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Best, Gloria and Best, Adrian

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Transcribed by Gregory Peters

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Hello, I'm here at Fordham University with Adrian and Gloria Best and this is the latest round of interviews for the Bronx African-American History Project. And we're very glad to have the Best family here with us. The first question is when did your family first move to the Bronx? Did they come to the Bronx before moving to the Patterson Houses?

Gloria Best (GB): Yes, we came back to the Bronx, we lived in the Bronx and we moved to Manhattan and I came back to the Bronx when I was twelve years old.

MN: Wow.

GB: (Laughing). Yes, so we've been in the Bronx, yes.

MN: When, where did your family first live when they were in the Bronx?

GB: We first lived on Bathgate Ave. Then we moved - -

MN: - - Bathgate, do you remember between where and where?

GB: (Laughs) No, I don't. I don't remember that. But I remember we lived on Dawson Street after that, I was about five years old when we moved from Dawson Street to Manhattan to Sugar Hill. And then we came back when I was twelve years old, we moved on Union Ave.

MN: Union Ave.

GB: Right, and I was there like forever, on Union Ave., till I moved to Patterson.

MN: So, you went to high school in the Bronx?

GB: Yes. Morris High School.

MN: You went to Morris High School. Is your family originally from the South or the Caribbean?

GB: No, Caribbean, from Antigua, from BWI.

MN: Now, did they move, was the first place they moved to in the United States the Bronx? Or were they in Manhattan first?

GB: They came, I don't remember really but I think they came to Bathgate Ave.

MN: And what sort of work did your father do?

GB: He was a furniture maker.

MN: And did he work in the Bronx?

GB: No, he worked in Manhattan.

MN: He worked in Manhattan. Were there other family members who lived in the Bronx or other people from your home community?

GB: Yes, I had relatives in the Bronx.

MN: Right. When you moved back to Union Ave. was your family affiliated with a particular church that you went to?

GB: yes.

MN: Which one was that?

GB: Zion Apostolic, a Pentecostal church.

MN: Oh, and did your family remain in that church?

GB: Yes.

MN: And that's the church you grew up in also?

GB: Well, no, my mother became a pastor and she opened her own church. Opened up Bethel Pentecostal Church and that's where they went.

MN: So your mother was a pastor? Oh, I'll have to tell Dr. Chapman because he'll want to have an interview with you just about that. One of my colleagues is an expert on the Black Church in

America and he'll eventually be doing that section of the Bronx project. But was it very unusual for a woman to be a minister at that particular time?

GB: It wasn't easy but it wasn't unusual.

MN: Now, where was that, first was the Zion - - where was that, what street was that on?

GB: That was on Forest Ave., in the Bronx.

MN: And that was before they built the Forest Houses?

GB: Right.

MN: And then the church that your mother founded?

GB: That was on Westchester Ave. by Prospect.

MN: Now when you moved back to the Bronx at twelve years old, was the neighborhood you were in multi-racial or was it predominantly African-American and Afro-Caribbean?

GB: When we moved there it was a lot mostly Jewish and then became mostly African American.

MN: and what about Morris High School when you went there? Was that also - -

GB: - - Predominantly white.

MN: It was a predominantly white high school. Did you feel comfortable living in a predominantly white neighborhood when you were an adolescent? Was it a - -

GB: - - Sure, we always did. Even in Sugar Hill, it was predominantly Italian. You know we always lived , we had had no problem.

MN: Now, how old were you when you moved into the Patterson Houses? Were you already married?

GB: Yes, we lived in the Quonset huts for about a year before we moved into Patterson.

MN: Oh, so your husband was in the military?

GB: Yes, he was in the army.

MN: Was he also from the Bronx?

GB: Yes, he was born in St. Thomas but he came when he was three years old, but they lived in the Bronx on Third Ave.

MN: Ok, where did you meet him?

GB: At work. I was working for Internal Revenue at the time and he was in the 369th, and the whole 369th came to Internal Revenue.

MN: Right. Now did you have to be a high school graduate to work for Internal Revenue at that time?

GB: Yes.

MN: And this was passing the Federal Civil Service Test?

GB: Yes.

MN: Now, when you moved into Patterson, what was the atmosphere in which people decided to enter the project? Was this a time of optimism, was this considered a good opportunity?

GB: Yes, I think so, because it was hard. The projects were a good opportunity for people who couldn't afford to pay a lot of rent. It was nice, it was a blessing, really. And everybody got along very well.

Adrian Best (AB): You know, even as young as I was at the time, I felt better going away from the huts to the projects.

MN: so where were the Quonset huts located?

GB: By Zerega, by Castle Hill on the other side of Zerega, over that way.

MN: So folks were still living there in the late '40s?

GB: Yes, it was like army barracks.

MN: And that was because of a housing shortage? How many families - -

GB: - - Right, and you could only stay there for a year.

MN: So where did you live before you went into the Quonset huts?

GB: I lived on Third Ave., that's where my husband lived so I lived there.

MN: So you lived there, then went into the Quonset huts, then went into the Patterson Houses.

So was your family part of the first group of families to enter Patterson in 1950?

GB: Yes.

MN: So, well I can see where going from Quonset huts to - -

GB: - - We got the first opportunity to get, you know , get into the projects. That's why I took the Quonset huts, because we had the first - -

MN: - - Oh, I see. So how long before that did you have to apply in order to get in?

GB: To the projects? As soon as they started building them. I applied as soon as they had the first couple of buildings ready, you know.

MN: Now, you know this is a question I probably know the answer to, but I'll ask it anyway.

Were the Patterson Houses a safe place when you moved in?

GB: Oh, yes. We lived in 314, and we had one bedroom, I only had him and he was two years old.

MN: and what forces in the comm. - - Was this mostly young families with children who moved in?

GB: Yes, mm hmm.

MN: so everybody was kind of in the same boat, you had people who were, you know, starting families and were pretty optimistic about the future.

GB: Right.

MN: What sort of jobs did most of the men work at in the '50s at the Patterson?

GB: I think like federal, like a lot of people worked in the post office, transit, you know - - no police, I think they made too much money. It had an income level you know - - corrections officers.

MN: So you had a lot of people who were civil servants, who were working there?

GB: Yes, right, a lot of veterans.

MN: And a lot of veterans, which is good. We'll come back to the whole difference between veterans of World War II and the Korean War and Vietnam veterans, and at that time, being a veteran didn't seem to destabilize people, it almost had the opposite effect.

GB: Yes, yes they got first opportunities in everything.

MN: Oh yes, because you may have seen the thing I sent out by Sister Soldier where she describes the men in the green coats in the early '70s were walking around the projects she grew up in and were obviously disturbed. But here you had the veterans, these were solid citizens, which is very, which is very interesting. Did most of the women work, or were most of them stay-at-home mothers?

GB: Most stay-at-home mothers.

MN: Now this is an issue that is very interesting to me, a lot of the people who came out of the Patterson Houses ended up with careers in music or the media. How was music part of this environment? You know we mentioned Mr. Bonameer but was it also something that was played, you could hear in the hallways that family, that this was something that was part of the -

AB: - - Yes, music was all over the place. I mean if they weren't playing congas across the street on Morris Ave., we were at parties at each other's apartments. Latin music was prevalent all over the place, but you know we had doo wop and R&B stuff. It was a particular relief for

me because I used to listen to, before R&B got popular, to country western, you know. Like some Saturday mornings when my father was with us, he'd watch cowboy movies, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry, singing cowboys you know. But when R&B or soul music, whatever they called it or doo wop started up we ate it like cake.

MN: Now that raises an interesting question when you mentioned Roy Rogers and the cowboy movies, did kids wear like cowboy hats and the outfits?

(Laughter)

MN: Do you have any pictures of that? We have to get those this I've got to see! Did you ever have a coonskin cap like Davy Crockett?

AB: Yes, I did.

MN: I used to run around Leforts Ave. with I mean, you think about how ridiculous it is running around Brooklyn and the Bronx with a coonskin cap. Did you play cowboys and Indians?

GB: Yes. They talk about kids, don't give them guns today; that's all they played with! Cowboy hats and guns.

MN: I know the guns and the holsters, the bows and arrows.

AB: I had a Roy Rogers gun and holster and I had a shirt that had a drawing of tassels on it, it's an orange shirt with black and white drawing of tassels on it and there's a picture of me around somewhere with that. I had a mechanical horse in the room that I did not want to ever get rid of.

GB: Mm hmm. (Laughs). It was life-size and when you'd go up and down it moved. I don't know what I ever did with that thing.

AB: You got rid of it.

MN: So that whole thing just swept through?

GB: Yes, everybody had a cowboy outfit.

AB: Yes, used to have fast-draw contests, yes. And later on, when we didn't buy the holsters I used to make them for my brothers out of cardboard. Get some cardboard, rope, I used to cut the cardboard out in the shape of a, you know, the pieces of a holster and then sew it together so we would have holsters.

MN: God, it's so much like where I grew up in Crown Heights. I mean all those – what was professional – you lived pretty close to the Polo Grounds, was baseball a big thing with the Yankees and Dodgers?

AB: Softball.

MN: Softball?

AB: Softball we played a lot, but baseball we'd become, I was a Brooklyn Dodgers fan, absolutely.

MN: Was that very common that because of Jackie Robinson there were a lot of Brooklyn Dodgers fans in the Patterson Houses?

AB: Probably, yes. And Willie Mays, yes, Giants, yup.

MN: did people go around making basket catches like Willie Mays?

AB: Tried to, yes. But mostly my area was Jackie Robinson because of speed. And there was one play I saw Jackie Robinson make where he was playing first base and I think the shortstop threw to him and he jumped up, caught the ball and tagged the bag before the runner got there. And that was my goal, to try to do that, I loved that move.

MN: Now, who, well it's interesting you talk about softball because I guess your ball field was concrete and were there any fields which were not concrete within - - so you basically grew up with concrete play spaces, not grass.

GB: Yes, that's right.

MN: And yet you didn't have trouble finding ways of amusing yourself?

AB: No, not at all.

MN: So that's really interesting. When did you start playing an instrument? Did you become interested in music before you went to junior high school or was this mostly Mr. Bonameer's influence?

AB: No, we had music at home a lot.

GB: My husband was a bar player, he played sax, and all his brothers are musicians.

MN: He played the sax?

GB: Yes, and one of them played the trumpet, and I forget - -

MN: Were they jazz musicians or marching band or orchestra?

GB: No, Uncle Albert played calypso music.

MN: Oh, so they played West Indian.

GB: Yes, and my husband played in the service he played the sax too.

AB: And he used to play Charlie Parker which intimidated the heck out of me. But what I liked was Killer Joe, which was played a lot. Quincy Jones, that's when I first heard the trumpeting that I liked. And I remember one Christmas my father bought me a four-valve toy trumpet that I used to play.

MN: And how old were you at that time?

AB: I was young, young.

MN: Were there people who gave piano lessons in the Patterson Houses?

GB: I don't know.

MN: Ok, so what about the church? Was there a lot of music in the church you were in?

GB: Oh, yes.

AB: Yes, grand pop played the guitar.

MN: He played the guitar. Did you have an organ or - -

GB: - - A piano.

MN: A piano and a guitar.

GB: And Carl played the piano with it.

MN: So a lot of family members were in the church? So music was a part, a big part of your background even before you had formal training?

AB: Oh yes, absolutely. We used to sing doo wop out in the street, too.

MN: Now what about Mr. Bonameer? I mean Nathan mentioned him as a tremendous influence. Was he that way for you also?

AB: yes, but he used to dance, took dancing lessons. Because I remember that when I told you that Mr. Bonameer was my teacher you had mentioned that.

GB: Yes, yes.

AB: But, yes. Mr. Bonameer was great, he always had a saying that there's no such thing as "I can't" it's always "I will try." And that was a great motivator for all of us. We had to take a test for, a certain kind of aptitude test when we were in the sixth grade. And for me and some of the rest of us it became, music was supposedly strong. So when we got to the seventh grade I wound up in the special music class, and that's where I first met Mr. Bonameer. I wanted to play French horn but the school didn't have French horns so he said, "Well, why don't you try a trumpet?" So I started playing trumpet. Now I don't know if he was friends with Uncle Oliver then or not but Uncle Oliver knew Mr. Bonameer, you know I came to find out later on. But, yes he's the one that taught me how to play trumpet, and also sing in the chorus.

MN: Right, now you, Adrian, mentioned that you used to go dancing, did you go dancing at clubs in the Bronx or in Manhattan?

GB: No, in Manhattan. If any the Gate, the Golden Gate.

MN: So all those lindy-hopping places that Malcolm X talks about in his autobiography –

GB: Yes. (Laughs). Yes, Savoy, oh boy.

AB: Savoy was really, that was a great place.

MN: The Savoy Ballroom and they closed it down.

GB: Yes, they closed all of them down, or burned it out.

MN: Was there any place like that in the Bronx after the Savoy Ballroom closed?

GB: No.

MN: so you couldn't go dance lindy-hop like that anywhere in the Bronx?

GB: No.

MN: did you ever get into Latin music when the Latin clubs opened up?

GB: No.

AB: Well, I did.

MN: But that was the generation - -

GB: There really weren't that many Latin-Americans in the Bronx, at that time.

AB: But we always played their music. And when I was in the eighth grade played with a Latin band which was made up of some of my classmates.

MN: Were there particularly clubs or places which specialized in calypso or West Indian music?

GB: Mm hmm.

MN: Were those in Manhattan or the - -

GB: - - Yes, Manhattan.

MN: So, in other words it sounds like a lot of people from the Bronx ended up going to Manhattan for their cultural you know activities.

AB: Didn't Uncle Oliver's band play in a couple of, or at least one party that I know I went to - a dance?

GB: In the Bronx?

AB: No, in Manhattan.

GB: Oh, yes he played a lot of them in Manhattan.

AB: Yes, that's what I thought.

MN: Now, when hip hop arose in the South Bronx in the '70s, gangs were, you know, were pretty central to its development, was the same thing true of doo wop? Was there any connection between the gangs in the Bronx in the '50s?

AB: Not that I knew of, no. Just guys who could get a particular note.

GB: Not that much of a gang problem.

MN: So in the '50s it wasn't that much of a problem?

AB: No, I mean Melrose Projects would war against the Patterson Projects after a while. There was a few times when they'd come through and then we'd send some guys up over to Melrose Place, but it wasn't awful.

MN: So there wasn't any sense that - see, some people talk about what happened in the '80s sometimes even in the '70s, as communities dominated by young people. Were adults clearly in charge of that world in the '50s?

AB: I would say so.

GB: Because mothers were home, you know. We didn't send them out to play; we sat out there with them. They had benches all around and we all sat out there with the kids.

AB: That's for sure, yes.

GB: And when we went upstairs, they went upstairs.

MN: Would a child talk disrespectfully to you?

GB & AB: No! (Laughter).

GB: Never, they wouldn't think about it.

AB: Not even.

MN: So somebody wouldn't say shut up to a mother or a grandmother?

GB: No, not even today.

AB: Not unless you had a death wish.

MN: So the young people were trained to be respectful to their elders?

GB: Absolutely, and one parent could chasten the other child. Because I had to go to work after a while and I left my kids with my neighbors, Miss Archibald, my best friend. She looked out for my kids and I'd look out for hers. And they wouldn't dare do anything. Any mother in the building, you know they wouldn't hit them but they would tell them you know, what to do. And they listened, they listened, they better listen 'cause they knew they had better listen.

MN: And was the same thing true of like community center directors if they told the child what to do some people would respect them?

AB: Yes they had authority, oh yes, absolutely. Of course you had a couple of jitterbug types who thought they were tough but they'd always get run out, they'd acquiesce.

MN: So there'd always be a couple of guys who would sort of swagger into the PS18.

AB: Then you'd have some cats who would be wearing pointed shoes and big-legged pants you know, and they thought they were tough, right, they'd get run right out. You know we had Mr. Wayne in there and Mr. Crawford, they didn't take nothing from anybody. Mr. Bonameer would

never accept anything from anybody, you know. He'd unbutton his jacket, "Get out of here!"

And they were gone.

MN: So there was no way that what today they would call thugs could intimidate adults?

AB: No how, no way.

MN: this was an adult dominated world in which different groups of adults reinforced one another.

GB: Right, that's right.

MN: Was the same thing true of school, like if a teacher was having trouble that they could call on the parents?

AB: Absolutely, and you didn't want your parent to be called in.

MN: Now did the parents in Patterson Houses like, go into school on open school night and get involved in the PTA and that?

GB: Yup, mm hmm, right.

AB: Yes.

MN: Now the always, the disturbing question in these interviews is when did it start to change, you know? Because today people actually can't believe that it was the way you're describing it. Their image of the projects or as in hip hop, the PJs is so – when did you start to see and feel that something was going wrong?

AB: I think when the drugs came in and started paying the rent. When kids started selling drugs, getting the money and families did not have any money through legitimate jobs or whatever - -

GB: - - See, I moved away from there in 1974. So it wasn't that bad before I was - -

MN: - - Ok, but it's interesting because the Dukes family moved out in the mid-sixties and I guess the Arch – Vicki moved out in the mid-sixties. So, it was still pretty safe up through the '70s?

GB: Right.

AB: Through '74, yes. And I got out of the service in '70 and I was home for a year I guess before I moved out, so yes, it was still pretty good.

MN: When did you first notice heroin coming in? Was that in the '60s or - -

GB: - - No.

AB: No. When I came back and found out a friend of mine named Stanford Allen was thrown off of the roof of a building behind some drugs that's when I was first aware of it.

MN: Right. Where'd you go to high school?

AB: Gompers, Samuel Gompers.

MN: To Gompers? And so was there much talk about drugs?

AB: No.

MN: No. Not at that time.

AB: We were all just trying to get through school and some guys were trying to get into college and other guys had other plans, try to get into transit or whatever.

MN: Now did you go directly into the service after high school or did go to work, did you go to college?

AB: I went to work, I went to work for a year. I worked down in the Village, on Great Jones Street, for an import/export company.

MN: Right. Now, when you went into the service did you end up being in the service in the Vietnam years?

AB: Yes, absolutely.

MN: And did you go there?

AB: No, I wound up in Guam. I was with 8th Air Force, B52 bombers and refuelers. And the job there was to support our troops on the ground at Vietnam. So all the B52s were stationed either on Guam or in Thailand, and they would strike from there and come back.

MN: Right, did you have friends from the Patterson Houses who went to Vietnam as foot soldiers?

AB: Yes, there were some that did go as foot soldiers. I don't know – I can't give you names of the ones that didn't come back. But I do know that there were some who were lost.

MN: Yes, did some of the people come back with bad experiences?

GB: Yes, I don't know about Patterson but my nephews did. They lived in the projects in Manhattan and went to Vietnam. And what they saw you know, they used to have nightmares, wake up screaming.

MN: Now, were you very aware of the civil rights movement when it was going on in the South?

GB: Oh yes, sure.

MN: How did you relate what was going on there to what was going on in your own community? Did you see a connection or was the environment in the Patterson Houses somewhat protected from the kind of discrimination that you know is in many other places in the United States?

AB: I don't know anything about what happened in the Patterson during that time. My experience with it hit when I was in the service.

MN: That was your first hard hitting experience with discrimination.

AB: Yes, but not in the projects.

GB: We never had any problems.

MN: That's – so you became politicized in the service? That was when you became - -

GB: - - Oh yes, he came back different, you know, changed.

MN: And did you become a political activist or was it more like what you felt and were going to express as an artist?

AB: Yes, it was more what I felt I had to express as an artist.

MN: Mm hmm. Now you know there was a lot of music training and a lot of sports training, you eventually went into theater. Was there any theater programs in the school or in the community center that you were exposed to growing up?

AB: No.

GB: There was a play in school one time.

AB: Oh that's right, yes.

GB: You played a German.

AB: I was in the third grade and I played Dr. Warner Von Braun. And a friend of my named Francis Braille wrote the play. And I, I had to play a German scientist and I had to explain the workings of a three-stage rocket.

GB: And speak with a German accent. And the boy who wrote the play's mother, she was Italian, she didn't know who I was and she said to me, "You know, I didn't want him to play that part but he did such a good job." I didn't say anything. I didn't tell her who I was. I just smiled at her. (Laughs).

MN: When you came back from the service were there political groups in the Bronx? Was there an active Black Panther Party, was there a Nation of Islam, were there groups that expressed that political consciousness?

AB: There's only one group that I got hip to in the Patterson, that was the Young Lords. The Young Lords had a paper called "Pallante" and it was really a strong political paper, very, very, well put together. I had gotten familiar with Philip Luciano through that and Guzman - -

MN: - - Pablo.

AB: Pablo, Pablo Guzman through that paper. And that was to me the most profound paper at that time. The Blood Muslims didn't have that much of a presence I don't think, in the Patterson, neither did the Black Panthers. Black Panthers were mainly in Manhattan. But the Puerto Ricans with "Palante" absolutely, and it was a great paper, great paper.

MN: Now how was, was the church, what year did your - sister, was it? - that found the church - -

AB: - - My grandmother.

MN: Was that in the '60s or earlier?

GB: I don't know, in the '60s I guess.

AB: Yes, it was in the '60s. They had two locations, well they had to move from Prospect Ave. to Hintervale.

MN: and about how many people were in the congregation would you say?

GB: Wasn't that many, about 30 I would say.

MN: So you could have a church survive with 30 people?

GB: Oh yes, yes.

MN: Was that, how many days a week were you at the church?

GB: Almost every day, but at least three days.

MN: So do you think that people who were involved in the church this way that their children were more likely to avoid being pulled into the pitfalls of the street and the underground economy than people who weren't?

GB: Yes.

AB: I think so, yes. I think of course where my cousins were concerned, even though they hung out on the street more than I did, they still had some connection that kept them grounded that had, the church was responsible.

MN: Now when you started pursuing an acting career where did you go for training?

AB: Well, that's interesting, when I was in high school, when I was in Gompers we had a theatre club so I was active in that. When I was in the service my last year in the service up at Westover Air Force Base in Massachusetts, because of our political activism we had formed an organization called the Black Discussion group. We put on a production called "The Day of Absence."

MN: I remember that play.

AB: So we put that on up there. And when I had come back from Guam, that was, that was in '68 when I first came back from Guam, but I had also gotten involved in theatre when I met this young lady who worked on a job with my mother. She was involved in theatre so that kind of like, it sent me in that direction too. So I started hanging out with the Negro Ensemble Company.

MN: Oh, ok.

AB: And upon my release from the service, for that summer I did street theatre tech work for them. I helped set up the lights for the street theatre. And I became a member of a group called Theatre Black and I was with that group for about three years.

MN: and did that group put on performances as well as - -

AB: - - Absolutely, yes. We put on performances in Brooklyn and in Manhattan. We had street theatre, we had theatre for kids, we did some theatre at the Shakespeare Festival, theatre with Joe Papp, so yes, yes.

MN: Now this may be a difficult question, as a mother were you supportive of you know, Adrian's movement into the arts? Was this something - -

GB: - - Sure.

MN: Oh, you didn't say go get a real job?

GB: No. (Laughs).

MN: Oh well, that's great.

GB: All of them are in some kind of art.

MN: So this is a family tradition of people going into the arts and music.

AB: Yes, absolutely. When I was in elementary school I had painted a picture on my wall. And I didn't realize this but my brothers picked up art from that, you know. So they became painters.

GB: they went to Music and Art.

MN: Oh wow. And are they still involved with that?

AB: They still paint, yes.

GB: And the youngest one he sings, yes, they're all into it.

MN: Now what made you decide to leave the Patterson Houses? What was it was it something -

-

GB: - - Well, they were getting older, they had finished high school, you know, and I said I don't want to get stuck here, you know, so it was time to get out of there and get something better, if you know what I mean. And I made the move at the right time.

MN: To Flushing?

GB: To Flushing. I moved to Corona, then I moved to Flushing. Well, I was working and my job moved out there so - -

MN: - - Did now, this you know, you had two sons who went to Music and Art. Were they ever harassed for going to an elite, you know, special school?

GB: No, not to my knowledge.

MN: So there was no stigma attached to being a good student? Because this is, that's also something which seems to have come later. Where students who were growing up in a place like Patterson might have to, you know, fend off teasing. But nobody was ever made fun of for doing well in school?

AB: No, not at all, as a matter of fact, it was encouraged.

MN: And this was encouraged by your peers?

AB: Yes, yes.

MN: That's, that's interesting. Did you go to Flushing with your mother or were you living in your own place by this time?

GB: No, he was married by then.

MN: Oh, you were married? And when did you end up moving to New Jersey?

AB: Oh, 1984. So my kids grew up in the Bronx. They spent their earlier years in the Bronx. When hip hop first started, it started around our area.

MN: So where were you living at that time?

AB: First we lived on Findlay Ave. just off Grand Concourse, 174th St. I think it is. And then we were there for I think a year. Then my daughter was born and we moved from there to Story Ave. and Thieriot, which is right around - -

GB: - - By Bruckner.

AB: Bruckner Boulevard.

MN: And were you aware of hip hop when it was happening?

AB: Oh, absolutely, absolutely! Kurtis Blow – yes. A buddy of mine, Billy Lloyd who I grew up with also, he's from Patterson, he lived in 291. Billy and I got stationed on Guam together and we both took martial arts while we were over there. And I came back to the States before Billy did but I ran into Billy later on after I got married and everything. And he had opened up a dojo down in Manhattan and he talked me into coming to the dojo, so we worked in the dojo for a couple of years. And he at that time was talking about managing Kurtis Blow. It was something brand new but he was like very into rap, rap music. And the guys used to sit up there, used to run the wires across the street into a car.

MN: So you actually saw this?

AB: Oh yes, yes, they ran a wire from the third floor across the street into the park with these huge speakers you know, and they would start I think at 7 o'clock in the early evening up until about 11 or 12 at night. And there's been a couple of times when I put on my karate gee pants and walked out there and said, "Look, if you guys don't cut this music out I'm going to call the cops." You know, "I've let you go now till about 10:30, I got to get up in the morning, this has got to stop."

MN: So this is in the late '70s or early '80s?

AB: This is the, around '70, let's see the kids were young, they were in elementary school, I'd say maybe '74, '75.

MN: Now, how did you feel about sending your kids to the elementary schools in the Bronx?

AB: At the time I had no problem with it and they were fine. It was when they started going to junior high school, that's when the problems began.

MN: And was that part of what got you to move to New Jersey?

AB: Absolutely, yes.

MN: It was the school issues. What sort of things were happening in the - -

AB: - - They would get chased home, they would get threatened, you know they were smart kids.

MN: So in other words, that was when it started to happen. It wasn't your experience it was your kids' experience that having smart, being smart was a problem.

AB: Oh yes, And even before that when we lived on Findlay Ave. we had, what was the name of the gang? We had a huge gang problem on Findlay Ave., just before we moved. That scared me a lot.

MN: Do you remember which gang it was?

AB: I'm trying to remember.

MN: The famous ones are the Black Spades and the Savage Skulls.

AB: The Savage Skulls!

MN: Which is mostly Latino.

AB: Yes.

MN: Ok, so they were the two ones that everybody was afraid of.

AB: Yes, they were Savage Skulls and there were times when I'd walk home from down Grand Concourse and you know at the time I was still kind of like doing my karate thing from overseas, and I would feel people on my back. And there was one night I just felt something, I turned around and I took my position and I yelled and there was nobody there, you know. I said I can't, I can't deal with that.

MN: Yes, you're just, too much paranoia.

AB: Yes, and there was a couple of nights too when, well there was one night in particular where a station wagon stopped and six guys jumped out of a station wagon with their guns drawn running toward a building, and the guns were drawn and then the badges flew out, they were plain clothes cops, ok. And they were going after somebody or some bodies, and I said, you know, we got to get out of here, this is not right. It was Savage Skulls territory.

MN: Right, and so where'd you end up moving to first?

AB: We went to Thieriot Ave., we went to 820 Thieriot Ave., just off Story. Then we moved to 880 because the twins were born and we needed more room after that.

MN: Right, and then you moved to New Jersey?

AB: And then we moved to Jersey in 1984.

MN: Is it the same place you're in now?

AB: Yes.

MN: So did you know other people who moved to that particular community in New Jersey? How did you find it?

AB: My wife wanted a house. (Laughter). My accountant, the guy that was doing my taxes was telling me at the time, Ron, Ronald McDonald told me, that's his name, he said this city is robbing you blind, you've got to get out of here. And at the time, I had started at ABC in 1977,

so I was doing pretty well at that time. So he said, "You've got to get of New York, the city is killing you." So we started looking and we wanted to move somewhere that was relatively close to the city so I didn't have a long commute. So we started looking up in Bergen County at first, and then we couldn't find anything suitable, or a house big enough I should say. So we moved south and we were recommended to go to Essex County in Maplewood, which was a great community and we found a house in Maplewood.

MN: Well, it's, you know it's interesting, because people still in my neighborhood talk about Montclair and Maplewood as places to move, you know when they want a diverse good community.

AB: Absolutely, absolutely, and it's still that way.

MN: Now are your kids proud that they once grew up in the Bronx? What do they say about Bronx roots?

AB: Absolutely. Well I think the Bronx carries with it a sort of toughness, you know. And when all these hardcore people talk about the Bronx like, yes I'm from the Bronx, I was born there, I was raised there. They were actually born in Manhattan, the hospital was in Manhattan. My daughter was born in the Bronx, but they lived and they grew up in the Bronx.

MN: So that's something that they, they periodically go back and have seen the Patterson?

AB: Oh yes, absolutely, yes. And I'm proud I've come from Patterson.

MN: Now, do you still see a lot of your friends from the Patterson days?

GB: I went to two reunions, the year before last and then two years in a row. I hadn't been there in years, but I went to them.

MN: Do a lot of people come back for those reunions?

GB: Mm hmm, yes.

MN: So we're talking about tens or hundreds or close to a hundred?

AB: I'd say about a hundred.

GB: Maybe a hundred. It's so good to see everybody.

AB: Yes, because it brings back all those old feelings, you know.

GB: All the kids, the grandparents, I'd say they caught up with me, look at them. (Laughs).

MN: Now do you, this is again another one of my leading questions, do you think that young people growing up in the South Bronx today have the same opportunities that you had growing up?

AB: No, no.

MN: What happened? If you were going to give a -- to explain it --

GB: -- Why not?

MN: Or they should?

GB: Yes, it's up to them, it's up to you.

MN: so you the opportunities are there if you want to take advantage of them.

GB: Take advantage of them, right. You can be what you want to be where you want to be. And I think, I think parents though are lax; I think parents, they're not doing their job. You know I can't say why but I think children are allowed to do what they want to do, you know, without any guidance and encouragement from the parents. Those who don't want to make it -- those who want to make it, make it.

AB: See I think, I think it's a combination of several things; there are more children having children, there have been too many young girls having children without having the opportunity of growing up themselves. You know, especially having the discipline that comes along with maturity.

GB: This is everywhere.

AB: I think another thing too is that teachers are looked upon as being the enemy by the parents. So when a child does something wrong in school the parent comes to school in the teacher's face when it should be the parent in the face of the child. I think some parents are afraid of their kids. I think they're afraid to tell them what to do, for some unknown reason. I think the extended family idea, the idea of a village raising a child unfortunately is gone. Because if somebody now says something to your child, "Don't you talk to my child like that, that's my child." I think that attitude is prevalent. So I think as a result the child has more power than the adults do. And the only thing that will keep them in line is their peers and what they do. They'll just follow along to, they'll do whatever they want.

GB: I raised my children alone from when my youngest one, from when he was nine years old, you know. And I had no problem with them, they knew what they had to do, they knew that they had to do it. This is what I expected from you and you're going to do it. And I could leave them and come back and they're right where I told them to stay. You know how you raise your children, and you raise them in the church. You let them know who God is. So they have to fear somebody, these children have no fear.

AB: Exactly, yes.

MN: Ok.

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE; BEGINNING OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

MN: Ok, so anything that you would want to say about this whole experience?

AB: About being in Patterson?

MN: Yes, and about what happened to the Bronx and you know, or can we bring this back again so that children – or again do you think it's the individual responsibility or all of our responsibilities or some combination?

AB: I think it's a combination of everything. We have to on a grassroots level, these young people have got to know and understand what responsibility is first of all, to have a child they have to understand what discipline is all about and capture the kid's attention before they get to a point where you don't have control because every child, no matter where that child is at the age of 14, 15, 16, they want to rebel. The trick is to catch them before that.

GB: Yes, before that. You got to get them in elementary school, you can't wait until they get teenage years, otherwise it's too late. Otherwise you've lost them.

AB: Right, that's on a grassroots level.

GB: And like, you see the commercial of the children saying that telling their parents, "You got into my business and you wouldn't do this and you wouldn't do that." And then they say thank you, you know children appreciate that.

AB: Absolutely, absolutely they want guidance. This is one thing we have to understand; no matter how tough that kid may be, he wants discipline.

GB: He wants to know somebody cares. You know, you care what they do, you care what's happening to them.

AB: That's part of the reason why they get into gangs because they feel that these people care enough about them to tell them what to do and what not to do.

GB: yes, I think it begins in the home, number one. You can't expect the teacher or her boss on the job to do your job; you know it begins in the home.

AB: And I think that brings me to the next point, adults have to band together. You as a mother or father band with that teacher, principal, whatever, and come together as a strong force to educate that child. You know you cannot get in the teacher's face every time you think that the teacher is probably wrong. We hated for our parents to be called because we knew if that teacher said we were wrong, we were wrong. And we were gonna catch it.

GB: And it's alright to be your child's friend, but you're not their friend, you're their parents first. Their friends are on the street, you know, and I'm your parent. It's ok, you can talk to me, anything that's bothering you, you can talk to me but I'm not your friend.

Mark Smith (MS): I had a question that goes back to what Dr. Naison said, when he's saying how can we get the Bronx like it was 30, 40 years ago, and I want to know what you thought about since hip hop is a culture now in urban and African American society, do you think that rappers and the hip hop culture has a strong responsibility to get the African American community back to what it was, or do you think that if adults and parents do their job that it doesn't matter what the hip hop community does, that we can still get back to how we were? Do you think that we should just ignore the music industry's strong influence on youth today and do you think that us as African Americans should put pressure on the hip hop industry to be more - -

AB: - - See, I'm glad you asked that question because I like hip hop, you know I listen to it. And I think some of the brothers and sisters who are involved in hip hop are not the way like they present themselves to be in their music, some of them aren't. You take a guy like Busta Rhymes. Busta is a really, really nice guy who has a nice big house in Somerset, New Jersey. Ok, but he's a sweetheart guy. He, P Diddy and a few others have the intelligence and the influence and the strength to help parents band together. See because they're mature people. See one thing I always told to the kids in school, there's one thing you can't stop unless you

commit suicide or you want to go out there and get killed, you're gonna get older. Ok, you're gonna get older, you're gonna mature, what are you going to do with that time? These guys they've made a lot of money, they've got a lot of responsibility, and I've seen P Diddy do business. And believe me if he was recruited or asked by the community to do something, it is his responsibility to help do something. Recently, I just saw, I read an article about the Crips and the Bloods making peace, because some kid in Brooklyn got killed and the parents banded together to make them responsible for this particular killing. Now I don't know if that truce is still happening but there was a beginning somewhere. So the parents, I think that it's a combination of the parents banding together you know, church being involved and getting these ladies and gentlemen who have such a strong influence on our children, getting them into the mix. They don't have to have a responsibility to it. I mean they don't really owe it. But they could be requested and I think they should really see, I mean since they are, quote, unquote "role models" they should have a hand in it as do athletes and actors.

GB: The public has to stop supporting these people too, that are teaching, that have these rap songs that are telling - -

AB: - - Absolutely, yes.

MN: But see part of it is that you're talking about that natural adolescent rebellion and then marketing that rebellion as a commercial entity all over the world.

AB: Yes, I've even seen it in Africa. I went to the Ivory Coast, where they speak French, walked into a store, this young man was rapping verbatim, in English, what he was hearing on his beat box and then he'd go back to speaking French.

GB: They do what sells, and if people would stop buying, you know they wouldn't be able to sell these things, they wouldn't be able to make it so big, if we stopped supporting them.

MN: Rachel, do you have any questions?

Rachel: Actually, I do have a question, it's actually for you Mrs. Best. You mentioned that the majority of mothers in Patterson were stay at home mothers, right, while the fathers were off at work. And I was wondering you said that the moms were out there playing with kids and when they went upstairs their kids went upstairs. And I was just wondering because this is a really large project and I wondered if both of you could think about how the dominance of mothers during all those daytime hours shaped young boys' relationships to older women, boys' relationships to girls, if girls, young girls got distinctive role models from the fact that in the housing projects it was women who held the day and I wonder how that was, that's different from a lot of other places?

AB: Well they didn't actually play with us, they were out there watching us.

Rachel: Right, well that changed.

AB: Yes, so I mean there wasn't, we behaved ourselves.

GB: And so did the girls. The girls, like today girls are interested in boys like ten years older, but they weren't like, I mean they were all playmates, you know what I mean, they didn't think of each other as the opposite sex.

MN: But that raises an interesting question related to hip hop as opposed to, you know the doo wop. You know doo wop is at least on the surface very respectful of women, and did the boys grow up being respectful of the girls in this world?

GB: Yes, I think they did.

MN: Or was that on the surface and beneath it there was something a little different?

AB: Well, it depended on you know, the type of cat it was, you know. I mean we had guys who were very popular with girls you know, we had tough guys who were very attracted to girls who weren't very attracted to them.

GB: And they were older then, they weren't little kids, they weren't considered children.

AB: That's true. But we had some guys, we had some guys in junior high school who were like that, I can think of guys like Henry Rady, who had his girlfriend pregnant when we were in the ninth grade. There were a couple, Bubba was real popular.

MN: Oh pretty pudding huh?

AB: Yes, Bubba was popular, he had his girlfriend.

GB: Yes, but they had girlfriends, and nothing wrong with girlfriends.

AB: Yes, it was girlfriends. My playmate when I was a kid, how old was Mickey when Mickey and I were, we were in 314?

GB: you were three and she was two.

AB: Yes we were babies, but we were playmates.

GB: They all played together but they were never disrespectful of one another. And they listened, you know they knew right from wrong and they did it.

AB: We didn't get really rough 'til we were in high school.

GB: They weren't disobedient. No, they were nice kids, what we would call nice kids.

MN: Mm hmm, anything else? Ok, well thank you very much, this was a wonderful session, gives us a lot to think about.

[END OF INTERVIEW]