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Bronx African American History Project
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Transcriber: Dominique Jean-Louis

Natasha Lightfoot (NL): This is an interview with the Bronx African American History Project. And we're here with Hugh Beckford, who runs Caribbean and American Community Services, and is also a Fordham College graduate at Rose Hill, Class of '85, I remember that from our conversation. The interview is taking place on December 5th, right, today's the fifth, 2007, with Natasha Lightfoot and Dr. Mark Naison. Okay, so, just to start off, if you could give us a bit about, first of all, spell out your name for us, just for the purpose of the tape.

Hugh Beckford (HB): Hugh G. Beckford. H-U-G-H, initial G, B-E-C-K-F-O-R-D.

NL: And when and where were you born?

HB: Jamaica, West Indies. In a place called Trelawney.

NL: Okay. And it what year, what's your birthday.

HB: 1/1/51

NL: Oh wow! So it's coming up! [Laughter] So, tell us a little bit about you family, how many siblings did you have, what did your parents do, et. cetera.

HB: My parents who were married very, very early, and divorced very early, and so they both went their separate ways. I was grown up by my grandparents.

NL: Okay.

HB: Who was quite instrumental in my life, and later on, I happened to grow closer to especially my father. But most of my early impression of life came through my relationship with my grandparents.

NL: Okay.

HB: My grandfather, who was sort of a stately person, very much a farmer, but was quite involved with the social and political endeavors in Jamaica. Especially as it relates to children.

Mark Naison (MN): You said he was a farmer? Did he own his own land?

HB: Yes, he did. As a matter of fact, he was champion farmer for Trelawney.

NL: Really. And what was his particular product? Banana?

HB: Well, he had an array of different products. At times, he cultivated a lot of sugarcane, bananas, yams, and a lot of citrus. Plus spices.

NL: Spices, wow, okay.

HB: Ginger and pimento.

MN: And is Trelawney near the coast or it's inland?

HB: It's near the coast, but it runs right across. The famous story about Trelawney is that Trelawney was the last parish to remain in Jamaica. And it just came by accident, because there was thirteen parishes. And at the end they found out that one of the past governors, Governor Trelawney, there wasn't a parish named after him, so they cut up different parishes, and dropped in Trelawney.

NL: I see.

HB: So it is bordered by several parishes. And happened to be one of the very agricultural parish. Part of it, is for tourists, when you go to the northern section of the

country, but the southern section is mostly agricultural and industrial. MyGrandfather, who has traveled, in his earlier life, to Cuba, Panama, and the Dominican.

NL: He traveled for labor migration, essentially, to work on the Canal. And to work in sugarcane. Okay.

HB: Right.

NL: And then came back to Jamaica.

HB: Right.

NL: Okay. And what did your grandmother want to do? Was she also involved in the family farm?

HB: My grandmother was mostly a housewife, she was, as a matter of fact, one of the recently arrived immigrants from Germany.

NL: Oh, wow.

HB: So, you know, you have a mixture, within the family-

NL: Wow.

HB: -from the early years. So it was-they were extremely instrumental in my background.

NL: And when you say they were political, was your grandfather touched by Garveyism?

HB: Not necessarily, I think he was one of these very intelligent persons who, you know, knew that you had to be involved socially and politically.

NL: Right.

HB: And although he has never run for any political office, but even the late Norman Manley was somebody who, whenever Norman Manley was passing through Trelawney, he would stop at my grandfather's house.

NL: Wow, okay, so you remember, you interacted with Norman Manley as a young child.

MN: Now was there-were there formal dinners at the house, where people sat down and talked about politics, and-

HB: Not necessarily, but my grandfather was extremely involved with the church, the Baptist Church.

NL: Okay, okay.

HB: And, so wherever he goes, it's like, everybody listen to what he had to say. And he didn't have to come on an audience, you know, it's just like using a paper cup, you hear, and turn to me, and this and that. So it just-

NL: So he had a way of influencing political opinion in the parish. Interesting, wow.

MN: What was the school system like in Trelawney when you were growing up?

NL: Well, by the time I got to school age, you have had no, the public schools. But most of the schools in the early stages of Jamaica came through the churches, you know. The Anglican church, the Baptist Church and Methodist, Presbyterian, Moravians-

NL: Right.

HB, -and even Church of Christ. All of them were instrumental, especially when it relates to secondary education. They were very much instrumental, and in the basic school development, they were the archetypal, that sort of education system.

MN: And how old were you when you first started school.

HB: Oh, well, my kindergarten education started from, I can't even tell you when, because the kindergarten was almost next door to me. Just a house away from ours.

(laughs)

NL: Okay.

HB: My grandmother was instrumental in making sure that I go to kindergarten before I could even realize what I was doing. [Laughter]

NL: Okay. So education was strongly stressed in the household.

HB: Exactly.

NL: Okay.

HB: And then, after it went down to primary school, which I accelerated rapidly through.

And then I eventually went to St. Georgia's College.

NL: And St. Georgia's College is in where?

HB: Kingston.

NL: Okay, and-yeah, how far-

MN: How far was that from Trelawney.

HB: Over a hundred miles.

MN: Wow!

NL: Right.

MN: And so you had to board there?

HB: Well, I had relatives in Kingston, so I-

MN: Now, is Saint George's College the equivalent of a-like a prep school, or a high school, or is it more like a real college?

HB: Well, it's more than-it's a high school, but more than a high school. The sort of British system, it's a different emphasis on education. For example, in my elementary school days, I went to all the classes, not only to read and write, but to act it. (laughs) I'm serious, we did most of the Shakespeare plays in elementary school.

NL: Wow.

HB: So by the time you get to high school, you're already familiarized with all the classics.

NL: Right.

HB: When you graduate from high school in Jamaica, especially if you're , you could go into the work force as easily as possible. You were well-rounded, so to speak.

NL: Did you have examinations, kind of like what they have now in the Caribbean, the A-level, O-level?

HB: Right.

NL: Yeah. And you took both examinations.

HB: Correct. And then after that, of course I went into the working environment. I became a junior foreman at one of the largest companies in Jamaica, Desnoes and Geddes, Limited.

NL: Say that again.

HB: Desnoes and Geddes, Limited.

NL: And what kind of business is that.

HB: Those are the people who makes, they make Red Stripe beer. [Laughter]

NL: Oh, Okay. I see. Okay.

HB: Dragon Stouts and D&G soft drinks.

NL: Right, right.

HB: Right. And then after that, I left there, went into a different company. I guess being enchanted at sort of, political bigwigs that I got to know, I went into West Indies Paper Company group of companies.

NL: Okay, and around what time is this? How old were you at the time?

HB: Well, I left high school and went straight to D&G.

NL: Okay.

HB: And, from D&G to that, to the paper companies.

NL: So I'm thinking, this is early twenties.

HB: Yes.

NL: You're early twenties, so this the mid-seventies.

HB: Nineteen going on twenty. Nineteen going on twenty.

MN: Now I've studied something about Jamaican music. Were you very aware of all the musical developments in Jamaica, the ska, rock steady, reggae, all this music? Or is this something that was-passed you by?

HB: No, it-fortunately, or unfortunately didn't.

NL: It swept you up? [Laughter]

HB: Not only did that, although I wasn't a singer, or play any musical instrument, I was quite involved in the music world. I was considered one of the very good dancers in Jamaica.

MN: Oh!

NL: Okay!

HB: and used to come on national television.

NL: Wow!

MN: So you were on like band shows, like the equivalent of American Bandstand with Dick Clark?

NL: What was the name of the show?

MN: What was the name of the show?

HB: It was-first, it started out as Teenage Dance Party, and then it became Young World.

NL: Wow!

MN: Because we know someone who did a movie about a Teenage Dance Party in Washington, D.C. And so you were one of the dancers on-

NL: On Jamaica's equivalent, wow!

MN: Very impressive!

NL: That is something!

MN: Do you have any video of yourself dancing?

NL: Oh. [Laughter] Maybe in film archives in Jamaica, you might find it.

MN: Did you have a nickname, from when you danced?

HB: Yes, they used to call me Skanker Number One. [Laughter]

NL: Skanker Number One!

MN: Skanker Number One!

NL: Love it! I love it. [Laughter]

MN: That's hilarious. Skanker Number One. Wow.

NL: And so, how did your grandparents react to your other life, because-

HB: No, they admired very much.

NL: They admired it, wow.

HB: Especially my grandmother, she used to love to see me dance.

NL: Okay. And did you see a lot of live performances?

HB: Oh yeah.

NL: Who were your artists that you went to see?

HB: You had from James Brown, coming back, I was a member of the Ben E. King fan club during that time.

MN: A Ben E. King fan club!

NL: Wow!

MN: That is unbelievable. I mean, so "There's a Rose in Spanish Harlem?"

HB: Exactly.

MN: So this was in Kingston, or all over the country?

HB: Kingston, it was in Kingston.

MN: Did he come to perform in-

NL: And you saw him! When did he perform?

HB: At Carib. We had a large theater called Carib.

MN: C-A-R-I-B?

NL: Carib Theater. Wow.

MN: Carib Theater. Ben E. King, did you ever see Curtis Mayfield.

NL: Curtis Mayfield, yeah.

MN: James Brown? So all of the great American soul singers came to Jamaica.

HB: Right, right.

NL: Wow.

MN: Wow.

NL: And what about the reggae artists? Did you- which reggae artist were you enamored with?

HB: Well, you just happen to know all of them.

NL: Right.

HB: Remember, with the sort of demeanor I had, I was one of those persons who you wouldn't know seriously who I'm attached to, I just make sure I keep a neutral relationship with-

NL: You floated around.

HB: Yes, keep a neutral relationship.

NL: Lot of hot rivalries, huh?

HB: Right. I knew Bob Marley before he became famous, you know and he was the young man. One of his greatest friend was Skillcore, the guy, the soccer player. And seeing them practicing.

MN; Did you-were you very involved in sports?

HB: Yes, I played some soccer, a little cricket. Not to any great extent. So, I wouldn't call myself.

MN: In cricket, were you more of a bowler or a bat man?

HB: Did both.

NL: You did both. Okay. Okay. And, so, I guess you seem to have been very involved in the culture life of Jamaica. Now, as a young adult, what kinds of, you know, political action did you find yourself involved in?

HB: Well, I didn't get too deeply involved politically at the early stage. I was one of those youngsters who was very concerned, but at the same time try not to get too

seriously involved. Later on, I developed a serious relationship with quite a few politicians.

NL: Because you came of age right as Jamaica was gaining independence.

HB: Exactly, right.

NL: So what did you, how did you experience that?

HB: Well, it was in the time when you have great expectations, but with anticipation. If I remember as a youngster, because you wanted to assert yourself, but trying to weigh things, and where the country is going, and what is going to be there in the result of all our doings. So I was one of those people who was in ambience, if you mean, with great anticipation of what was going to happen.

NL: Okay.

HB: Later on, I got involved, so much so, in the early seventies, I started to, I met then Michael Manley. And one of his great supporters, who was the treasurer of People's National Party, William Issacs, and through William Isaacs I left D&G and went to work with the Wilson's Paper group of companies because he was the manager and director at that time.

NL: Okay.

HB: And then I got more politically involved in everyday life. And at one point they were trying to get me to run for political office.

NL: Really.

HB: And at the same time they wanted me to run for -----.

NL: For ----- . Did you know Edward Seaga?

HB: Yes, I knew all of them.

NL: Wow! My God. Get out of here.

HB: So, you know, there was always this mixture.

NL: And, I guess, you know, I knew one or two Jamaican-born friends growing up who said to me that, you know, their parents were very reticent about their political leaning, because of how tense and, you know, sometimes violent the political situation could be. So they didn't want-you know, I have friends who said she never knew which way her mother voted, the whole time she was growing up.

HB: Wow.

NL: Because, she was, you know, her mother was fearful for her, you know, saying the wrong thing in the wrong crowd about what her parents-how her parents vote. And I wanted to know, what are your thoughts on the PNP, JLP, you know, rivalry.

HB: Yeah, I understood the riot quite well. And like I said, later on I developed my own political-

NL: Right.

HB: -Endeavors in that. I understood what was happening, because I was able to relate to some of the early people in the party. One of them, Jeff Thompson, who was not only a mentor to me but also he was one of my Kiwanian brothers.

NL: Oh, okay, you were a member of the Kiwanis.

MN: Now, what is the Kiwani?

NL: It-

HB: Actually, it started here. The Kiwanis is-

MN: The Kiwanis Club?

HB: Yes.

NL: Yeah.

HB: And I happened to have been the youngest person in Eastern Canada and the Caribbean to join at that time. So, you know, I was very involved. (laughs)

NL: Wow. And what-when did you become a member?

HB: I became a member in 1974.

NL: And the Kiwanis were very active in Kingston.

HB: It went all over the country. It is now one of the largest service clubs you have.

NL: Right.

MN: It started in the United States and-

NL: Spread international, yeah.

HB: It's international.

MN: Oh!

NL: Right, right.

HB: It's-The three clubs that you can get the scholarships if you need. It's the three service clubs in the world. It's recognized as the Kiwanis, the Lions-

NL: My father was a Lion in Antigua.

HB: Right, and the Rotary. (laughing)

NL: The rotary, right. Antigua's big service company, and the kind of club that drew on everyone were the Lions.

HB: You're right.

MN: Wow.

NL: So I know exactly the kind of things you might have been involved in through the Kiwanis. So your mentor that was also a Kiwani, he was a member of the PNP?

HB: Right. And so, whenever I had the chance, we would sit down, have a drink, and we would talk about the early development of politics. Because he was very much an associate of Norman Manley and Bustamente.

NL: Right, all those trade unionists, from the thirties, forties, and so on.

HB: Right. And as a matter of fact, just speaking about that, your prime minister, and my cousin-

NL: Baldwin Spencer?

HB: Yes, and my cousin were good friends.

NL: Really. Look at that.

MN: That's from Antigua?

NL: Yeah, the Prime Minister of Antigua. He's a long time social justice fighter as well so, wow, look at that.

HB: As a matter of fact, when he came here, and met me, and he said, Hugh Beckford, you know, last name, I thought you were my cousin.

NL: Look at that, the world is so small. Caribbeans even smaller. [Laughter]

MN: Now during those years, late sixties and early seventies, did you ever visit the United States?

HB: No, I didn't. During those days, I was more fundamentally concerned about goings on in Jamaica.

NL: Right.

MN: Did you have relatives who lived in the United States?

HB: My-one of the separation from my father. I originally took the exam, the common entrance exam, with the intention going to Saint Elizabeth Technical High School,

because my father was living very close to that High School. So, you know, it would have been tremendous advantage to have that. And but, he migrated to the United States so I had to switch from Saint Elizabeth to in college.

NL: And where in the United States did he end going?

HB: Right here in the Bronx.

MN: Really! In what, this neighborhood?

HB: Actually, he, when he came, he lived in the South Bronx for a while, and then he came and lived in the Northeast Bronx. That's where a lot of Caribbean people land.

MN: Do you remember streets he lived in the South Bronx?

HB: Finley Avenue.

NL: Wow.

MN: Finley between-

HB: If I remember, it's between one sixty-six and one sixty-seven, and something like so.

MN: And do you know, was he involved with a church?

HB: Yes, the I think the church is closed down now, I think it's one sixtieth street.

NL: What denomination was it?

HB: Episcopalian.

NL: Saint Margaret's?

HB: Saint Margaret's? Saint Simeon!

NL: Saint Simian, that's still there! I know Saint Simeon's! [Laughter]

MN: Where was that one? What street?

NL: I don't know what street Saint Simeon's is on but I have longtime family friends who are still members of Saint Simeon's.

HB: Really?

NL: Saint Simeon's Church is still very much operational. I have to ask-

MN: So he was in Saint Simeon's, and then when he moved here it was Saint Luke's?

HB: Yes, yes, yes.

NL: Okay.

MN: And what year was Saint Luke's opened? Was this a very old church?

HB: Yes, I have the history somewhere. As a matter of fact, my father only migrated to Florida last year.

NL: Oh, so he was a member of Saint Luke's until-

HB: He used to sing in the choir and everything.

MN: Does he ever come up to New York?

HB: Yes.

MN: We should interview him.

NL: Yeah. So what year did he leave for New York then it was what, the mid-sixties, late sixties?

HB: Yes.

NL: Okay, okay.

MN: And what was your impression of New York living in Jamaica.

HB: Well, first, you know, because even though my grandfather came here, he didn't give us, speak about New York of such, you know. I guess most of the times he always focused on the Caribbean. And it's a passion to become part of that, because even though I live in the United States, my focus still is on the Caribbean. And because my grandfather was always concerned on what is happening within the Caribbean region, in

particular in Jamaica. So, he didn't talk much about United States. And when he came here, he worked at one of the hospitals, for a short while.

NL: Okay.

HB: And my grandfather was the type of person who was gifted, if you may. He could set a bone better than any doctor. Or a flip joint. And if you had certain illness, he would know what sort of-

NL: Roots, or-

HB: Roots, or tea, green leaf to get and to give you to, what would cure it better than any doctor. (Laughing)

NL: So he was sort of like a healer.

HB: Yes, not in some ways-

MN: Holistic medicine.

HB: Right.

MN: What they call today holistic medicine.

HB: Exactly. That was his forte.

MN: He sounds like a remarkable person. To be able to create this whole agricultural complex, and-

HB: No, he was, he was.

MN: What was his name?

HB: George Murray.

NL: George Murray.

HB: Yeah, that's where my middle name comes from.

NL: Oh, okay, okay. So, I guess now, you're a young adult now, you're working at the West Indies Paper Company. How then did you end up moving towards an idea of coming here, not continuing your professional career in Jamaica?

HB: Well, what happened is that I-there was a big joke about valets. I got a scholarship to go Canada, to study, and then to work part-time with the Wyer's group of companies.

NL: And what kind of companies are that?

HB: The Wyer's group of companies, they make paper products.

NL: Okay, sort of continued the same of work you did on the island.

HB: Right, because, one of the companies that William Isaacs was managing was associated with the Wyer's group of companies, that was the West Indies Paper. And, what happened is, (laughing) I went to Canada, and the first winter start hit me, before I was started. Like right now. [Laughter].

NL: So, snow was not your forte.

HB: Not at all. I went right-straight back home. And, because of this, I couldn't go to Isaacs, because it was through his company that I-

MN: So he made the connection for you.

HB: Right, it is through his company I got the scholarship. So, what happened, I stayed in Trelawney, and starting working with an agricultural society. Minister of Agriculture, through one of its affiliates. And I switched my whole profession. I starting doing accounting, because I was good at figures.

NL: Okay.

HB: From elementary school. Right. I became an accounting clerk, from there I became a bursar for a secondary school.

NL: Okay.

HB: And the fascinating thing about this, while I was the bursar, I opened an agricultural store. And agriculturists and myself, leased a cattle farm, and we started work [Laughter]

NL: Wow.

MN: So you raised cattle?

NL: Jack of all trades.

MN: A dancer, and a cattle raiser, and a paper-wow.

NL: And a politician.

MN: There are no cattle in this building, are there? [Laughter]

NL: So then, the cattle rearing, that you, you know, were you doing dairy, or were you doing actual meat products?

HB: Not dairy. We bought a young cow, some aluminum company.

MN: So you didn't slaughter steers and make steak or anything.

NL: Okay, and from there, how long did that last?

HB: It lasted for about three years, and then somehow, I got restless, and I decided that I would sell the agricultural store and the cattle farm. I sold them to my prop. After then, I went back to Kingston, became the accountant for the Caribbean Conference of Churches.

NL: Wow.

HB: And did part-time accounting for the Jamaica Council of Churches.

NL: Okay.

HB: And it was while I was there, and still very active with the Kiwanis movement, I was sent to California as a delegate, and on my way back I stopped with my father here in the Bronx. And this was 1980.

NL: 1980.

HB: And my father insisted that because of the political endeavors in Jamaica, I should stay.

NL: Because, I know, by 1980 things were getting violent.

HB: Yes.

MN: Natasha, I'm going to have to take a break, I'm feeling a little sick, so I'll be in the car, and come when you're finished.

NL: Oh, okay, no problem.

MN: I just feel a little under the weather, so.

NL: All right. So you came here in 1980, and you decided to stay.

HB: I didn't, actually.

NL: Well, your dad decided for you. Okay.

HB: Because I really wanted to go back to Jamaica then. And he insisted that I stay because one of the things that he was very concerned about was the political endeavors in Jamaica.

-----Inaudible-----

HB: And that's how I ended up at Fordham.

NL: Okay. Wonderful! So, you ended up at Fordham, and what year did you enter for them, then.

HB: Eighty-one.

NL: Eighty-one.

HB: Because I came here in the summer of 1980.

NL: Right, but you couldn't enter right away, you had to wait for the next fall. Okay.

And what did you do in the meanwhile? Did you work before you started Fordham?

HB: My father had a business here, in the South Bronx.

NL: Okay, and what did he do, because when you mentioned your father last he worked for a hospital.

HB: No, that's my grandfather.

NL: That is your grandfather! Oh, I didn't realize. So, what did your father do then, what kind of business?

HB: He had the AAA franchise for the South Bronx.

NL: Oh, wow! So he did auto-body repair.

HB: Not the body. You know, if you break down, you call AAA.

NL: Right, the services.

HB: He was the company that would come and whatever help your need.

NL: Roadside assistance and a mechanic. So he's kind of like traveling auto-body repair.

[Laughter] And where was his business located?

HB: River Avenue on 149th Street.

NL: My dad used to have an auto-body shop on Third Avenue. A long time ago.

HB: My father possibly knew him, too.

NL: Your father-?

HB: It is possible that he-

NL: That you might have known my-

HB: Yes, because we used to-our air went up 170th Street, and crossed over Third Avenue.

NL: It's very possible, then. My father used to do work for something called Capital Motors, I don't know if you remember that. But he had his own mechanic shop, somewhere in the South Bronx. And that was above 149th, probably somewhere in the 160's or something like that.

HB: My father would know him, then. Although I'm not sure.

NL: Okay. Well, if you ever have your father up here for a visit, please let us know. And, we would love to interview him, he sounds like he would be a good interview as well. So, we're off-topic now, back to you. [Laughter] And your work. So you decided to go to Fordham, and did you have trouble with your-your transition into life at Fordham.

HB: Well, it was really amazing, to a certain degree. The decision was to either go to NYU or to Fordham. Both had accepted me at the time.

NL: Okay.

HB: I chose Fordham and I'm happy I did.

NL: Really.

HB: Yes.

NL: Okay. And why?

HB: Well, two things had happened. One, it was closer to me. The second thing is that-

NL: Because you were staying at home, right?

HB: Yes.

NL: Okay, you didn't move out.

HB: And the second thing that happened is that they were very open to the sort of studies that I wanted to do.

NL: Okay, and that's what I was going to ask you next. What were you interested in?

HB: But before I got to that, all of the sudden, I don't know if it was the influence of the churches in Jamaica, but all of a sudden I decided that I was going into the ministry.

NL: Oh, wow! Okay. So you got the called.

HB: So I was going to study for the priesthood. And I went to Fordham. While at Fordham, though, I became a postulant of the diocese.

NL: Really.

HB: Definitely.

NL: So, in the Catholic-

HB: No, in the Episcopal Church.

NL: Oh, in the Episcopal Church. That's what I was going to ask you, in which, you know. Okay.

HB: And I was fortunate, and I hate to say this, to make other students hear it because they might get jealous. [Laughter]

NL: Say it anyway for the kids, maybe somebody might be inspired by it.

HB: I was able, through the Dean's, to pin my studies, to do both Sociology and Theology.

NL: Wow..

HB: Theology you're not supposed to do at undergraduate level.

NL: Oh, wow.

HB: So I was fortunate to go to a lot of lectures in theology at the graduate level.

NL: Oh, wow. And who did you work with? Who were the professors that you-

HB: Well, we had Dean Burna and Dean Healy, who was very instrumental in procuring it for me.

NL: Wow, okay.

HB: So I enjoyed both were-and, of course I have, during the course of this I was working with my father, and then by the time I graduated, I worked with the Catholic charities.

NL: Right, okay.

HB: And, in the course-before doing that, however, another surprising thing happened from Fordham. Doctor-oh, gosh, what's the name-he was adjunct professor for Fordham.

NL: He was a what kind-an adjunct. Okay. In which department, in sociology?

HB: Yes. I was going to tell you something. He was fascinated somehow with what I was doing, and my type of personality. And he invited me up to Orange County to do a project.

NL: Really. And what kind of project was this?

HB: Well, he knew that I, early stages of, that I believe in preventative services. And so he wanted to give me the opportunity to come up to Orange County to create one. And out of that came the first project, local and state of New York transition from education. college students, from prison to college.

NL: Wow.

HB: Riker's Island, I understand, use it as a model.

NL: Wow. That is wonderful.

HB: Doctor Pearson was the professor.

NL: Doctor Pearson, okay. And so what kind of program did you implement-what was the curriculum?

HB: That was-the curriculum, for example, if a youngster was in prison, or mainly Orange County Jail, and the criminal element was mental health related, then that person would be eligible, go to the college, start giving them courses towards their degree. They get a prisoner's completion of it. They could walk onto the campus.

NL: And complete it, as a full-time student. Wow, that is wonderful.

HB: It was the first of its kind, what can I say, you know. And then I, after working with, I became educational coordinator for New York City, and part of Westchester

NL: Wow. And all of this happened while you were still an undergraduate?

HB: I had finished [Laughter]

NL: You had finished, okay. Because I was going to say, there is just so much on your plate! [Laughter] Okay, so we're on track, but I wanted to go back a little bit, before we finish the conversation about Fordham, I wanted to find out, what was Fordham like for you, what was life like with the other types of students there? Did you come across a lot of Caribbean students?

HB: Yes, there were a few Jamaicans, a few Hispanics, but there were mainly Caucasians. But growing up the way I grew up, it didn't phase me one bit. My grandmother was Caucasian, so.

NL: Right, no, I understand that, yeah. It's just because I know, from what I understand, Fordham was, you know, not always the most racially harmonious campus.

HB: I guess it didn't worry me much, and I can remember a communication with Doctor Humphrey, a class, and Doctor Humphrey is a gentleman that I-professor that I really

admired. Because he was one of those very liberal type of person. And yet very strict. You know, you had to do things properly. But he was one of these liberated persons who could see beyond color and creed and variety of things one does. And in the communication class we had to pick a subject from the table, that was very harsh, touching something racially.

NL: Right. And what subject did you choose, do you remember?

HB: It was the element of black person being treated.

NL: Right. Is this police custody?

HB: In the community.

NL: Oh, in the community. And were you focusing on the Bronx-

HB: No, no, no.

NL: -or the wider New York City.

HB: Yes.

NL: Okay.

HB: So I-not only you had to write a paper on it, but you had to do an oral presentation.

So I did both, and of course, and that class, I'll never forget it, I got an A. [Laughter]

NL: You always remember the good stuff, right?

HB: So what happened is, one of the great experience of that, is that there's a young gentleman from Boston, who was studying here, and for some reason came to sit with me. And during the conversation class he sat with me as well.

NL: Right.

HB: And after we finished the presentation, he said, 'Hugh, that's not your experience'. I said of course it's not my experience, but I said, 'Why would you say something like

that'? He said 'Because you're a Jamaican'. So I had to tell him, 'If I'm walking down the street, and two Caucasian people come and see me, and see me approaching them, they wouldn't know whether I'm Jamaican, or I'm African , or American.'

NL: Right.

HB: Because all they will be looking at is a black person.

NL: Exactly.

HB: In which they would have developed an attitude.

NL: Right, right. So you were already developing race consciousness.

HB: Yes. And that made his eyes open, his intellect opened a little bit.

NL: Right.

HB: He thanked me for doing that because he was studying journalism, so it felt good to see that I could help.

NL: Really, look at that. So now that you mention that, what were your first impressions of life in New York City when you came here in 1980?

HB: It was far beyond what I ever imagined and thought.

NL: In a good way?

HB: Negative way.

NL: Oh, a negative way! [Laughter]

HB: You know, well you looked on the housing-

NL: Right.

HB: -and the whole outsides. All of the lavatories, just, some of what we have in the islands.

NL: Okay,

HB: And the establishments, the way of life. It was very different.

NL: So, what kind of housing did you and your father live in?

HB: Private house.

NL: Okay.

HB: But nonetheless, even just the makeup of it. (Laughing)

NL: Right, right.

HB: The architecture of it is quite a bit from what we-

NL: Right. And were you in contact with other, you know, of your family friends and what kind of housing were they living in?

HB: Most of them in private houses.

NL: In private houses. And they were in the area of the Northeast Bronx?

HB: Northeast Bronx, and even those from Brooklyn, and a couple in Queens.

NL: So your father was connected to a upwardly mobile set of West Indians in the city.

HB: Yes but my father-my father is the type of person who is very social. He is a man who mix with everybody. And yet can be wherever he want to be when he want to be.

NL: Right, right. And where did you live when you were living in the Northeast Bronx with your dad?

HB: Amundson Avenue.

NL: Amundson Avenue, where is that?

HB: Its-you go to 233rd Street, cross over Baychester-

NL: Okay.

HB: -it's about three blocks up.

NL: Spell that for me?

HB: A-M-U-N-D-S-O-N.

NL: Oh, okay. I can kind of-I see it now. I went to school on Baychester. I went to Spellman High School. So I know there are other little side streets that continue up on Baychester. Okay.

HB: And then later on we bought a house on 232nd Street.

NL: Okay, okay. And at the time, was this neighborhood heavily West Indian or were there still other types of people living here? Because now it is, this neighborhood, the Northeast Bronx is currently a West Indian neighborhood. In the early eighties was it that way?

HB: When I came in 1980, yes, there had been a larger -----inaudible-----, but there were also quite a bit of Jews, Italian, and of course, when you go to Woodlawn.

NL: Yeah, Irish.

HB: Yes.

NL: Right.

HB: And through Doctor Pearson and others, we -----inaudible-----

NL: Right. And-go ahead.

HB: But between 1980 to 1990 there had been a tremendous increase, in terms of the West Indian population.

NL: Right, right, right. So I guess you think by 1990, this neighborhood was more West Indian than any other kind of ethnicity. Okay. That's very interesting in the history of the neighborhood.

HB: Yes, it has an increase to about sixty, sixty-five percent.

NL: West Indian. And what's the other remaining percent? The other thirty five?

HB: You still have a few Jews, and you have African Americans. And of course, now, coming in there, is some Africans-

NL: Right.

HB: -and Hispanics.

NL: Right, right, okay. And so, you mentioned that you felt like, in the early eighties, you felt that the housing stock here was, in your words, derogatory. Did you feel safe here?

HB: A little more then, because you didn't have responsibility of people. What you had to be careful of is the element of drug.

NL: Right. And were you aware of the drugs coming into the neighborhood?

HB: I have known people who were involved with drugs.

NL: Really.

HB: And who-unfortunately, they are all dead.

NL: Really, wow. And those are the people from this area, they were-they used, or they sold drugs.

HB: Mostly selling.

NL: Right, yeah, wow. And how did you stay away from all of that? Because it's something that you hear a lot of, especially black men, they have the most contact with the drug culture. They knew someone with-they're connected to it. How did you manage to avoid it?

HB: Well, my upbringing, the first thing.

NL: Right, right.

HB: I've seen-that was one of the heartaches, when I came here and saw, and which was very disturbing, was two youngsters who went to elementary school here, the mother was my teacher. And to see them, and they went to high school and to see them start selling drugs, and eventually if you see both of them today you believe they're coming from such a background.

NL: A strong background, right.

HB: But I think the way I was-growing up, that's not something you want to get involved in, because that's not a good thing. As a matter of fact, if you drink one too much it would have been a challenge-

NL: Right, just let them find drugs and stronger stuff.

HB: Exactly.

NL: Okay. Now, once you got out of school, you graduated, you mentioned that started as, you know, education coordinator for New York City and Greater Westchester.

HB: This was with Catholic Charities.

NL: Through Catholic charities, right.

HB: Carter-McClasty Children and Families.

NL: Carter-McClasty?

HB: Children and Family Services.

NL: Okay.

HB: And then later on I went to work with the city.

NL: With the Board of Ed.?

HB: No, that's where I was supposed to go, but I refused to go.

NL: Now, why did you refuse to go to the Board of Ed.?

HB: Because I was a considerate advocate for reversing

-----Tape break-----

NL: And that's what made you-

HB: What I found out is that, actually, a directorship job was offered to me. And then I found out that it was people from the special ed. department who recommended that I get the job, and I refused it.

NL: Wow. [Laughter]

HB: Of course they wanted to get rid of- [Laughter]

NL: Okay.

HB: So I ended up going to working with Child Welfare Administration.

NL: Okay.

HB: And during my time at Child Welfare, I-they were going to put me into Foster Care section.

NL: Yeah.

HB: And I raised one hell about that, too. [Laughter]

NL: So I guess for the same kinds of issues.

HB: They had to put me into Preventive. And in Preventive, possibly after about three months, they wanted me to take over the department.

NL: Wow.

HB: And I refused them doing that as well.

NL: Why did you refuse that?

HB: Well, by the time I started at developing my work, my knowledge from the experience of being, first a undercare worker, and secondly to educational coordinator, I

realized there was a big gap in services for new immigrants, especially as it relates to the Caribbean community. So, all of a sudden to desire to open a preventive social services took me.

NL: And so, here we have. When did you first start Caribbean American Family Services.

HB: 1991.

NL: 1991. So this is coming right out of your city work. Okay. And when you started, how difficult was it to get this organization off the ground?

HB: Quite difficult.

-----Pause-----

NL: So how difficult was it for you to get the, you know, Caribbean American Family Services started?

HB: Well, it wasn't very easy, and to a certain extent it was very hard. What happened is I did-I was very much in one of those effective social workers, and I quickly, the preventive section which I worked with which traveled here, when an agency into problems, I was the one willing people they would send to try to straighten out things. So, during the course of that, you quickly start to develop, achieve the knowledge how to have an effective maintenance.

NL: Right. And I know that, before we even get into, you know, this organization, in the eighties in New York, there was clearly a fiscal crisis.

HB: Precisely.

NL: So how did that affect the work you did with child welfare?

HB: Well, what happened during that course, when I decided that I was going to open an agency, the key factors were to get to know the shakers and movers, especially in the black community. And Dr. Meghan McLoughlin, who was Federation Protestant Welfare Agencies.

NL: Oh, okay.

HB: She was the president, the CEO.

NL: The President, the CEO of the Federation of Welfare Agencies.

HB: Welfare and Protestant Agencies

NL: Okay.

HB: And they were extremely powerful group.

NL: And this was a city agency, or was it independent.

HB: Independent agency, but it has a lot of different contracts.

NL: With the city. Okay.

HB: And not only city, but, they had a lot of private end of it.

NL: Okay, okay.

HB: And she, at the time, was recognized as one of the leading social workers in the world.

NL: And this was a black woman?

HB: Mm-Hmm.

NL: Wow.

HB: She just retired some few years back.

NL: And was she working in the Bronx, or was she-

HB: Manhattan.

NL: She was in Manhattan, okay.

HB: And she and I have become very close.

NL: Right.

HB: And of course she's a West Indian too, so.

NL: Oh, where was she from?

HB: Jamaica.

NL: Okay, okay.

HB: SO, with her and-what I used to do is in the evening I used to make appointments with executive directors of black agencies, and I would sit with them for hours to go through little things that you do, how they do it, so on.

NL: So what kinds of agencies were you in touch with and trying to learn from?

HB: American makers, a lot of them, many of them have been closed over since.

NL: Really.

HB: And so after I gathered the information, which was very intriguing, I wrote to the same city that I'm working telling them that I'm going to propose an agency. After a while they responded and said that I-they're not the ones that I need to get in touch with, it's the-

NL: Oh, okay.

HB: So we had to go quickly to the center upstate.

NL: And so who were you in touch with upstate?

HB: The State Department of Social Services

NL: Okay. Did they come up with funding?

HB: No, no, you don't-far from that.

NL: Oh! I don't know how this thing works. [Laughter]

HB: No, no, you first have to be approved.

NL: Okay, okay.

HB: And remember I'm doing a preventive social service agency. So I have to be approved. And when they finally wrote me back, saying that they're going to do an interview. We had the interview in the city, so I went to the interview with nothing, didn't send them nothing and they were shocked that I came with nothing. So when I remember the gentleman's name correctly, he was the deputy director of social services for Braun Shear. And he said to me, 'Mr Beckford,' I'm sitting at one end of the conference, and he and his crew were sitting on the top, and he said, 'you didn't send us a package proposal. Now did you bring anything? This is very unusual, because people generally do that, and we have nothing to go by, so there's nothing to be said.'

NL: Right. (Laughs)

HB: And I said to them (makes noise), and I purposely did that. He said, 'Why?' I said, 'Because I don't want my ideas to be given to somebody else.'

NL: Wow. So-

HB: He was startled. I never forget it, a young a lady by the name of Ms. Lee, a black woman. Ms. Lee introduced herself and said, 'Mr. Beckford is here, we are here. We can-it would make no sense to schedule another.' I think she was uncertain what was going to be the outcome. I trust that it is what she said, she said it, but my rational feeling was that she said it because it would be easier to just dispel me, to say all right, I'm going to go. Anyhow, whatever the sort of wisdom, she said, 'Let's start with Mr. Beckford, since he's here.' I said to them, 'Where do you want me to start?' And they

said, 'Well, we have to know what kind of agency.' I said 'Fine, no problem.' And I sat there, and went into the rationality of having the agency.

NL: And what was your rationale for having this agency?

HB: Because from that I described the need for the agency because of the transition in terms of the population range and the influx of Caribbean and other immigrant communities, and then I went into the need for service. And I explained all of that.

Then, after I went into the need for service, I described how to deliver our services would come through our agency. And when I got to stopping they stopped me.

NL: Right.

HB: They said, 'Very amusing. We didn't expect anybody could do that.'

NL: Off the top of their head! [Laughter]

HB: So they said, 'What can we do for you, Mr. Beckford?' I said, you guys are the experts. This is the agency I'm describing to you and I want to bring it to-

NL: To life, yeah.

HB: And they said to me, and Braun Shear said to me, 'No, Mr. Beckford, you're wrong this time. We're not the expert, you're the expert.'

NL: That's it.

HB: Go get your lawyers and start the legal proceedings. And we got our approval three months after that.

NL: Three months.

HB: It was approved by the state.

NL: Wow. And when you established yourself, were you always in the Saint Luke's building, or had you started out somewhere else and then-

HB: No, no, no, fortunately for us, and I've had a long association with Saint Luke's since I've been here.

NL: Right, I want to get into that next.

HB: We started here, as a matter of fact, our first board meeting was at Saint George's, which is part of Saint Luke's. And out of that, no money, nothing, but we now had an approved agency, so we had to do something. And so, understand the plight of the immigrants, we decided to volunteer an immigration outreach program. And a specialized tutoring program. And we were going to-we started downstairs.

NL: In the parish hall of Saint Luke's?

HB: Right

NL: Okay.

HB: And it grew. The specialized tutoring program, in particular, grew to the extent of, we had to-with all the things that happened in Saint Luke's, we had to ask the councilman to get Richard Green School opened Saturdays for us.

NL: The Richard Green School is a middle school?

HB: Yeah.

NL: Up the street?

HB: 113th.

NL: Okay, okay. Was the councilman Seabrook at the time?

HB: No, it was Walden.

NL: Okay, I don't know him.

HB: Larry Waldman.

NL: That was the one before Seabrook.

HB: Yeah.

NL: Okay, okay. And I wanted to know, when you first started, on average how many people on average sought out your services?

HB: Well, for example, like I said the specialized tutoring, and when we were finished with that, and switched to immigration. The specialized tutoring, it rapidly grew, and because all of the parents had to provide with the books, and bring the kids, and bring a snack. The teachers were free, they were all volunteer teachers.

NL: Oh, wow. And were teachers would actually have been teaching in schools and they came after school to this center?

HB: Yeah. We were only doing it on Saturdays.

NL: Oh, okay, I thought you were doing it after school, it was on Saturdays, okay.

HB: No, no, no. The whole Saturday from eight o'clock, no sorry, it was from nine o'clock right back on from three.

NL: Okay, so it was another school day.

HB: Yes, but the understanding is that the parents had to be here with us.

NL: That's great.

HB: So we had the parental involvement, because they are going to make sure that their children is there.

NL: Yeah, and make sure they succeed. That's great.

HB: We did that and the first time, thirteen kids from this district passed the test of specialized high schools. And we're talking about Bronx Science,

NL: Stuyvesant.

HB: Stuyvesant, and Brooklyn Tech.

NL: And Brooklyn Tech. Wow. In your first year! Wow, that is amazing.

HB: Exactly.

NL: That is wonderful.

HB: Everybody was shocked.

NL: This shows you what a little extra work can do.

HB: Precisely. ON my board at the time was one Caucasian teacher, who was in this district I purposely put in here. Because having worked as an educational coordinator, and through the whole educational system, and I wanted to make sure I had a lasting impression on them. The things that I was advocating for, I wanted to be with through agency. At the immigration program, when we started we started at Saint George's. One volunteer, and sometimes we, if you get one person for the day-and we were just doing that on Saturdays, so it's- well if you get one person for the day you're lucky. And what I had to do, which is-it's very unorthodox, but that's how I do a lot of things.

NL: That's sometimes the best way to do things. (Laughs)

HB: I would give out flyers, and I would take the flyer, and sometimes I'd take off at church, and go to different churches and drop off the flyers. That is on Sunday. But Saturday night, and other nights during the week, I would go from bar to bar.

NL: I was going to ask- [Laughter] -if you had to go to the nightclubs and so on.

HB: And one Saturdays, I go to the nightclubs, and I would give out flyers. And I never forget it, a gentleman who supported me so well in what I was doing, his name was Shane, used to have Shane Pillar. And one night Shane called me to his office and he said, he said, 'What you're doing is wrong.' So I say, 'Why is this wrong?' And he said, 'What you're doing is a good thing, but how you're doing it is wrong.' [Laughter] So I

said, 'Why?' and he said, 'When people come to party, they don't want flyers.' I said, 'This is what we're advertising.' He said, 'All right, let me show you. Okay, he said, 'We're going to do this. Fold, fold into smaller.' And he said, 'All right. I'm going to go, and you'll do likewise, and I'm going to hand this to people. One thing they're going to do, they're going to put it right in their pocket.'

NL: Right. That's it. So you started handing out smaller pieces of paper, so that you knew people would take them home.

HB: Exactly.

NL: Okay. And then did you see the numbers change?

HB: The numbers started to change. When-

NL: So, before we go on, the immigrations services that you offered, was it for green cards, was it for-

HB: No, it was for citizenship.

NL: Citizenship, okay.

HB: And then, after a while, another agency came up, the C.I.S., Caribbean Immigrant Services, with Irwine Clare and Winston Tucker.

NL: Okay.

HB: And they were doing a lot of citizenship as well. So what we did is we have joint ventures.

NL: And they were located in the neighborhood as well?

HB: No, they were from Queens.

NL: Oh, they were in Queens. Doing very similar-

HB: Now the school became a beacon school. So the doors for us weren't open.

NL: Right.

HB: So what we did, I got affiliated with the college of testing, who had a contract to do the testing for immigration. So we had the C.I.S. group assisting us in making sure-at that time we used to do fingerprinting and everything.

NL: Right.

HB:: And for one weekend in particular, I'll never forget it, because even one of my board members, who is a lawyer, was there. The Saturday, from ten o'clock to six, and the Sunday from one to five, we eventually stayed after six. We processed five hundred and two people for citizenship.

NL: Wow. And what year was this?

HB: This was in 1993.

NL: Wow, so you had only been in existence two years. Wow.

HB: And we-during the course of that now, you could come get your fingerprint, your application, and you would have the classes, we develop the classes, and you could come to the classes, then you could take the test from-

NL: Right.

HB: We had the whole thing.

NL: Wow.

HB: Which, you know, was a blessing in disguise, and sometimes, you know, you thank God for the good deeds. I remember on one occasion that were two women, they work in healthcare. Never knew each other from-both of them are from Jamaica. Had two illnesses that caused them to have memory lapses. And their gone to do the test, and had failed the test twice, and came to us. And when those two ladies passed the test, now,

you're talking about ladies who if they wasn't in their sixties was near their sixties. You saw those two ladies jump like two young kids. [Laughter]

NL: Yeah, you can tell you're really doing an important service for people. Now I wanted to know was it- had you encountered people who were really unaware about the citizenship process?

HB: Oh, yeah. Up to now, you still have people who are, how you said, unaware of it. What I had to, and still doing, I had to go on the air, and I was fortunate that you had Ken Williams.

NL: And who is Ken Williams?

HB: He has the Ken Williams show on 93.5 FM.

NL: Okay.

HB: Now he comes on Thursday evenings.

NL: Okay.

HB: But during that time he used to come on more times during the week. He's a person that used to own Carib New York, in New Rochelle.

NL: Right, okay.

HB: And Ken Williams used to take me on to his show to talk about-

NL: -All the immigration services.

HB: Right. Then later on Ira John came, and Ira John would facilitate us when we wanted to. And then Linkoff came along, and Linkoff, his mother did her citizenship with us. And through her, we started the Immigration Forum with Squeeze, and after he got too big, he wanted us to find funding for it and I said no, we're making your show

big. [Laughter] So what happened he went out and start getting lawyers and, you know.
So, here come Brad Burnstein and the rest of them, and-

NL: Oh.

HB: Right. Of course, there's the Good Lord, so the Good Lord opened opportunity after their offer end I got a call from the WLIB that they wanted me to come.

NL: Were you on Jack Barnes?

HB: No, Bob Fredericks and some others.

NL: Oh, okay Bob Fredericks, I remember him.

HB: Yes.

NL: Okay.

HB: So we used to do the immigration forum-

NL: forum on WLIB. Okay.

HB: And so we were able to discuss in length and in depth the immigration process.

NL: Okay.

HB: And now I have my own program.

NL: You are on the radio?

NL: On WorldwideCaribRadio.com, in which we discuss, you know, I do a one-hour program weekly, in which we can discuss it. Well, I always discuss immigration, but we discuss not just immigration but other community activisms.

NL: Okay. And I wanted to ask you if you've come across people who are reluctant.

Because I know, at least some Caribbean people feel like they may not want to become American citizens, and give up their ties to their home country. I wanted to know how

you've been able to talk to Caribbean immigrants about this issue, and what have you done to convince them?

HB: Yes, well it has become much easier now. (Knock at the door) Come. Already?

-----Tape break-----

NL: So how did you convince Caribbean people?

HB: I was able to do that because two things. Because of the accessibility towards each others and has come to the agreeable term in that their immigrants can become citizens and still remain citizens of their countries of origin.

NL: Right.

HB: And even before that, you had certain countries in the Caribbean who used to practice that.

NL: Right.

HB: And so, when that formulation came out, it made it easier for us to relate that to our community. The fact that one can maintain their passport, and use it if necessary, it made the community more competent.

NL: So they didn't feel like they were giving up on their home country.

HB: Exactly. And then in discussion, we talk about the benefits of one becoming citizen.

And how it can influence policies towards the Caribbean.

NL: That's true, too. That is true.

HB: I'm one of those persons that I-when I speak, or try to advocate for policy changes, or politician react to any changes, when immigration reform came, we were on the pathway to hoping to get immigration reform, I was contacted by the Daily News.

NL: And when was this?

HB: That was over a year ago. That might of sent it - Schumer or Clinton has come out in favor of immigration reform. Which I wasn't aware of. So I spoke out about it. And I defined rational reasons why they should. Well I can tell you, it was in the news the next day. And the next day they called me, to tell me they are in support of immigration reform.

NL: Wow! Wow. You have there's an influence.

HB: Exactly.

NL: The Caribbean political voice can have if you're active in politics.

HB: Precisely

NL: And the only you can be active is to be a citizen.

HB: Exactly. And so, the fact of the matter is, one can help to foster the notion that the Caribbean community needs to be dealt with, because they're serious voting blocks.

NL: Yeah.

HB: Does that make sense?

NL: Yeah.

HB: But if you don't have that, then-

NL: Your interests are ignored by the state, and the politicians.

HB: Exactly. Now, early on, when I started the whole immigration-

NL: -Right.

HB: I remember a politician staff member said to me, 'We don't have to support you because your people doesn't-'

NL: Don't vote.

HB: I only said that to him, I said, 'All right.' I didn't discuss with him the immigration program that we were putting out there. But what I did was as vigilantly as we could, and we didn't- at the time you had the school board, and people used to have to run for the school board. I found out that there was no West Indian on the school board, and yet we have the majority of kid-

NL: -Of the kids in school.

HB: So what I did, I put a committee together, and I ran somebody for the school board, and won.

NL: Really. Who was that?

HB: Sandra Everetts-McGee.

NL: Wow. And she was the first West Indian on the school board in this district.

HB: Exactly. She was a lawyer.

NL: What school district is this.

HB: Eleven.

NL: Eleven, okay. And she's a lawyer, you said.

HB: Right.

NL: And where was he from?

HB: She-her parents are from Jamaica, so she considers herself a Jamaican.

NL: Right.

HB: She went to England when she was little.

NL: But, you know, she still counts. [Laughter]

HB: Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes! I mean, her only fortes are Jamicans. But she was the lone West Indian voice.

NL: Wow. And what year was this, that you got her campaign off the ground, when she got elected?

HB: This was 1997, I think, if I remember correctly. Because she served two terms.

NL: Wow! Okay. Now, I had a question, now that you mention that, you know, your work on the school board, et cetera. What were the roles that you played in local politics in this area? Because it seems as though-you've made a lot of references to it, but talk a little bit more about the kinds of political activism you've had, now in the context of this organization.

HB: Well, when you have helped over forty thousand people to become citizens-

NL: That's how many people you've helped! Wow! Wow. That's remarkable for what, we're talking about fifteen years, sixteen years in existence.

HB: Right.

NL: Forty thousand people.

HB: Right, and when you've helped pretty near twenty thousand to file for green card.

NL: On top of the forty thousand who become citizens.

HB: Right, and then simultaneously assist them in making sure that they've passed the test.

NL: Right.

HB: We have a ninety-eight to ninety-nine percent pass ratio.

NL: Really.

HB: And we still do it, still do. On Saturdays, if you ever come here, you will never go to an immigration class and have the same experience that you would here.

NL: And what makes this experience so unique?

HB: Because we deal with the, not just the one hundred question, we deal with the civic matters relating to new immigrants.

NL: Right. So you prepare them for the kind of citizens, actually, that they will become.

HB: Right. And not only that, give them rational reasons why they should be proactive-

NL: Right.

HB: -in the whole process. For example, you never go to-if I ask you if you know if a West Indian has even acted as vice president, and people tell me no.

NL: Yeah. (laughing) I would say that.

HB: But there is a West Indian who acted as vice-president.

NL: Really.

HB: It was just for a couple hours, but he did.

NL: And who was that?

HB: Alexander Dallas.

NL: Wow. And what year was that.

HB: I forgot the precise year, but it's when the Constitution changed.

NL: So in the 1777 period. And where was he born?

HB: Kingston, Jamaica.

NL: Look at that.

HB: And they- there's a draft- a lot of vibrant politician and who came from the West Indies that a lot of Americans don't even know. There's a lot of West Indians don't know about this. Alexander Hamilton, who was the man who founded the New York Post, Bank of New York, the Federal Reserve System, was a politician. These are the

people who have made significant change, and have stimulated the growth of the United States.

NL: Right.

HB: So. When they leave here, and I mean, we look at even the civil right movements.

NL: And there are lots of West Indians involved in local and national civil rights.

HB: One was right here in the Bronx. At 174th Street and Bronx River Parkway.

NL: Who was that?

HB: Cleveland Robinson.

NL: Oh, yeah. I knew you were going to say that. See, a lot of people knew about his work, you know, in the unions, et. Cetera, and I know there was a big write-up in his obituary. Was it in the Times, I believe.

HB: Possible.

NL: I have seen his obituary, and I've kind of become familiar with his story through people mentioning him in the projects. Like Dennis Coleman.

HB: Right.

NL: He knew him very well.

HB: About three months before he died, Cleveland and I sat down and chatted.

NL: Really.

HB: Yeah!

NL: And what was he like?

HB: Well, at that time he was, you know, old, had lost sight, and so on. But his faculty was still working. And we talked about when he, you know. Because he was the co-director for the 1963-64 March to Washington, D.C.

NL: Yeah, was what Dennis Coleman told me.

HB: Yes.

NL: And I couldn't believe that there was a group that came from the Bronx to the March on Washington.

HB: Oh, yeah.

NL: And I'd love to see if there's anybody that had any kind of documentation on that. If you know of anyone, please let us know.

HB: Definitely.

NL: He talked about organizing the march.

HB: Yeah!

NL: Really!

HB: Exactly. I knew he-you, know, and of course he was the special advisor to Martin and Ewing, and so forth. There are so much to feed our people with, and I try my best to, you know. And I say feed our people, I mean positively. Because what I can relate to them, or what I've related to them, is something that they will be able to share with their children and grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. And, very fascinatingly, the former prime minister of Jamaica was doing a lecture series-

NL: Patterson.

HB: Yeah, at Schomburg, early on last month. And I went there, but I got there a little late, because I was preparing for two functions for the same evening. And, after completion of it, I was on my way out, and a gentleman stopped me and he said, 'Oh, Mr. Beckford, I'm so happy to see you.' And I said, 'I'm happy that you were able to come and-he doesn't leave the house often- I encouraged him-

NL: -to attend, yeah.

HB: So anyhow, he said, 'In the opening of Sir. Patterson's monologue, he mentioned some of the early West Indians, here,' and so he turned to his colleague and said to him, 'All that I know.' And his colleague said to him, 'Liar.'

NL: (laughing) Didn't believe him.

HB: So he said, 'Yes, man. That's the gentleman who taught me, I learned this in his class.'

NL: You would probably be one of the neighborhood's greatest teachers, and you don't really work in a school, but, a lot of people are enriched.

HB: Yes.

NL: By what you do.

HB: Importantly. So the whole idea of community development, the whole idea of really empowering people is not merely to be able to say to them, 'No, you go over there, and you get this, and you go over there, and you get that. That's not what it's supposed to be. It's supposed to be strengthening minds to be able to do for themselves, and not to go over there for handout.

NL: Right. As the saying goes, give a man a fish, he eats for a day, teach a man to fish, he eats for a lifetime.

HB: Fair enough, fair enough, and that's my philosophy. So I try my best to do this, and of course, I know that all of us here, time is limited. So, live it for best living.

NL: Well, you've done so much for the Bronx. And, most of the people who have come to you are based in the Bronx, who've come to you for help?

HB: Oh, gosh. Used to. Now it's-

NL: Now it's citywide.

HB: Not citywide. All over the world.

NL: Really!

HB: All over. People call us from all different states, to different countries.

NL: And so you're not necessarily just limited to Caribbean immigrants, now. Okay.

Who are the kinds of people that you're helping service?

HB: People from former Soviet Union, they've come here, from Asia, all over.

NL: A lot of Central Americans and-

HB: All over.

NL-because I know that's a huge influx now, Mexicans, Central Americans.

HB: All over there. Believe me. All over they come. And we have got called from

Switzerland.

NL: Really. Wow! And all this you do here, with just a small team.

HB: Exactly, all of our team, the people who have been with us are people who have volunteered.

NL: Really. So how do you fund yourselves, then? Is it a service that you charge, or-

HB: No, we don't charge.

NL: You don't charge anything.

HB: No. Our people, I started out as I told you, with a volunteer. The volunteer corps grow to about eight people at one point, and sometimes we have- they bring other people with them. And philosophically, one has to understand the purposefulness in serving.

For them to work with me. Because I can be annoying, [Laughter] or I can be the most

relaxed person, like today, my staff is cool and they want to- well, it's not busy, yes, they can.

NL: They can go home and escape the freezing cold. [Laughter]

HB: But I'm the type of person that- I can be here until nine, ten o'clock, in the night.

And sometimes they are until then. As a matter of fact, we don't open Sundays, and there are Sundays when a coordinator will come in for hours.

NL: Wow.

HB: But it has to be that sort of commitment, you know, so we, somebody has to be, you know, committed in showing me that they want to give to the community, give back to the community, and in so doing, then we have no problem.

NL: Do you have immigration lawyers affiliated with you?

HB: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I call them at any time, and they respond to us.

NL: And do you help with deportation issues. Because I know that's also a major-

HB: Yes, only if it's-special cases I will handle, but I try not to get too deeply involved with that. I try to prevent that.

NL: Right. It seems like that's a lifetime mantra, is about preventative services.

HB: Yes, yes.

NL: Okay. Well, I guess for now, I feel like there's much more. You said that you work only on preventative services.

HB: Oh, yes, I- we do counseling, and most of the counseling is done by me, and occasionally I'll bring in other people. So I'm really a workaholic. But they- if I have a couple, not working for more than six months, then I think I've failed. I have to be effective, if not-

NL: And it's idealized as well.

HB: Right, so that's how I do things.

NL: Have you helped people with the amnesty issue as well?

HB: Well, we have been able to, over the years, as long as it relates to immigration.

NL: Right.

MN: It's very interesting because last night, we are in touch with this very famous jazz pianist and composer Valerie Capers, and she asked me, she has a young man she works with, a Mexican immigrant who's a brilliant student but doesn't have legal papers, whether I can find an organization willing to work with him to try to get him in college, and, is that the kind of thing that you do?

HB: They need to come and see us, and we will see what can be done.

MN: Okay, and this will be a great contact for you, she's one of the Bronx's Great Ladies, in music, so I'm going to tell her to bring in this man named Victor Vega to see you.

HB: Okay. Certainly.

MN: This is quite wonderful, because she brought it up just on Sunday at an event we had.

HB: Certainly, certainly.

NL: Yeah, so, I guess for now, you know, to maybe wrap this session up, you know, I want you to tell me what your thoughts are on the Bronx today, versus the Bronx you met in 1980.

HB: Actually, I've been serving on the board for this community.

MN: This community.

HB: Yeah, twelve. Community Board Twelve. And it's been fourteen years.

NL: Really.

HB: And so I've seen the changes, I've known the ins and outs of things. I've also, because of my advocacy for health-related things, I am also on the community outreach board for Lady of Mercy Hospital, which as you know, part of the Montefiore Health Network. I've seen a great transformation. Some of it I've tried to stop, some I can't because it's beyond my bounds of powers. But, for example, there has been a rapid change in terms of the whole fabric of the community. We have housing, a lot of things of concern. And this is a concern to me, because you have-

-----Tape break-----

NL: You were saying.

HB: Yes, so every space of land has been utilized for housing, and there have not been provision made for schooling matters, provision made for recreational activities, and for my knowledge and for my experiences, youngsters need that sort of outlet, especially recreationally. This is where they socialize and learn to compete, and learn to expend their energies. And if this is not provided, then you're asking them to go on to other things, or to end up to other subcultures. Without proper educational system, then you are preparing a community to fail. And of course, being a person from the West Indies who, I've had the privilege of early intervention up to adulthood, in terms of education and all the recreational access that we had. It helped us to be extremely well-rounded, and it helped us to compete on any given part of what we ascend to. And I don't think we are preparing our youngsters to do that today. My daughter, who was a gifted child, and I used to have to take her to different, different things, pertaining to her learning.

And when I take her to these various activities, I used say to myself, 'I was such a gifted child, I didn't even know it!' Because these were things, you'd experience it every day! Now I had to take her to learn it.

NL: Right, right.

HB: You understand. I was raised by more than her, and yet I was a gifted child. And once, I make the comparison to show that, if you don't provide the accessibility for want to learn, then you're asking the youngsters to be as lowly as can ever be.

NL: That's true.

MN: You know we- I was doing a tour of Morrisania in the South Bronx with Leroy Archibald, who is a longtime community activist.

HB: My Kiwanian brother.

MN: And he was saying, look at all these houses, no schools, no recreation centers, where are the young people going to be? They're going to be in the streets.

HB: Precisely, precisely. And that's where they develop a subculture.

MN: Yeah.

HB: And, you know, in my earl-I never forget an experience I had with my elementary school teacher, God rest his soul, his name was Peter Dean, headmaster. He used to love me like his own children. And we had a elementary school competition. I had the flu. And that night he drove down to the house, and gave me, I think it was fancy, at the time, elephant's grass, those came in later. Came back about few hours after that, asked my grandmother how I was doing. Grandmother came and she- no fever, nothing. And I had to go and compete in a cricket match. Not to mention, I took the most wicket for the day, and made over 50 odd runs. And teacher said to me after that, he said, 'If you had stayed

in bed, you would not have done well, neither would you have been able to help the cricket team.’ And I learned a great lesson from that, as a youngster. What are teaching kids today? We’re not even providing access.

MN: Everyone I speak to, in our generation, who had these opportunities says the same thing. Why should we have had much better, fifty years ago, than they have today, it’s not fair. Now, you have to be wealthy to have even the minimal recreational opportunity.

HB: Precisely. You go up Scarsdale, you’ll see these big huge land spaces between homes, and not only that, they have special recreational-.

MN: They have ball fields, soccer fields, football fields, tennis courts.

HB: Amen, thank you.

MN: Basketball courts.

HB: Right. And this is-

MN: Lacrosse, swimming, tennis.

HB: Exactly, exactly. And then what happened is, majority of the people who are doing this investment in our community are coming from those lucrative areas. So I have a serious problem-unfortunately, there’s not much we can do about it, now we’re getting the whole place rezoned, but this is after the aftermath, so it’s-

NL: Too little, too late.

HB: Exactly. So-but I’m concerned. I’m very, very concerned, and some people, what they are trying to do is migrate to other areas, that they think they can go. One of my good friend, who is a lawyer, both of them are lawyers, the couple are lawyers. And they have business here in New York, but they got a home in Atlanta, Georgia, in which they moved the whole family there, and then, you know.

NL: They have to be back and forth.

MN: They commute to run their businesses.

HB: Exactly. You know, and they say they can't afford to have their children grow here.

NL: And those are the decisions that a lot of people are making right now.

HB: Fair enough, and it shouldn't be so. People are foreigners, trying to enjoy the best of life, and get don't want to seem foreign. And this is why I come back to the important element in my life, and I hope other people grow to it, is to live your life purposeful, with a little bit of purpose, so that you can positively transfer to this.

NL: That's something you've lived out.

MN: Oh, man, this is-

NL: Your extremely long and really service-oriented career. It's remarkable, the amount of things you've done. I do hope we get to talk about more of what you've done.

HB: Oh, yes.

NL: It's-

MN: And please also visit us at Fordham.

NL: Yeah, really.

MN: And we will take you to lunch in the faculty dining room. You know, we have a whole team of people. Professor Lightfoot used to be living with us, now she's at Columbia, but she's still part of our team.

HB: She got to Columbia.

MN: She's a professor! She got a job, a hundred and sixteen people from all over the world applied, and she got it.

HB: Great.

NL: Yeah, I teach African-American and Caribbean history at Columbia now. But I still am a member of the African-American Studies department at Fordham. Through this project I'm actually the person who interviews Caribbean migrants to the Bronx. That's my contribution. So I've been doing it through sort of networks of people that I know, and now, you know, little by little, I've come across people like you. And I'm hoping that you can help lead me to more people in this area of the Bronx. Because this, if you're looking for Caribbean people in the Bronx, here is where you need to be.

MN: But also, we may even have a- the Bronx African American History Project, call like a public meeting about the recreation crisis for you, because it's something that comes up in almost every interview we do.

NL: Every single interview.

MN: So, I'd like, you know, if we do that, I'd like to have you as- because you're so eloquent on the subject.

HB: No, certainly, whatever I can do to help. Because I'm really kicking back on it. You know, the Fordham after-school program, unfortunately is not as it should be. Now thank God, when I was going through my school endeavors, I didn't need after-school programs, as much. But today it is a necessity, to have it. And it's not being provided.

MN: No, no. And when I was growing up, I grew up in Crown Heights, and every day, three to five, seven to nine, the elementary school was open for supervised play. The schools were open seven days a week, and every afternoon and evening, and they took that away in the seventies.

HB: Precisely.

NL: From the seventies to now in New York, we see what happened as the generation that lost those services came of age.

HB: Precisely. Ms. Lightfoot can tell you this, I suppose. Our curriculum in the West Indies, provide for during the school day, for- a period for recess. In that, the period of recess is that time, in which the children are allowed to play for a certain amount of time, and usually it's between from a half hour to a hour. Usually it's a hour. Might sometimes, for special things, they might go to a-. And then, of course we have, what, summer right during the year. So, when you get out of school, if you don't have special studies, to do, then you have a opportunity to play a game until- for another hour, two hours, you know. Some of us who are smart, we make sure we get our homework out of the way and just-

NL: And play all day? [Laughter]

HB: And have fun. But they extend that energy, and the second thing is that it helps you build camaraderie with you mates. Now, you don't even have anything to say to kids that give you social bonding. So you're asking people to go into strangers.

MN: I can see it in my classes. They don't know how to connect with one another.

HB: Yes, they don't even know how to communicate!

NL: Yeah, yeah.

HB: Because we haven't been able to teach them the socialization process. I'm very scared about it. And because, you could have too much robots (laughing).

MN: This is something that I think we can be a vehicle to, you know, to get out to the public and try to, you know, influence policy makers. Because, you know, Arch says the

same thing, a number of the people I work with in the South Bronx in the schools- everybody's saying the same thing. We need to bring these programs back.

HB: Yes, social skills is important. Yeah, it's important. If not, you're going to go in the street.

NL: Wow. I guess, maybe we can end here for today.

HB: All right.

NL: We'll be back

MN: Oh, yeah, and I'd like several of your cards.

NL: Yes.

MN: Because there are people, you know, we'd want to have you work with, but also this young man I'm going to have come to see you.

HB: Yes. What we've been able to do, and which we'll touch on, next time, the work we have been able to do with different dioceses.

NL: Okay. So definitely, you do so much of the outreach through churches that-maybe there are churches we can find out more about.

HB: Right.

NL: Yeah.

MN: Thank you very much, again I'm sorry that I had to get a –

-----End of Tape 2-----