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Marietta J. Tanner

Mark Naison

Transcriber: Sophia Maier

Mark Naison (MN): Okay, you're smiling. Hello. This is Dr. Mark Naison from the Bronx African American History Project. This is the second of the interviews we are doing with members of the Eta Omega Omega chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority. And we are honored to be today with one of the founding members of the chapter, Marietta Tanner. So, Marietta, could you tell us a little bit about how your family ended up in the Bronx?

Marietta Tanner (MT): My family didn't enter into the Bronx, I did from Willow Grove, Pennsylvania.

MN: Wow.

MT: So that's where I was. I have always been active politically. It's because, well, of my parents. I wanted to say that my father was a New Dealer. Most of the black people were still members of the party of Lincoln. They were Republicans. And his ideas of liberal were opposing Wilson, Coolidge and Hoover. I listened as a six-year-old to him and his friends as they argued about the New Deal and why it was so important. And they used to listen to a person whose name was Father Coughlin.

MN: Oh boy.

MT: He was a supporter of Lindbergh's, really Nazis really. Right Wing America Firsters. That's what they were. And I watched him take on white Republican township officials to change street lights and cinders for are dark and muddy streets. And we lived in a segregated section of Pennsylvania, Willow Grove, called Crestmont. That was the bottom land that had been redlined for black people to live in.

MN: And which part of the state was this located in?

MT: Southeastern Pennsylvania, northeast of Philadelphia,

MN: Northeast of Philadelphia. Is it anywhere near Chester?

MT: No, Chester is on the other side. Chester's south of Philadelphia. Right. We were north. And so I wanted to say that my father was very political all the time, and he made us be that way. I carried petitions house to house when I was six years old, I remember doing it. And my sister and brother and I, we used to try to get people to register to vote. I had a little trouble sometimes, one time I just got so tired I stuffed all the rest of our petitions in this person's mailbox. And lo and behold a man comes over to my house with all these, "Mr. Jones, who put all these petitions in my mailbox." I thought, "It was Marietta." I said, "I was tired, and I didn't want to start a panic." He fell down laughing because as a six-year-old I said panic, and he thought that was a very big word for me. But anyway, he didn't scold

me, he just laughed, like I guess she was tired. So this was when it was really Jim Crow in the 30s in Pennsylvania. And it was the law of the land. And the tentacles of Jim Crow was as active in Pennsylvania as it was in Alabama. So every day My parents brought the racism that was going on to my attention. And my mother was as active as my father. But she would go to the schools and she'd protest because -- sometimes she'd be all by herself and sometimes she'd take one of the kids with her and I'd go sometimes -- and she would, she protested the hand me down textbooks that we had. I went to a segregated school called Park School. We had worn out textbooks from the other schools we had to patch. I remember patching up with this stuff that looked like cellophane, we had to patch these textbooks before we could use them. They were made of it and torn and then we got the, I'll never forget, we got the old curtain from the high school and then it didn't fit. I was awful. Anyway, that was the school I went to it was segregated, but it was good enough, as they thought, for the black kids. So the school board, my mother would go to school board and she'd be ignored and disparaged. But she would go and she would listen. And then she had a friend named Mrs. Adams who was very, very light complexioned. And Mrs. Adam would go and sit in some of the meetings. They didn't know her as well, and they thought she was white. And she'd get the information to come back to my mother and they'd go quick with what she had. And they would go and they would complain about things and things that were said. So this was a little trick. These were the members of the NAACP -- troublemakers black neighbors said -- but anyway, that was what my early childhood was like in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania.

MN: Willow Grove. I'll remember that name.

MT: Oh, yes, you remember it because John Philip Sousa used to come to the park. And it was a big deal because he was very famous,

MN: Right. So where did you end up going to college?

MT: I went to college *clears throat* I went to college in West Virginia. That sounds very odd. But I wanted to get away from my father, because I was going to Temple but he was very much, very demanding. I had to be home at a certain time. I couldn't do this. I couldn't do that. So I said, well, I was gonna go away to college with these friends of mine, whom I met while I was working in Philadelphia. And so I went to West Virginia, and that's where I became a member of the sorority 73 years ago.

MN: Wow. Wow. So you joined 73 years ago, what college were you at?

MT: I was at West Virginia, what's now West Virginia State University. It's near Charleston. Some of my fondest memories being there was during an I believe. I mean, it was really great to be in a sorority. And one of the things I had to do when we were having a meeting, I would wind up the Victrola. And we would play Fritz Kreisler's music, we had very sweet music there. And then one time Marian Anderson came to visit our campus and I was very excited for it. So I helped her dress in her gorgeous velvet robe

that she got from Russia, and I told her that I had heard her in Philadelphia, my mother was very, very much a fan. And she was very interested in that. So that was how I --

MN: Was West Virginia State, at that time, an HBCU?

MT: No, I don't think so. Because I think it was always a State College. It might have been an HBCU, because we did everything with the HBCU colleges, so probably.

MN: So after you graduated as a proud member of AKA, where did you go next?

MT: Well, I was supposed to be visiting my friend in New York just for the weekend. My roommate after I graduated. And she said, "Oh, why don't you stay here because it's so easy to get a job. And you could get a job easily because you should stay here in New York with me." So guess what? I did.

MN: Now where was your first apartment?

MT: My first apartment was on 147 Street in Manhattan. And our neighbor at the end of the hall -- we had rooms really -- was Billie Holiday. She was at the end of hall.

MN: Oh Jesus, so we go from Marian Anderson to Billie Holiday.

MT: The people I know, everybody says, "you couldn't have." I did because everybody lived in Harlem then.

MN: And what year was this that you moved to New York?

MT: It was 1949.

MN: Wow. So I just want to say now that, even though anybody looking at this interview wouldn't believe it, Marietta Tanner is 93 years old. So just to place yourself. So you're in Harlem in 1949. And how long did you stay in Harlem?

MT: Oh, well, I left Harlem really to move to the Bronx when I got married. So that was in 1960.

MN: 1960.

MT: No, 1959 I mean.

MN: 1959. And what neighborhood did you and your husband moved to in the Bronx?

MT: We lived in the Tremont section. Originally, we lived in the --- very near the Hone Avenue area --- I forget what you call that section but it was very prejudiced. My mother-in-law found this house in an Italian neighborhood. It was very prejudiced.

MN: That could be the Arthur Avenue area?

MT: That's right. That's exactly right.

MN: We've done a number of interviews of black families who lived in that area and their children had very difficult experiences going to the public schools.

MT: We had a very, very --- well, our neighbors were pretty nice next door --- but generally it was very, very prejudiced, people were very prejudiced. But we did have some friends around there. And so that's where we lived in the Bronx.

MN: So you lived in the Arthur Avenue area.

MT: Yeah.

MN: Wow. And you bought a house?

MT: Well, my mother-in-law had a house and we had an apartment. And there were three floors and we had the second floor,

MN: Do you remember the address?

MT: 1621 Hone Avenue.

MN: 1621 Hone Avenue. I will have to drive by there the next time I'm in the Bronx. How long did you stay at that particular apartment?

MT: Let's see, until my daughter was born. I guess I lived there about six years.

MN: Right, so until about 1965 or six or?

MT: 1966. My mother-in-law was furious because she didn't want to go back to the section, but we moved to Anthony Avenue. 1825 Anthony Avenue in the Tremont section.

MN: In the Tremont section, which is a little south of where you were?

MT: A little north, isn't it? Or west.

MN: West. Okay, and how long did you live at that particular spot?

MT: Oh, let me see. Until my daughter was out of college.

MN: Okay. So you were in Tremont, in that area, for quite a while?

MT: Oh, yeah. I lived there until 90, until the 90s.

MN: Right. Okay. Now, when you were in New York, what sort of work were you doing?

MT: Well, I began working as an editorial assistant for magazines. And I worked for a child welfare magazine. And our office was at 1790 Broadway. It was the first job I ever had, and that was with the American Public Health Association as an editorial assistant. I worked on --- they did testing --- and I worked with a psychometrician there. And then I went to, let's see what was it, 350 United Nations Plaza. Yeah. And that was for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. And I worked there for years with the Child Welfare League of America as an editorial assistant.

MN: Okay. Now, the years that you moved to New York are high points of the Civil Rights Movement, both nationally and in New York City. When you were in New York, were you involved in political activism during the 50s and 60s?

MT: Yup. In the 50s, that's when we were very politically active. Because, you know, everybody thinks about the 60s as being where it was really political, but there was a lot of stuff going on. What we did was my roommate and her brother and I, we registered immediately and we got very, very political, and we used to carry petitions. Dangerously my father had, you know, we'd always been --- I had always been getting people to vote. So I said, Well, I did it in Pennsylvania. I'll do it in New York. And we used to go to the top floor, the sixth floor, of these apartment buildings and come all the way down and try to get as many people in there registered to vote as we could -- register or get a petition signed. So we worked very hard to try to get black people to vote. I was really active with that, from the day I really got registered in New York. And I registered very quickly because my father said, you vote in every election. And so I did.

MN: Were you ever involved in New York and the NAACP or the Congress of Racial Equality?

MT: Oh yes. I was. I received many awards with the Urban League.

MN: The Urban League? Ok.

MT: I was more involved with the Urban League than the NAACP in New York. But I did belong to the NAACP. I worked with Anne Keel. Now, Anne Keel was very close to our sorority and to the Eta Omega Omega chapter. And one of the things that she --- we were very much involved at the time in the 50s, with the 1954 decision, Supreme Court decision, which was about the desegregation of schools --- and Anne Keel was very active with that, and she worked people in our sorority. In fact, somebody said she joined, I don't know, I don't think she did. Anyway, she used to do a lot of things with Eta Omega Omega. And one of the things they did was to try to get children into these groups called a Better Chance. That started and she was very active with that. Well, my child even went to Fieldston. My son went to Fieldston. And she was instrumental in that. But during that time, in the late 50s, she also became involved with Martin Luther King. And they would come to the Bronx too. I used to do --- they had a lot of supporters in Riverdale, and these were wealthy people that had these events --- and I would go to them. I met up with so many of the civil rights leaders who came to the Bronx, also with Jonathan Bingham, who was the Congressman at that time.

MN: So there was a lot of fundraising in the Bronx for the Civil Rights Movement?

MT: Oh, a lot of fundraising, a lot of fundraising. Anne was very much involved with that, she and her husband. They did a lot of work with that. And there were other people in Riverdale, but she was spearheading a lot of those activities. I used to go to her house very often and help with that.

MN: Now. When did you and other people in the Bronx decide to start the Eta Omega Omega chapter?

MT: Well, that was in the 1960s. And at that time, I was working with the HARYOU Act program. And that was an Adam Clayton Powell program in Harlem. Now, the Bronx was mostly run by Puerto Ricans and Harlem was run by blacks. I mean, that the anti-poverty programs. I worked with the anti-poverty program in Harlem. But we also brought a lot of the activity to the Bronx, I used to write a newspaper column for the Amsterdam News called “The Community's Conscience.”

MN: Wow. So when did you start writing that? Because we have to look those columns up!

MT: You do.

MN: Wow, what year did you start writing that?

MT: My little child was about… let's see. I could see. I know I had an infant. So I say 1960, about 1960-1961.

MN: Right, and this was a weekly column?

MT: Yeah.

MN: And how long did you write this? For how many years?

MT: Oh, I wrote it for about 10 years. I was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1968 and I was writing it then.

MN: Right. Now was, “The Community's Conscience,” focused on the Bronx or?

MT: On the Bronx only.

MN: So this was a Bronx column that you wrote for the Amsterdam News called “The Community's Conscience? So we're going to have to get every copy of that, somehow.

MT: They probably have them archived.

MN: No, this is not rocket science. We can find these. And they should be part of the collection that you give to the Bronx County Historical Society, because --- were you talking about Bronx related issues?

MT: Oh, yes, we were. I was talking about the people who --- Lindsay was the mayor. And he used to send out people up to talk to our groups who were trying to --- we had a group called Parents for Leadership and Action Now, which is called PLAN. And what we were trying to do was to ---

MN: Parents for leadership is the first?

MT: Parents for Leadership and Action Now: PLAN, mostly they were parents of children in the school, but some of the teachers would help them. I think this woman, Marie Thomas, and she was a principal of the school, and she would help to organize these parents. And what they were trying to do is, well, to do some integrating of schools. And the schools were highly segregated. But in the Bronx, they were. For instance, Taft High School was segregated.

MN: Oh, yeah. I know Taft very well.

MT: Right. And so we were trying to get our students in there and get better conditions for them. Then we wanted some schools to get them in, like Bronx High School of Science, and other schools like that. And so we were very active at that time helping to integrate the schools.

MN: Right. Were you also involved in efforts to get black history taught in the schools? Was that part of it at that time?

MT: Well, at the HARYOU Act program in Harlem that was a very big part. We worked with Doc John Henrik Clarke, he was the scholar at the time. Of course, I met everybody like Malcolm X and all those people.

MN: Just Malcolm X, Billie Holiday, Marian Anderson.

MT: All around there. They all came, Ossie Davis and all those people came.

MN: So HARYOU Act. Yeah.

MT: Ruby Dee too. They were very close to us, because they were always trying to raise money to help us. They were they were wonderful people. And they would, for instance, this group PLAN, when A Raisin in the Sun first came out we went down. They sponsored a theater party. And we met, you know, Ossie. Ruby Dee was very active in making sure that was a success. It was wonderful.

MN: Now, was PLAN only in the Bronx or was also?

MT: Only in the Bronx.

MN: And they were supporting this Bronx parents' movement?

MT: Yes.

MN: Was PLAN mostly an African American group?

MT: Mostly all black. I worked with a lot of Jews too, a lot of people were Jewish. Yeah. And, oh, I wish I could think of her name. But she's the one who organized the Bronx Committee on the Arts. I was a founding member of that.

MN: The Bronx Committee on the Arts, which now is the Bronx Council on the Arts?

MT: Council on the Arts. Yeah. And there was another, there was another woman who I worked with at the zoo and the Botanical Garden. She moved to Israel. They were very active in trying to get these things started, like the Bronx Art Museum and all that.

MN: Wow. Now, one question. I did --- over the years, we've done a lot of interviews with people from the Morrisania section of the Bronx. Did you ever find yourself going to any of the music venues along Boston Road or Prospect Avenue?

MT: I'd go to see Marietta Williams or Maxine Sullivan.

MN: Oh boy, you knew Maxine Sullivan?

MT: She was the president of her museum there, which was called the House That Jazz Built.

MN: You gotta be kidding. We've worked very closely with Maxine Sullivan's daughter, and we got her papers, some of her papers, to be donated to the Bronx Historical Society.

MT: Now I met so many musicians. For instance, I have a lovely picture of Eubie Blake, he wrote To Shuffle Along, but he was one of the people who could come often to Maxine Sullivan's House That Jazz Built on Prospect Avenue.

MN: Right. Well, it's so interesting. Her house was on Ritter Place. This nice white house there. And one of my good friends is the great jazz pianist Valerie Capers.

MT: No, she's my good friend. She lived across the street from me and Valerie and I used to go to the opera together.

MN: Oh, you're kidding.

MT: I'd say, Valerie step up. She says, Oh, I noticed step up. She said, because I felt your arm movements if you were going up. I loved everything about her. I said, I can't be lazy because I see Valerie going out there every day to do --- she lived right across the street from me.

MN: Oh, she lives right across the street from you now.

MT: No, she lived on Anthony Avenue.

MN: She lived on Anthony Avenue? Wow. Because now she's on the Grand Concourse, 158 Street.

MT: Well, if you see her again, just tell her I said hi. I'd love to get together.

MN: Oh, I will email her tonight and tell her that you say hi.

MT: When you do, say what kind of wine would you like? She had all these bottles, all marked in Braille.

MN: Right. Because Valerie remembers growing up right near Maxine Sullivan's house and Maxine inviting the children in to the neighborhood and then also, Maxine was also a president of the local PTA in the school across the street.

MT: School district 12. I worked in 12.

MN: Did you know the Pruitt family? And Harriet?

MT: I knew Harriet very well.

MN: Oh, no. You know Harriet well too?

MT: It was just --- she had two years ago, they had a reception for her in district eight. And I wrote her, it was printed in the in the supervisors.

MN: Okay. So Harriet was one of the first people in the community to come on and support the Bronx African American History Project. She had me and my students to her house. Our brother, Jim Pruitt, has been a friend of mine since the early 70s, when he ran the Upward Brown program at Fordham. So that family has probably, more than any family, helped put this project on firm foundation.

MT: Who's the former president of the, I can't call his name, the president of the Bronx Historical Society?

MN: Harmelin.

MT: No. Kazimiroff. There was a Dr. Kazimiroff. And this man worked with us all the time with him.

MN: So you've been involved in so many different components of the Bronx Community. In addition to everything you've done with this chapter, which I'll have your sisters ask about, but I'm fascinated that --- how did you first meet Maxine Sullivan?

MT: I met her through district 12, Edith Gaines was the Superintendent. And I that's how I met Maxine.

MN: Right. And Harriet was at one point, the Assistant District Superintendent.

MT: She was in district eight; I was in 12.

MN: You've been in district eight, a different district, right. So it's --- I'm trying to think --- did you have any involvement with the Bronx chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality?

MT: Only in collecting petitions or things like that. I didn't really do too much with them, because I didn't have much activity time.

MN: Okay, so, I mean, there's a ---

MT: I knew them because, you know, we would all meet. There'd be a lot of meetings and I'd be there. Certainly doing the reporting, I used to report on stuff that they did.

MN: Are there --- before we hand it over to the Eta Omega folks --- are there other musicians you worked with in the Bronx other than Maxine Sullivan and Valerie Capers?

MT: Other musicians? Hm.

MN: Did you know Jimmy Owens at all? Because Jimmy is a world class jazz trumpeter who grew up grew up right down the block from Harriet, the Pruitt family, on 168 Street.

MT: There were many musicians.

MN: Did you ever become a member of a church in the Bronx? Did you ever join a congregation here?

MT: I used to go to the Presbyterian Church there.

MN: St. Augustine's?

MT: Yes, I used to go there.

MN: Oh my god. Did you know Edler Hawkins?

MT: Oh yes, I knew Edler Hawkins.

MN: Because that church was the intellectual, cultural center of Morrisania.

MT: I was instrumental in taking his choir to sing at the World's Fair.

MN: So you took the St. Augustine's choir to sing at the World's Fair in 1964?

MT: Right.

MN: Wow. I know also, because one of my students is writing a dissertation on Edler Hawkins and St. Augustine's Church, and he had a lot of --- he had HBCU choirs perform there, Dr. King spoke there, so ---

MT: He was very active. And he was very active --- the thing that I really remember is his really despairing aura, because they used to have this shape up, called black women on the ---

MN: The Bronx Slave Market.

MT: He wrote that thing up. I remember how hard he worked.

MN: That's been a major subject of our research as well, it was very bad in the 30s. And then started to come back in the 40s and early 50s.

MT: That was one of his projects. He was very devoted to that. I also worked for Herman Badillo, out Puerto Rican congressmen. I knew more politicians than musicians.

MN: Okay, did you know Joseph Gallagher?

MT: Oh, of course. Oh course I knew Joe Gallagher.

MN: I had five of my students work as interns in his office in the 70s.

MT: Oh, really?

MN: Yeah. And just when they were being raided by the FBI, so that was an interesting experience. But I liked him personally.

MT: Very, very fine person. Yeah.

MN: So there's like --- we could probably interview for about you for like 500 hours. But I want to now turn it over to your sorority sisters and talk about how you created the chapter and how it evolved.

Donna Joseph (DJ): Thank you, Professor Naison and Sor. Marietta. Again, I'm honored. Thank you for helping to arrange this. When we had our 50th Chapter anniversary, we had an opportunity to honor you and bring you up. And I remember meeting you, but I don't remember --- I mean, everyone was surrounding you, so I don't remember being so intimate in our meeting, and now as the 19th President of the chapter, it's just an honor to have this opportunity. So I know you mentioned stuffing mailboxes at the age of six with your dad. But are there any other events that helped shape your political activism?

MT: Well, at that time, you know there were so many dastardly things going on. My father also was kind of an avid reader. He wanted it. You know, he had these politicians, these people that he wanted us to know about like April Randolph, and Dubois, Dr. Dubois, people like that. And so we did. He would

talk about that. And then the person who really did a lot of work with me was my uncle who was a dentist in Nicetown. And they belonged to ---

MN: Was that in Philadelphia?

MT: That was in Philadelphia, yes. Nicetown, Philadelphia. My father worked at the post office in Philadelphia. And when he worked there, you know, that was an elite position for a black person to have at that time. The way he got that job and how he had to study for it was very interesting. They used to talk about the things that happened to them as black people. I wrote about it in a book that I wrote about how ---

MN: Wait a minute, so you wrote a book? What's the title of the book?

MT: Well, I wrote two books. One of them is called Children Are The Barometers, that's about the children in the South Bronx, and how they survived the drugs.

MN: When was that published? Children Are The Barometers.

MT: That was published --- everything happened --- I had those books lying around my house, but I never did anything to it until I got down here to Virginia and my husband said, get that stuff out. Let's start these books. So I did. It was published, I think, 2016 or something like that.

MN: So this is a relatively recent book.

MT: And the other book was published two years later, 2018. And the other book is called Driving in Second. And that was about a trip I took to Mexico, but really, we went through the southern United States to test the Supreme Court decision from 1954.

MN: And this was a drive that you and your family took?

MT: Np, three friends.

MN: Three friends, Driving in Second. Wow. Okay, I've got to get both of these. Okay.

MT: No, but anyway, I talk about the way that my mother and her family were reared in North Philadelphia. And she talked about that too, as being something to really know about, the struggle that they had to make a living and to go to school. And how they, for instance, they used to say, when they raced black kids coming home, they'd say, a dark cloud arising, and they'd throw snowballs and such back then. And she said that this white boy wiped his feet on her pinafore --- she's to wear the white pinafores --- and this boy wiped his feet on there, but she cried, but she couldn't --- the teacher saw it but

she didn't say anything about it. Didn't do anything about it. So she said that was the kind of thing they endured when they were went to school.

MN: They were going to mostly white predominantly white schools?

MT: Oh, yes. They went to white schools.

MN: In Philadelphia.

MT: Yeah. But my uncle became a dentist, and he used to tell us about his struggles and about --- I always said I was gonna write a book about his army --- his position and things he told me about the army --- but I just never got back to that.

MN: Now that was in World War One or World War Two?

MT: He was in World War One. And he talked to me, I really had a lot of information about his time. After he finished with his work --- we were visiting him in Philadelphia --- we'd come into his office and running right up and down in the chair. He was just a wonderful guy. And he talked to us about all kinds of stuff, about how he was a medic during the war, and how, you know, he would run on his bicycle. And well he had a motorcycle, because he was a medic. Because he had gone to Howard for a couple of years, and he had had some background in medicine. But he got enlisted in the end.

DJ: All of these, I don't want to say experiences, but I guess life experiences that you had from, like your political activism at age six and you experienced segregation. Was that your dad that was in World War One?

MT: No, my dad wasn't in the World War. My dad wasn't in the war. He didn't go to war. It was a sore spot between him and my uncle.

DJ: Got it. And your uncle was in World War One. So how do you think these experiences then helped you charter a chapter in the Bronx? I can only imagine what you had to go through to actually charter an African American sorority in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement.

MT: Well, Olga was very anxious to do this. And she was really the spearhead of the whole thing.

MN: What's her name? Olga?

MT: Garrett. What did her name become? Because she got married.

DJ: I know her as Olga Garrett. Do you know her married name?

SAUDAH MUHAMMAD: It's Olga Chellis, but she died Olga McCauley in 2006. I actually just got a picture of her from her granddaughter.

MT: Right. Well, she was Olga Garrett when we had the chapter. And I met her at the HARYOU Act in Harlem. And I was very active there because we were developing the after-school study center, at the HARYOU Act. And that meant that we were talking about black history in a way that they wouldn't talk about it. We had quite a row with the union, with the UFT, they were they were going to write this, what black history ought to be about. And we had a big, a big, big, big, big fight about that. Anyway, Olga was very interested in what we were doing. Dr. Clarke was --- I remember going to a meeting at Dr. Clarke's house. He had a house opened up on a what they call --- what's that row?

MN: Is it Strivers Row?

MT: Pardon?

MN: Was it Strivers row? 138 street?

MT: Yeah, a house there. We used to go there. when they wanted to talk about black history, they would say, well, we don't have to talk about all that about Africa, we're gonna just talk about what happened to the blacks here in this country. And Dr. Clarke would hear none of that. He said, start, really start. Our lives didn't start with being enslaved. And I remember how he would be pressed for that, and how he argued the work that he did, to make sure that our children knew about blacks having lived in Africa, and what Africa was like before they were captured and brought to United States. That's how I really became very active in the African movement, because there was a man whose name was Charles Seifert. And he's forgotten now, but I always say that I think his materials should be brought to hall. And I've been trying to get the Schomburg to do it, but they've never done it. But anyway, he had a little museum on a corner of Eighth Avenue and 135 Street. And he had scrolls from ships. All kinds of stuff from slave ships. It was fascinating the stuff that he had. And one of his co-workers, a person who would come there was --- what's the woman who wrote A Raisin in the Sun?

MN: Lorraine Hansberry?

MT: Leo Hansberry was a good friend of his. And Leo Hansberry showed this picture "Africa, lost, stolen and found." And I'll never forget that, that was just like an eye opener for me. And I was really angry because I've seen revisions of that movie, and I was very angry because they were plagiarized. I always felt. Anyway, that was where my activism, as far as Africa was concerned, began. Dr. Clarke was one of the students there with Dr. Seifert. And Dr. Seifert was the first black professor at City College.

MN: How do you spell his name?

MT: S-E-I-F-E-R-T.

MN: S-E-I-F-E-R-T.

MT: His collection of work, his work --- his wife, whom I got to know pretty well --- and I tried to get her to let the collection be a part of the Schomburg, but she wanted a separate museum for her husband's collection, but she wasn't able to take care of it. I got Jim Shroyer, who was a congressman, to agree to buy the collection from her but she wouldn't sell it. And she finally sold it to Duke University and that's where it is now. But I tried to find out from several people where it is at Duke, and it's been subsumed under another collection. I know she's turning over in her grave. But I'd love to go to Duke to see it or have it brought to Harlem because it was a fabulous collection.

DJ: So after working with Sor. Olga to start Eta Omega Omega, do you have any early memories, or a fond moment, you can share of Eta Omega Omega?

MT: Oh, well, I used to have meetings at my house. And we used to go --- we had a fine member who lived up on the Hudson, she had an estate up there. She bought this house up there. And we went up there. And I remember that. I said, I said, we've got a good show for her. And I said, Well, we should give her a planting for her yard. And all of us go, I don't know how to plant any stuff. But I did, so I was able to plant these --- I got the shrubbery and these other things. And she was very delighted. We planted this shrubbery in the yard. And then we did things with Anne Keel, which I was telling you before, a lot of the work that we did was around school integration. And we worked because there were a lot of prejudice about a few black kids going to school, going to the schools that were, you know, the schools that were white here, and children in the Bronx, for instance, out there where I lived around Arthur Avenue, it was terrible, they were terribly prejudiced. And there was a, I think it was a Presbyterian church, that was trying to do some things about the integration of the schools there. But when we talk about the section around Taft High School, getting black kids into Taft high schools was hard. And Morris, they used to have terrible fights about trying to get some black children to be able to go there. And you had no black teachers. That was another big thing that we tried, we worked on, trying to get black teachers in the schools.

DJ: I'm sorry, so is that --- Sor. Marietta, are you saying that was one of the programs that Eta Omega did? Was trying to increase the black teachers in schools?

MT: Oh yeah. The black teachers in schools and black students in the schools. In the 60s, that was really where our focus was.

DJ: Okay. So would you say, in hindsight looking back, would you say that the chapter was successful in their programming with trying to increase the number of African American students as well as teachers?

MT: I don't know about teachers. It wasn't until almost --- I'm trying to think when --- we had all kinds of fights. Trying to think when we finally began to get some teachers.

MN: We've done --- there were a number of people we interviewed who talked about racial black students having being chased out of neighborhoods going to Evander, going to Columbus.

MT: Oh, yes.

MN: Going to Roosevelt. You know, there were certain schools where, you know, kids in the neighborhood would make it very difficult for some of the black students coming in from Morrisania and Tremont and going up to the north Bronx. Columbus is near Pelham Parkway.

MT: Morris High School too. Now Morris High School is right there in Morrisania. But there was a lot of prejudice around there. And they had no --- we really had to fight to get a few black teachers in there.

MN: Harriet Pruitt was one of them.

MT: Yes, that's one of things that she worked on.

DJ: What were some of the service programs that were done to combat that?

MT: Service programs? Well, we'd meet with parents, that's the big thing that we did. That was a big thing, to try to talk to parents and talk them into letting their children go out. You know, because it was dangerous, it was really quite a hardship to get, because you wouldn't think now that that these schools were like that, but that's how it was.

MN: One of my good friends is Paul Cannon, who's the principal of PS 140 in the Morrisania section of the Bronx, and he described going from Morrisania to Columbus. And he said, it turned him into a distance runner, because he had a run home from school so often.

MT: Well, my son went to went to Columbus. And that was in the 70s, so it was different. They'd gone through the the hard part. It wasn't as bad. But even then in the 70s he and his friends --- he had a very good group of friends, five of them --- and they decided they were going to finish high school and everything. They never wore sneakers to school, because your sneakers can be stolen. You know, don't wear any of those fancy sneakers at all, because they'd take your shoes right off your feet.

MN: Well, that reminds me of something. So you know, you go through all these civil rights battles. And then, in the 70s, we have the burning and the arson. So was that something that the chapter was concerned with as it was going on?

MT: I wasn't active in the chapter in the 70s. I was active in the 60s and then after 1968 I wasn't active in the chapter.

DJ: So during the 60s, can you --- well, I think you will remember, because you mentioned some popular names earlier --- do you remember who the national president was?

MT: Parnell was the supreme Vassilis when Eta Omega Omega was formed. And she was very interested in Job Corps and trying to get, he wanted us to see if we could establish a section here, but we really weren't able to. But we did try to do something about hiring people of color. Adam Clayton Powell was the congressman from Central Harlem. And this is when they had the anti-poverty programs in the 60s. And he established this thing, which was radical, he said that no program could function without maximum participation of the poor. Now, that was revolutionary. I mean, poor people? Well, they really can't, they don't know what's going on. But you know, it amazed me how bright some of these women were, took the numbers, but they were. They were very intelligent. They really were, they just never had any opportunity to do anything like that before. But they would come to those meetings, and they were no patsies. I mean, they were no pushovers at all. They really learn how to express themselves and get some things done for their children. This was Adam Clayton Powell. And so we worked with the black parents and the Puerto Rican parents who also we're actively trying to get things done in a neighborhood. I mean, people who never had a high school education became, really, activists.

MN: Did you get to meet Evelina Antonetti of United Bronx parents?

MT: I knew Eveline very well. Yes, Evelina. I know her from way back.

MN: Oh, wow. So you were working closely with her during that.

MT: We met people who really became very strong, very active, and she did a lot for Puerto Rican kids. But, you know, we'd fight all the time because they'd say, Well you can't have that job unless you can speak Spanish. And this happens to be a black neighborhood. Blacks here, we're gonna have some people here, this is a big fight too, because they said, Well, you gotta speak Spanish in order to work in the South Bronx in any of these things. And so that was a big thing. And I got a bad reputation for being anti-Puerto Rican, because I wouldn't, I wouldn't let them get away with that. In fact, I ran a program in in the 70s about --- it was out consortium. And I was the --- we had women and men. In fact, we went around to the neighborhoods and got these men. I got a couple of men off park benches, got guys and recruited them in the program, because they said, Well, this program I was having had to be mostly Puerto Rican, but no way, but I understand that. So we recruited a lot of black men too and women. And these were paraprofessionals. These were paraprofessionals in the schools, but they were getting degrees to be teachers. And one of the schools was Fordham, and the other was Lehman. And the other was the

College of Mount St. Vincent. I worked with those three colleges. And that's where the students went to school. We did very well, we got quite a few people who got degrees and went on from there.

DJ: So when you speak of the poor people's --- when you mentioned the in Harlem, with he was being very radical. And then today, we had a reassertion --- not today, but in the last month --- we have resurgence of the Poor People's Campaign. And I'm just thinking programs of the 60s seem like they are repeating themselves in the 20's. So if you had a forwarding message to today's generation of Eta Omega Omega, to continue the traditions of activism in the chapter, what tidbits would you give us for service?

MT: I just want to say. You know, I mean, I didn't mind going into places that people was like, you shouldn't go there. You're not going to really meet the people, you know, being standoffish. I mean, I've gone into really bad homes, considered, you know, we there were people who are really poor. I mean, for instance, because we organized a Headstart program, one of the things we did with that group PLAN, and we got a Headstart group together. Now, in order to get those Headstart children, we had to go where they were, and we had to go to homes. I mean, Marie Thomas and I went to homes where conditions were pretty bad. For instance, she had a mother. And she says, we gotta go there and get those kids out of there. And this woman, this mother, called to say that the boy couldn't come to school. And she'd say, why? And he doesn't have any clothes to wear. And then when they go to the house, there'd be piles of dirty clothes. She hadn't just, you know, she just wouldn't wash the clothes. She'd go buy clothes. You know, it was really, the conditions were like that, really very, very bad. But you have to go, you have to be willing to go where the people are. And I think that sororities had the reputation for being elitist. And we can't do that. We can't do that. We have to be --- we have to come down. We can't just be going to the cotillions with the links or whatever. You know, maybe that's one part of what we do. But the main thing is to go where the people are and be willing to go in those apartments and register people like we used to do. I mean, that made all the difference. Because we would go --- when I was teaching, and I'd go to the Bronx River Houses to get petitions signed. This is the way I got to know all the rappers is when ---

MN: Oh, so you went to Bronx River with Afrika Bambaataa and ---

MT: How did you know him?

MN: Well, my nickname is Notorious Ph.D. So I may have to wrap for you.

MT: I knew him as one of the kids who would escort me in the Bronx River Houses.

MN: You're kidding me.

MT: So I wouldn't get bothered getting petitions.

MN: And this was in the 70s?

MT: Oh, yes. He was one of the kids who had helped me.

MN: Yeah. And he had a great organization he founded called the Universal Zulu Nation.

MT: Yes, he did.

MN: And also, there was DJ Jazzy Jeff who was from there. So Wow. So you were doing this in the Bronx, doing voter registration in the Bronx River Houses?

MT: Yes, I did.

DJ: Along with voter registration in the Bronx, and helping parents during segregated times and student safety. Well, let me give you a little --- yesterday, we mentioned, it's interesting that you said that a forwarding message would be to go where the people are and to just celebrate the opportunities that we've been afforded. I know when you came to the chapter anniversary this year, you gave us a charge of remembering who we are, right, and where we came from. And so you mentioned Roosevelt High School, Taft High School earlier, and so our chapter signature program, its rites of passage, was started in Roosevelt in 1989-1990. And then it's moved into different areas, just to combat what you were saying. It was in Taft for a little bit, it was at McKinley Community Center. Lorraine Hansberry, now at East Chester Heights Community Center. Are there, other, any advice you would give moving forward?

MT: Well, I used to --- the teachers used to say to me, you know, you should really be teaching at a school where the kids would appreciate what you do. I said, they appreciated what I do. You know, because now my kids were --- I had kids I taught when I was an assistant principal at Lorraine Hansberry school.

DJ: Oh, wow.

MN: Wow. Well, I didn't really --- so you were a teacher and then an assistant principal.

MT: Right.

MN: In what years were you teaching?

MT: The 60s

MN: In the 60s and was Lorraine Hansberry School in the Bronx?

MT: Well, it was. I was working with district 12 when it was built, and decided to call it the Lorraine Hansberry school.

DJ: And Sor. Marietta, that's interesting that you said you were the assistant principal there because we have another former president in our chapter, Sor. Joy Elaine Daly.

MT: Went in there right after I left.

DJ: Oh, okay. Great. Great. Wonderful.

MT: I never worked with her.

MN: What street is the school on?

MT: It's five points, it's at West Farms Road.

DJ: Right. 1970, I believe, West Farms Road, underneath the train. And okay, so your pathways crossed with Joy, Sor. Joy Eliane Daily.

MT: Right.

DJ: Okay, because our mentoring program was there while she was principal of that school. Wow. That's amazing how generations have followed similar paths doing similar service. Do you remember any fundraising activities from your time in Eta Omega Omega?

MT: What did we do to raise money?

DJ: And how much money were you trying to raise, at that time?

MT: I don't know what we, I really don't remember anything. I don't remember. But I remember working at Lorraine Hansberry, which was very important to me, because what I wanted to do was to give the children experiences that would, you know, that would really be --- they could use for life. For instance, I had these --- the river was right there. Right. And we had these wonderful people. I was trying to think, Kazimiroff was the person who really got me started on this. But we had the kids in that school test the water every week.

MN: Oh, wow.

MT: Yeah. And it was a statewide project. We were the only a junior high school doing anything like that.

MN: So this is a junior high?

MT: Yeah.

MN: I think I know exactly where it is. It's right at the intersection of Tremont and West farms?

MT: Right. And we were able to have these people from the Botanical Gardens. We worked with them. And we replanted --- well, I had the river dredge there, there were mattresses and everything else in there --- and then we redid the river bank, so that we'd have native plants, and we got the kids to do all kinds of things like that. And they said, how do you make the kids to do that? I said, they'll do anything if I let them go out and work on that garden, they just loved it. I mean, no discipline problems, that was good. The main thing was to just get out their work in the garden. So it was wonderful.

DJ: Kids love the hands-on approach, right? They like to go outside, get their hands dirty.

MT: You know, they really became --- they were ready for climate change and all that, they knew something about it.

DJ: Sor. Marietta, tell me with 73 years of service. I'm so excited for you to become diamond. What is your fondest memory of being a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha?

MT: My fondest memory, my fondest memory.

DJ: I mean, with 73 years, I'm sure you have a few.

MT: Yeah. Well, yeah, there are lots and lots of things that we did. But I was so --- the fondest memory is having all those people with you when you want to do something. It's, you know, as soon as you say, I'm going to whatever you want to do, you have people who say, we'll help you with that. We're gonna work on that with you. For instance, I was interested in the United Nations, and I did a lot of work with them. And so we did, with our chapter in Pennsylvania, the chapter was wonderful we did a lot of things with with the United Nations group. We had raised money for UNICEF and all that kind of thing. And the children got an understanding of world affairs, you know, people got very interested in doing some things like that and broaden their horizons. I was pleased with that.

MN: So I want to ask, you know, there's, in the last two months, there's been this incredible upheaval in the country, you know, following the killing George Floyd, and protests in every nook and corner of the country spilling over into universities like my own to address issues of racism and marginalization,

which had been ignored. How do you feel as somebody who's been in this struggle all your life looking at what the young people are doing now?

MT: How young people are doing now? Well, I think young people have always been the leaders. They've always been on the cutting edge. I just don't think there would have been much of a Civil Rights Movement without them. sitting in at the lunch counters. And then there was a Children's March that garnered the attention of the news media around the world, when they used those water hoses on all those children. The young people have always wanted change. And they know. These kids got a chance to go to a --- you know, when they were in a segregated school --- but when they began to let them play basketball with the white guys, and they're going and say, look at this school. Look at the gym. We got this raggedy weak. We have to patter in our auditorium, we don't have anything like this. Why don't we have? So they began feeling we are deserving of these kind of surroundings also. So they have aspirations and they need to be encouraged in their willingness to make change, these kids will stay on the street. I mean, they asked me if I'm going to any marches. I said, I'm marched out. I can't march anymore. I've been to all of them, when it was cold and everything else. Raining. I said, no, I can't do it anymore.

DJ: From 12 members meeting at your home, to now Eta Omega Omega has 129 members. Do you have a forwarding message for us?

MT: I think the most pressing issue for the sorority today --- I was just talking to my granddaughter --- it's an improvement in training. I think Sarah Wilson, our Vasilis, she's wonderful because she wants us to keep up with the news, and she always has regionals, you know, where we develop leadership, but many of our black women consider themselves world citizens and don't want to be associated with anything black, strictly black anymore. And I think, now, I think this latest black lives matter that has helped a lot to make black people, a lot of black girls, think about wanting to be, wanting to associate and be with black people. But I know my daughter wouldn't join a sorority. I had a very hard time with her, she went to the Merchant Marine Academy for her degree. And she didn't want to go to a black university. And she now, you know I tell her, you see; as old as I am, I still have all these people who are my friends, my sorors, they're all around me, I've got all this crowd. And I said, whenever --- you know, I had a 90th birthday party in Philadelphia --- and a whole bunch of people from my sorority came. And it was just wonderful to see what it means to be a part of this whole sorority, part of this whole sisterhood. Wherever I go, where is it --- I took my kids on a --- when my husband died in 1974 --- we went on a tour across the United States, he had this what you call "Ameripass," bus passes. And it was you take the bus to a certain place that you stop, get off, do what you want to do there, and then get back on the bus and go to another city or whatever. So the kids would say, Ma, who are there people --- we're coming into Detroit --- and they say, what are those people running down? I said, Oh, my God, that's one of my sorors. I haven't seen her in 10 years, you know, 15, 20 years. But you know, all over, every place we went, there were people who I knew who were members, who were my sorors. And they just made wonderful for us. We had a wonderful time everywhere. I said, now that's what it means. It means that.

Also, you always have a cadre of people to support you. And so that's wonderful. So I think I want us to start working again with these teenagers, because we have to start with the intermediate school kids and start talking to them about what it means to be in a sorority, be in a black sorority. What it means to be an AKA. Middle School is the point. And I think they should learn. I'm trying to talk to my granddaughter, although she's now ready for college, but I want to talk to her. I've always talked to her about how great it is to be a part of the sisterhood because it's meant so much to me. Have these friends all over. I had a friend in Seattle, Arizona. My friend now who's 90, 92 and we're going to make it the two more years and we're going to go together, we're going to be together and we become diamond, I'm hoping. And she's in Texas, we communicate all the time.

DJ: I'm sorry Sor. Marietta, were you still finishing up your last statement?

MT: I wanted to say I think that's what we really have to do is to go work with the kids in the junior high school, because it's where you're going to find them. Because they have so many other things going on, and they don't think about how it's going to be when they're 93. They'll still have friends all over the country that they communicate with if they're in a sorority. And when you go to the Boulais, and you see Oh, it's just just wonderful to see somebody that you haven't seen in 25 years.

DJ: I agree. Sor. Marietta. I appreciate you spending time with us. I totally agree. Our chapter has attended international trips, even together, a few of us went to Italy and Paris, and some went to Dubai, and then to Thailand. And it's amazing to be in these other countries and meet other members of the sorority, and you already know you have a similar focus, and you're like minded and they come in and they pick you up and they take you out. And my mom says to me, Don, you did not meet an AKA in South Africa. I said, yes, we did, and we went out to dinner and everything

MT: I did too, mind you. I met an AKA in South Africa. So it's just wonderful. It's nothing like it, I think that idea has to get across. I think I've gotten across to my granddaughter, she's looking forward to pledging.

DJ: Now, this wasn't a question on here, but because of your last answer. When you became a member in West Virginia, did you know the depths of the sorority at that time?

MT: Not really, although I did meet some really wonderful people, because one of the women --- God, what was her name, she was a founder. And she was from Charleston, and she and her husband were so active in trying to get schools integrated. And, you know, she was a kind of a role model for us. And then there was another --- so they had things going on that they were doing things just so avant guard at the time. And they talk about, you know, what we had to do, and you just felt that you were obligated to really work for this sorority, and to work with the other women and get things done. And I liked it, because you had a purpose, over and beyond the social aspect of it. The social aspect of it is very important, but you have a purpose beyond that, which is great. I mean, other sororities, like sororities

don't have that same kind of social function. You know, they're just really for just having a good time. But we have, you know, we had to support the NAACP at that time. Were expected to give money to that. We did raise money for the NAACP, I know, at the chapter. Yes, we did. And we were very active with the NAACP and the Urban League, because Anne Keel was very much connected to the Urban League.

DJ: And so I'm proud to tell you that even today, we still, as a chapter, I know nationally they do, but as a chapter we still give to the NAACP as well as the Urban League. And I liked what you just said, and I definitely thank you for joining us today. SAUDAH is our chapter historian, and she has been diligent with archiving our history. Not just sorority history, but African American history. As Professor Naison saw today, I mean, the people that you knew are amazing. Like literally knew. And I just thank you so much for joining us today and allowing us to celebrate and learn from you with all of your expertise. Thank you so much. Thank you.

MN: This was a very important interview. I learned, I thought I knew almost everything about the Bronx, and some of the organizations like PLAN I'm gonna have to look into, I'm gonna have to get your books and read them. But I also think it's very interesting you were talking about young people, you know. I think there might be some Fordham students who might be interested in joining this chapter, because I think the solidarity, the camaraderie, the mixture of social support and involvement in the great issues of the time, are something that some of these students, I think, are really looking for.

MT: They need more support to do it, that's the thing.

MN: So, you know, this interview is going to be pretty widely viewed when it goes up on our site. And I want to thank you for honoring us with your presence, with your wisdom, and with your experiences.

MT: Thank you so much for having me.

DJ: Thank you Sor. Marietta, Thank you, Professor Naison.

MN: And I will give you the information about Dr. Payne and the Bronx County Historical Society. And make sure you send these two interviews the Lionel Spencer, because he's the one who's going to make sure they get posted. I'm low tech. So I think what I have to do, since I promised, is I have to rap for you before we wrap it up. Would you rather I skip it? We can skip it. I'll do it some other time. Okay. Thank you again, this was just wonderful. And you're a great inspiration to so many people. Thank you so much.

DJ: And Sor Marietta, I'm not sure if you saw the chat, SOR. SAUDAH and I agree with her sentiments. We are going to be there when you become diamond. We're excited.