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Ahmed, Ramatu

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Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dawn

Interviewee: Earle Alexander

Mark Naison (MN): This is the 143rd interview of the Bronx African-American History Project. We are here with Dr. Earle Alexander, distinguished psychologist who grew up in the Bronx. We're at Fordham University on February 6, 2006. Dr. --

Dawn: Okay, before we get started, Dr. Alexander could you face the camera just a bit more?

EA: Where's the camera?

Dawn: Over here.

EA: Oh, you, okay --

Dawn: Just a little bit because we don't care if we don't have a good shot --

EA: I don't mind [laughs].

Dawn: We want to have a nice shot of you [laughs].

MN: Right. Dr. Alexander, could you tell us a little bit about your family background.

EA: Well, my parents are immigrants to the United States. My mother coming from Trinidad, and my father from Grenada, and they met in New York and married in New York and produced three children- my sister Elma. I'm the second child, oldest son, and my brother Dawn. We were all born in Harlem. About the mid-1930s, we -- the family migrated to the Bronx. I think it was -- one of the things my mother did because the education system in Harlem was deteriorating, they started having two sessions, two of us would go to school in the morning, and the other two in the afternoon, and then my father, the Pullman porter, so the yards, the final station the trains went was in the Bronx, I think 161st street and Morris avenue is where it used to be. And so we moved to the

Bronx, and I started school on P.S. 42, I think that's on Claremont, probably Washington Avenue. We lived right on Washington Avenue. The Morrissania section is on there, and the first thing I remember --We were Episcopalian, and there was a church one block away, St. Paul's Church. This was on St. Paul's place and Washington Avenue, that's a block from my house. So my parents were very happy that the church was so close to my house, so I remember I was six, my brother was three, and my sister was about nine, and on Sunday morning of course you dressed up in your Sunday best, and my mother just -- Since it was a block away, she didn't go with us places, it was just my brother and myself, and we were greeted at the door, I remember it was Crumlick, [laughs] I don't know how I remember her name is Crumlick. She was superintendent of the Sunday school, and she told us, she stopped us and said, "What are you doing here." My sister said we came for Sunday school, and she said, well uh, she said on the back she wrote a note and she gave the note to my sister Elma, and we went to my mother, she was shocked to see us back home in about 10 minutes, what happened, you know? So she read the the note that said of course that next Sunday we should go to St. David's Church, and St. David's Church is farther, about 10 blocks down the road. So then my mother asked neighbors, and they all said that well, they don't like any black families at St. Paul's, and St. David's was a black church, and St. Paul's was the white church, and then my mother asked around and the Purcells, who were Episcopalians, had converted to the Roman Catholic faith because the Roman Catholic church around the corner, the Brians went to the Lutheran church, some of us went to the (inaudible) church, because they felt -- A lot of people go to St. David. For the next Sunday, of course, my mother dressed us and sent us back [laughs] to St. Paul's, and of course Mrs. Crumlick was shocked to see

us again, and she asked my sister did you give your mother the note? She said yes. What are you doing back, so she wrote another note, and of course the third Sunday, my mother sent us back, and I remembered it, and the first thing Mrs. Crumlick asked my sister is, “Can your mother read?” Maybe she can’t read, you gave her the note, but maybe she can’t read, you know? My sister said no, she taught us how to read. She said so far the borough came out and said well I better see this lady, and he wrote a note and called my mother up on the phone, and we were the only ones in the house that had the telephone, because my father was working up in the railroad as a contactor, so he called my mother and said I’d like to see you, so I think she – the Tuesday morning she took my little brother, who was three – my sister and I went to school, and he greeted her, and she went in, so he explained to her that Father Best is the priest at Saint David’s church, and he has a gentleman’s agreement with Father Best, that if black people come to Saint Paul’s, they go to Saint David’s. If any white people go to – come to Saint David’s, they come to Saint Paul’s. So my mother listened very quietly, and [laughs] she was quite a feisty lady, so she said, well, I have nothing, I’m not a gentleman, so I have nothing to do with your agreement, you know.

MN: [laughs]

EA: I mean, you made agreement with Father Benjamin, I have nothing to do with that, and so he said, but if you could just put it in writing – she had an idea because she knew the bishop, the bishop from New York was Bishop Manning at that time, and so she got an idea – she jumped in a taxi with my brother and went in the cathedral of Saint John the Divine, that’s over by Columbia Heights. And she wanted to talk, he said “Olive, what are you doing here?” because he knew her from Harlem in All Souls Day, and he was so

shocked because he was the bishop that had gone into churches in Harlem with crowbars with broken lamps because he was at risk. So he jumped and called his limousine, my mother and little brother – his wife just started crying. The bishop was standing with this little lady from Trinidad and [clears throat] anyhow, it turns out that we did go to the Sunday School and – not the exact end of the story because my mother and father went to the church next Sunday for – when they got up for Communion, they got up from the rail. They said they couldn't take Communion from it. So at the end of the service, all of the people that came – all white – they came to my mother and father and said why did you take Communion, and they explained what had happened, and people were shocked. They said, “ That's why little black families wouldn't care. That it was the priest who did it, not the people.” But to the end of the story – it was quite and ending because my father had a stroke, and he was running the railroads in Chicago. So I was doing my internship in Canada. My mother and my sister and my brother went, and my sister opened the newspaper and she said something about Bishop Borough, who was then – who became Episcopal Bishop of Chicago, so she called him up. He said I wondered half the time what happened to you all. He came and gave my father Communion, but in the end he asked my mother for forgiveness. He said he knew he was wrong. So that would be quite a happy ending to the story.

Dawn: Wow. Affected social change, there. I want to put this a little higher –

MN: Now, how long did your mother remain a member of Saint Paul's Episcopal Church?

EA: Oh, we remained members until we -- after we all went to college in our first coop on the Lower East Side, and so that was about 1960.

MN: Right.

EA: It happened some old day, but it was quite a few years. 1936, 1937, 1960.

MN: Right, now you had mentioned that your mother was called the Rosa Parks of the Bronx.

Ea: Well, yeah. I -- I think we referred to her as that.

MN: [laughs]

EA: Because the very institute that elected my sister eventually became an organist of the Church. Went to Julliard, and that's another story. I guess -- she went to Walden High School. That was up by Kingsbridge Road,

MN: Right.

EA: Yes, and she was very good at the piano, because she went to Julliard Prep School and Miss Shine I believe -- all these names we remember in our lives, and she used to take Elma out of the class a lot, you know, to play on tour. So my parents noticed that her grades were going down. So they confronted my sister, and she said well, half the time I'm in the auditorium playing, and my mother went up to the school the next morning and told them look, it's not fair. So Ms. Shine said, "Oh, why would she want to learn math, I mean she is the only black going to Columbia University. Julliard was part of Columbia University at that time, and then Ms. Shine said well black girls didn't learn classical music, I mean she's in the jazz band, so why should she learn -- The next day my mother took her out of Walden and took her to Rose Prep, the prep school in lower Manhattan, and she eventually went on to Columbia. She had her undergrad and grad at Julliard. She became a --

MN: Now how did your mother find Rose Prep?

EA: Well, she did research. She did the research.

MN: You ended up going there as well.

EA: Yes. My sister did so well there, that I -- after two years at Dewitt Clinton High School, I -- when I went to Rose Prep, I did very well.

MN: Now your mother sounds like an absolutely extraordinary person. What was her educational background?

EA: Well, my parents, you know. My mother -- she was a nurse. She was in Trinidad, and then she started nursing, and then she finished nursing.

MN: Where did she go to nursing school?

EA: At Lincoln Hospital.

MN: Was it at Lincoln School of Nurses?

EA: Yes, I believe --

MN: Right, and was she working when you were growing up.

EA: No, no, no. She was taking courses at that time.

MN: Right.

EA: It wasn't until we had -- my brother was 12 or 13 that she went --

MN: Yes, now what about your father. What level of education --

EA: Well, my father -- It's interesting that my father was an accountant before he came to the United States, and he told a story of how he opened the New York Times one morning and saw there was a comment from a Wall Street broker or something, and his uncle laughed at him because his uncle had sent for him. He said are you crazy. Because he went for the job, and they were just looking at him, and he said he did shorthand and he did so well, and the fellow said we can't hire you because you're black. We want to

hire you, but all the other colleges won't count. One of the chief economists told him that maybe if he come in at the back in the morning and slip him in, but they said no. I think he said they took out 20 dollars and gave him no (inaudible). So he became a public porter because he had children to support --

MN: Right, yes.

EA: And he said many of the public porters in those days -- one was a dentist. There were lawyers, and they couldn't because of the racism.

MN: Now what was, you know, your parents both very impressive, educated people.

What was --- was there much political discussion in the house? What was a family dinner like?

EA: There was a lot of political discussion .because my father was a Garveyite. Yes. Oh my [laughs] -- I remember him taking us, and then he belonged to the Blood Brothers --

MN: Right.

EA: I met A. Philip Randolph because I went to the -- the -- the -- I think about three dollars a month they paid, and the winter was very hard. My father left me outside to put to the three dollar minimum, and I shook A. Philip Randolph's hand, yes. So they were great -- My father joined the local Democratic Club, and --

MN: As children, were you expected to, like, read the newspaper and discuss it? You know, how -- You know, obviously, there is a tremendous emphasis in education and learning.

EA: Yes. My father went to the railroad station. He brought home a lot of magazines.

Time and *Look* magazines, *The New York Times*, so yes. We used to have a contest, and even now, I remember the capitals of countries all over the world, you know, like Oslow,

Norway -- And we used to have, like, oh there were contests, so in politics we were very -- When the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, yes. My father was very -- My father said they showed us a picture where the troops walked into Vatican square, and the Pope blessed the guns, yes, that went to kill the Ethiopians. So we were always very --

MN: Was music and the arts emphasized in your home?

EA: I played the violin. Then my sister, the piano, and my brother played the piano also.

MN: What sort of music did they listen to in the home? Did you have a phonograph?

EA: Yes, we had a phonograph. I remember my mother used to send away for records, and the -- record club --

MN: Right, now what are your recollections about the neighborhood you moved into in the Bronx?

EA: The neighborhood was predominately Jewish, predominately Jewish neighborhood, because the schools were good. The schools were very good. The teachers -- my mother was very active. She went to -- She was very active with the Parent Teacher Association. I remember a lot of names now. She became president of the local PTA, so -- the neighborhood was mainly blacks from the South, a lot of -- I remember a lot of signs going up: "Colored. Renting to Colored."

MN: There were signs?

EA: Yes, yes, yes.

MN: Did they -- some of the signs that people were talking about said we rent to select colored families --

EA: Yes -- Yes --

MN: Would it have something like that?

EA: Yes, it would. My father was a, you know, a porter with a regular income.

MN: Now what about your building? How -- What was the structure?

EA: Well, they were railroad apartments. I remember we were first at 1518 Washington Avenue between 171st street and Claremont Avenue, yes. Wooden stairs --

MN: What floor did you live on?

EA: The second floor.

MN: Now, of the families in that building, what were their ethnic composition?

EA: Most of them were all black, but I mean, there were some whites, and they moved out. Snipes lived up in the South. There was a Jamaican family next door to us. I forget their names now. The Bryans, they were from Antigua. The Elis, they were from Antigua. Many were southern Blacks -- You had southern blacks and West Indians.

MN: Now what about the elementary school you went to?

EA: P.S. 42.

MN: What grade did you enter there?

EA: First grade.

MN: First grade.

EA: It's when I started.

MN: Were you tested to see what, like -- were classes tracked by ability?

EA: Well, I remember you had A, B, and A, B, C and D, yes, like if you were in 2-A, 2-B, if A: if you were smarter --

MN: Yes --

EA: And B, C, D. I don't think it went down to D, but yes. So, so if -- because we were all skipped. I was skipped. Afterward, my brother skipped a grade. My sister wasn't. We all skipped grades.

MN: Now, what were the relationships between different groups in the school? Was there any tension?

EA: Not that I -- no, because I remember my best friend Philip. Philip was Jewish and from a Polish family. We used to visit each other. My sister -- the Brown -- they were -- my sister is still in touch with her friend Linda Brown. So I don't think there was any tension, and everybody visited everybody else's home. It was more or less what you were doing because there were very (inaudible) black families. I remember my friend Gertrude Ozar. That's the first time I've ever heard German because her parents were from Vienna, and [laughs] I remember they were -- That's German, and they taught us how to count, and I went to Germany and -- [laughs]. And then at the church, and the church eventually -- there were a lot of white families. Now, the church, of course, is all black, but at that time, even in the church, there was a lot of bigotry.

MN: What did your family do for recreation on weekends? Did you go to hear live music? Did you go to parks or museums or --

EA: Yes. My mother would take us. I remember going to -- through my sister being at Julliard, yes, we used to go through the same office when I was little boy, and go up to Radio City Music Hall. We were very fortunate in the summer, since my father worked in the railroad. We always had a passage to go to New England, to go to Maine, to go to Chicago, because we traveled quite a bit from my father being on the railroad, but when I

-- I would come back after the summer, teachers were shocked -- you went where?

Because, you know, it was only by trains we took off.

MN: Now, now where would you stay in --

EA: Well, my father had friends where he went. I remember in Montreal. He went to Montreal. We went to Cape Cod. I remember going to Cape Cod on the ferry going over the (inaudible), so he would always take us to --

MN: And you would stay with friends of his?

EA: Yes, I remember once -- Yes, I remember years ago to Maine, to Farmington, Maine, and he met General Shmemberg, that's another story of mine, and General Shmemberg-- they had a lot of these -- well, they had some homes in them at that time, and he was a white retired command general. I remember my father said he had this little boy, and it was me, because Shmemmberg had a chauffer had a chauffer who had a little boy also. They were from Boston. I went back there and spent the whole summer. In fact, I spent three summers there, the biggest state up in there. As soon as school was finished, I left. I think I was always the one that wanted to go out everywhere, and once I -- they were going to stay there for the year, and Mrs. Smithburg -- I wanted to stay, and they enlisted me in the local school, and my mother said no, she went and got me, and I went ahead because I didn't want to go back home, but I remember some beautiful summers up there.

MN: Now, did your parents let you play in the street with the other kids? Did you do all the street games?

EA: Yes, marbles. You know, marbles in the street. The snow used to be high at that time. I'd say we used to dig piles of snow. The kid who even lived across the street.

You had to get back when it got dark. I remember Philip Gerard and all of my friends used to play --

MN: You used to play like stickball and --

EA: Yes, yes and Crotona Park was close by, so when the park had wagons and go down the hill. Yes, yes. It was relatively safe there. Relatively safe. The doors -- I don't remember doors being because we had glass in the doors in Yonkers. I remember when we moved they were putting up tint over the glass because of the beginning of wartime --

MN: Oh, so the war -- This was World War II?

EA: Yes, yes.

MN: So the neighborhood started to become a little more dangerous?

EA: Well, the neighborhood started changing then. People started moving away and -- The neighborhood started deteriorating, yes because I think they removed from 1518 to 1355 --

MN: 3055 of the --

EA: 13, 1355 -- That's my building at 169th street.

MN: Right.. So it was a higher quality building?

EA: Yes, high-quality building. Then we moved to East 164th street near Boston Road. 600 east 164th street off Boston Road.

MN: And what year did you move into that area?

EA: I must have been -- because I went away to college. It must have been about 41 or 42.

MN: Right. Now so, you know, did the neighborhood, you know, that sort of -- where you moved to originally, is sort of down the hill from Boston Road.

EA: Yes --

MN: Did that area deteriorate.

EA: Yes, it deterior -- Now they're running a housing project. Eventually they knocked down all those houses, yes. Those were, oh, 10 minutes away.

MN: What were the manifestations of the deterioration? Was it buildings were more poorly kept or was it --

EA: More poorly kept, yes, more poorly kept. Doors wouldn't be the -- You'd tap the other system, and the other system wouldn't work anymore, and --

MN: Now, what junior high school did you end up?

EA: P.S. 55. That was on Washington Avenue, yes, that's across from the church. And from there I went to DeWitt Clinton High School.

MN: Now, did you -- was the career you eventually pursued as a physician something that you were interested in as a child. Was this a kind of a life-long dream or it's something that came later?

EA: No, my uncle -- my father -- my mother's brother was a physician, and he came from Trinidad, and he went to St. Augustine's College, that's why I went to Saint Augustine's College, and then he went on to Harry Medical College in Nashville.

MN: Right.

EA: Yes, and then he practiced in Richmond. My mother being, and then my grandmother in Trinidad was a nurse. My grandfather was a pharmacist --

MN: Like medicine in your family.

EA: Yes, yes, yes, like one -- I guess one son -- I never was really -- I was always the kind of the happy-go-lucky compared to my sister and my brother, you know. When it

was time to go to college, they wanted me to go to college in New York, because at that time in the South -- you know, racial discrimination. You had to sit at the back of the bus, but I insisted I wanted to go to Birmingham, because my sister, when she just went in the subway everyday and came home, you know? And I went down to visit the campus -- dances and parties and football games -- I mean, my God, college -- And my uncle --

MN: Now St. Augustine's was in what city?

EA: Raleigh, North Carolina. The Episcopal College --

MN: Yes.

EA: Yes, yes. They felt that since it was a church school and go to 10 chapels [laughs] at the same day.

MN: Right, now, throughout school, were you a less serious student than your sister and brother?

EA: Less serious, yes. I was the one that would play a lot. I remember teachers saying, "You couldn't be Dawn and Elma's brother, you know? [laughs] I mean, they were just so studious, and I realize maybe it was the middle child syndrome, I guess, yes. I never gave problems though, with the everyday, but there was a point where I just got by, you know? It wasn't until I went to (inaudible), one of the prep schools, that really was a big change in my life.

MN: So, you were never, like, highly motivated when you were in elementary school?

EA: No, not like my sister and brother. No, no. They were really do their homework on time. Sometimes they did it and I didn't do it, yes. I would play all the time.

MN: Now, when you say play, did you like sports?

EA: Yes, yes. Running with the track team, and running around the block, riding around the block with my bicycle. I remember going across the George Washington Bridge. My parents said, "Where did you go?" I said we went across the Bronx, 155th street Bridge, and we would bicycle up to Jersey. [Laughs] Sometimes we got lost, all sorts of things. I think I have a lot of gray hairs because of --

MN: Now, were you on the track team in high school, or --

EA: No, I was not.

MN: This was more just informal?

EA: Informal. More informal, yes, played a lot of tennis. I was on the tennis team in college --

ML: Oh, okay. What part did you play tennis in?

EA: Well, at the McCooms Dam. Yes, there were some courts there. In fact I learned the tennis coach was the coach that taught Althea Gibson. He used to hold the balls...

MN: This was the coach at McCooms Dam, or --

EA: No, at the Y. No, at the YWCA in Harlem. We had --

MN: They had tennis instruction.

EA: And he coached Althea Gibson.

MN: So how old were you when you first started taking tennis lessons?

EA: I must have been about nine or ten, yes. So, when I went to college, I was quite a good player.

MN: Now, did any of your friends from the neighborhood play tennis, or you met people at McCoombs Dam?

EA: I met people.

MN: Now, was the cohort at McCoombs Dam multiracial or was there a group of black tennis players --

EA: No, no because we were junior, and the coach would take us there. He would take us there from -- See, he used to go up sometimes in Harlem, 155th Street by the Harlem River Houses, but then we used to go to McCooms --

MN: So you went as a group?

EA: Yes, yes. As a group every Saturday.

MN: Did any of the high schools in New York have tennis teams?

EA: No. I remember DeWitt Clinton did not. It wasn't until I went to college --

MN: Now, I know DeWitt Clinton --

EA: I was in the orchestra of DeWitt Clinton. I played the violin, oh yes, and Mr. Lemir, oh yes. I was one of the first black boys with the violin, and I even played in high school. I met him many years later.

MN: Now, where did you -- did you take violin lessons, you know, privately?

EA: Yes at Frances Grekley. Frances, she had a music school at 125th street, and we all went there -- my sister started there.

MN: So after your parents moved to the Bronx, they still related to cultural institutions in Harlem.

EA: Oh yes. We used to take the Willis Avenue trolley -- there was a trolley car. I remember we would go down -- We went to church in the Bronx.

MN: Did your family ever go to things like the Apollo Theater, or was that considered --

EA: Oh, yes, yes. My sister and I, when we drove, we would sneak away sometimes. You know, Vinny Epstein was singing there. He was a heartthrob of my sister --

MN: Right. Did your parents disapprove of rhythm and blues and popular music.

EA: They didn't disapprove because they came from the Caribbean. No because we had parties in the house, they also had the music. They realized we were -- especially my father. My mother is more of the rigid one. My father was like, "Leave the kids alone."

[Laughs]

EA: Now was there West Indian music in your house?

EA: Oh yes, because of my father. My father was very much into the culture. My mother not as much, but my father was very much into the quartet and sing songs and my uncles would come in.

MN: Did they belong to West Indian organizations in New York City?

EA: Oh yes. Trinidad and Tobago Benevolent Association. They would give dances --

MN: Was that located in Harlem?

EA: 155th Street and Eighth Avenue they had a large dance hall --

MN: Rockland Palace?

EA: Rockland Palace, yes, right.

[Laughter]

EA: And then Carnival dances. My friends would dress up --

MN: Really?

EA: My mother kind of reluctantly, my father would kind of insist.

MN: Are there any pictures of your parents at Carnival out?

EA: I'll look. I'll look. I'll look because they had a lot of them.

Dawn : Did you go to Carnival in Trinidad?

EA: Well, I think -- there was no air travel then, so the first time I went to Trinidad, I was about twenty [mumbling] – the first time I ever went there. First time I saw my grandmother was when my sister married. The kids now, they go every summer –

Woman: Are there lots of Trinidadians in the Bronx?

EA: Yes. Well, my parents yes, all their friends are Trinidadian, but maybe in Brooklyn. I remember going more to Brooklyn.

MN: Now was cricket something that your family --

EA: My godfather would take me to Randall's Island. They had no children, and I was – They had a brownstone on 123th street near Lenox and 7th. Sometimes I would say I'm going to stay with my godparents, and my parents would just laugh at me, and they rarely spoiled me, so he would take me to cricket matches --

MN: What about food. Was Caribbean food cooked in your family? Did they Americanize their cooking --

EA: My mother Americanized. My father would do more of the Easter, Christmas -- and when he came home, he would bring food from Boston. My mother is not much -- maybe spaghetti and meatballs she would make for us. Of course, we would like more of the American food, you know? We had a lot of American friends, and the food oh, was so different. So my mother kind of -- the curries and the peppers, she never gave that to us. As a nurse she said it was unhealthy anyhow.

[laughter]

Woman: That's not true.

[Laughter]

MN: Was being of Caribbean ancestry something that, you know, was very important to your family in the mix of cultures in the communities you live, or did you kind of blend into the general atmosphere of the –

EA: Well, the territory went to most of the Episcopalians was Caribbean, so were Black American. I -- When I went to parties in Brooklyn. Manly people from the Caribbean. I remember having a lot of friends whose parents were from the South, you know, or native northerners, but it was mainly a Caribbean culture. I realized that after because when I went South to college. I was from New York. They said, “No, you’re not from New York.” I mean accents; you know, the accents --

MN: Yes --

EA: They said you’re not --

MN: So, you’re saying you went to parties in Brooklyn when you were a teenager?

EA: Teenager, would be more in Brooklyn because Harlem -- Blacks started moving out of Harlem. All up in Williamsbridge --

MN: Right. Oh --

EA: Up in Williamsbridge, yes --

MN: Oh, did you ever go to, I guess, Fish Avenue?

MN: Oh yes, I remember Fish Avenue. I remember St. Luke’s Church into Williamsbridge. The lobby -- we used to go up there. Fish Avenue, Elder Avenue, Longwood Avenue, yes, I remember.

MN: Now, this was in high school that you began going to parties?

EA: Yes, parties, yes. We would go up to the Northern Bronx. See the West Indians who wanted homes. There were no homes in our area.

MN: Right.

EA: They either went to Brooklyn or up to the northern Bronx.

MN: Was there a, like, a class distinction in the black community in the Bronx as you were growing up that, you know, either formal or informal, that there was certain kind of, you know, you were going to socialize with people at your social, intellectual level?

EA: I think that automatically happened. Yes, from church or as we got older, I went to prep school. So I think it happened automatically with kids who want to go to college also.

MN: Right.

EA: So, you had a band of kids who didn't, and then there – when you were young, your parents kind of steered you away – they always want to know what sort of family they came from. It was a lot of that.

MN: Did you ever become interested in jazz? Was that something you ever gravitated to musically?

EA: Not as a youngster, no. It wasn't until later. No. No, I never --

MN: So -- like, when you were a teenager, what was the music that you would choose to listen to. Obviously, you were also performing, so.

EA: Yes, I remember it was in the little orchestra. We went to parties, but at least, my sister and brother were more into that. I remember doing the lindy hop. We would go to the Savoy Ballroom. My sister joined the sorority. I would go with her. I was -- I remember even though I was younger than she was, I was taller than she was, she would take me out with her and said, "Don't tell them I'm your sister, now. [Laughs] But, yes, we would go to the Savoy Ballroom to lindy hop and all the new dances --

MN: Right. Ok. Dawn, could you just check on the tape recorder to see that it's still going?

Dawn: Oh, you think the tape might -- Yes, sure.

MN: Now, what prompted the decision to go to Rhodes Prep? Was this your decision or your parents?

EA: Well, since my sister did so well there, it was always kind of a [pauses to turn off phone] -- [mumbles] Let me turn this off.

Dawn: [imitates sound of phone shutting off]

[laughter]

EA: Yes, so I -- and then I went there with my sister. The school was so nice. They had blazers, oh my. So when they asked me -- I think they were glad to get me out of Clinton, yes.

MN: Now, was Clinton a tough school, or was it merely a school where it was easy to get lost because it was so big?

EA: It's so big, yes, and I had a impediment of speech when I was smaller, yes, that's true because I used to go to the speech therapist in Manhattan, and I -- So I was very -- So I was always -- Never raised my hand a lot, and things like that. Music was the only means of my expression, so when I went to Rhodes, the smaller classes, and I really came out there. I remember Miss Lacharelli was French. I remember Mr. Goodman was the principle. All these names are coming back, and I did very well. So I was glad to -- because I would go with my sister sometimes. Classes where everyone knew you, and --

MN: Right.

EA: The kids were so nice. I felt very happy and comfortable.

MN: and where was that school located?

EA: It was on 54th near Fifth Avenue. Right across from –It no longer exists.

MN: Now, was there ever a point where you felt, like in your adolescent years, it was dangerous to be in the Bronx? Were there ever issues with gangs or tough kids who you had to sort of avoid?

EA: I remember we were going to 164th street. My brother and I – we were going to something at the church, at St. Paul's Church. So we walked down Third Avenue waiting for the bus. I remember some boys came and took my brother's watch. They started yelling. By the time we went home, my mother was very upset. She said, "Call the police." The streets were kind of dark at night. I remember the police would say you boys look kind of different. Kind of like prey, you know? They have to start tonight. I remember that as – And after that, we didn't go out because you know, because it's very dark --

MN: Right, right.

EA: So we -- we --

MN: Was there much talk of gangs in those days? You know –

EA: It's beginning. It's beginning. That's when it started -- we were lining on such a already, and the neighborhood started deteriorating.

MN: Even at 164th street?

EA: Well, yes. We had to be a little more careful coming in at night. We would call and -

-

MN: And this is what -- in the 40s or the '50s -- the early '50s?

EA: This is --When the war started, we were still in -- on Washington Avenue. Yes. So this is between '41 and forty -- I went to college in '46 --'43, '44 --

MN: So even in '43, '44, you had the sense that --

EA: Oh yes. It happened to my brother and I --.

MN: Now what was college like? How big an adjustment was it moving to, you know, a segregated South?

EA: Yes. I had visited my uncle several times in Richmond, so I knew about the South. Interesting, I went once, and it was so interesting to see him on Thanksgiving. He wanted me to get a scholarship. And when I went to a meeting of the Richmond Medical Society at his home, and most of the people there were white, you know? And then I found out on that level, you know, they had integrated the hospitals in Richmond, because he was in the hospital [inaudible] The first hospital that day. I found that I began understanding the South. On a certain social level, you know? It's kind of a class system in the South also.

MN: Right. So professional-level blacks had -- some of the boundaries were fluid?

EA: Seemingly, yes. I remember my aunt -- [inaudible] a very exclusive store in Richmond, and they knew her there. She would go to the store and she would shop -- I mean -- and they had cars, so they never went on the bus.

MN: Right.

EA: Even in Raleigh, when I went to Raleigh in college. The students were treated different. I remember on the bus only going through the black area so we could sit anywhere on the bus. So we used to walk. I remember going to the theater. We had to go upstairs to throw popcorn downstairs.

MN: [laughs]

EA: And then the stores -- they had stores for college students. And the campus-- our life --

MN: Life was very self-contained --

EA: Yes, on the campus. Shirley University was in Raleigh. Seven colleges in Raleigh, and two were black. And one, St. Mary's, was an Episcopal college, and we used to go there for the debating team.

MN: And that was a white college?

EA: Yes.

Mn: And the debate team would compete --

EA: Yes, there were both Episcopal colleges.

MN: And so that's fascinating, so St. Mary's debate team would compete against --

EA: They would come in our campus, and there weren't any social events -- dancing --

MN: Yes, right --

EA: We would talk, and some kids were from New York also.

MN: Interesting. You wouldn't know that if, you know, from --

EA: Yes. Yes, but there were some kids from the South and some white kids from the South wanted to meet other black kids. It was a very nice -- but there was no dancing, though, but they would have coffee hour. We would have luncheons together.

MN: Huh !

EA: [laughs] As long as we weren't dancing together, but I remember one incident -- I just attended last week the Trinity Institute in New York. In the Trinity Church. The guest speaker was Bishop Curry, who was the new Episcopal bishop who was black, and

he was the guest preacher, and I remember one Sunday, we all -- some Northern kids, about 12 of us -- so we went to the service at the Christ Church Cathedral in downtown Raleigh. I never forgot. We walked in, and [dramatic sigh] the bishop came and gave the absolution and the dismissal and ended the service. I never forgot that, and ended the service on Easter Sunday, and it was such uproar, and they wanted to know where we were from. We said Saint Augustine's College. The next day, the president called us in and said well you kids are north of town. We live down here very well and we don't want any -- That was about 1947 or '48.

MN: Now -- What he said -- We live down here very well --

EA: Yes --

MN: Did the black professors at the school live in nice homes and --

EA: Yes, they had quite -- I remember the Delaney family. That's the family that -- should have been called Delaney College, really, and Bishop Delaney -- Their father was a bishop of North Carolina, and one, summer, is a physician. He -- When Judge Delaney was handing off --

MN: Right. That was Hubert Delaney.

EA: Yes.

MN: And the Delaney sisters --

EA: All orphans of St. Augustine's College. So intellectually, people enjoyed -- There were still limitations because a judge could not become a judge down there -- but a physician, doctor's orders --

MN: Did you feel any fear of the Klan or --

EA: No --

MN: White sup --

EA: No, no, no. We never -- They never came near the campus.

MN: So you never had, you know, white thugs come in and --

EA: No, no --

MN: Injure --

EA; no, no, no. That was never, and they never bothered me. So the South is very, very different to the North. It was -- I would say I felt more comfortable in the South.

Everything -- You knew where you stood in the South. In the South you don't go here and you don't go there. In the North, you go and they slam the door on you.

MN: Yes. Were there places in the Bronx when you were growing up which were --

Repeat the story because we may have missed it. When your family first moved to Washington Avenue, you went down -- your mother went down with you and your sister to the Y on 161st Street and they turned you away.

EA: No, but the Y.M. --

MN: Y.M. --

EA: Yes, my brother and myself, yes she took us down there --

MN: Right --

EA: -- because they had a lot of athletic programs, and [inaudible].

MN: Now, by 1960 -- your parents were still living in 164th street?

EA: Yes, and they moved [in] April -- I mean April --

MN: Right. Were they feeling that the neighborhood was becoming unsafe or not quite --

EA: It was deteriorating. Even the houses were -- Beautiful house -- it was deteriorating, yes. You couldn't buzz in anymore because the door was broken. You felt unsafe.

MN: Right, now what about drugs? Was there any awareness of drugs entering the community?

EA: We would hear about drugs. It was very foreign to us. The police came one day and drugs became -- and that even made me feel -- Can I go to Rhodes too?

MN: Right. So the sense that in Clinton there were some problems?

EA: Yes.

MN: Now, after St. Augustine's did you go directly to medical school?

EA: Oh no, I was in the army.

MN: And how old were you when you went in the army?

EA: 21.

MN: And where -- what year was this?

EA: I graduated in May. I was 21 in April. [I] just turned 21 in April.

MN: And what year was that?

EA: That was in -- I graduated in 1950. In 1951, I started doing graduate [work] in Fordham.

Dawn: Oh my God!

EA: Because I couldn't get right into medical school. It was a very different quarter system, so I came up here to Fordham.

MN: To the school of pharmacy?

EA: No, no. The school of bacteriology?

MN: Oh!

EA: It was a nun -- There was many more people --

MN: Right. So you started in bacteriology?

EA: Yes, in Fordham because I said well, let me get into medical science.

MN: Right.

EA: And through that when I was drafted -- Just started in September when I was drafted in January. Until that I graduated and I was drafted out of the Warfare Project with the Army.

MN: Wow!

EA: Yes. Yes. And they just integrated the Army, and I went to -- I did my basic training at Fort Dix, and they had just integrated the Army, and Fort Dietrich in Maryland had the chemical corps.

MN: Now, was there -- you know, was there tension surrounding the integration of the Army that you experienced?

EA: Well, when we were doing basic training, I remember we were one of the first in a mixed group, yes, because it was the black side of Fort Dix and the white side of Fort Dix. We were never friends group. I remember years ago [laughs] we insulted Adolf. He was a scientist we called Adolf Hitler --

MN: [laughs]

EA: So rigid, you know? My name was Alexander, so I was the first one -- My father and brother came to see me. He loves me. My son is very athletic, you know. Yes, I got through basic training very well, and I was sent to be interviewed -- We were the first blacks on the post, and Norman Brown, he was from Williamsbridge. Tommy Evans, he was from -- So we went there to work in the lab. Top secret. [laughs] I remember the FBI came to my house and I had neighbors.

MN: Right. Now did you get sent to --

Dawn: Mark, could you move a little bit more, because I'm trying to get Dr. Alexander to look more this way.

MN: Okay --

Dawn: Cause you were going so far back.

MN: Now, did you get sent to Korea?

EA: No, no. My brother did. I didn't.

MN: And your brother was in what division? Was he --

EA: I forget. My brother passed, but he had not finished college.

MN: And he was sent to Korea?

EA: He was sent to Korea.

MN: Now, how long did you stay in the Army?

EA: Two years.

MN: And did you then apply to medical school after you graduated?

EA: Yes. After that because we were offered to become an officer, and I was -- Because we were college graduates, so to become an officer was very tempting. It was very nice. It happened between Washington and Baltimore.

MN: So your time in the Army was fairly pleasant.

EA: Yes, because again -- Even though we weren't officers, we were treated very well --

MN: Now, did you return to live in your parents' house?

EA: Yes, yes. After I got a job and I got another job running a postal, a railroad postal, I got a job at Grand Central, and then I was going to school, I started back at school.

MN: You started at --

EA: No, no Philadelphia. Yes, and there was a professor here, and so he said -- Because I always liked German, he was a German professor. Because I took two years of French and two years of German, and he said oh you like, I always kept up my German. We used to talk, and then he said why are you going to get a masters in bacteriology? I said to go to medical school. So he said why did you go to medical school? So I said ... He was shocked. He said, you just came out of the Army? Oh! He said, well my brother is a professor at the medical school in Adbury. He said, why don't you apply. I said [laughs, inaudible]. We became very good friends, and I signed the application and da, da, da, and that's how I went to Germany.

MN: So you went to Germany to medical school?

EA: Yes. I went to Germany.

MN: So your medical degree is from --

EA: University of Hamburg.

MN: Wow!

EA: Yes. (Says "Wow" in German)

Dawn: (laughs)

MN: So you never went to

EA: No, I didn't go to medical school. It is very difficult, and I was never an A student (laughs). I was just a... In those days, you had to be a genius.

MN: Right.

EA: They had the waiting lists, and then schools just started to integrate.

MN: So how many years did you spend in Hamburg?

EA: Well, in Germany I spent about six or five years there.

MN: Wow, and this was in the fifties?

EA: Yes.

MN: And what was that experience like?

EA: Well, I was lucky. It was a wonderful experience. I -- Going over on the boat, I went on a freighter, and the boat was leaving, my godfather and my father were waving -- I heard (German sentence). My father thought I knew German. I said, my God! So I went down to breakfast the next morning, and a woman I met from (German City), and she was retiring from the University of Detroit, and she taught German. So I told her my dilemma. I said I am going to Hamburg. For ten days she had me talking. It was very lovely.

MN: So you had a session on the boat going over?

EA: Just by chance. She kind of put the language together for me, and I got off the boat in Hamburg, and her nephew was there. I spent two weeks with his family, and one thing led to another. So I had made a lot of friends and learned the language. In six months, we went to the Dolmarcht institute because you had to know some of the language --

MN: Right --

EA: Before you were matriculated. Yes, but there were so many other foreign students there who had no knowledge of German at all, so...

MN: How would you compare the training in medical school from the United States?

EA: It was more academic. I think the American system, you do more practical work.

With the Germans, anyone could learn to take blood, so they're very, very academic.

Very academic, and then after, you go on internship there, so it is mainly -- but it is quite an experience.

MN: Now did you develop a specialty?

EA: Psychiatry.

MN: And did you pursue that when you were there?

EA: No, I did not. I became interested because of the Freudian. It was understandable [laughs]. Professor Yuras -- He was a professor of Psychosomatics, and I was fascinated with psychosomatic medicine.

MN: So, because it seems like an unusual specialty.

EA: It was an adventure, and I was always very adventurous.

MN: Did you have any intention of staying in Germany and settling there.

EA: No, no, no. Just going to school there. I go to Germany once a year now. I take my daughter there. Oh, yes.

MN: Now, when you went to Germany, were you married?

EA: No, no, no. I was about 26 or 25. 23, 25, about 26.

MN: Now, when you -- You began psychiatry training in Germany?

EA: No, no. I did my internship-residency.

MN: And you did that at a hospital in Germany. The internship?

EA: No, no. Just medical school, and then I -- In Europe, you have to do a year -- You have to get your doctorate. You have to do research. It's not like this country where you automatically get your doctorate. In Germany, you graduate, you're a physician --

MN: Right --

EA: Then you have to do research, which took me about a year and a half longer ... (inaudible)

MN: And were you going back to the United States in the summer?

EA: Right. In Europe in the summer, I went to Switzerland, I went to Greece.

Scandinavia -- I worked in Switzerland for a whole semester. I spent a whole semester in Geneva because I wanted to pick up on French.

MN: Now, would you say that the racial atmosphere was different in Europe than the United States, or pretty comparable.

EA: People ask me that question often in Germany. I say in Germany, anyone who is not German is an Auslander. So you're just part of -- whether you're French, Nigerian, Trinidadian -- You're an Auslander.

MN: Right.

EA: Yes. So the Germans are very Deutschland first. So -- That's why I like the largest -- when I was in -- I did research in Hollandberg, and the villages, Catholic, very very rigid, but when I went up to Hamburg, 52 consulates, and then all Germans are like Scandinavians. It's like two different countries.

MN: Really?

EA: Yes.

EA: So I liked Hamburg. Went on the subways, opera -- I had a wonderful time.

MN: Now, when you came back to the United States, where did you live?

EA: Well, I was living with my parents in Grand Street.

MN: So when you finished medical school, they were now on Grand Street, and I had to do the Foreign Medical Graduates Exam, and I didn't pass it at first. I realized all of my knowledge was in German. I thought since I know English; I could translate the other things, so I had to do a year of post-graduate work. I went to St. Barnabas Hospital in

Edison, New Jersey, and then of course, graduate work, and then after that, I did my New Jersey Board, my New York Board.

MN: And where did you go for your psychiatric training?

EA: I went to Bellevue. NYU Bellevue.

MN: And how soon after you came back did you do that?

EA: I -- because I had done my internship before, and you see, I graduated, and then I came and did my internship, and then I went back to do my doctorate. So I finished in about '65 or '66.

MN: After your parents left for the Lower East Side, did your family retain any connection to the Bronx?

EA: Yes. They went back to church there for awhile, and then they got older. They were just deteriorating, yes.

MN: So was there a point with which your parents just didn't feel safe going up there?

EA: Well, I wouldn't say safe. Everyone moved away, I mean, the houses -- they put projects up, so there's nothing left.

MN: Right --

EA: When I drive up there now, it's only the church. Only --

MN: The church is there and then it's the Claremont Houses.

EA: There's nothing left. I know at Prospect Avenue, St. Augustine's -- It was
(inaudible)

MN: Did you ever end up going to St. Augustine's Presbyterian?

EA: I remember Elder Hogate. I remember he was the pastor there. Yes. We used to go to a lot of social activities, because there was much more going on there than at St. Paul's Church.

MN: Right.

EA: Basketball and youth sessions.

MN: Right.

EA: I used to go there very often.

MN: Oh really? So you were (inaudible) when you were on 164th street?

EA: Yes, the Youngs used to go there. Roscoe -- Roscoe Young. He became a physician, and Marie, so we used to go there.

MN: Were there any other neighborhood institutions that you went to? Did you ever go to Forest Neighborhood House?

EA: No.

MN: So St. Augustine's --

EA: At that time, it was the hub of all the activity. At that time, we would go there for activities because (inaudible).

MN: What about -- did you ever go to the music clubs on Boston Road? Like Freddy's or Goodson's or the Blue Morocco?

EA: No, because I was young (inaudible).

MN: Right. Now, in looking back at all of this, are there any conclusions about your Bronx experience, you know, that you'd like to share with us. Sort of that -- how clearly were the formative years spent?

EA: Well, I think the Bronx became. It was a very integrated neighborhood, and then the Polish -- Walter was Polish. Philip, my good friend, he was Jewish. A fellow was Italian. I think -- and those were my formative years: fourth, fifth grade to the ninth grade before I went to DeWitt Clinton, and even the church. It was never an all -- When I went to St. Augustine's, it wasn't an all black church.

MN: Right. St. Augustine's on --

EA: Presbyterian Church, yes. Even from my church, it was very international, I should say, yes. That's what I got -- Never felt uncomfortable or more comfortable only with blacks or uncomfortable with whites, and I think that's what I got from those years.

MN: Well, that's interesting because you were able to go to a traditionally black college and then go off to integrate the Army and go off to Germany. You could move between worlds very easily.

EA: Yes, and my friends in Germany -- you know, sometimes people in this country -- people have a right to be very angry because of the racism in the country. I studied in Germany. A lot of people helped me out with my exams; I mean they were willing to drive people over there. So, just good friends. So it's very difficult for -- the experiences that I've had, I think, were kind of American experiences. That was the time. I remember the minister told my mother, "Why are you sending your children to Saint Paul's." [She said] "Because they are going to be discriminated against." They're too young. Remember the Jamaican family? They didn't want to expose their children at such an early age with such rejection.

MN: Right.

EA: They're going to have to experience it sometime, so they might as well not run away from it.

MN: So there were families in your neighborhood that went all the way to Saint David's.

EA: Yes, and they refused for their children to be discriminated, but then eventually (inaudible)

MN: Right. So your mother's actions made a big difference.

EA: Yes, college was quite a -- and even when I went to Saint Paul's, they didn't let us be acolytes, you know? But I rarely experienced rejection, but somehow you don't let that tarnish you. I remember my sister coming home once and saying some of the girls at the church told her that she's black, you know? She said she told my mother, and my mother said -- she said, well, if you're white, you have nothing to fight for.

MN: (laughs)

EA: If you're white, everything is there for you. Those girls have something to fight for, so don't let them make you feel bad that you're black, and then after, "Black is Beautiful" came out, but you have to deal with it. So I think the positive experiences I had early -- you know, my childhood growing up, being in school.

MN: I mean, it sounds like you were all given a great deal of self-confidence through all these experiences.

EA: Yes, yes. Then my sister, she became a professor of (inaudible) at Princeton. She went from American head of Cultural Attaché, and she played all over the world. In Ethiopia. In Israel. She went to Nigeria.

MN: So she's like a well-renown organist.

EA: Well, pianist. Yes.

MN: She does piano and organ.

EA: And organ, but she had children, so she doesn't really – But my brother was in the corps, he died of cancer about 10 years ago, but he did very well. He was a court reporter. So never I didn't feel – My experiences in Germany and in Europe also, you know? When I went back to my daughter to Germany, I said, I used to really feel like a celebrity, because at that time there were not that many black people, you know? So I said, "Look, I'm going down the Major Deegan Expressway . Now no one is looking at me."

[Laughter]

EA: But my experiences in Germany were all positive. In southern Germany, you were like a celebrity. I remember coming out. Children wanting to rub your hand to see if it would come off. So, it was nice.

MN: Okay, well thank you very much.

EA: It was a pleasure.

MN: This was wonderful.

EA: It was a pleasure.

MN: Okay.

Dawn: Okay.

MN: Great. This was terrific. I hoped you enjoyed it.

EA: Yes. I enjoyed it. I want to come back.

[Laughter]

MN: This is great. Bring your sister.

EA: Yes. Yes.

MN: I think that she really wanted to --

Dawn: (inaudible)

MN: Right, yes.

EA: So this program is sponsored --

MN: Well, it was sponsored three years ago pretty much by accident. At that point, I finished a book tour for something else I was doing and the Chief Archivist at the Bronx County Historical Society met me at a book party and said, "Mark, we're getting all these inquiries from people in the community about material about African-American life in the Bronx. We don't have anything. We don't have any documents. Can you and your colleagues try to get a database? We have a African-American Studies program at Fordham. I said, "Okay, I have a little time on my hands." I did a little research, and found that not only the African-American experience was left out of the history of the Bronx, but the Bronx African-American experience was left out of African-American History in New York. The Schomburg Center often concentrated on Harlem and Brooklyn, so you had a very large and diverse population of people of African descent, who had almost no written record of their presence. So, I said, well, when you have something like that, what do you do? You do an oral history project so you learn what's important and collect documents after that. So I said that I was going to do this in a kind of, you know, (inaudible) for awhile. So I did one interview with a former student of mine who had grown up in the Patterson Houses in the 1950s and 60s. It was a really a remarkable interview because it talked about when public housing was safe and nurturing. It was called, "It Takes a Village to Raise a Child: Growing Up in the Patterson Houses in the 1950s and 60s." And what happened is after I interviewed her,

her friends started calling me and saying, when are you going to interview us? We've been trying to tell this story for 20 years.

EA: Right. Right.

MN: So I started interviewing other people from the Patterson Houses. Then, a friend of mine who was a New York Times reporter was sort of fascinated by this grassroots approach to community history. She wrote a story about the work I was doing on the Patterson Houses and said it was part of a larger study on African-American life in the Bronx.

EA: Where's that?

MN: It is between 138 and 144th street between Morris and Third Avenue. Not too far from Lincoln Hospital.

EA: That area, yes.

MN: And it was the first public housing project to open in the Bronx in the 1950s. Then I started getting indignant e-mails and phone calls from people in Morrissania. We were the most important black community. When are you going to interview us? And it's been like that where it is a word of mouth, you know, I don't recruit people. People want to put their stories on record. And we've written articles and done some exhibits. We had a benefit concert. And I managed to get Fordham to first tentatively sponsor it, and then over time to embrace it.

EA: I attended a concert. (inaudible)

MN: That was it. 750 people.

EA: Yes.

MN: Now Fordham embraces the project after seeing the response, and we have a lot of Fordham students working for it, and then for the additional fundraising, I hire people who are academic experts on various subjects, so I have an expert on Caribbean immigration, an expert on African immigration. An expert on the history of jazz, and we just hired Dawn as our, sort of, to train the staff in videography and documentary and film because there's – and that's the funds we raise outside of Fordham. Everything from concerts to selling t-shirts to personal appeal. So we now have 18 or 19 people working for the project. Some of them archivists and also we have had tremendous donations of documents. Somebody gave us 25 boxes of material on the history of jazz and Latin music in the Bronx. Another person, Councilman Foster, gave all his papers to the project. We've been getting donations of material about churches and family photos. We recently got materials on early hip-hop. Tapes of early --

EA: It is interesting because I met Father Mercer. He's the priest now at St. Paul's. I met him socially. He said he once had a hip-hop band.

MN: Well, he should contact us because I actually interviewed the person who was responsible for the hip-hop masses, which is Curtis Blow, here. Curtis Blow does hip-hop masses, several at Trinity Episcopal --

EA: Which is across the street from Morris High School.

MN: Yes.

EA: Because --

MN: Let me give you several of my cards before we leave.

EA: Yes, because I am missing some contact information.

MN: But tell -- give him my information.

EA: So at Trinity they --

MN: Yes, they did some -- and we had a Hip-Hop Mass at Fordham, which the Jesuits had a few problems with, but the students enjoyed it.

EA: The students are the future.

MN: Exactly, so --

EA: When they don't like it --

MN: But Fordham's support for this is probability -- this is all new equipment, the flat-screen TV.

EA: This is all their support.

MN: It wasn't easy to get their support. I'm an old sort of political activist. I had to use some of my skills from the Columbia strike --

[laughter]

MN: To initially --

EA: My daughter goes to a Roman Catholic college -- Manhattanville.

MN: Oh.

End.