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Silvers, Cleo Interview 1

Bronx African American History Project
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Transcriber: Katrina Mallebranche

Tape 1, Side A

Mark Naison (MN): Hello. This is an interview with the Bronx African American History Project on February 21, 2007 at Long Island University in Brooklyn, New York with Cleo Silvers, a longtime labor activist and political organizer who was very involved in the Lincoln Hospital struggle and the Black Panther Party in the Bronx. Today, we have as interviewers Lily Clarkson and Dr. Mark Naison. The way we begin our interviews is to have people talk a little bit about their families, so could you tell us a little bit about your family and how growing up in that family shaped your political activism?

Cleo Silvers (CS): Absolutely. I actually come from a very interesting background in that I had access to my ancestors, if you will, through my grandmothers on both sides. When I was a little girl, my grandmother on my father's side, and my father's side was the slave side. The two sides of my family, one was slave, and one was free, that was my mother's side of the family, the freedmen, and I'll tell you all about that, but my grandmother on my father's side used to braid my hair and sit me in between my knees and tell me all about slavery and tell me all about because she was two years old when slavery ended in this country. Her sister who was ten years older than her, had actually been a slave, and had actually worked in the fields and had become a teacher, and she told me all of these things when I was getting, you know, as a little kid before I started school. I knew all about slavery and how the master treated you but partly because I was a nosy kid and I used to sit around and listened to what the old people talked about around the potbelly

stove because when I was a little kid, we didn't have the indoor toilets and we had to go outside. We had the big garden.

MN: Now, this was in Philadelphia?

CS: Outside, right outside of Philadelphia right by the international airport in a community called Elmwood, and Elmwood is still not built up completely.

MN: Was this a predominately African-American community?

CS: Predominately African-American but it was fully integrated. We had Polish people. We had Native Americans, we had Gypsies, and it was this kind of community that had had all these different kinds of people. We had Italians, and so I had access to lots of different kinds of people, and of course, my school was mostly African-American but there were pockets of kids from all the other communities in Elmwood that were there, and all of our teachers were White, so we were and what I considered to be fairly well-educated from Kindergarten up through the Sixth Grade.

MN: Did your family belong to a church?

CS: Yes, well actually that's how my family got there to Philadelphia from South Carolina - - Greenville, South Carolina. There were three churches that brought people to the North. This is my father's side of the family again, and it was People's Baptist Church, which was our church, Calvary Baptist Church, and Beulah Baptist Church. Calvary Baptist Church was the church, I believe, of Patti LaBelle's. Patti LaBelle and I - - grew up next door to Patti LaBelle's house on Ashwood Avenue, and we consider ourselves to be cousins, but - Jackie, her younger sister and I used to play wetcakes together, and so that community brought a group of people up to Philadelphia who when

they first settled on Callowhill Street, and I know all this from my grandmother's telling me about this - -

MN: What year did the settlement begin?

CS: I believe in the twenties, in the early twenties, and they settled on Callowhill Street, and then they picked up and moved outside of Philadelphia to Elmwood, and that's how Elmwood evolved with these three churches of African-Americans.

MN: Wow. So there were three African-American churches in Elmwood?

CS: That's right.

MN: Were a large number of people from South Carolina in your community?

CS: Yes. Yes they were from one, kind of, one little area in South Carolina.

MN: Wow, that's amazing.

CS: And then, of course, there were other people that moved in, you know, people from different areas - - Georgia, Arkansas, Alabama, but mostly even with people from South Carolina. So that's my father's side of the family, the slave guys. My mother's side of the family - - When I went to visit my grandmother on 8515 Osteen Avenue it was the address of a stop on the Underground Railroad. My mother's grandfather Frisbee Green was a freeman who came from the United States from Haiti on a merchant ship at 14-years-old, and he wanted to - -He came to the United States to engage in the anti-slave rebellions in Louisiana. He could read and write. He eventually became an abolitionist, traveled around the United States up and down the East Coast, and was friends with Frederick Douglass. Now, how do I know all this? I have letters dating from 1842 up through 1901 written by Frisbee back and forth between him and the family and friends,

and postmarked all up and down the East Coast. He talks about riding a train, working in hotels, and going to meetings. Those letters - - I have some of them at my house. In fact, he - -

MN: Do you have them professionally preserved?

CS: No, not mine. My sister donated hers to the Schomburg.

MN: Right.

CS: And they could be found in the archives the Schomburg, in an archive called the Green Family Letters.

MN: The Green Family Letters.

CS: Yes.

MN: Okay.

CS: Yes, Frisbee Green. So that was my mother's side of the family, and my grandmother wanted to make sure that we had these letters and all these documents from Frisbee. We have a picture of him and then all of that so that we would be aware of our background, so I - but when I was young, when I was really young, like five or six, I really didn't get it, you know, people used to - - My grandmother's brother-in-law was one of the only people that graduated from college in my neighborhood. People would come by on Sunday afternoons to shake his hand and to talk to him. I'm glad.

MN: Now, did he go to a traditional Black college?

CS: Yes, and you know, he had a college degree and he was - - and people just came around to discuss things with him, get him to write for him, but I stood there and said, "I don't know why you think Uncle Ed is so cool. He's silly to me." At five years old, that

was kind of my attitude toward the whole thing. I didn't really get the whole thing, and I didn't understand why the house was such a big deal.

MN: Right.

CS: But as I grew up and grew older and learned about, you know, what the role of the family had played during slavery, and I started to get it clear that this was like pretty - - some pretty important stuff. Okay, so I was raised, when I was born, into a family with a very young mother. My mother was 18 when she had me. She was very beautiful, and she had had a child previous to me out of wedlock, which in 1946- - when she married my father in 1944-'45 - - that was like really, a horrible thing, it was unbelievable. My father was 12 years older than my mother, and he had been a boxer and a baseball player, and there is a picture of me somewhere on his shoulders at a Little League baseball game, because he had been a manager in the Little League team out there, so they played out there - -

MN: So there was a ballpark in Elmwood where there were Negro League games?

CS: Yes.

MN: Do you remember the name of the park?

CS: [Laughs] It was 84th Street Park or - - yes.

MN: Do you have any pictures of the park?

CS: I don't, and there is a picture of me somewhere that my family has, and that is a picture of me on my father's shoulders at the games.

MN: Right.

CS: That's all I got, I mean that's all I - - No, I said to my uncle who was 90, 92 who reminded me that he and my father had been active in the Negro League management, and that they had taken him to games, and that was very recently that I spoke to him. So my mom was brilliant too. That's the other thing. She's really, really smart. She had - - She spoke French and English fluently, and she had a photographic memory, so I learned how to read at about three years old. My mother was kind of like, you know, she was reading all the time, and I think that - - see, maybe I figured that she could do this, I could do it to. [Laughs] So I learned how to read very, very early, and it's kind of interesting because I used to go on the subway, and people used to give me money because I was so little, and I could read, and people would be like, "Give that baby some money because she can read." You know, so my father was an older guy, a boxer, a kind of in and out tough guy [laughs] and he was also very smart, very very smart. Neither of them got an opportunity to go to college, but they did make sure that my sister and I - - I had one sister who was five years younger, and a brother who was two years older, that's the child - -

MN: - - Right - -

CS: - - that the mother had out of wedlock, which we can't find by the way because he's lost. We're actually looking for him. Anyway, my dad built houses, and he built two homes. The first one he built on Ashwood Avenue, and the second one he built in Glenolden, California, I mean, Glenolden, Pennsylvania, right outside of Philadelphia, ended up going for a Darby. Now, in my house, my mother, even though she had two jobs - -

MN: What kind of work did she do?

CS: My mom was a floor lady in a factory.

MN: Wow!

CS: In a clothing factory.

MN: Was this a unionized clothing factory?

CS: No, it was a sweatshop.

MN: It was a sweatshop.

CS: Yes, and initially she went there to work. I think she was probably a cleanup girl, and then moved up to be a forelady, and my dad was a construction worker who built his home after work.

MN: Was he in the union?

CS: Yes, he was in the union book, but this interesting story - - His story is how he got his first job on the construction site is that the week after I was born, he took me and stood outside of the construction site where they were working, and stood there all day. He had me bundled up, and stood there all day until they gave him a job.

MN: That's incredible - - It was incredibly difficult for an African-American to get into that union - -

CS: Exactly - -

MN: In Philadelphia or anywhere else. That's remarkable.

CS: Exactly, and he said that he wouldn't - - taken me more if they hadn't given him a job that day, then he would have taken me back the next day and the next day because he figured that he was going to get a job, and he was determined, so he stayed in

construction business as a laborer in construction until his death. He died on a construction site in the New Year's Eve of 1985.

MN: How old was he?

CS: 63. So, and totally determined, both of them were unbelievably determined. In my house, a couple of things - - you were never allowed to come home with anything less than an A on your report card. This was just not done. You didn't come into my father's house with B's and C's and think that you were going to get food. I mean, this is his story to you. That you don't get fed if you come home with Bs and Cs. This is not representing him properly, not representing the family properly. So I pretty much stuck to my guns having stuck to what his rules were, and I didn't come home with anything less than a B, and then you would get lectured if you brought a B home. It was such a terrible thing. My mother was into the arts. She had us in music lessons, piano lessons, dance lessons, modeling school - -

MN: Now did she have - - did you travel out of the neighborhood for those?

CS: No - -

MN: Everything was within the neighborhood?

CS: Yes. Everything was in the neighborhood.

[Pause for phone call]

MN: So this was a community where in the community, you had dance classes, you had art classes, you had music?

CS: That's right.

MN: And all within the same neighborhood?

CS: All within the neighborhood, within walking distance.

MN: Within walking distance.

CS: Okay, at dinnertime, there were a couple of things. My father was a bit abusive. He had to have his underwear ironed. You had to have his bathwater ready when he got home - - This was my mom's job. I didn't have anything to do with this, you had to have dinner ready on the table. The children clean and sitting at the table ready for dinner, and after dinner, the children, me and my sister, had to have dinner conversation. In other words, and this was everyday. You had to have the sum discussion of something that you learned or something that you read everyday, and if you didn't the question was, "Why?" because everybody learned something everyday, and if you don't learn something everyday, then why are you here? [Laughs] That's my dad, so that's the kind of environment - - and of course, my grandmothers were absolutely the most wonderful, loving, smart women that, of course, that I ever knew because they both knew everything. My grandmothers were both great cooks, so then I spent a lot of time, while my mother and father were at work in the, you know, in the care of my grandmothers. I was walking around behind them while they cooked, so I learned how to cook, and I have some fabulous recipes that are you know, barbecue sauce recipes, one of a kind. Home-made ice cream recipes, potato salad, good old chicken and dumplings, real good, you know, which I still use.

[Laughter]

CS: So, that's the kind of background - - So when I got to be around nine years old, it occurred to me that there were some things going on in the South that needed to be taken care of.

MN: And what year was that?

CS: Let's see - - early sixties?

MN: So what year were you born?

CS: '46.

MN: '46, same year that I was.

CS: Yes.

MN: So were you aware of the Montgomery Bus boycotts?

CS: Yes, absolutely.

MN: Because that would be when you were about nine.

CS: Well I was aware even before that - -

MN: Even before that.

CS: I was seeing images on television of kids getting beaten up at the lunch counters. I was seeing people getting hit by. I saw a White kid walking and get hit in the face on television with that axe handle. Do you remember that? And I was like, I mean, traumatized by that.

MN: Do you have any memory of the Emmett Till case?

CS: Yes always - -

MN: And pictures - -

CS: Well - -

MN and CS: [in unison]: on Jet magazine.

CS: Jet magazine - - That's the other thing about my household. We got *Ebony*, *Jet*, *The Pittsburg Courier*, *The Crisis*, and *The Crusader*. One of the first books that I stole and read on my own was *One Thousand Lynchings*, which I stole out of my dad's drawer because he didn't have it out for, you know.

MN: Right. Now, for all this information you had in your home, what was it like going to a school?

CS: Right - -

MN: I mean, this was invisible.

CS: No, it wasn't - - well - -

MN: Or it wasn't invisible - -

CS: Let me just tell you. I have friends that I went from Kindergarten up to high school together, and you'll have to talk to them, and what they'll say is that I was a constant disruption in the classroom at the time.

MN: [Laughs]

CS: Because I questioned everything that the teacher said. My first question in the second grade was how this man that we had could - - Do you remember the second grade history books on - - where they had the slave guy with the welts on his back and the paragraph says that the slaves were happy and dancing, and this guy with the welts on his back?

MN: No, I don't remember anything from second grade [Laughs].

CS: I couldn't - - I could not figure out how the teacher could say the slaves were happy and dancing and this guy got beat like that because I've seen people get beat, and I know

that when you have welts on your body like that you got a pretty bad beating, and it could not - - I just couldn't justify my mind how you could be happy and dancing and get beaten up like that, so that was the first thing, and my mother and my teacher Mrs. Fink, my second grade teacher, Mrs. Fink, did some work together at the Bank Street, and helped to change what that one paragraph that was in the second grade history book into a larger, more expansive - - I think maybe a one-page discussion of slavery.

MN: Were there any teachers in the school who were radicals or political activists that you - -

CS: No, right wingers - -

MN: They were right-wingers.

CS: [Laughs] As a matter of fact, when I was in the fifth grade, I had two teachers. Mr. Heller and Mr. Duchovny, both of which had been in NATO, and so Mr. Duchovny, who was a NATO lieutenant, spent all his time talking about Communism and explained to us why it was bad and having us read on all this stuff, and my view of this whole thing was if your definition of Communism is, "To each according to his needs, from each according to his ability..." and the other economic system that you are describing is kind of a dog-eat-dog - - whoever is the most - - the best is the person that survives. To me, the other one sounds fairer. Now, this is a ten year old thing, right? So - -

[pause for phone call]

MN: Was Paul Robeson a figure in your family's house?

CS: Yes - -

MN: Was this somebody whose records and - -

CS: He was loved by my family, but he was loved with all of the other iconic, musical
- - Malcolm X in my house - - this is a story.

MN: Malcolm X, when he was a minister - -

CS: When he was a minister - - Jeremiah X was my best girlfriend's uncle, and my uncle
was friends with Jeremiah X, who recruited him into the Muslims.

MN: Right.

CS: I was 12 at the time, so on a Saturday morning, Jeremiah X brought Malcolm X to
my house to meet my uncle, and they sat around, and I'll tell you exactly what they did.
They were listening to Earl Warner and Thelonious Monk and going like this [Laughs],
and they were drinking milk and honey and having this big discussion, and reading books
and passing books back and forth, and having this big discussion, and Malcolm X said to
me - - I served him some milk and honey, I fixed it, [and] served it to him. He said,
"You're going to be real revolutionary one day." Now, that happened in kind of isolation
because I never paid very much attention to what he said. I said, "Thank you." You
know, and curtsied, you know. Everything was very polite, you know, and you had to
curtsy and all that stuff back then, and I kind of, you know, I didn't really get who he
was, and I didn't really get all the, you know, all the big thing about having him come to
the house and about all this - - having the music out and - - What they were listening to - -
He came back another time to listen to Dakota Staton and discussed her and Joe
Williams.

MN: Where was the temple in Philadelphia?

CS: It was in downtown.

MN: It was in downtown.

CS: Yes, it was in downtown.

MN: And how long did it take for you to get from Elwood - - Elmwood - - What was it called?

CS: Elmwood.

MN: - - Elmwood to downtown?

CS: About an hour.

MN: An hour, so -

CS: On the trolley - - on the 37 trolley car. I used to travel around the city by myself. If you get on the 37, and then you would get to Woodland Avenue and Bloom, whether you're getting to West Philadelphia or North Philadelphia.

MN: Now, when all of this is going on, are you aware of popular music as well as jazz?

CS: Hey, look. They were listening to blues and jazz. My father was singing blues on the weekend. You know, on Saturday mornings, all day blues. Nothing but blues in my house. Jocko the, you know -

MN: Jocko, right -

CS: The Radio Guide. Of course, I was listening to R&B music, Georgie Woods. Rock and Roll, so Frankie Lymon was my - - Oh, I would just be, you know, I - -

MN: (Starts to sing)

CS: - - Because Sun Rose and Scent are Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers - -

MN: (Sings in doo-wop fashion) -

CS: *Why do fools fall in love* - -

MN: (continues doo-wop)

CS: *Why do birds sing so gay* – [Laughs] *And lovers await the break of day* - -

MN: Did - - were there, like, doo wop groups in your neighborhood. Were people sing - -

CS: Oh, everybody was doo woping. Well, we had in my neighborhood Patti LaBelle and her group. They were right there singing in the choir.

MN: Were they singing in school in the choir - -

CS: - - in the choir in talent shows, and in the neighborhood. We had Frankie Beverly and Maze.

MN: Oh really, they were from - -

CS: - - Rice and Elmwood - -

MN: They're from Elmwood?

CS: They were from Elmwood, yes, which I mean, [laughs] that was –

MN: Are they also from the church.

CS: From the church, they're - -everybody. Oh, Teddy Pendergrass. Teddy Pendergrass went to one of our churches and sang in the choir. You know, these people were just - - they were just kids, you know. Just kids singing, you know. They had some other groups that came from Philadelphia, but our neighborhood was very musical, you know. Patti LaBelle's husband Armstead's family was very musical, and they were in contact with all these other musical influences. A lot of - - A lot of people were into music in the neighborhood, and when we have our reunions because there's an Elmwood reunion. You know, you go back there. Happy are our reunions. I mean you just see any number of

amazing people – “Oh shoot, I didn’t know you were in Elmwood around the same time I was?” Elmwood is kind of an interesting place.

MN: Right.

CS: And by the way, Elmwood did not have like sidewalks and stuff. Nobody locked our doors, and everybody was cousins in my neighborhood. You know, if you were somebody’s cousin, you were somebody’s cousin, and somebody married somebody who’s a cousin of yours or a cousin too, I mean people would come by at dinnertime. We’d always made sure you had enough for somebody who just dropped by at dinnertime. You never just cooked for the number of people in the house. We always shared what you had in your garden with the people on your block, with the people around the corner. There never was seemingly this – Just our food kind of thing. There was always people – People brought you stuff. You brought stuff to other people. It was just –

MN: Now one of the things is you know, you mentioned being very aware of what was going on in the South. Was there also an awareness of racism in Philadelphia.

CS: Oh!

MN: And how did that manifest itself, and what are the incidents that you remember most from your childhood.

CS: I mean the clearest thing is why did I leave Philadelphia and become a VISTA volunteer. I was a bright kid. I graduated 13 out of 638 kids. I couldn’t get a job. They were not hiring dark-skinned girls in jobs in the banks or the telephone company, or –

MN: Now this was –

CS: - - insurance companies –

MN: - - would a lighter-skinned Afri—So there was an internal color thing that was reflected in the labor market.

CS: Absolutely. Absolutely.

MN: Wow.

CS: If you were dark-skinned, you were expected to work in some or clean somebody's house as a cleaning person in a factory, as a waitress, which of course, I had a job as a waitress –

MN: Now –

CS: - - but I was the first Black waitress in two restaurants in Philadelphia, so –

MN: - - Now if you were 13th in the class, how come they didn't send you to Bryn Mawr or Smith?

CS: No, I wanted to go to college, and my father couldn't afford for me to go. I spent a semester at Lincoln –

MN: Right –

CS: - - Because Lincoln was a newly – They just started taking women –

MN: - - Right –

CS: That was the first year – '64 when I graduated that it went coed, so I went there, and what I found there as a traditionally Black college is that I didn't fit in because I was from a working class background. You go to those schools, your father has to be a doctor or a lawyer, or you have to be very light-skinned and almost straight hair or else you don't survive, you don't make it.

MN: So you were dealing with class and –

CS: - - and color –

MN: - - and color internal racial and class hierarchies.

CS: That's right, so I was working at –

MN: Was this something that your family prepared you for or was this something of a shock?

CS: No it was not. It was kind of – It just pissed me off –

MN: Right –

CS: - -Let me just say that. It pissed me of, but I mean, my parents prepared me as much as they could to – They said two things though. They gave me a couple of messages. You can do anything you want and you can be anything you want. My mother's message was [to] travel the world and do the arts. Do whatever you want, but on the other hand, it was clear that racism had kept them from doing the things that they wanted to do because these were not, you know. These people were nothing to shake a stick at. These were very smart people, very well read, very conscious, very aware community leaders, you know.

MN: Were you active at all in demonstrations when you were in high school?

CS: Well [laughs]now if you know the story about. I was with a group of people, the first Black kids to invade Bandstand at 39 and Market.

MN: Wow, what year was that?

CS: '63 or – Yes, '63.

MN: Oh, I've got to tell my Rock and Roll to Hip-Hop class –

CS: Sure, sure. Ok, American Bandstand. American Bandstand was, you know, Janine and the Bunnyhoppers, right, and they didn't let in Black kids. Black kids couldn't go on American Bandstand to dance, so we had our own Saturday dance show, and –

MN: What was the name of the show, because there was one in Washington called Teen-a-rama.

CS: No, this was another – It was a wonderful name. If I could just remember it, but they didn't let us go on Bandstand. Bandstand came on after school everyday.

MN: Right.

CS: So, we were like sitting around “Oh, we can't go on Bandstand. This kid can't dance. We would like to go on there and show them how to really dance because we can dance better than them.” So one day, we just decided – Everybody got tired, you know? There were kids from Elmwood, by the way.

MN: It's kids from Elmwood at Overbrook?

CS: No, no, I went to John Barkin High School.

MN: You went to John Barkin. What part of Philly was that in?

CS: John Barkin was in Southwest Philadelphia. As a matter of fact, when I went there, it was just being integrated.

MN: Right.

CS: The White Citizens Council was still heavily active in the community where our school was, and kids would call you “nigger.”

MN: In school?

CS: In school, after-school –

MN: Now, was this was something you ever experienced in your neighborhood?

CS: Never.

MN: So you left and went to junior high or was it elementary straight through eighth grade?

CS: No, elementary was in Elmwood.

MN: Right

Cs: And then, in junior high I went to Tilden, which was right next door to Barkin, which was in Southwest.

MN: Okay, so you first experienced that kind of hostility in junior high?

CS: In junior high. When they would tell us you guys have to leave early because the White Citizens Council is having a meeting in the auditorium, you kids have got to go. Go back home early, and then in high school, the White Citizens Council was still having meetings. Okay, so we were like - - we don't understand why we can't go dancing. We're just going to go dance, so we did.

MN: And you just rushed right in there?

CS: [Laughs] We rushed in and of course then there was the thing that they wouldn't put the camera on us, so we would go, and they would pretend like we weren't there. We would palm our hands up when we were in front of the camera, and Bob Horn was the first, and then Dick Clark.

MN: Right.

CS: They used to push us out of the way so that we wouldn't be seen, but we just kept popping out little heads up until finally two or three of us got to be seen.

MN: So that was your first civil rights demonstration?

CS: [laughs] That was a civil rights demonstration. That's a damn shame, but it was [laughs].

MN: We all have funny stories like that.

CS: Yes, but that's all I knew about in terms of really doing –

MN: - -But were you aware of demonstrations like at Woolworth's at downtown in Philly.

CS: No.

MN: Or things like that?

CS: I had a job at Woolworth's. Um, in Philadelphia, there was some tiny attempts at - - You've got about 23 minutes - -

MN: A little more than that.

CS: [Laughs] There was some tiny incremental attempts to integrate, although for the most part there was a real, you know, strong pull against any kind of equality for people of African descent. It just was like, "You cannot have this." Because there are whole communities of people, and Philadelphia itself was pretty segregated, and to tell you the truth, it's still is, and what happened in Philadelphia is that one community would integrate itself like, a Black family would move into West Philadelphia, and all the Jewish people would move out of Philadelphia, and all of these homes would be available because as soon as one family would move in, they would change the whole nature of the community.

MN: Yes, when I was in Philadelphia, my editor took me to Philadelphia around Fairmount Park. It was just astonishing. It was pretty depressing.

CS: Oh North Philadelphia around Temple University is just coming back now. It's unbelievable.

MN: Now, you know, so you're out of high school, you go to work, and then end up joining VISTA.

CS: I go to work in one night in the middle of the night - - I'm working midnights as a waitress at 13th and Locust at Wynton Dress Bride, and you know, I wanted to go to college really bad and I wanted to do something and I was just really not happy with my life, and there was an ad on television, and I was seeing a rotten guy. I'm always seeing a rotten guy [laughs]. That's not true, I mean three of - - my three lovely husbands. I love you all [makes kissing noise].

[Laughter]

CS: But I did see some rotten guys [Laughs].

MN: I could make a comment but what else is there?

[Laughs]

Lily Clarkson (LC): Oh wow.

CS: So on the television there was an ad. Join VISTA and see the world, and I was like, hmm, and I remember my mom was like "Remember I want you to see the world. I want you to travel." Here is your opportunity. So, I wrote to Washington, D.C. for an application for VISTA. Sent it back, filled out the application, never thinking that they would call me to be a VISTA volunteer. Come to find out I was like the second woman,

the first or second Black or African-American woman to join VISTA. So they sent me letters saying pack your things. This is what you should take. And come to Baltimore. You're a VISTA volunteer. So I met - - The other VISTA volunteers were people - - I was in the class with Jay Rockefeller and some other really, really rich kids. I think my first boyfriend was a Yalie I met in VISTA. I don't remember his name -

[Laughter]

CS: I don't see his name, but he was actually a very nice boy, and yeah, it's you know - - [laughs] kind of amazing - -

MN: Now that was training in Baltimore, and your first assignment was the Bronx.

CS: - - South Bronx.

MN: Okay, now describe your first impressions on arriving in the South Bronx.

CS: Well, you've got to know that I come from - I don't - I never really knew anything about Catholicism, so my assignment when I came to the South Bronx was - - St.

Anselm's Church and the New York City Housing Authority.

MN: What street was St. Anselm's on?

CS: St. Anselm's was on St. Ann's - It was on St. Ann's Street?

Unknown: There's a St. Ann's right by McKinley. There's one -

CS: 151st -

Unknown: Yeah, 151 and St. Ann's -

CS: Okay, St. Anselm's. I moved to - By the way, my husband was a priest at St. Anselm's Church. He left the priesthood, but anyway -

MN: So how many people have you taken out of the church?

[Laughs]

CS: Just the one, and that's - - by the way, now that's an urban legend. I met a woman a few years ago who, when I was working at Community School District 5. She says, you know, I heard the story of this Black woman who came into the neighborhood and stole one of the priests, and they were right on, you know, open with it, and I said to her - - I said, "I married one of the priests at St. Anselm's. She went to St. Anselm's, and she was like 10 years old when this happened, and I said I was actually married to Father Philip. She goes, It was you, it was you. [Laughs] Oh yes, it was me.

MN: Right

CS: I married Father Philip. That's true, but anyway, my impressions. My impressions of the South Bronx were, first of all - I've always liked stuff that was different, and it was different. What I was concerned about were the conditions were very, very bad. It was very bad. Worse than I could imagine.

MN: This was like the housing conditions, especially -

CS: The housing conditions, and my experience of the education. You know, that was the first thing that I did, and - -

MN: Were you working in schools?

CS: yeah, well, my partner and I went to volunteer. We - - as a VISTA volunteer, your job is to do what is necessary. What the community would do.

MN: Right.

CS: So the first thing we did - - We went to the school and offered to tutor kids at the elementary school.

MN: You remember what elementary school?

CS: It was 151.

MN: Which was on?

CS: 158 and Trinity.

MN: Okay.

CS: And where the principal told me that the kids were just garbage and that they would never be anything, and - -

MN: - - That's what the principal - - Do you remember the principal's name?

CS: I do not remember this principal's name.

MN: Now was this – What was the ethnic composition of the students?

CS: Puerto Rican and Black. We're the abnormal straight Puerto Rican and Black.

MN: Right.

CS: And that's all there was in the neighborhood. That's basically it, and there were like two or three people from like, the Bahamas that lived around the corner.

MN: Right.

CS: On Forest Avenue, but essentially, it was –

MN: Puerto Rican and African-American from Southern –

CS: yes, and he said that these kids are nothing. They are garbage. They are not going to be anything, and the best you could do – I've got a couple of them that are getting ready to graduate and are reading on a second-grade level and they are disrupting the rest of the school. You want to take them and work with them? You could do it. So we took eight kids all reading at the second grade level, and we developed our own educational theory

on how to work with them. Of course, we were reading Summer Hill and reading all the books on new educational ideas and stuff, and we decided we would find out what the kids liked, but before we did that, we had to go to the kids' homes and talk to the parents and ask their parents if it was okay for us to work with them, so that's how I started to learn Spanish because when you go to the kids homes, you'd have to talk to the parents. Most of the parents didn't speak English, and so the kids would say. Oh tell mama that she's a pendeja first, and then you could start talk - -You know, ask her stuff, and I'll translate for you, but I [laughs] So the parents would be like laughing - -

MN: [laughs]

CS: - - and you know, they would tell me to say things like maricon.

MN: Right - -

[laughter]

CS: You know - -

MN: Maricon, puta. That's what the kids -

CS: Maricon, puta - -

[laughs]

CS: I would be, you know, and the parents would be laughing, and I figured out that they were teaching me how to curse, so [laughs] They taught me how to curse, and then I of course, learned a little Spanish along the way.

MN: Had you been exposed at all to Latin music at all growing up in Philadelphia?

CS: No.

MN: Because that's - - so not at all.

CS: Not at all.

MN: So what was it like the first time you heard Latin music.

CS: I was like Oh I like this. I really like this. [laughs]

MN: Now, did you encounter men playing congas in the street –

CS: On the street. Everything.

MN: Yes, so that and - -

CS: - -And just a musical - - by the way. Music was coming from everywhere.

Everybody's window was open. The music was just playing loud on the streets, and it was food and - -

MN: The smell was of - -

CS: People sharing - - It was amazing. What an amazing new culture, you know. It was just completely different than anything I had ever experienced, you know.

MN: Did you connect this to your community and see like connections like, tradit – you know, African traditions being reflected in different ways in these two cultures.

CS: Absolutely. Absolutely, and I can see it more – even more now as I consider all the different traditions and the way in which people interact. I'll give you one real good example. I, always in my house - - people were going to come to your house, you cleaned up the house real good. Just never let anybody come to your house if it was messy. You know, it could be messy when you're there, when the family's there. If somebody's coming to your house, you're going to clean up. And a person's house, a Puerto Rican's house – Anytime you go to somebody's house, the house is always immaculate. Always clean, and it's these women that run – really concerned about keeping the house clean,

you know, and that's, you know, and also feeding people when they come to the house.

People want to be fed when you come to their house. They want to feed you, and that's the tradition that's in the African-American community. You can't come over to the house and not eat or, you know, and not have something to drink.

MN: That's why we have triple XXL shirts in the Bronx African-American History Project.

CS: And you can't go into a Puerto Rican home without having – If you go in there in the morning, you have to have café con leche and you're going to have flan. Okay, it's a part of the tradition, and at lunchtime, you are going to eat some rice and beans, and at dinnertime you are going to have rice and beans and meat and a salad and, I mean, this is what you're going to have. And when you go to somebody's house at dinnertime, an African-American, you're going to have smothered chicken and rice and green beans or something like this. Some greens, you'll have fried chicken, macaroni and cheese. That's the way it is. That's the way the culture works, you know. We, and what used to be is that you couldn't cook the food because everybody in the neighborhood knew you. I know you little Cleo, you can't go. You'd better go to school. I'm getting ready to call up your grandmother and tell her you're not in school right now, and they would do that and they would watch out, and the same in New York when I came to New York. Everybody on the block knew all of the kids, so I mean, the kids could be acting up, but somebody's going to call on somebody mom –

MN: Right, now where was your first apartment?

CS: 158th and Trinity.

MN: Was it in a walk-up or –

CS: - - in a five-foot –

[End of Tape 1, side A] [Beginning Tape 1, Side B]

MN: So, you're living in a tenement on 158th, you're working in the schools.

CS: Right at the corner across the street on - -

MN: Now, at this point, are you in contact with any political organizations in the community?

CS: Absolutely not. You should know that there is a picture of myself and my partner that became a picture of the VISTA Volunteers in Service to America for that year, 1967-'68, and it's a picture of me and my partner in the back of our building talking to a group of kids.

MN: Right - -

CS: Because we were doing gang stuff.

MN: Now, the next time we do the interview, could you bring some photos, like - -

CS: I actually don't - - I've been looking for them. I've been trying to track down this photo, and there is also an article going about because we were a white girl and a black girl.

MN: Right.

CS: VISTA bombed here in the South Bronx by *The New York Times*. The New York Times did that –

MN: Right. That's your tape, okay, so that's sixty - -

CS: '67.

MN: '67, and at that point you are not in touch with any political organizations but you are aware of this grave injustice being done in the schools?

CS: Absolutely. In the local schools, they had us from the schools when I was going to the welfare department. I was going with the kids' parents to the hospital - - to Lincoln Hospital emergency room.

MN: Oh, ok.

CS: People were waiting for 36 hours to get seen in the emergency room.

MN: 36-hour wait in the emergency room?

CS: Yes. There was drug addiction even though 25 percent of the people in the South Bronx were addicted to heroin.

MN: Right -

CS: Or some kind of drug.

MN: And so you saw the heroin right out there?

CS: I could be like standing on a corner and drug addicts would be nodding out on the stoop, you know? Housing - - Remember that kids were getting eaten up. I was working for the housing authority - - kids were getting bitten by rats. Kids were eating lead chip - - lead paint chips and getting brain damage. I saw all of this stuff. I mean contact, direct contact.

MN: So by this time the housing conditions in the projects were deteriorating?

CS: All in the projects but also mostly in the tenants.

MN: In the tenements.

CS: I did my organizing mostly in the tenements, and I worked for the housing authority where they did code enforcement.

MN: Right.

CS: So people would call up with, you know, we have no heat and hot water, the ceiling has just fell down, my bathroom, because somebody else upstairs had flooded their bathtub, a rat bit the kid - -

MN: Was this after VISTA you were - -

CS: - -No, this was during VISTA - -

MN: During VISTA you did housing authority work as well as education work?

CS: Yes, the sponsor of VISTA volunteers was New York City Housing Authority.

MN: Oh.

CS: And St. Anselm's Church.

MN: Okay.

CS: So those were the two sponsors, and I worked, you know, during the day with the housing authority, and in the afternoons we did work in the community. Now, the other work - - There's important work that came through the housing authority was the establishment of the Kelly Street Block Association. The Kelly Street Block Association, I believe, was the first block association and of course Banana Kelly was an all-Black neighborhood. That neighborhood was all African-American, and then after that, the next neighborhood association, block association was the Trinity Avenue Block Association. It was right down on the corner right underneath my building, 158th and Trinity Avenue. We were responsible for organizing that block association of VISTA volunteers.

MN: Now, what did the block associations do at that time?

CS: Well, at that time, they were like – People could come in and use the telephone.

People could come in and get somebody to go to the welfare with them.

MN: Wow, okay.

CS: You could come in and complain about, you know, they handled complaints about the housing conditions.

MN: So it was like a community ombudsman kind of thing?

CS: Yes.

MN: And – Did you have block parties also?

CS: We had block parties. We had huge, big wonderful block parties. That was one of the most wonderful aspects of that whole thing was at a block party. As a matter of fact, my reception after I married my husband in November of 1967 was a big block party at Trinity Avenue.

MN: Wow.

CS: So the block parties – We had a lot of them, and we used to take the kids bowling. I don't know if you've talked to John Gay yet. You talked to John Gay?

MN: No.

CS: John Gay was the first president of the Trinity Avenue Block Association.

MN: Is he still around?

CS: Either he is around or his son, John Gay, Jr.

MN: John – how do you spell it, G-A-Y?

CS: G-A-Y. John Gay.

MN: Of the Trinity Avenue Block Association.

CS: Yes.

MN: Now, what was the nature of the housing on Trinity?

CS: Tenements - -

MN: Tenements?

CS: All tenements until you get to - - What was that street, one hundred and fifty - -

MN: Now, are those tenements now gone - -

CS: They're gone - -

MN: They're gone with the fires and the new housing is up.

CS: Yes.

MN: John Gay.

CS: Yes, it's a sad story.

MN: Yes. Now, when did you become involved in issues with Lincoln Hospital?

CS: Well, the end of '67 after I got married, I came back, and somebody said to me, after my VISTA tour was over, and somebody said they're hiring community mental health workers at Lincoln Hospital. You should come over and I think it was one of the priests.

MN: Right.

CS: - - Said to me, "You should go over and get an interview." Which I did. I properly went over to Lincoln Hospital and interviewed for a position as a community mental health worker. Well, of course, this is three weeks before the community mental health workers took over the hospital and demanding better care for the mental health patients, and so I just got swept right in. I was interviewed by the leadership. The three main

leaders of the community mental health workers and a psychologist and a psychiatrist who eventually became my bosses. Marty Mintz and Ray Parker were my bosses, and Richard Weeks and Ruth and - - Ruth Dawkins and Aubrey Dawkins, and they watched the interview on a two-way mirror, which, in other words, I didn't know that they were behind the mirror. I just thought it was a mirror back there, and they collectively decided on who they were going to hire, and I happened to be one of the candidates that got hired as a female health worker, and from that point on I was swept up in the struggle in the South Bronx. Now, one - - There was one group that I came in contact with prior to this -

MN: Ah, oh yes.

CS: Evelina - -

MN: And you knew Evelina?

CS: Evelina was my mentor.

MN: Really?

CS: Yes.

MN: Her daughter - -

CS: Lorraine - -

MN: - - Is a good friend and her grandson Joe Conzo is the first hip-hop photographer who documented the early rise of hip-hop in the Bronx.

CS: Evelina - -

MN: Tell me about Evelina because they want to know about Evelina.

CS: What an amazing woman. This woman - Evelina Antonetti was kind of medium. She wasn't a dark skinned Puerto Rican woman, but she was not a white Puerto Rican, and

she never - - She always acknowledged her African-ness. Evelina Antonetti was the leader of United Bronx Parents. She organized parents in the school district all around the South Bronx to demand better education. Now, she had a team of people who worked for her. Ellen Lowery and Kathy Goldman, and Ellen and Kathy did the research. They gave the information to Evelina. She took the information, broke it down so the parents could understand it and organize around the absolute conditions inside of the school, inside of the classroom down to information on what was going on inside each of the classrooms in the neighborhood. She was an amazing woman, and parents became active in PTAs. One of the most wonderful experiences that I had with Evelina was that the school food. You know that the food that was being served to the kids in the South Bronx. We had green meat, sour milk, stale bread, and it was just nasty, horrible food, and the parents kept saying, you know my kids can't eat this food. The kids are getting sick. It's a terrible thing, so Evelina was so upset about this, and the parents were really - - They were like - - our kids - - we can't take this anymore. They're serving our kids this nasty food, so they went around - - By the way, you know, Evelina used to take parents to the Board of Education meetings down here at 110 Livingston Street, so the parents would all get together and travel down by the subway from the South Bronx all the way to 110 Livingston Street to make their complaints to the Board of Education, so this one night on Friday, the parents got together and had a meeting. They planned to take all the food for out of the two or three different schools. One of them was my school, 151, 163 I think, and there was a 48 right around that neighborhood. I took the food from those schools in the black garbage bag and we went to a planned Board of Education meeting and the

young people helped the parents take the Black bags of food and spread them outside in the well of the Board of Education - -

MN: - - Rotunda - -

CS: - - Rotunda, that's right because the parents are angry and sort of, you know, our kids aren't going to eat this, you eat it, but of course that was a period in which people demonstrated their anger in very open ways and ways that impact on, you know, really make an impact on the psyche of the people, you know - - They were asking to make the change. Now, I think that's one of the things we're missing now. We're not as demonstrative in terms of getting people to understand what our issues are, and we really should because when we're that demonstrative, people get the point. Sometimes, people don't feel what you feel if you're a victim of discrimination, or you are a victim of the horrible conditions. You know, when you tell somebody about, they don't get it or, you know, what are you talking about, you know, it's like you know the whole thing about you will never know what it is like to be an African-American and to suffer from the injustice and the inequality that you face in society unless you have gone through it. You don't really get all the - There's a lot of subtleties involved in it, you know there's more to it than just you know well, and nowadays it's worse than just the whole thing of not drinking water at the same water fountain or not being able to eat at the same restaurant or ride on the bus. Now it's way more subtle. I'll give you an example of what I'm talking about and that is that African-American women are not involved in the leadership of anything in our society, and the only one that you can see pretty much doing anything is Oprah. Take a look at it. You take a look at - - And not only are they not involved in

the leadership of mostly anything if you really looking at what's happening in society.

They are picking out of places where we were in leadership. A good example is leadership of labor unions. Although labor unions in New York City are predominately African-American, the constituency is African-American and Latino women. I think you would do well to find one besides D.C. 37 that is lead by an African-American woman, and they view like 1199, they're picking out African-American women out left and right for the leadership and replacing them, but how, if you - - you know, if I say that to you and you're not living it and you're not seeing it and you don't have friends who are African-American women who are trying to move up in society and are trying to move up in society or are involved in you know what is happening in society, you wouldn't know, but I know African-American women who are leaders in the labor movement, who are attorneys, who are big in business, who are even from Wall Street, are being kicked out of these positions and looking for ways - - looking for ways to get people to understand what is happening to us, you know. Why is it that we're not being given an opportunity to prove our worth in society. We're not doing anything bad. Although you can't - - We're not afraid, we're not intimidated so we're not easily intimidated. We didn't easily stand up for ourselves, and I think that what they're looking for in the society today is people who are a little less willing to stand up for themselves, a little more afraid of the powers that be, or a little more willing to bend with the way in which things should go, in the way in which people think things should go. Our view is that there is a way - - There is a right way to do things, and there is a way that people can be treated with equality and justice, and if it's not happening, we're probably going to say

something about it, and we're probably not going to be afraid. My feeling today is that they are trying to intimidate us, and I'm sorry at 60 years old, I'm not going to be intimidated, you know, because there's only a few - - I don't have that much longer to go, and there's only a few more things you can do to me. I have experienced every bad thing that could happen to an individual human being. I'm still here. I'm still surviving, and I'm not going to be intimidated. If you take my job away from me, I will scrub floors, okay. So if I can't do this or what I was doing before or something after, I'm not afraid to scrub a floor. I've done it before. I'm not afraid to be a waitress. I'll be that, you know. So you can do that to me. You can try to beat me up. You can try to intimidate me. You can try to diminish the quality of my humanity and the character of who I am, but you can't stop me from living unless you kill me, and I think that's the whole thing. I think that's part of the problem. Part of the problem is that we are pretty strong characters. We're not backing down, [Laughing] and it's tough on people who would like to intimidate you, you know, they would like you to not come, or let you know that you're really scared of this person, and for some reason, I think that men, if they are really trying to survive, they are not as confrontational as women are, and as a matter of fact, I don't really think that Black women are confrontational. I think that it's just that we stand our ground. It's very hard to push us back, and if we're intelligent, it's very hard to give an intelligent reason for treating you in a way that's not equal, [Laughs] so that's the point, you know, so if you're just going to do something to somebody and you don't have a reason, you don't want to do it to a Black woman so you get rid of them when you don't have to explain yourself, so it's the subtleties - -

MN: Right - -

CS: that are what's happening, really. [Laughs]

MN: Okay, why don't we - - At least I have to go. Why don't we set up - -

CS: Scared you, huh?

MN: Yes.

[Laughs]

MN: Well, you scared me before. I'm used to it, but anyway - -

CS: I'm sorry Mark. I have to say that. I have to get that out because I'm - -

MN: No, no it's who you are, and people are going to hear this interview - -

CS: [Laughs]

MN: This is going to be a very popular interview - - let me just tell you what happens
because we'll - - Let me turn this off. You get a copy of everything that we do, so - -

[END OF INTERVIEW]