed the money, that's why I'm working now at 74. But I can't - -I have to do right. I can't do what people want you to do. I just can't do it.

BP: Was Community Board Five predominantly –

KS: [laughs] [crosstalk]

BP: African-American?

KS: No, well I had to be the African-American at that time. The community for the area still had White people.

BP: This is still –

KS: Five! You know Five. You know –

BP: Bronx Heights.

KS: Yes. So all of the people - -the majority of the people on the board were White people and they had a Spanish girl there, and Lorraine was White. She was the district manager, so they had to hire a Black person. People were demanded in the area. You had more people being vocal. If you had one ethnic group, then you can't have two of the same. You had to have somebody to represent. So that's how I got that job.

BP: What was her name Lorraine?

KS: Lorraine Holtz.

BP: Holtz. Okay. If you had to think about and describe the roots of how you came to see civic involvement as something important. Where does that come from? Was your mother someone who was involved in community affairs or community organizing?

KS: I really don't - -I guess it's fighting for the rights of my children, just to get –

BP: Sorry if we could just pause for one second. I just want –

[TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES]

BP: Okay we are continuing our interview with Ms. Speller. So in working for Community Board Five up through the 90's, what were some of the things that you saw going on in the Bronx? So you started that job I guess in- - you left –

KS: I believe about '80. About '78 or '80. I think, I definitely did '75 and '77 in Morris Heights, so I would say like in the '80's I might have started.

BP: Did you move directly from the Morris Heights Improvement Association to Community Board Five?

KS: Yes.

BP: Okay. And how come you left that organization? The Morris Heights Neighborhood Improvement Association.

KS: To go to Community Board Five because it was more - -the community boards were first initiated for the development of the community. So to me, that was tremendous. And then Lorraine Holtz was really a pioneer as one of the district managers that - -I worked under several, but Lorraine Holtz was really fantastic.

BP: Lorraine Holtz?

KS: Yes. H-o-l-t-z. She was a district manager. And she was very creative in helping to revitalize Community Board Five, helping to revitalize the economic development part like Burnside that was completely abandoned and losing all the banks. But one stayed, which was Chase. So it was good working under her, and I learned a lot because she used to take me along with her when she would go down to meet with the commissioners and different things like that. Some of the things she would allow me to do. Like when I would play streets, and they would need different things from the parks. Different mobile units and different things like that. She would say, I don't have time to look into that so I want you to take that. She gave me a stronghold to begin to create a lot of things and to do the research to find out why our community doesn't have a lot of things. And I was able to help do types of things like that.

BP: Is she still living?

KS: yes but she's out. She retired. She left and then she moved to the Poconos out there in Pennsylvania.

BP: What types of things did you see going on in the Bronx in the 1980's into the early 1990's before you retired. What were some of the major issues that Community Board Five was dealing with?

KS: When I retired?

BP: Before you - -throughout the 1980's and into the early 90's.

KS: Well mostly it was the housing issue because remember our area was like a bombed out section.

BP: Right.

KS: We looked abandoned. Our commercial strips all but Fordham Road, was all gone. So I've seen good revitalization being done here in the area.

BP: How did that happen? How did people revitalize the Bronx?

KS: Well through a lot of the community housing corporations. Northwest Bronx Community, and different groups that came in, wrote, and got directors - -hired directors that really knew the earth, and found that type of studies and that really knew what to do with the [unclear]

BP: Here's some tissue.

KS: It's not going to do any good. It's an allergy or something. It just hurts - -itches right there. Those damn trees coming in here. Those trees. [laughter] To revitalize the area. And with the help of the district managers that had been - -because I worked under all of them. It was her and then George Martin. There was Marisol and then it was Adolfo.

BP: Oh he was a district manger from Number Five?

KS: Yes.

BP: Oh. How did drugs affect the Bronx?

KS: It tore the Bronx down. It really did a job- - -and it's still doing a job on the Bronx. When the heroin came in, which came in the 70's it took its stronghold. But mostly what really took the Bronx down was the blackout. What was that the blackout of the 70's? That's really what really destroyed the whole Bronx. The whole entire, from Fordham Road on. When that blackout was and people were robbing the stores and different things like that, so that really did a job on the Bronx.

BP: Do you have any specific memories of what you saw during that blackout?

KS: I wasn't - -I was away.

BP: This was 1977?

KS: Yes I was away down south when I heard, on my vacation, when I heard it on the radio, the television. But when I came back and saw my area, Featherbed Lane and Fordham Road, it was terrible. Because people vandalized and set fire to some of the stores. It was kind of devastating to see it. And it wasn't that devastating to me because I was with the blackout - -what was that thing when it was Martin Luther King Day in Harlem when they did it in Harlem also years and years and years ago. And they - -something where the police pushed somebody and everything got out of hand and they just started rioting. It led to that so. That's the second riot. That's the second type of thing where people to me destroying their own community. That's what I could never understand. When you do these things you're destroying your own community.

BP: Right. I guess the last question I have is what I asked before the break was just how did you come to see that civic involvement and political organizing was important. I asked had your mother had done anything like that or?

KS: No it was never that, Brian, it was like fighting to get different things for my children. And always teaching them their rights because I always felt as though people didn't know their rights.

It would start with me when I would take them shopping and we would go downtown to Macy's and down to what you call the better stores, and we're treated not in the right way. Then I would have to ask for the manager of the store and just going to my spill [laughs] and different things like that. Because I've come up in an era and a time where you always had to fight for your right. Fighting for your rights. You're not fighting and asking and begging for anything. I just have the right to this and I want this. So that's always - -you become an advocate because you would say - -you would come to me and you'd say, Ms. Speller I went so-and-so, and they wouldn't give me and they told me and so-on. And I say no, no. And I just always feel people need to sue their politicians. See I use my politicians and I didn't sue them because I did anything for them. I use them because that's their job. That's what they're here for. If I'm having a hard time with my daughter in college in different things like that, then I'm supposed to go to my congressman. That's who I talk to. If I'm having a housing issue, then I go to so-and-so. And in those days that's what I would do, and quite naturally, you would have to fight because at that time everybody was White in the Bronx. All your politicians were White.

BP: Right.

KS: And after - -so you being the little person on the totem pole in a predominantly White community, and it's just a handful of Black and Puerto Ricans. So you have to fight. You have to become civic. You had to become a part of - -at that time they used to call it the North Democratic Club. It used to be on Fordham Road. You go and become apart of it so you can voice your rights. Our community is not getting enough for our children. Our children aren't getting any summer jobs. We're not getting that. But the kids on Webster, or the kids on so-and-so are getting it when they come in. So our kids need it so. So that's how it works because when you lived up here in the Bronx you had to become, not really political, but you had

to be an advocate in order to get what you had to get for your community or even for your family. Your rights.

BP: Any closing thoughts? You lived in the Bronx since the late 1950's, are you proud? Close to 50 years, been coming to the Bronx since you were a teenager, and have been working, raised your children in the Bronx, and have been active in the Bronx for the better part of 40 years.

Even until today right? Any final thoughts on the borough and the communities as they stand right now in the 21st century?

KS: My thought on the Bronx is that Black people in the Bronx need to come together and begin to fight for the issues of their community also. Not that you're letting out anybody's community. But everybody, every nationality in the Bronx fights for the issues of their community, and I just feel like sometimes African-Americans in the Bronx, particularly young people, are not getting their fair share of things that would give them upward mobility. The health issue with the issue of AIDS and how they say in the African-American community, AIDS is more prevalent than the Hispanics, the Asians, the Whites and everyone. I don't see a forum here in the Bronx to educate the African-American. I see forums, maybe they just say it like that that they have a forum and hostess for the Hispanic community. I don't think it's nothing there but we must begin to educate our kids also. We must begin to have things where we can bring our kids in. We must begin to have organizations that are able to give out information to the Hispanic and to the Black community to me because that is something to me that is not being done. Everything is immigrant. We're all immigrants. We're really living in a society where we are all immigrants. But we're the most ill-informed, not informed or however you say it, community in the Bronx to me.

Interviewers: Brian Purnell, Princess Okieme

Interviewee: Kathryn Speller

Date: September 23, 2006

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BP: Okay. Well thank you so much for participating in this. Putting your memories on records.

And this is a very rich source now for people to sue to learn about the Bronx, and to learn more about Black people's experience living and working and struggling in the Bronx, so thank you.

KS: You're welcome Brian. [laughs]

END OF INTERVIEW