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Sanderson, Shelley

Sanderson, Shelley Interview: Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Transcriber: Danielle Lund

Mark Naison (MN): Sixth interview of the Bronx African American History Project. It's April 18th 2006. We're at Fordham University with Shelley Sanderson who is a Spanish teacher at P.S. 153 in Co-op City who grew up in the Morrisania Community. And, to begin with Shelley, tell us a little bit about your family. Where are they from?

Shelley Sanderson (SS): Well, my mother is from South Carolina, Clarendon County, South Carolina. My father is from North Carolina, but I'm not exactly sure where in North Carolina his family is from. And they migrated. My mother came up with my grandmother to Harlem and her one brother and two sisters. There were four of them. And they came up to Harlem and from Harlem they moved up to the Morrisania area of the Bronx. My father lived on Stebbins Avenue, and he and my mother met at Junior High School 40.

MN: So they met in the Bronx?

SS: They met in the Bronx. They all know the same people. As a matter of fact, I asked my father about a few of the people that you have shown on your previous interviews and he knows everyone and he was kind of - - you know, he lives in California now - - so he was all [Tape error], "Oh him," you know, "Oh him, wow, that's something. Isn't that something?" He was telling me a few stories. And, you know I lived with my mother in my grandmother's house, so my earliest memory. And there were a bunch of us. There was my mother and her brothers and sisters and my cousins and we all just you know - - everyone was working in the household. Everyone contributed to the household, so you know the children were very independent. We were independent, but we were responsible, so - -

MN: Now, where was the apartment located?

SS: Oh, on Boston Road between Union Avenue and Prospect Avenue.

MN: Okay. [Tape error] So, it was right up near the intersection of Boston Road and Prospect.

SS: Well we were like [Tape error] - - That was a long block between Prospect and Boston Road, and the block kind of curved. And we were on the uptown side of Boston Road. On the downtown side, there were a lot of streets that cut into Boston Road coming, you know, coming across. But our block was solid all the way from Union, all the way down to Prospect.

MN: And, what sort of building was the one you lived in?

SS: A five story building. [Crosstalk]

MN: It was a five story walk-up? Is it still there?

SS: Yes.

MN: What's the number?

SS: 1368.

MN: Right, and what floor was your apartment on?

SS: Fifth floor. [Laughs]

MN: You were on the fifth floor?

SS: Yes.

MN: Facing?

SS: Facing the street.

MN: Facing the street. And did you have a fire escape?

SS: Yes. [Tape error]

MN: Okay, so what are your earliest memories? Did you - - were you born in that apartment?

Were you living in that apartment when you were born?

SS: We, yes. Well when I - - I was born in Lincoln Hospital, the old Lincoln Hospital, on the Bruckner. And we lived there for a while. I don't think it was long, because my mother tells me that she and my father and I lived in Brooklyn for a while and then we came back to the Bronx.

MN: Okay, and how old were you when you [Tape error] - - What are your first memories of that apartment on Boston Road?

SS: My first - - I guess the summers. Those were my first memories. Going with my grandmother to the armory, because at that time everyone was entitled to what they call government cheese. So we were on line for government cheese and milk because there was so many of us. So, I remember in the summer, going with my grandmother, riding in a shopping cart. You know, I was in the shopping cart and she would push the shopping cart and I would - - you know, the tall ones with the two wheels - - and we would go over to the armory and I would come back, and I was able to go downstairs and play on the stoop. My cousins were there, and -
-

MN: Was this the armory on 166th Street?

SS: 169th and - -

MN: And Franklin?

SS: - - and Fulton. Right across from St. Augustine. Or was it Franklin?

MN: It was Franklin I think. So what years were those?

SS: That was, I would say 1950 - - about, 1958, '59.

MN: Now was your mother working at that time?

SS: Yes.

MN: What sort of work was she doing?

SS: She was a secretary for an insurance company downtown. And you know, we would play outside, and she would come home from work, you know, and we'd see them coming, she and my aunts, and they'd be coming from up the block, because we were not around the train station. They would take the train, the bus to the train, or either walk to Freeman Street train station. And so they'd come around the corner, we'd all run up the block to greet them, you know, because you could always see them coming down the block. We were always in front of the house, at that time.

MN: So how many sisters were living there with your grandmother?

SS: It was four sisters and four brothers.

MN: Wow.

SS: Yes.

MN: So there were eight kids in that apartment.

SS: Yes, and grandchildren. So, it was me and my two cousins.

MN: So, how many people all together?

SS: So that was with my grandmother, that's eight and four, twelve people.

MN: And how many rooms were in the apartment?

SS: [Pause] Three. A big living room, kitchen, bathroom. Four, I think. There were four, because there was one room all the way up in the front. That was my grandmother's room.

MN: So where did everybody sleep?

SS: Well we all slept together. You know, families would sleep together. I slept with my mother. My cousins slept with their mother, and then my aunts and uncles had a room in the back that was really really a big big room, and my aunts slept in one bed and my uncles slept - -

I'm trying to remember if there were two rooms back there. I think it was one big, huge room.

So, we were all together.

MN: Wow, so you were on top of each other.

SS: Yeah. Pretty much, pretty much. We were all together. Of course, my oldest uncle was in the army, so he was not at home, and the uncle right under him was always working. And there were the two younger ones, so they were there, and then my aunts, and then my mother and I, and my other aunt and my cousins in the up front room, and then my grandmother in the very, very front room.

MN: Had your mother gone to high school in the Bronx?

SS: Yes. She went to Walton High School.

MN: And was she a high school graduate?

SS: Yes.

MN: Now, what elementary school did you go to?

SS: I attended P.S. 61, right on Boston Road, and those houses that they built over there - -

MN: Oh, by Charlotte Street.

SS: Charlotte Street. Boston and Charlotte. And I left there, and went to a special program at P.S. 50 on Vice Avenue. So those were my elementary schools.

MN: Now, what was P.S. 61 like for you?

SS: It was a wonderful school. It was a wonderful place to be. It was safe. I mean we would come in in the morning and line up in the yard. There were children there from all ethnic backgrounds because right behind P.S. 60, there was the Yeshiva School. And it was 61, Yeshiva, and then Junior High School 98 - -

MN: Herman Ritter.

SS: - - Right. That was my junior high school. So, you know, there was a nice mix of children of all backgrounds. We had people of Jewish background, Hispanics, African Americans, and it was really, really great.

MN: Now, was education something encouraged in your household?

SS: Yes, yes. We were all good students. All of the grandchildren were excellent students. I was the only one that went to public school. My two, my peers, my two cousins they went to St. Augustine Catholic School.

MN: Were teachers attentive to students in your experience? Did you enjoy the teachers you had?

SS: They weren't there for you to enjoy them. They were there to take care of business. They were there to teach you, and they weren't very friendly. My first grade teacher was a little friendly towards the end of the year, and I think that's the way they teach teachers. You know, you be stern at the beginning, and then you're friendly, or friendlier towards the end. I do not remember my second grade teacher. My third grade teacher was a pusher, because from the third grade she was trying to get us to go to this special program at P.S. 50, so she was always on us. You know, we had to drill our reading in the morning, drill our math in the afternoon. So we were there to take care of business.

MN: Now what was the special program that you got into?

SS: It was the gifted program, intellectually gifted program.

MN: And when did they start these intellectually gifted programs?

SS: Well I was aware of it after third grade, because I went to the fourth grade at P.S. 50 and that's where it began for me.

MN: And this was all test scores?

SS: Test scores, yes.

MN: Reading tests. Now, were the schools tracked in those days so they put - - you know, were you in like a one class - - so it was the kids in the one class that were being pushed?

SS: Yes.

MN: Okay. And how far from your house was P.S. 50? Was it walking distance?

SS: No, I took public transportation. I took public transportation in first grade. I was - - I got on the bus, I rode the bus to the school, and got off, and the crossing guard was there, and we crossed, and we went right to the school. [Crosstalk]

MN: Now was this an adult crossing guard - -

SS: Yes.

MN: - - or a kid? The kids were not the crossing guards.

SS: No, no, adults.

MN: And you went on with a bus pass?

SS: Yes.

MN: So you had a little bus pass in first grade.

SS: Yes, yes.

MN: How much further was the - - was P.S. 50?

SS: I would say another half a mile. So, I would go to school, but at that point, we had moved to Longfellow Avenue, my mother and I.

MN: So this was Longfellow between where and where?

SS: Right off the - - as a matter of fact, we lived right off the Cross Bronx, and Longfellow.

MN: So this was a little further north?

SS: Yes.

MN: Now this - - so you and your mother got your own apartment?

SS: Yes.

MN: And what year was that?

SS: I was in the fourth grade. So that I guess - - oh boy, you're asking me to do math at this time of the morning - - so I was ten, so that was '63.

MN: Now when you - - what was the - - was the Boston Road neighborhood safe - -

SS: Yes, yes.

MN: - - when you were living there?

SS: Yeah it was. Well you know what, it was safe to us because we were the children and the adults made sure we were safe.

MN: So everybody looked out for each other?

SS: Yes, yes. There was always someone looking out a window, always someone walking down the street. We never - - you know, we would hear things. We used to play on the roof. We were allowed to go up on the roof with adult supervision, but we had one incident where someone was either pushed or jumped and after that they didn't - - we didn't go up there anymore. That was that. We were allowed to go out in the back because there was a big - - the way the block was built, it was long around Boston Road, then it came up Union, a little bit on Union, like one storefront, then down Jennings Street to Prospect, then around Prospect, so it was one solid - - you know, there were no breaks in the houses. They were all stuck together pretty much. Then in the back, there was this grassy area but there was a walkway and there was a time where you - - I suppose that you could walk through the back instead of going in the - - you know, walking down in the city street, from house to house, in the back. And there were times where I would look out the window because my apartment, our apartment was so big it

was back to front, front to back. We could look out the back windows, and look down into the courtyard, and we could see people out there in their lounge chairs, but that was very early in my life. After, I would say about three or four years, I didn't see that anymore, and we weren't allowed to go back there.

MN: Right. Were there particular stores, or churches, or music venues that made a big impression in you when you were growing up?

SS: Yes. We had one record store, one record store that everyone went to. It was on 169th Street and Boston Road. Sis's Record Store.

MN: Okay, what - - how do you - -

SS: It was Sis. We called her Sis. I think - -

MN: S-I-S?

SS: S-I-S. I don't remember the name of the store. It was Mellow Tone or something like that, but Sis ran the record store. Her family ran the store. And that was where we purchased all our forty-fives, and seventy-eights, and thirty-threes at the time.

MN: Now, were you very into all the music that was in the community? [Crosstalk]

SS: I couldn't help it. My uncles were music fiends. We had music in the morning, music at night. It was on all day.

MN: And what kind of music?

SS: We listened to jazz. I grew up on Dave Brubeck and Jimmy Smith, and Tito Puente, and Willy Bobo, and we - - my uncles - - all my aunts and uncles called Latin. At the time they called it Latin.

MN: Were any of your uncles or aunts Latino, or these were all African American?

SS: They're all African Americans - -

MN: African Americans who were completely immersed in Latin culture - -

SS: Completely. Well we lived right - - and we lived right down the block from Sylvia's Blue Morocco. So, my aunts would get caught all the time up there. My mother - - my grandmother didn't want them there, and they would always get caught coming down the block from Sylvia's Blue Morocco. It was - - you were surrounded by it.

MN: Were there any Latino families in the neighborhood?

SS: I - - one across the street that I can remember. And then I think around on Prospect, and down Ritter Place, but I didn't know them that well. I knew mostly the people that lived on our block.

MN: So your exposure to Latin music came through African Americans?

SS: Yes.

MN: So everybody danced Latin?

SS: Everyone, everyone. You could - - had to - - if you were going to go to the Boston Road Ballroom and you were going to dance you had to know what you were doing. So everyone knew what - - when any record that came on - - everyone knew how to dance. It was great.

MN: Now was the Boston Road Ballroom a place where you went to as a child much? Was this a place where people took their kids?

SS: Well they would have one thing a year that everyone went to and then they had the Halloween party and everyone was allowed to go, but mostly it was the adults. I would here them talking about the concerts and the shows that they were going to see down at the Boston Road Ballroom.

MN: Did you try singing when you were a kid?

SS: [Laughter]

MN: Did you try to become like the Chantels?

SS: Yeah we did. We had our little group. We used to pretend that we were - - what was our favorite? I think it was the Supremes, and Gladys Knight and the Pips. And we would sing Shepherd in the Limelights and the Flamingos. Those were our favorite Doo Wops.

MN: So you tried to form little Doo Wop groups.

SS: Yeah, we did. My uncles basically. My uncle used to sing in the stairwell, with his friends.

MN: Really? Oh, wow.

SS: Yes.

MN: So, now, was your uncle close in you to age?

SS: Yes. He was - - my uncle, as a matter of fact, we attended the same elementary school, for a year. He was in the sixth grade, I was in the first grade. And he was my, kind of my caretaker. And whenever he had to go somewhere and there was no one home, he was in charge of me. So we were very close. And he - - I would listen to whatever he listened to, watch whatever he watched. He was my hero.

MN: Was there a separation by gender in street games, or did the girls and the boys play the same sort of stuff in the street?

SS: Well the girls played potsie, the boys played skelzies, but the girls wanted to learn to play skelzies, so we could play with the boys. The girls jumped rope, and the boys would play like Johnny on the Pony or they - - all the the young boys wanted to learn to play stick ball. The stick ball games took place up on Jefferson, around on Franklin. There was a little street that came into Boston Road, and I don't remember which one, probably Jefferson, because I think Franklin runs north and south. So Jefferson Place, you would go up Jefferson Place and turn on Franklin and right in that block right there, they would hold fierce stick ball games. So all the young boys

would be practicing off the stoop trying to play stick ball so that they could participate in these games.

MN: But no girls tried to be part of that at that point?

SS: Not - - no. We watched. We watched. We were the - - we were the cheerleaders.

MN: The cheerleaders.

SS: Yes.

MN: Now, what was it like moving to Longfellow Place from Boston Road? Was it a different type of neighborhood? Was it a different feeling?

SS: It was. It was a different feeling. That neighborhood basically there - - it was still a heavy Jewish population. There were lots of African Americans there. I really - - I was so tied into my Morrisania community that I really didn't make many friends there. We didn't live there very long. Okay, and I would spend most of my time down on Boston Road. If my mother was working, I'd go from school to Boston Road, then she'd pick me up there and we would go home.

MN: And so where did you go from Longfellow Avenue?

SS: Longfellow Avenue - - we went to St. Mary's Projects.

MN: Oh, okay. Back down to - -

SS: Back down, and that's where I really - - there, that was a heavy Hispanic community, Hispanic and African American. And that was - - that was fun. We had good times.

MN: Now, so you didn't get to see the real deterioration of the community first hand, or were your relatives still living there?

SS: Some of my relatives were still living there, and I did - - I saw it - - I would go back and it was like, wow, and then this was gone. And I would go back and, wow, that was gone. We had

a rib shack across the street from us, which I think is, I think it's still a gas station. It went from a rib shack to a linoleum store and then from a linoleum store I think to a gas station. And just, you know, I had a good friend of mine that still lived on Fulton and 168th in the Robert Fulton Houses over there, so I would purposely go down Boston Road to go to her house, just so I could through the old neighborhood and see what was going on.

MN: Because a lot of that stuff, you know, near your school, that was the stuff that burned.

SS: That's right, that's right. Yes, and I remember going back after the Charlotte Housing Project was finished, and just looking and just seeing how different it was, and remembering the walk when the bus wouldn't come on time. I would be brave enough to walk from my school home. It was just one straight shot, and the consolidated laundry that used to be there and it's not there anymore.

MN: Did you have any sense, like, you know, in the early '60s that things were going to deteriorate there? Were people talking about moving out?

SS: Yes. A lot of, a lot of my neighbors were moving to Co-op City. Co-op City had just been built, and there were people on waiting lists and they were trying to move out. I guess they saw, you know, they saw it. As children, we didn't see it. This was our home.

MN: Now were you at all aware of drugs?

SS: Yes.

MN: Okay, you know, so even when you were growing up, that was something you were aware of.

SS: Yes.

MN: And how - - what was the form that took?

SS: I think it was heroine.

MN: Heroine, yeah.

SS: Yeah, heroine was the drug of choice at that time. We saw it, but no one ever bothered the children.

MN: So when you say you saw it, you saw people like nodding out.

SS: Yes, yes, yes. We never saw - - we were - - we knew that it was done by injection, but we never saw any of the remnants of anything around, but our super was kind of - - he was going down that path, but he was basically a nice person. It's just that he just chose to, you know, to do the drug thing. We would see it sometimes even riding on the busses. They'd be on the busses. You know, but it wasn't the type - - I guess because heroine is the type of drug that does not make you violent, you know, it was just something that we would see, and our parents made us aware of it.

MN: Now was this something that made people lock their doors, or put bars. Was - -

SS: Yes.

MN: Okay, so you didn't grow up with open doors.

SS: I did at one point, but it was in my early years that I started to see the doors locked.

MN: And guards on windows - -

SS: Yes.

MN: - - Because the fear the junkies would - -

SS: Yes.

MN: Right.

SS: We - - I was - - the children were not allowed to have keys. The only key holders were the adults. So, the doors were open. And we would come home from school and just walk right into the house. We had neighbors across the hall from us that grew up as family members practically,

and we would knock to let them know that we were coming in, or we would just walk in. Our doors were always open, but as things started to happen, the doors became locked.

MN: Now what about gangs? Was that an issue for the boys? For like, your cousin? Did he have to worry about going into different neighborhoods or - -

SS: Yeah, there were a couple of - - there was only one, one gang that I remember, the Disciples. And they were like the Jennings Street area gang, and if you - - there are certain times that you just didn't go around there, because you knew that they were there.

MN: And was this something that more affected boys than girls, or girls had to be aware of it too?

SS: The girls had to be aware. I remember my uncle's wife telling me how when they were younger, because they were childhood sweethearts, how she had to run one day because they were being chased, and she took off her high heels. They had just come from a party and they were, you know, they were really running to get home.

MN: Now was your family involved in any church when you were growing up?

SS: My grandmother was Roman - - well I wouldn't say Roman Catholic, but she was Catholic. She attended St. Augustine.

MN: Now, this was your mother's mother?

SS: Yes.

MN: From South Carolina?

SS: Yes.

MN: Now was she Catholic in South Carolina, or was she a convert when she came to the Bronx?

SS: That I - - I don't know.

MN: But did you ever go to St. Augustine's?

SS: Yes, yes. Many times. That was our - - well that was the church that my family was affiliated with, as I said, I went to public school, so whenever my, our cousins would go to mass, sometimes I'd go with them. If - - but I was baptized Presbyterian. I was baptized in St. Aug - -
[In unison] Augustine's!

MN: Right, okay.

SS: [Laughs] That's my church. But because that was my father's - - my father's mother's church, but because at that time I was living with my mother and her mother, then we all went to St. Augustine.

MN: Right. Now, [Tape error] still close to your father's family?

SS: Yes.

MN: And where did they live?

SS: They lived on Stebbins Avenue.

MN: Stebbins between where and where?

SS: Off of Prospect and the next block down. I'm not quite sure. But he - - he knew Colin Powell. You know, they didn't live too far from Colin - - from, you know, where he was.

MN: Now was your father living in the Bronx when you were growing up?

SS: Yes.

MN: So, how many times a week did you see him?

SS: Once a week at least. At least. And I would spend weeks over with my grandmother, with his mother, and we would go places, and then she would take me to visit my Great Grandma T, who lived up in Washington Heights, who was my grandfather's mother. We - - and I had relatives at Coney Island. She'd take me out there, so - -

MN: So, you had a lot of family - -

SS: Yes.

MN: On both sides.

SS: Yes, yes, yes.

MN: Now, were you a regular at St. Augustine's?

SS: No. I wouldn't consider myself a regular. My cousins were, because they attended school, you know, and you had to go to Sunday mass if you went to school, so I would go from time to time with them.

MN: Now were the masses well attended at that time?

SS: Yes, yes.

MN: So this was a very dynamic congregation?

SS: Yes, and the mass was in Latin. [Laughs]

MN: It was in Latin?

SS: [Laughs] Yes. So, I learned a few words.

MN: Now, were you still in elementary school when you moved to St. Mary's? Or were you going - -

SS: Yes. Yes, I was. Yes I was.

MN: And you stayed in Junior High School - - you stayed in P.S. 50?

SS: Yes.

MN: Now that's a fairly long trip.

SS: Yes.

MN: [Laughs]

SS: Bus. [Laughs] I had friends from the neighborhood that were all - - that were Latin, and we would all get on the bus together, and African American too, and we would just meet at - - in front of Morris High school, and catch the bus there, and then just take the bus right on to our - - Herman Ritter, get off the bus, and go to school.

MN: Now, what was St. Mary's Houses like when you first moved in there? Was this - - was this considered a step up?

SS: Yes. It was - - that was middle class. St. Mary's was a middle class housing project. Very safe. We played in the stairwells. I - - we did whatever we wanted. We played in the halls. We played - - we were outside and the parks in the summertime were wonderful. The guys would play basketball. They'd have the conga drums out at night and, and it was just very rich, culturally rich.

MN: Now how many of you were there when you moved there?

SS: It was just myself.

MN: Oh, just you and your mother?

SS: Just me, my mother, and my stepfather.

MN: And your stepfather. And where did your mother and stepfather meet?

SS: In the neighborhood. They were all from the same [Laughter] - - all from the same neighborhood. Yes.

MN: And what did he do for a living?

SS: He - - he was in the Air Force. But he was - - he's an electrician. And, oh, he worked for Bell Telephone. That's what it was - - that one down on where near the World Trade Center is, that building down there, if it's still there.

MN: So, there was the three of you, and how big was the apartment?

SS: It was a nice size. We all had - - I had my own room - -

MN: You had your own room?

SS: I had my own room.

MN: So you went from [Crosstalk] five in a bed or something - -

SS: to my own room.

MN: Wow.

SS: But, when we moved to Longfellow Avenue I had my own room.

MN: Okay.

SS: And then from - -

MN: Now was that - - was your stepfather there at Longfellow Avenue also?

SS: That's when he and my mother married.

MN: Okay, right.

SS: And, then he - - we moved from Longfellow Avenue. That was my mother and my - - that was ours. That Longfellow Avenue was ours. And we moved from there to St. Mary's, and that's, you know, where we moved after she married my stepfather.

MN: And St. Mary's was - - how tall were the buildings?

SS: I think the tallest was sixteen. Sixteen or twenty-one, I think it was.

MN: And how many buildings were there?

SS: Five. There's three on - - no - - yes. Three on the - - on the I guess you would call it the uptown side of the El, and two on the downtown side of the El.

MN: And which El was this?

SS: The number two. The IRT. The number two and the five.

MN: So, were you excited to get there?

SS: Yes, yes.

MN: And kids were pretty friendly? It wasn't like, "Oh you're the new kid?"

SS: Well they were, yeah, because I was the new kid, and because I did not attend the neighborhood schools. I didn't walk to school with them. My friends didn't live in the neighborhood because I kept up with my friends. And, so, I had friends, but they were not as close to me as my elementary school friends. So, it was a place where I could go and play and we could sit out on the bench and talk and whatnot, but I still stayed tied to my Morrisania community. That was my family.

MN: Now, were there any tensions between like Puerto Ricans and African Americans in St. Mary's or did people get along really well?

SS: We all got along. There was really nothing that I can remember of that nature. [Tape error] Of course there was between housing projects. If you were from St. Mary's, you wouldn't go to Melrose, you know, or if you - - you know, like that - -

MN: So rivalry between the projects.

SS: Yeah. Nothing violent, but you know, it was just like what are you doing here, you know, that type of thing. You had to know someone, and then you could kind of move in from that, knowing a particular person, and then you were accepted.

MN: Now were there like - - was there a community center at the St. Mary's Houses?

SS: Yes. And a daycare.

MN: And a daycare. So, were there dances at the community center, or it was more like recreational activities?

SS: [Tape error] It was more recreation. We had a - - you know you could have a party there, a birthday party if you wanted to. It wasn't that big, but it was - - some people did hold things there.

MN: Now what sort of - - did you pick up any artistic or musical activities outside of, you know, the school that you - - did you take music lessons or - -

SS: Yeah. I - - I took guitar lessons. I played saxophone in junior high school.

MN: You played saxophone?

SS: [Laughs] Yes.

MN: At Herman Ritter?

SS: At Herman Ritter.

MN: Were you in the band?

SS: Yes.

MN: And did you take home the saxophone?

SS: Yes.

MN: That must - - do you have any pictures of you with a sax - -

SS: I don't know. I have to ask my mother, because we had our spring concerts, you know.

MN: Now, when you're playing saxophone, did you dream of being like a rock and roll saxophonist?

SS: Well actually at that time I was taking guitar too, and I dreamt of being a guitar player, of doing something with that. My band teacher is David - - was Dave Barger. He played with Blood Sweat and Tears, and now he is a tubist trombonist. He has his own website.

MN: B - - How do you spell it?

SS: B-A-R-G-E-R-O-N

MN: Bargeron. Wow. So, he was a practicing musician?

SS: He was, yes. He was deep in it.

MN: And he was deep. And you knew he was good?

SS: Yes. Yes. He was excellent.

MN: Wow.

SS: He was excellent. He was my homeroom teacher in the ninth grade, and he was my music -
- my - - the band teacher.

MN: Now did you - - I mean, because one of the interesting things is not a lot of women become
like instrumental musicians. Did you ever try to like, get a band together to play on the side?

SS: No. We didn't. I had friends who did, but we were basically - - at that time, as you said, the
women really didn't do - - it was mostly the guys that did it, and we just were the groupies I
guess you could call us. [Laughs]

MN: Right. No, I mean I know that whole scene because I started playing saxophone because I
wanted to be like King Curtis.

SS: Oh, okay.

MN: It was just I had no talent.

SS: [Laughs]

MN: But you know - - but I never knew any of the girls who did that.

SS: We had a lot, a lot of girls in the band. The flutist. The flautist. Excuse me. And I wasn't
the only saxophone player. We had a girl who was the baritone saxophone player, and it, you
know, it was a nice mix, a nice mix in the band.

MN: Because I mean, you think about it, there are not too many like women guitarists who came out of the '60s. I guess from Sly and the Family Stone, you know you had - - that was where the - -

SS: That was where the - - yes.

MN: Did any of your friends try to become like pop musicians, or rock, or soul bands or - -

SS: Well, not the girls, but the boys did, the boys did. I left Herman Ritter and I went to Music and Art, as an art student.

MN: An art student?

SS: Yes. Dave Valentine went on, Noel Pointer went on.

MN: Now were they at Herman Ritter with you?

SS: No. They were at - - well Dave actually went to junior high school with my dear friend, at 135, and she knew him. She knew him very well. And he then - - he left there. He was very talented. He played many, many instruments. Now, I met him there at junior high school, then we wound up at Music and Art together.

MN: Now was he from, like, the neighborhood near St. Mary's or - -

SS: He was from - -

MN: or from Hunts.

SS: - - the Stebbins area, because 135 was built in the old Stebbins Avenue area. They tore down a lot of the buildings there and built 135 - - is it 135? I think that's the number of the school. And, so he lived over in that area.

MN: Was music as much a part of the St. Mary's experience as the Boston Road experience?

SS: No. [Plane] The Boston Road experience was very musical. St. Mary's, it was musical in a different sense because I was a little older, so I started going to dances, and we started having

house parties, and the Motown sound was big at that time. So, it was musical in that sense, where I was more of a participant as a dancer, or a partier, but - -

MN: Now how old were you when you were allowed to start dating?

SS: About sixteen, thirt - - something like that. Thirteen, sixteen.

MN: Was your mother fairly strict? Your parents - -

SS: Yes, they set very strict rules. I - - I couldn't - - I had to be home by ten. Ten or eleven o'clock. Everything just started happening at ten or eleven o'clock, so I was really, you know, upset about that.

MN: Were you, now, did they ever allow you to throw parties?

SS: Yes. I had parties. I had house parties, but they were over by ten. [Laughs]

MN: They were over by ten, and your parents were there?

SS: Oh yes. Yes.

MN: Now, so the house parties usually had a parent there?

SS: Yes. Always a parent, always a parent.

MN: Now were these the red light, blue light parties?

SS: Well, mine wasn't, but I did attend a couple in my friends' homes, you know, where they said there was a parent there. I assume there was, but those were the red light parties. Actually, the scarf over the lamp parties.

MN: Oh, okay - -

SS: You know, that type.

MN: - - the scarf over the lamp party.

SS: Yes. Yeah. They were yes, red light. [Laughs]

MN: So this is - - what - - where did you develop the artistic talent? Was this some that started early?

SS: Yes. In elementary school I was really interested in drawing and I did do a lot. I was considered one of the better artists in the class. I took art lessons, as a matter of fact, at Saks Fifth Avenue on Third Avenue, when Saks used to be there. Not Saks Fifth. Was it - - Sachs Furniture Store. They had it. And above that, they had a big board room and they offered art lessons to the children in the area.

MN: This is Sachs in the Hub?

SS: Yes.

MN: And how old were you when you were going down there?

SS: Oh, ten.

MN: Did you go by yourself or - -

SS: My mother.

MN: Now was your mother artistic? Is this something - -

SS: I think she - - yes. My mother is very artistic. And when I was growing up, she did little things, but as she got older, she took many - - she's a wonderful artist. A painter. My father was a commercial artist - -

MN: The first - - your [Crosstalk]

SS: - - for a while.

MN: Your biological - -

SS: My natural, my biological father.

MN: So, you have both parents with artistic talent. And was - - did the school encourage you?

SS: Yes. Yes. We had art. We had music. Especially in junior high school. And you know I -
- we had a great - - a good art teacher, and he knew how to push you in the direction you needed
to go.

MN: Now, do you think that the schools today have the same kind of cultural instruction that
you had when you were growing up?

SS: No. I don't. I really don't. My school does. My school is very special. But I don't think
that it's - - I - - I can't say, because I'm not, you know, in the region to know for sure, but I don't
hear of a lot of art being offered in the schools, as I knew it to be, or - -

MN: Or the music - -

SS: - - or the music.

MN: - - where the kids are taking home instruments.

SS: Well now in some of the junior high schools, yes. In the area where I am, the school behind
me, 180, the children do. That's considered the school for the arts, or something.

MN: Now where do you live now?

SS: I live on 220th off of White Plains Road.

MN: Oh, okay. So, you had both art and music in the schools in junior high.

SS: Yes.

MN: And how did you get into Music and Art? Did you have to take a test?

SS: Yes.

MN: And what was that test like? And what did you have to submit?

SS: It was scary. I had to have a portfolio, but I had been painting all along. My mother
encouraged it. We had a friend who was a wonderful artist at the time, and he encouraged it. He
would buy little canvasses for me. He gave me my first set of oil paints, and I was always

painting or drawing or doing something, so I was always immersed. It was either music, listening, or trying to participate, [Crosstalk] or through my art. And, the test was scary. I had a portfolio. Then they asked you to draw a still life. They asked you to draw something from your imagination. They asked for a - - and then it was just a basic test. It was also an academic test. Because it was a special school, you had to maintain a seventy-five academic average. And, I remember being very nervous taking that test, and I think an interview was involved too, so after that, I left there, and went to my mother's job, which at that time she worked on Knickerbocker Avenue which was not that far from Music and Art, so I just walked down the block to her and, you know, told her about the test and all.

MN: Now was your apartment filled with art - -

SS: Yes.

MN: - - your artwork, and your mother's artwork?

SS: Yes. Yes.

MN: Wow.

SS: Yes.

SS: And at that time, my stepfather had embraced Islam. And their type of artwork is a little different. They are not allowed to depict the human form or anything. So, a lot of it is scroll work, and different Islamic sayings in the scroll - - worked into the scroll work, and it was through him that I discovered what they called at that time the Osmiroid pens, where - - the pens with the very fine points and the different inks that you could use, so I got into drawing with that.

MN: Now, which type of Islam did he become?

SS: Sunni.

MN: And where did - - was this in the service that he became exposed to it?

SS: No. This was during the black revolution movement. The, you know - - and some people moved towards Islam, others moved towards the black Islam, the black - -

MN: The Nation of Islam.

SS: - - Yeah, the Nation of Islam.

MN: So he became - -

SS: No. He moved to the Sunni. To the right, where Malcolm X went after he was enlightened.

MN: Now, was your stepfather a politically conscious - -

SS: Yes.

MN: - - person?

SS: Very. Very. So I - - he made me aware of a lot of things, but at that time, I was a flower child, so I didn't care.

MN: Oh, okay, so - - [Laughter] - - So, that's interesting. Are there pictures of you in - - so, this is in the late '60s. And did your musical tastes flow in that direction also?

SS: Yeah. I listened to a lot of protests. I also - - I listened - - my tastes were so eclectic, because I really listened to a lot of the protest songs of the time, and even though, you know, my father would try to make me more politically aware than what I was, I was basically involved in whatever that struggle was. If it was against the Vietnam War, that's where I was. You know, I was involved in the black power struggle a little later on, but my first - - my first turn was towards the Vietnam War and protesting that.

MN: Now were there - - there must have been a lot of political activism at Music and Art.

SS: Oh boy. Yes.

MN: So tell us a little bit about - - what year did you arrive there?

SS: In '68.

MN: Wow.

SS: '67, '68 I think. So we were in the heat of it.

MN: You're right near City College too, which - -

SS: Yes, and we, oh yes. So we were really involved. That was really - - at that time, that was when I became involved in the black power movement.

MN: Now, did you go in any anti-war marches?

SS: No, basically what - - yeah, one, I did. One at City College, I was involved in. [Lowers voice] I wasn't supposed to be there, but I was. And there was one that - - I mean, one, that they marched through our school. The people from City College came into the school and marched through, and we all left our classrooms and we joined the march outside. Our spring festival at that time was basically a black - - an African American black movement spring festival, and we were all involved in the Boot Dance and we were - - you know, everything was, you know, black power and all that - -

MN: Did you grow an afro at that time?

SS: Yes I did. Yes I did. I'm not going to say I was the most politically conscious person there, but I was leaning in that direction.

MN: Now were there any, you know, musicians of the late '60s who, other than the Motown people, who made a particular impression in you?

SS: I - - I - - now - -

MN: Did you like get into Jimi Hendrix or - -

SS: Yes. Okay, yes. Jimi Hendrix, Sly and the Family Stone, the Isley Brothers. As a matter of fact, I saw a free concert of the Isley Brothers at the Beacon - -

MN: Oh my gosh.

SS: When it was free! [Laughs]

MN: A free concert at the Beacon?

SS: Free. It was free. When they - - when - - that was when I had - - went to NYU, at that time, that the student council. They were giving out the free tickets to see them at the [Crosstalk]

MN: So you went to NYU from - -

SS: Music and Art.

MN: Now did you go to NYU downtown or up - -

SS: Downtown.

MN: Right. Boy. Those were exciting times.

SS: Yes they were. Yes they were.

MN: I mean. I was in the Columbia strike, and The Grateful Dead came to play at the Columbia strike.

SS: Oh. Okay, okay. Yes, I wasn't too much into The Grateful Dead, but Sly and, and Jimi, and I'm sure if you could name a few others, I could say yes. [Laughs]

MN: What about Janis Joplin?

SS: Yes. Yes, yes. And - - what's the child's name? [Singing] When I was - - something - - when I was only seventeen - - Jan - - Ian.

MN: Janis Ian.

SS: She when to Music and Art. [Crosstalk]

MN: Music and Art. And Laura Nyro - - what about Laura Ny - -

SS: I didn't know her.

MN: You didn't know her.

SS: I didn't know her.

MN: Wow. What about - - did you ever get into Gil Scott-Heron?

SS: Yes, yes.

MN: And The Last Poets?

SS: Yes. Oh my gosh. Yes, yes, yes. All of those. Yes.

MN: So, wow. Were there any kids who were folk musicians? Did you - - were you still playing guitar?

SS: No. I - - because I was accepted into Music and Art as an artist, I really just kind of dropped it and focused. My guitar teacher was the guitar teacher - - was the guitar player for Willie Bobo. [Laughs]

MN: Now, your guitar teacher in - - in the neighborhood?

SS: And he lived - - I think he was from - - my mother knew him, and so I expressed an interest. This was in my junior high school years. I expressed an interest in learning the guitar, so she asked him, if he would give me and my friend guitar lessons.

MN: And this was private lessons?

SS: Yes.

MN: And this was when you were living at St. Mary's, or at Longfellow?

SS: Well it was when I was living - - oh boy - - I was living at St. Mary's, but I would go back to my grandmother's house on Boston Road - -

MN: And that's where he was - -

SS: - - to give me the lessons. Yes.

MN: Okay. So, he was in that area.

SS: Yes.

MN: Wow, so you had been exposed to some pretty good teachers.

SS: Yes. And he did come to St. Mary's too. He came, but you know, it all depended on where - - when he was available. I would go.

MN: Were you optimistic in those years, that all of this activity was going to make the world a better place?

SS: Yes. Yes, yes. We all were. We all wanted things to get better. We wanted everyone to, you know, stop all the war, and keep the environment clean, and everything I guess. We just - - it just didn't work out. [Laughter]

MN: Yes, here we are.

SS: Yes.

MN: Yes. Oh man. What was NYU like?

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

MN: And music venues you went to.

SS: Oh, Café Wha?

MN: Oh gosh.

SS: The Blue Note. We weren't - - we didn't go to The Blue Note, because at that time it was very jazzy, but the Café Wha?, and then there was The Bottom Line. Those were the two basically. Oh, and there was a place that we would frequent called Adam and Eve. It was - - at the time everyone was into drinking Sangria, when you get these big mugs of Sangria. We would go there after class and a lot of us would meet there, and you know, saw dust on the floor type of thing was - -

MN: Now, now was your friendship circle at Music and Art multi-racial?

SS: Yes, yes. I have a great picture, as a matter of fact - - I should've brought it, I forgot all about it - - of me and my afro and a couple of friends of mine, Manny Cabrera I think and

another young man and this young lady that I stayed friends with. She was a young lady of a Jewish family - - I don't know - - and we were all in this picture together.

MN: Wow, so, and of course the Beacon Theater had great music.

SS: Yes. Yes, yes. That was the time - - that was when people like Jimi Hendrix would play there.

MN: Now did you ever go - - did you go to any of be-ins in Central Park?

SS: Did I? No. No. Never attended any of those.

MN: Now what did your stepfather make of the hippie politics? [Laughs] He didn't know - -

SS: He - - you know, they didn't know what - - that poor - - my mother, my stepfather didn't know what to make of me. I had the beads, the glasses, the safari jacket, the buttons. You could go down to Greenwich Village and get all the little buttons, that Make Love Not War and all these little slogans, and that - - I guess that's just where I was, and they figured if they just leave me alone I'd be okay, and yes, it lasted for a couple of years and then that's when I moved into my black consciousness movement.

MN: Now when you - - was it at NYU that the black consciousness organizations - - or did it happen at Music and Art more?

SS: More at Music and Art. Music and Art. I would say, my, umm, like my junior and senior year.

MN: Was there a group there that you joined?

SS: I - - there was a group. I believe there was a group for African American studies. I did not join. And there was also the ASPIA [?] was there. There were lots of groups there, but I really didn't join anything, but we were, you know, we were also - - you know, we were foot soldiers, if they needed pamphlets handed out. We would do it, you know whatever they needed. We

were more on the periphery. The inner circle was a little too heavy for me. Yes. It was very, very political, because all those minds there, you know, everyone reaching, aspiring and reaching upwards, so we were all very - - everyone was conscious of what was going on.

MN: Now, what about the Bronx? Were there like political groups in the neighborhoods? Was there like - - did you ever see Black Panthers in the Bronx handing out in, you know, in their uniforms, or handing out flyers, or was it more in Manhattan than - -

SS: It was more in Manhattan. We didn't see too much of that that I can remember, in our neighborhood. I do remember the Nation of Islam, when they started handing out, you know, and I remember a couple of them, but it was mostly the Jehovah Witnesses that were prevalent in the neighborhood that would hand, you know, hand out the religious flyers.

MN: When did you start becoming aware that really bad things were happening in the Bronx? Or was your neighborhood relatively insulated?

SS: No. When I moved to St. Mary's - - we moved away from Longfellow - - it was still pretty - - everything was still pretty much in tact. Morrisania area, Boston Road was pretty much in tact, but when we moved to St. Mary's, that's when that Bronx burning started. As a matter of fact, I could look out my bedroom window and watch the houses on Caldwell Avenue just go up in flames.

MN: Wow. Now, your building was in the north side. What street was it on?

SS: Trinity and 156th.

MN: Okay. So that's where the St. Mary's Houses - - Trinity and - -

SS: It starts - - it started at 156th on Trinity Avenue and then it would go like three or four houses down then cross over to the - - over the El, and two houses on the other side.

MN: So, you could see houses burning out your window.

SS: The houses right in back of the playground. As a matter of fact they - - when the firemen came, there was a lot of debris in the playground that a lot of the children played in that had to be cleared out.

MN: Wow. What was that like to see that?

SS: It was scary.

MN: How did your parents explain this? I mean what did - - what - - how did people who were watching this happen before their eyes - -

SS: There was no explanation except for discontent. People were not happy, and rather than see certain things happen - - I guess rather than give the rent to - - whatever was in their mind? And I can't say who burnt the houses down. It didn't have to be the people who lived there.

MN: Yes, it could've been the landlord.

SS: It could've been someone else. It could've been the landlords. It could've been - - whoever it was, but just to see it, it was, it was very - - it was scary and it was sad and you just didn't know - - you didn't know what to make of it. It was a time where you just didn't know what direction the world was going to go.

MN: Yes, because those early '70s years, I mean, you know, you had all the hopes in the '60s and then, you know, the '70s are - - and all these things are, you know, are happening, and people coming back from the war. Were - - Was that something that you were aware of? Like, guys from the neighborhood going off to fight in Vietnam and then coming back and - -

SS: My hero was supposed to go to Vietnam, but they didn't send him, and I was afraid of that, and my uncle was in the army at the time, and he wrote me a letter once telling me that was a possibility that they would be sending him to Vietnam, but he wound up not going for whatever reason. He didn't go, but I remember getting that letter. I was away at sleep away camp, and he

wrote me, and I remember crying my eyes out thinking that my uncle would go to war and be killed and I would never see him again.

MN: This, now, how much of Caldwell Avenue burned? A good portion of it?

SS: A good portion, a good portion. It was that whole row of houses right behind my - - my building was the first building as you walked in off of 156th Street, the most northern building.

MN: What was the address of - -

SS: 700.

MN: 700, 156th Street?

SS: Yes.

MN: And Caldwell ran into a Hundred - -

SS: Caldwell - - 156th Street ran cross this way. Trinity came out, ran through the projects, and continued on the other side. Caldwell was the next block up.

MN: Right, yes. Wow. Now when you were at NYU, were commuting or were you living there?

SS: Commuting. Commuting. They said I lived too close to live there.

MN: And did you spend all four years there?

SS: Yes.

MN: And when did you decide that you thought you were going to become a teacher? Was that at NYU?

SS: Yes.

MN: And what prompted that decision?

SS: Well I was - - I always looked at teaching. I was a member of the Future Teacher's Club when I was in junior high school, but of course, you know, as you grow, your thoughts about

what you want to be change. I wanted to be an interior decorator. I wanted to be a translator for the UN. I wanted to be a nurse. There's so many things, but I enjoyed art, and when I realized that it was hard for an artist to make it, and how, you know, you hear all these stories about the struggling artists, I didn't want to go that route, so I said I would go into education as a back-up, then I wound up just going through with it, and I was certified as an art teacher, then they cut the art program [Laughs] in the schools, so - -

MN: Now that's an interesting story. So you started out in the system as an art teacher.

SS: Yes.

MN: And at what school? What was your - -

SS: At NYU.

MN: At NYU.

SS: Yes.

MN: No but what - - were you placed in an elementary - -

SS: Oh, no. Our programs were cut. I started in daycare, and then from daycare I went to private school. I went to - - taught Montessori School for a couple of years, and then from there, I went to the Board of Ed.

MN: Now how did you end up in Spanish as your area?

SS: Well I grew up in a Hispanic Community, so I knew a lot of street Spanish. I studied Spanish in junior high school for three years, and because I had Spanish speaking friends, I kept some of it and I was teaching first grade. The person who was teaching Spanish didn't want to teach Spanish anymore. She wanted to be in the classroom, so I wanted to get out of the classroom, and I spoke to her on the side and asked her if she would be willing to make a switch, and she did, so that's how I started teaching Spanish.

MN: Now did you ever like go through something where you reinvented yourself as a Puerto Rican, and - -

SS: [Laughs]

MN: - - have you ever - -

SS: Someone said that to me now. One of my friends said, "Oh, now that you're Puerto Rican." I said, "I beg your pardon." You know, but because I had so many Spanish speaking friends, you know, it was very easy, and me looking the way I do, easily mistaken for Puerto Rican. People walk up to me now and start speaking Spanish. Puerto Rican, Dominican, whatever, of Latin background, and people will start right in off the bat speaking Spanish. Now if I understand them, it just triggers and I just respond right away, you know, but I'm not fluent, so there are many things that they've said to me and I'll have to tell them, no I don't speak Spanish that well.

MN: Because my granddaughter, everybody asks if she's Puerto Rican.

SS: Yes, she does. She looks that - -

MN: So, when you graduated from NYU, where was your first daycare job?

SS: At the North Bronx National Council of Negro Women Daycare Center, on White Planes Road. [Laughs] Long title.

MN: Now, had you then moved up to that area, or you - -

SS: Yes. By then I had gotten married.

MN: Oh, okay.

SS: Okay, and I'm now - - live in the area, that you know, that I'm living in, so - -

MN: Now, did you marry somebody you met at NYU, or somebody from - -

SS: No, I'm married a police officer. [Laughs] Someone that - - actually he was a friend of my mother's dear friend, and we were invited to a dance, and it was a policeman's ball, at the Savoy Manor, and that's where I met him.

MN: And were you still at NYU when you got married?

SS: No. I had graduated, but I met him while I was at NYU.

MN: At NYU, and then you - - so, you started working, you know, in the same community you were living?

SS: Yes, once we had gotten married I had, but I used to work at St. Mary's Park, as a parky, when I was going to New - - NYU - -

MN: Oh really?

SS: - - I had a job down there. High school friend of mine and I had - - were placed there through the Urban League, and so we were parkies, and we'd take the kids on trips and take them over to St. Mary's pool. And that - - you know, so I was always somewhere working with children. And even during the summer I always worked in day camps, you know with children, rather than trying to go into like a filing clerk in the office. And once I graduated from NYU, that's when I went into daycare.

MN: And how long did you stay in the daycare area?

SS: I stayed - - I would say about a good six years - - six, seven - - six years.

MN: Now what - - were you very aware of the fiscal crisis affecting, you know in the '70s, affecting education and recreation?

SS: I was somewhat aware of it. I of course at that time - - well, that was when I was at Music and Art, and there was a teacher's strike. So, I was in the middle of that, and - -

MN: Now, what was the teacher - - was that a tense situation at the school?

SS: I don't recall it being very tense. I remember supporting the teachers. You know, the students supported their teachers, and we didn't cross the picket line. There were of course - - there's always someone that's going to cross the line, you know, but my group never did. And even in - - when I was in Herman Ritter, that was I think the first teacher's strike, in the '60s, and we would bring the teachers hot chocolate, and support the teachers.

MN: Okay, now, in looking back at this, you've lived in the Bronx all your life. [Plane] What are the things from your upbringing that have stayed with you the longest do you think, from the way you grew up and you know - - cause you're clearly a high energy optimistic person, even to this day.

SS: [Laughs]

MN: What, you know, are you still drawing on things that you were exposed to when you were younger?

SS: Yes. Everyday, everyday. Growing up in that community was - - is something that I - - I look at these children now, and how so many of them live in these high rises, and how they cannot go out and play out in the front of their building, and oh it's, it's heart breaking. We could go to the store. We were good at math. We never had problems with money. We would go and buy our own candy, or we went to the store for our - - adults in the building, and we were given money and we had to know whether or not we were getting the right change. So we had no problem. I look at these children now, half of them you - - they don't know what a - - what's a quarter? It's, it's really something. It's something. And it's - - I think about it. All the sunny days on the block, outside jumping rope, you know, the parents calling you from the window to come upstairs to eat, climbing those five flights of stairs, going back down five flights of stairs [Laughs] up and down, up and down. I mean we were strong. We were strong kids.

MN: Now did - - that brings up an issue. Did you have part time jobs, when you were, you know, ten, eleven, twelve?

SS: No. We were in school. We didn't - - we weren't allowed to really work until we were fourteen. We had to get our working papers.

MN: Working papers, right.

SS: So once we had our working papers, we would work. I had friends who did work after school, but I wasn't allowed. I could work during the summer. So, most of my jobs were summer jobs.

MN: So you think that kids today have, you know, a harder situation than you did in some ways.

SS: I - - you know, I - - I don't know if it's harder. I think it's deprived [Laughs]. That's the way I look at it, because you know of the things that they, you know a lot of the street gangs that they don't know. [Plane noise] They don't get that interaction. A lot of them don't have it until they get to school, you know, and their lunch period and their recess period, because they're in their house. They're playing video games. That's basically one to one. You know, all the board games that we played. You know, how we had to look out for each other, and all of that, it's - -

MN: What about the schools? Do you think the schools are better now?

SS: I think they're different. We were fine. We learned how to read and write, multiply. Our math was - - we were fine. There's always some that are going to slip through the cracks. I feel that all of these programs that they're instituting in the schools - - I don't know if they're really helping the children. The children seemed to be burned out. You know, the school is not - - I know you're there to learn, but we made learning fun, and it was, you know, it's not the same.

MN: You think there's more pressure now?

SS: There's a lot more pressure.

MN: Because of the tests?

SS: Testing, and our competition with Japan, and China, and all these overseas, you know, these countries that our students are not up to par. I think there was a cultural thing that put our students through that, you know, with the, you know, the lax thing with the - - I'm sorry to say, with the hippie era, and the parents, both parents having to go out to work, and as you said, the economic situation escalating, and you know that, that depression, that mild depression that our country went through and it's, it's hard when you have to go to daycare. Children have a long day now. They're out of the house from seven to six, and they come home there, and their parents try to spend what quality time that they can, but then it's bedtime, and then it's time to start all over again.

MN: Any final thoughts about this Bronx experience? I mean one of the things is, you know, you had a great neighborhood in Morrisania. You had a terrific public housing experience. The schools were good, and you had this incredibly supportive family. Even though your parents broke up, you were getting love and attention from both sides.

SS: Yes, yes.

MN: No wonder you're smiling.

SS: Yes.

MN: [Laughs]

SS: I cannot think about my childhood without smiling. I mean we, we remember - - I my cousins and I remember Junior High School 40. We used to play in the playground. We used to go there during the summer. That's where I learned how to make potholders. You know the little looms, square loom that you had to over under, over under. [Crosstalk]

MN: What did they - - who taught you how to do that?

SS: The arts and crafts teacher.

MN: They had an arts and crafts teacher there?

SS: In the summer. They had the summer camp, and you could go. You didn't have to register. You could just go.

MN: At Junior High School 40?

SS: At Junior High School 40. So, you know, it - - it was a great time. It was wonderful. I mean ice cream cones for, for - - double scoops for twenty-five cents. I mean what could you [Laughter] ask? The record store, the rib shacks. You know, and I remember having to go down to the corner to the BRT to get my uncles, but weren't allowed to go in. We had to stand outside the door, and yell and- -

MN: What is BRTs?

SS: - - get someone's attention. Oh, the Boston Road Tavern.

MN: Oh, okay. Tell me about the Boston Road Tavern.

SS: Oh. That was at the corner of Prospect and Boston Road, and it was the neighborhood watering hole. It was a very nice place, you know, the revolving wood, glass door, and it was really the - - it was the upscale bar of the neighborhood.

MN: Oh, okay. And this was - - how long did that place stay open till?

SS: It was open - - I was in high - - I was in college, it was still open.

MN: It was still open.

SS: My aunt was going there, because my family always goes back to the community. For the longest, my mother voted in the community.

MN: So, the Morrisania tie is a very powerful - - [Crosstalk]

SS: Is very strong, very powerful.

MN: So this is called the Boston Road Tavern. It was a classy place.

SS: Very. To me it was classy. I thought it was nice.

MN: Okay.

SS: I remember the first day I was allowed in when I turned eighteen, and I could finally walk through the door and have glass of wine or something like that, you know.

MN: Now, were the men polite to you?

SS: Yes, because I was from a family that everyone knew, and you knew that you were to be polite, or otherwise you would hear from my uncles.

MN: [Laughs] Okay.

SS: So, it wasn't anything. You know, no hanky panky.

MN: Right, okay. Now what about the Boston Road Ballroom? Did you go to any shows there?

SS: No. My parents, mostly my aunts and uncles that went there. We weren't allowed to go in some of these places. We would have to go down to the Blue Morocco sometimes. The cleaners that my grandmother used was down that end, and we would go down there sometimes to get, you know, whoever it was we needed to get, but we were not allowed in.

MN: Now which place - - were there any places which had a reputation for like, as having a little more trouble than others? [Pause] Or not really?

SS: No, no.

MN: No. These were - -

SS: Everyone - - we were all neighborhood. This was all neighborhood in our - - and everyone was good to everyone else. My aunt used to bar tend, bar mate some of these places, so, you know, my family was well known, and the children were known.

MN: Now what was the name of the family? You know, so like your - -

SS: My mother's family?

MN: Yes.

SS: Sabb.

MN: S-A - -

SS: B-B.

MN: S-A-B-B. So the Sabb family was known up and down Boston Road.

SS: Yes, yes.

MN: Well that's, that's - - and your aunt used to bar tend?

SS: Yes.

MN: Wow. At - - at - -

SS: At the BRT.

MN: At the BRT?

SS: Yes.

MN: I actually - - I think I have a flyer of - - from the BRT, from something, which I'll show you afterwards, but do you know Leroy Archibald who everybody calls Arch?

SS: Yes. You know, I didn't know him. My uncles knew him. My uncles knew them, and they knew, the Himmelsteins. They used to hang out with them. My father knew him - - I called my father, and he says, oh yes, I know him. I know him.

MN: He still comes back into Morrisania on weekends to [Crosstalk] hang out on Jennings Street.

SS: Yes. I - - my - - I'm telling you my - - we knew so many people. The people who were - - the men - - the family that lived across the street, their father was the only person I ever knew - -

this was something I'd seen on TV - - he was a hunter. He would go out once a year, like I think in the fall - - he'd come back with a deer strapped across the front of his car [Crosstalk].

MN: Oh that's hilarious. So, the deer comes to Morrisania.

SS: The deer comes to Morrisania. We'd all out - - everyone's out the window looking. Oh Mr. Johnson went hunting again.

MN: That's - - [Laughs]

SS: Oh, look at that, look at the deer. Oh no, he killed Bambi! [Laughs]

MN: Oh he killed - - Mr. Johnson killed Bambi. That's hilarious.

SS: You know, oh, but it was - - it was a great. It was one of the best neighborhoods ever.

MN: Now did you know the Chandler family - -

SS: Yes.

MN: - - from Jennings Street?

SS: Yes. [Laughs] Yes.

MN: Because they were another big family.

SS: Yes, yes. I knew them well. My family knows them well.

MN: Now, did you know Raymond?

SS: Yes. [Laughs] Uncle Ray.

MN: Because he's - - they're doing a big concert at the Paradise, him and his partner.

SS: Oh really? [Crosstalk]

MN: So I have to get you the information. It's going to be May 26th which is my birthday.

SS: Oh.

MN: They're having a big, you know, like '70s soul concert at the Loew - - at the Paradise, so.

I'll send you all the information when I get it, but I - - they manage to rent the place. Now, were you part of the hip hop group? Was that anything which - -

SS: A little bit, a little bit. Well, I was mostly part of the club group, you know. The hip hop - -

MN: You more were like the Pete "DJ" Jones, DJ Hot - - you were going to the discos.

SS: Yes.

MN: What were some of the discos you went to?

SS: Oh boy. The Act II on 42nd Street. I went to Manhattan - - no not Manhattan - - yes, Manhattan Center I went to once, once. We went - - we went to the Playboy - - used to go to the Playboy Club on 59th Street. There was another club right down the block. I think it began with a "Z." I couldn't take - - remember the name of it. It's on 59th Street, down the block from the Playboy Club.

MN: Does Nell Guin's ring a bell?

SS: Yes. Nell Guin's. Yes. Oh that was a wonderful place. I liked that. Yes, we - - Charlie Brown's when it downstairs in the Pan Am building, when it was the - - not when - - it was Pan Am, not Metlife. Oh my goodness.

MN: Any places you went to in the Bronx?

SS: In the Bronx - - you know, what we would do at that time - - NYU had the uptown campus, so there were a lot of parties at the uptown campus, so we were going to college parties at that time, so we would go in there and listen to the DJs spin, and you know, dance there.

MN: But, were you aware of like, you know Herc, Kool Herc?

SS: Yes.

MN: So, you had heard about those parties?

SS: I had heard about them. Yes, but I had never gone - - those, my younger cousins would go there, the ones right under me. They were the ones attending, attending then. I was more with the college crowd. You know, going up there, and doing those types of things.

MN: Okay. Okay, well let's wrap it up. Thank you very much. This was - -

[END OF SESSION]

MN: So we're talking about the big families in this portion. You know, there were the Sabbs, which was your family, the Chandlers, and then the Dashes.

SS: The Dashes, the Johnsons.

MN: And they all lived in this you know Jennings Street, Boston Road - -

SS: area.

MN: Now, did you know Arthur Jenkins? Does that name ring a bell? He became somebody who became a Latin musician.

SS: Yes. My parents might know him. They would know him.

MN: He's a little bit older.

SS: Yes, yes.

MN: And he used to go - - do you remember the Royal Mansion at all?

SS: My mother remembers it. She's trying to - - you know, that was on the other side of 169th Street, past the Blue Morocco. Right?

MN: No. It was 1312. It was north. It was, it was actually pretty close to - -

SS: So it was south. No, north, north. That's right, that's right.

MN: North. It was pretty close to where Union Avenue went in, into Boston Road. It was south of where you were, but - -

SS: Right. Before the Blue Morocco?

MN: No. It was north of McKinley Square.

SS: Okay, because we were north of McKinley Square.

MN: Yes. It was probably pretty close to you.

SS: But, it might have been across the street.

MN: It was across the street?

SS: Yes. It was across the street over the meat place over there. Yes, okay. [Laughs] Yes.

MN: Because that was - - he used to hear all the Latin music and that, you know, made him start to play. So, Damon Dash came from this family?

SS: He comes from the Dash - - he's a member of the Dash family, all of those people. Yes.

MN: Okay.

[Tape stops]

MN: Okay. We're also talking about the stick ball games on Jefferson Avenue, and you were saying that Boston Road was not a place you could play stick ball.

SS: No, because that was a major thoroughfare, so of - - the buses were there, and it was an effort to cross the street, because it was mostly congested, and cobblestoned at that too.

MN: It was cobblestoned.

SS: Cobblestoned. The trolley tracks were still there when I was there, but if you went up the block and around the corner on Jefferson Place and Franklin they would have these stick ball games, and it was just - - it was a summer thing. You'd go sit, and find a place on someone's stoop, and sometimes you would have like the Boston Road boys [] the Jennings Street boys against the Franklin Street boys, and it was a great game. I mean those guys could hit that ball, and if you could hit it higher than the five story building, of course that was a home run. If you hit past there that was a home run, you know, and it was great.

MN: Now was that - - was stick ball bigger than basketball at that time?

SS: No. It was just that you did either or, or you did both, and there were times when the basketball games were going on, and times - - it's just a matter of what you preferred.

MN: Okay.

[Tape stops]

MN: Okay, tell us a little bit about the role that Crotona Park played in your life when you were living on Boston Road, and some of the things you did there.

SS: That was our - - that was our picnic area. Whenever we wanted to have a picnic, we went to Crotona Park. Easter time, we would go to Crotona Park and take pictures, because it was, you know, it was the park. We would ride our bikes in Crotona Park under adult supervision. There was one hill called dead man's hill, and you know, dare you go down that hill, okay, but we would go out on Indian Lake, in the row boats. We had row boats out there at the time, and row out into the middle of the lake. You know, boyfriend and girlfriends would row out into the middle of the lake, and it was really nice. Joggers would jog around the lake. That was like a track almost for them, and you'd jog around Indian Lake, but you were not allowed to go without adult supervision. You had an adult with you to go to the park. The guys would - - and that's where they hold the old timers' basketball games, over there at Crotona Park, at the end closer to Fulton Avenue of Crotona Park.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Interviewer: Mark Naison
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