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## Sanchez, Ivan

Sanchez, Ivan Interview: Bronx African American History Project  
*Fordham University*

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[START OF INTERVIEW]

[START OF SIDE 1]

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Hello? Okay, yeah. We're on? Hello, today is December 2nd, 2008. We're here at Fordham University with Ivan Sanchez, author of the hot new book *Next Stop*:—

Ivan Sanchez (IS): Thank you.

MN: —*Growing Up Wild Style in the Bronx*, and we're here in 633 Dealy Hall conducting the interview. I'm Mark Naison, and Andrew Teat (sp?) for the Bronx African American History Project, and Charlie Johnson is videotaping the interview. Ivan, could you please spell your name?

IS: First name: Ivan, I-V-A-N, last name Sanchez, S-A-N-C-H-E-Z.

MN: And what's your date of birth?

IS: 9/21/72.

MN: Okay, so Ivan we begin this interview like we do all our interviews: tell us a little bit about your family, where they came from, and how they ended up in the Bronx?

IS: Alright, well one of the saddest things for me is that I don't know my deep, deep history of where we come from. My father, he was never there for us. So, I don't really know his background, other than that they're from Puerto Rico. So, my father was born in Puerto Rico, and his family

still lives in Puerto Rico to this day, my grandparents. So I pick up bits and pieces here from the family—

MN: Did you ever meet your gradnparents on your father's side?

IS: A couple of—maybe two times, three times in my life. So, there's really no connection there, you know? I really didn't know—

MN: And did he have brothers and sisters who you related to?

IS: Yeah, his sister, who is my Titi (sp?) Velma, is probably the aunt that I'm the closest with the family. And that was because she lived very close to us on Kingsbridge, down on Baily Avenue. So, I became very close with her and my cousins. And so, sometimes, being at her house, I'd kinda see my father come and go. But we just never had a relationship. I think I've seen him ten times in my life.

MN: Wow. So you were actually closer to his sister—

IS: His sister.

MN: —than you were to him?

IS: I consider her like a second mother, so—

MN: Right.

IS: But, again, we didn't talk about the family history. She didn't talk about—you know, her parents much. She never talked about my father, because I think she knew it was a sore subject for me—especially as I grew older—that he wasn't there, that he allowed my mother to live in an abandoned building with her children—and his children. And so, you know, I just don't know much about my father's side of the family. Now, my mother was born in New York, and her mother was born in Puerto Rico. Now, the reason I can't trace my history past that is because—well, my grandmother's dead, and I never had a relationship with her. And my grandfather—my mother doesn't really know who her father is, because there's a little bit of hidden family history there that says that my grandmother slept with her sister's husband. And so that's the great family secret. And so everybody believes that my grandmother's brother-in-law is the father of my mother. His roots, you know, go back to France and Spain, and they're the Pheobos (sp?) and the Bettencourt families. And so this is who we believe is my grandfather in that family, but we don't know that for a fact. You know, because it was a big secret.

MN: Now, do you know where you mother and father met?

IS: My mother and father met in the Bronx. Met in the Bronx around 170th, somewhere in that area. Which is where we first lived when we were born, you know, just off of Jerome Avenue.

MN: Okay, so you were in the 170s just off Jerome? And are you the oldest in your family?

IS: I'm the middle child. I have a brother named William, who's a couple years older than me.

MN: And so how many of them are you altogether?

IS: And then I have a sister, Tanya, who's younger, and those children are from my mother. Now, true to Puerto Rican family, my father went on to spawn children all over the Bronx, so I have about seven step-siblings.

MN: And are you in contact with those step-siblings?

IS: I stay in touch with one of my other brothers. His name is Billy. You know, my father wanted to name all his kids Willy or William, or Billy, after him—even though he didn't want to raise any of us. My middle name is William. So, he wanted to make sure we had his name, but that's it, you know.

MN: Now, when your father worked, what sort of work did he do?

IS: He was a mechanic. And back in the 60s, he was a mechanic for Mercedes and Porsch and Volvo. I mean, he was a—from what I've always heard—a phenomenal mechanic.

MN: So he was a skilled guy?

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IS: He was a skilled guy, and eventually he went on to be a trucker. You know, drove 18-wheelers. And I do have one or two experiences actually going, you know, on a truck ride with him.

MN: Right. Now, was he a union member? Like, you know, did he have any, you know—?

IS: No, I don't think so. But he was an alcoholic, he was a heroin addict, he was a cocaine addict. He was a womanizer and an abuser. I mean, the one or two times I saw him early in my life, he was coming to beat up my mom. Or, coming to give my mom \$100 and try to rape her for the \$100. And when she wouldn't sleep with him, he'd take the \$100 back and leave. So these are my memories of my father. Also, he won a lawsuit. You know, something with the NYPD back in the 70s, and won a lot of money. Like \$50,000 or something, or \$40,000. And he opened a bodega. You know, he opened a store. And he only had the store with his brother Raymond and another brother, they only had the store for months. Because no one would go in the store. Cause they'd be drunk and they're be harassing the customers and beating up the customers, and grabbing them and—

MN: Where was that bodega located?

IS: I don't know, but I—

MN: Was it down further south, or was it up where—?

IS: It was in the Bronx at—I mean, we have a long history in this whole area, from 170th down to 196th and Jerome and Kingsbridge—

MN: Right. Now, what are your earliest memories of where you were living at 170th street?

IS: I really don't have a lot of memories of that time, because at—when I was five years old, five to six years old, we moved over to Creston Avenue, on 196th street, over there just off of Kingsbridge. So most of my memories of the Bronx are Kingsbridge.

MN: Now, you moved. I mean, I know the—you know, I was taking the Jerome Avenue el to Fordham, you know, in 72, 73, 74, and there were buildings burning alongside the el. So, do you have any recollections of the fires and the abandonment and that stuff?

IS: I have a few early memories of fires. I remember one fire, it was just—you know, from the third story up was just burning. And we were on another roof watching it. And I'm not sure if we ran up there with friends or whatever. I was probably about, maybe six or seven years old. And we watched this fire burn, and we watched people running down the fire escapes. But I saw fires all the time. You know, it was just nothing out of the ordinary back in those days in the late 70s, 77, 78. We always saw fires, so it was nothing, you know, out of the ordinary.

MN: Now, you know, Creston Avenue and 196th street is a very different neighborhood than Jerome and 170th. How did your mother get an apartment up there?

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IS: You know, my mother was a hustler, man. And to this day I don't—yeah, she really was. And to this day I don't know the full extent of certain things my mother did. My mother was a single mom. She was on welfare. Sometimes she worked off the books. She sent us to catholic school, which—you know, it was years later I went back and asked her, "How did you do that?" And she shared with me that my uncle Joey, who was a lawyer—Joey Bettencourt—had helped, you know, finance—

MN: Now, Joey Bettencourt is on your mother's side or your father's side?

IS: My mother's side. My mother's side of my family is Harvard educated, is Fordham University educated, you know, My mother's side of the family, they're architects, they're doctors, they're lawyers, they're West Point graduates. Joe—Jose Vettencourt, my uncle, was a West Point graduate. He had a very flourishing law practice. But we didn't have any exposure to that side of the family, because they disowned my mother.

MN: Oh, they disowned her?

IS: They disowned her because she got with a street thug from the Bronx and she got pregnant at, I think, fifteen years old.

MN: Wow.

IS: So she was completely disowned.



Andrew Teat (AT): As kids, at which point did you become aware of this? You probably weren't when you very young, right?

IS: Yeah, you know, we went up to Westchester County a few times when we were young, to see the guy who we believed was my mother's father, who owned a huge, huge house in Westchester County. He was a business owner, he owned a manufacturing company. And we saw how like our second cousins, our cousins were living. And it was weird, you know? Cause we'd go back to the Bronx and we'd be eating peanut butter straight out of the jar, or we'd be cutting up the big block of cheese, you know, that you get when you're on welfare. You know, so it was weird for us to see those things. When you're young, you don't really understand all that. You just understand that you don't have what they have, and so you get that ingrained in you from a very early age, like "Why am I not living like that?" You know, "This is my family, and why are we suffering, and why are they living so well?"

MN: So your mother had your brother when she was 16?

IS: She was about 15, I believe.

MN: 15? Wow. And you were—when you were born, she was 17?

IS: 17, yeah.

MN: And your sister?

IS: A couple of years later, maybe 19.

MN: And that was the last kid she had?

IS: That was it, yeah.

MN: All before she was 20, she had three kids?

IS: Three kids.

MN: Now, in terms of education, was she somebody who took school seriously, was she a good student?

IS: My mother, the one thing she got from her family was that, if you can become educated, you can have whatever you want. That's what she got from her sisters, who were nurses, and they were married to architects. And, again, her cousin Joey was a lawyer. So my mother always understood the importance of education. And she says it all the time, "I knew if I could get you guys through Catholic school, at least through Catholic High School, you'd go onto college. No question." And that plan may have worked, with the exception of the fact that our neighborhood started to fall apart, you know, in 1987, around that time.

MN: Now did your mother ever go back to school?

IS: My mother, she got her GED. So she has a—that's how much education she has.

MN: Does she ever talk about going to college herself?

IS: She never has. She never has. She's, you know, 53 years old now—

MN: She's still young.

IS: Yeah, she's, you know, she's retired. She suffered from depression her whole life. My mother's tried to commit suicide at least ten times.

MN: Was any of this when you were growing up?

IS: Oh yeah, yeah. But we didn't realize it as much, when we were growing up. You know, it would just be, a family relative would just show up and say, "You're gonna stay with us for a month," or "You're gonna stay with us for two weeks."

MN: So that happened—when was that—how old were you the first time that somebody came and took you to go in?

IS: The youngest I remember is probably second grade, third grade.

MN: And were you up at Creston Avenue by that time?

IS: We were already living in Creston Avenue, yeah. We moved into Creston Avenue the summer before I started the first grade in Our Lady of Refuge. So, probably by the second grade, you know. We didn't see my mother—I saw my mother have a lot of nervous breakdowns, and break everything in the house. That was kind of normal. You know, sometimes my mother would just—she just couldn't handle the stress of life, I guess. Being a single mother, raising three kids, I mean—I'm raising three daughters with my wife, you know, and we can barely do it. So I just have no clue how my mother did it. But sometimes her release would be to break everything in the house, because she just couldn't handle the stresses of life. So I saw that part of her. I didn't actually see her do any of the attempted suicides until, you know, the last ten years, when I've moved to Virginia.

MN: Right. So you grew up with—Were you aware growing up, that there was a lot of stress in your house? You know—Or did you—Or was the world around you so much like that, that what was going on in your apartment seemed like it was, like, just that this is what goes on here?

IS: It just seemed like normal life to me, you know. We didn't really stop to think about it, until I was much older, that this is a very high stress way of being raised. And we were normal kids. I mean, my brother tortured me. My brother was a couple of years older than me. He tortured—I mean, he beat the shit out of me every chance he got. There's no other way I can put it. I mean, my brother just tortured me. You know, my mother'd come home, I'd have a black eye here. "What

happened?” “I fell.” “I ran into the door”—you know, the doorknob. And then she’d come home a week later, and I’d have black eye over here. “What happened?” “I fell off the bed.” You know, “I was doing backflips.” I stuck up for my brother. But he definitely was my silent torturer growing up. It took us a long time to put that to rest.

MN: Wow. Now, what was school like for you, when you first started going? Was it—did you start off in Catholic school?

IS: I started off in Catholic school, right from the beginning, and I—you know at the time—I mean, I loved Catholic school. I really did enjoy it until, you know, the sixth grade, when you start to question certain things. Like, if you can’t pay your tuition, you get kicked out of school immediately, even though you’re learning about the Catholic religion, and you’re learning that you should take care of your brother and sister. And you’re learning all these things, and the next thing your know, if you don’t have that tuition money, then you can no longer be a part of this. You know, you get kicked out of school. And I saw—My mother did a pretty good job, I guess with the help of my uncle, of keeping our tuition paid, and not putting us through that kind of embarrassment, but I saw a lot of my friends go through it. A lot. And even my cousins, who my aunt had attempted to put them in there, and she could never—

MN: This is your aunt from your father’s side?

IS: My aunt from my father’s side put her daughters in that school. And, you know, she just couldn’t maintain it sometimes. So I saw my cousins getting kicked out of school all the time.

MN: Okay, now, it's what, about a six block walk to Our Lady of Refuge from your house?

IS: Yeah, yeah.

MN: What was that walk like? What that something you had to be very—as a kid going to Catholic school—?

IS: Yeah.

MN: Was that like walking a gauntlet?

IS: We used to fight the public school kids all the time, man. We used to get made fun of for our ties.

MN: You had uniforms?

IS: We had uniforms, we had ties. It was tough, because we had a Cath—if you go to Our Lady of Refuge, there's a Catholic school directly across the street—

MN: Of a public school.

IS: —A public school directly across the street.

MN: Yeah, I know exactly where it is.

IS: So when we come out for recess, they'd have a little tiny gate in the middle of us, and we'd be standing at the gate, talking trash. You know, they'd say, "all you Catholic school kids are punks, and when I catch you after school, I'm gonna kick your ass." And, you know, we had a couple really, really tough kids in Catholic school. A kid I remember, named Angel Beyers, who would beat this public school kids to a pulp, you know. Also, we'd always behind Angel, "Yeah, we'll see what's gonna happen when we get out." And we'd take off our ties, and we'd fight with them. So, it was interesting. It was an interesting time. The walk, you know, I was always on my Ps and Qs. Sometimes we'd be followed, sometimes people would try to rob us. My brother was robbed of his chain, his little chain that every Catholic schoolboy wears with the cross. He had it ripped off his neck. I chose to tuck mine in, you know. I didn't want to have it ripped off my neck. So, yeah, we went through all of that. You know, it was tough. Early, early on—like I said, first to sixth grade—it wasn't like that. But as drugs came into the community, and things changed. And actually, unfortunately, as more Latinos and blacks moved into the neighborhood, it got worse. And that's just the reality.

MN: Now, when you first started, what percentage of the kids at Our Lady of Refuge were black or Latino?

IS: We had a very very small population of blacks in Our Lady of Refuge. That's just the fact. Latinos, you know, we were pretty integrated in there. All of my first girlfriends: Christina, Maria,

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Karen, you know, they were all Hispanic. And so we had a lot of Hispanics/Latinos in the school, but very few Calvin and very few brothers in the school. It just—it was rare.

MN: And what about your block, Creston Avenue? What was the racial composition when you moved there?

IS: When we first moved there, it was Irish, Italian, Albanian. We were the first Puerto Ricans to move into that building. We lay claim to that, you know. And a year later, my good friend, Rinaldo Rivela was the second Puerto Rican family to move in. And I think I talk about him in the book. You know, Ray was throwing bureaus off the roof, and, you know. And, you know, Ray was crazy. And once we got together, you know, eventually we started doing graffiti together, and running around together. So, we were the first Latinos there, but over the years, you'd get another, you know, Pedro, so.

MN: Did you see a big difference between the Puerto Rican kids and the Irish, Italian, and Albanian kids?

IS: We all got along in my neighborhood. You know, I say we grew up in the UN, because we all got along, we were all friends. To me, the Bronx was always about your block.

MN: Right.



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IS: You know, you could be two Puerto Ricans, five Albanians, and two Italians, fighting two Puerto Ricans, five Albanians, and two Italians [laughter]. You could literally be doing that, because we're from over here. We're from Creston, you're from Morris.

MN: What was very funny: we interviewed this guy, Paul Himmelstein, who was the last Jewish family on Jennings street. And he said, you had your biological family, and your block family. And God forbid anybody should come on their block and mess with him or his sisters—

IS: Yeah, it just didn't happen. And that's another thing. Back in those days, we took care of our neighborhood. You could *not* coming into our neighborhood and do *anything*. And the late 70s and early 80s, you just couldn't come into our neighborhood and do anything, because we'd have mother throwing—this actually happened—Pedro's mother throwing bats out the window to the guys. You know, because we got into a dispute with another neighborhood. And they were in our neighborhood. So, no, that's not gonna happen. So the elders are throwing bats out the window, they're running down stairs. Everybody gets involved. And we're gonna beat you off our block, back to your block, you know. So we did take care of each other back in those days. You don't see that anymore. And once the Jamaican drug dealers moved into the neighborhood, that's kinda when it started to fall apart like that, you know. And they were actually invited in and helped by one of my Puerto Rican friends, Pedro, you know, who became a low level drug dealer with them, and eventually went on to make millions of dollars with these guys. So the loyalty was to the money.

AT: Do you remember at what point that was? What year it was? Were you still in school at that point?

IS: I was still in school when they first, first came in. And so it had to be '86 to '87.

MN: So this is the beginning of the crack years?

IS: This is the beginning of—for us, first we saw the marijuana, and then the cocaine, and eventually the crack in the late 80s, like '88, '89, we started seeing it. But not even as much in our neighborhood. We still kinda kept crack out of our neighborhood. So, but down on Baily Avenue, which is where my cousins lived—

MN: Now Baily was how far down—How far away from you?

IS: Probably ten city blocks down Kingsbridge—

MN: Yeah, no—Because I have to tell you. I saw like on Jerome, like 183rd, there were teenage prostitutes out by '86.

IS: Oh yeah, yeah, absolutely. So it's like you said: Jerome was a mess from 184th or 186th down.

MN: Down, right.

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IS: Oh, it was a mess down there. It was a whole different world. But, you know, Kingsbridge, 196th and Kingsbridge and Jerome, those areas, you'd see the crackheads walking around on their missions and stuff. But they very rarely came into our neighborhoods.

MN: Yeah. Now, in terms—What about, like music? What was the music your mother listened to when you were, like, young? What was the music in your house?

IS: You know, it wasn't the South Side, it wasn't the merengue. It wasn't all that, the typical Latino stuff. My mother was The Four Tops and, you know, The Whisperers. And I wish I could remember all these. Yeah, she was Mo-Town all the way—

MN: Mo-Town and soul music.

IS: She was soul music, she was R&B all the way. My mother gave me a huge collection of 45s when she left New York to move to Virginia. And that's the music I grew up on. So, when I hear that music, that's the music that's—it's very nostalgic for me. And so, of course I would progress into hip-hop, because it was that soulful music.

MN: Now, what was your first exposure to a live DJ spinning outdoors or at a community center? How old were you when you saw that for the first time?

IS: Man, you know, I was so young. And I remember—I had to be about eight years old, and I followed my cousins, you know. My mother would allow us to sleep over my Titi Vilma's house, down on—

MN: Now that's Baily and—

IS: Baily and Kingsbridge—West Kingsbridge.

MN: Right.

IS: And she'd let us stay there. And when she let us stay there—she didn't really—

MN: Now that's near St. James Park?

IS: It—Well that's a little bit further down by VA Hospital, down by that way.

MN: Okay, yeah.

IS: But we walked all the way up to—I believe it was DJ Disco Wiz's part. Cause we walked up to 183rd and that area. I want to say Ryer, or whatever it was.

MN: Right, that's the other side of the Concourse.

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IS: The other side. So we walked—and again I'm eight years old, but I'm with my cousins, so we're staying out til five o'clock in the morning. Of course, my mother didn't realize that, but those were the dualities of life me and my brother were experiencing. We're in Catholic school, we're good kids. But on the weekends, if we stay over here, we're breaking into the milk factory. We're, you know, going stealing cars—not stealing cars at that time. We're too young. But breaking into cars, breaking into schools. Cause we were with my cousins, and that's what they did. So we followed them. But yeah, the earliest hip-hop jam I remember is going with these guys to 183rd. I don't know who was spinning, I don't know who was doing what, but I was extremely fascinated by the DJ and the mic, and the call-and-response. And it was, you know, it was just electric, man.

MN: Now did anybody do that up near Kingsbridge? Did you have any outdoor jams in your area?

IS: Eventually we had a DJ named Jimmy Jazz, who would throw block parties down off of West Kingsbridge and Baily Avenue. I think it's P.S. 22 or P.S.-something, on the corner down there. Back behind the school, he'd throw jams. And one day, a kid name Poochie came walking in, and he wanted to DJ. And my friend Jimmy was like, "I don't know." And Poochie was like, "Come on, let me get on." So he let this guy up and get on. Well, this guy ripped. Ripped, ripped the park. I mean, the stuff he was doing. This was a little later in the 80s.

MN: In the 80s, yeah.

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IS: '84, '85, somewhere around there. This DJ was just phenomenal. Unbelievable. Well, he went on to be Kid Capri. Cause Kid Capri's from Kingsbridge. You know, West Kingsbridge, that area. So we saw Kid Capri from his earliest days, when you wouldn't even let him get on, you know.

MN: Now did you ever get into B-Boys stuff?

IS: I did it all man. I couldn't breakdance. Like, I couldn't do the windmill. You know, I could never get the windmill. So it pissed me off, so I started doing the Electric Boogaloo. You know—

MN: Oh, you were like—

IS: I was that guy, you know, with the white gloves and the—

MN: What do they call that stuff? The Pop 'n Lock?

IS: Poppin' and Lockin'

MN: You're a Pop 'n Locker?

IS: I was doing that because I couldn't get the windmills, or some of these acrobatic moves. I just didn't have it.

MN: Did any people put the cardboard down in the street?

IS: We did. My mother helped us. My mother would cut up refrigerator boxes for us and help us lay it out. Not only in the street, but in our apartment. Our apartment became, you know, the haven for these—for anybody. My mother welcomed everybody. So, at one time, our living room was completely covered in cardboard, because we have—

MN: Do you have any pictures of this?

IS: I wish—I have a few pictures in a Puma suit, you know, with the Pumas on and all that stuff. But we'd have to dig for the—to see if we've got the cardboard stuff.

MN: Now, did you ever try DJ-ing yourself?

IS: I did, I did. My brother came home with a stolen DJ set when I was probably about 14 years old. And when he caught me in his room—and my brother was a horrible DJ [laughter]. I mean, he was a horrible DJ, let's get that correct. And he'll admit to that. He couldn't get the timing down. He couldn't get the blending. He just couldn't get it. He didn't have the ear for it, I guess. But when he caught me in his room playing with his DJ equipment, I'd get the shit kicked out of me, but I kept going in there, because I had such a love for it. And eventually my brother gave me the DJ equipment. And, you know, I got pretty good.

MN: Did you ever throw parties?

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IS: I threw a lot of parties. I'd tell people—this is the God's honest truth—I had some big Gemini speakers, and I used to wake up around 9 o'clock in the morning on a school day, and I'd put the speaker out on the fire escape. And I could barely pick this speaker up, and it's 9 o'clock in the morning. You know, some people are still sleeping, some are going to work, school. I put the speaker out on the fire escape, and I'd put on a record, and I'd mix hip-hop with Mo-Town. I was already blending that stuff, because after a year of DJ-ing—And I'd wake up the whole neighborhood. And the music would bounce off the buildings, and, you know—

MN: Now what was the—Describe that block for us, in terms of what the housing looking like.

IS: We had two five story buildings directly across from each other. And those buildings took up the whole block, with the exception of a small house in the middle, across the street—

MN: Right. Now did these buildings have fire escapes?

IS: They had fire escapes, yeah. We lived on the fire escapes. We played on the fire escapes, we played on the rooftops. I mean, when we didn't want to be in the streets, we were on the rooftop.

MN: Now what were some of the street games you played growing up?

IS: The street games? Man, those are—It's hard to remember the names of those stuff, but of course we played the—the Scully's, I guess, in the street. When we painted the boards on the street



and we played the “hide and go seeks” in the buildings. And we—we just did the normal kid’s stuff.

MN: Did you play with what we used to call Spalding’s?

IS: Absolutely. Stick ball, wiffle ball. We played wiffle ball all the time. We painted, you know, the

MN: The boxes, the strike zone.

IS: The strike zone on the garage across the street, and we’d be playing in the middle of the street. You’d have to stop everytime a car would go by. Sometimes the car would get hit with the wiffle ball. But yeah, we—You know, we were very sports heavy in my neighborhood.

MN: Did any people go on from your neighborhood to like play, you know, high school, college sports? Baseball, basketball, football?

IS: We had one guy named Mike, who we called Blunt. And you know where he got the name from, but [laughter] he played for Dewitt-Clinton. And he was a phenomenal football player. But he never went into college or anything like that. He was really the only one. We had a couple professional bike riders. Some of the Albanian kids, you know, rode. They did the trick stuff. Some of those guys, you know—some of those guys had a little bit of fame for a litle while, but nothing—No one every really did anything huge.

MN: Yeah. Now what about, like—What is the food you grew up with? You know—

IS: I always joke with people that I always won the war with my mother, which was, “If you don’t finish what you have on your plate, you’re not leaving the table.” And then she’d wake me up the next morning and say, “You have to go to school.” So I always won that battle. I just have very selective taste buds. To this day, I don’t eat anything. But my mother—you know, my mother, my mother didn’t cook. We can just get that out there right now. She did not cook. So it was basically whatever. We were the only family that had credit in the pizza shop [laughter]. Brother’s Pizza Shop. And that’s a true—they had the hugest “No Credit” sign. They’re like, “You are not getting credit here.” And, God bless my mom, I don’t know how she got us credit. Maybe I don’t want to know how she got us credit. But we got credit in the pizza shop. So we’d go in the pizza shop, they’d give us a pie, we’d take it home and we’d eat pizza. To this day, I eat pizza, burgers, stuff like that. Once in a while, we’d have the Latino meals, with the empanadas and the rice and beans, and the, you know, haros con andules, and all that type of stuff. And I eat some of that today. My brother and sister eat everything. But I just never—I never got out of the pizza and burger phase, which is what we ate a lot. When we didn’t have money, the peanut butter straight out of the jar. You know, whatever the food stamps would buy you, you know, that’s what we ate.

MN: Now, how did you end up going to a Catholic high school in Westchester?

IS: Yeah [laughter], you know, it’s an interesting story. My brother went to Spellman High School.

MN: Right, which we all know.

IS: And he had some problems at Spellman, and he transferred over to Sacred Heart High school in Westchester. I got accepted to Aviation High School, in Queens. And I was excited about that, because I was interested in flying and all that type of stuff.

MN: Now, you must have been a pretty decent student to pass the test for aviation. That wasn't so easy to get into.

IS: I was—you know, with English and Writing, and all that stuff, I've always been really good at it. But when it came to stuff like Science and Math—forget about Math. Math kept me out of college for like ten years. In other words, after I got my GED and I was living in Virginia, I was working as a computer professional, I wanted to get a college degree. It was important to me. But math literally scared me out of going back to sign up for school. I remember math torturing me for so many years. So, but eventually I did go back and—So I was an okay student with a lot of things. I failed religion my first year in Sacred Heart. You know, go figure [laughter]. But math messed me up bad. You know, I just couldn't get it. And it was, you know, if you fail math, you have problems.

MN: Right. Now, were there ever teachers, you know, either in elementary school or high school who took a personal interest in you?

IS: The only—You know, we had a priest named Father Jenick.

MN: Oh yeah, he's still there!

IS: Who is still at Our Lady of Refuge.

MN: He's an amazing person.

IS: He's still at Our Lady of Refuge. He's really the only person I can name by name, that I remember that had that kind of affect on my family. Because he seemed to really care about my mother, he cared about her situation, he helped us out when he could. He took us on retreats. I don't know what happened on my brother's retreats, but I know my retreats were okay [laughter], you know, so—Yeah, Father Jenick's a great guy, so none of that stuff—

MN: Do you ever run into him?

IS: I haven't seen him in a long time.

MN: You should go, and tell him and show him your book.

IS: I will.

MN: He's still—He's a Bronx legend, by the way.

IS: Yeah, yeah.

MN: You know, you should definitely go—

IS: It's on my list, it's definitely—I saw him in the daily news not too long ago. Somebody was selling drugs right in Our Lady of Refuge, and he had to stop mass and force them out of church.

MN: Yeah, he's a tough guy.

IS: Yeah, so that's a new low, selling drugs in the back of a church. Because you think the cops aren't gonna get you. But it was just in the daily news, about six months ago.

MN: Wow.

IS: So yeah, I'm gonna catch up with him. Him—he was instrumental in at least giving us those morals and those values, and my mother as well. And I think that's what kept me from crossing those lines that my friends crossed. Like, you know—

MN: So, even though you were in a lot of trouble, that you always—you didn't jump off the cliff. You went to the edge of the cliff.

IS: I went to the edge of the cliff so many times. I have the shortest crack dealer history, I think [laughter]. I wanted—I challenged somebody to tell me they sold crack less, you know, for less of

a time than I did. I think I sold—I think I was a crack dealer for like an hour. My friends had—My friend Manny and Will had taken over Northern Boulevard after a friend of ours Nina—

MN: Northern Boulevard in—

IS: Queens.

MN: Queens?

IS: Queens. They went over to Queens because a friend of ours from Baily Avenue, her cousin was running a huge, \$30,000 a week crack operation in Northern Boulevard, in Queens. When he got busted, his cousin—who's a female—called on our boys and said, "Hey, this wide open. I have all the beepers. I know how the system works." So Manny and Will went up there, and they made a lot of money up there. And eventually they said, "Come on, come on, come with us." And I saw them driving the nice cars, and the jewelry kept getting bigger and gaudier. And I said, "Man, that's tempting," you know. And my daughter was born, and you know, I wasn't sure—I was still playing both sides of the fence. I was working in the World Trade Center, but I wanted that money that these guys were making. So I went with them to Northern Boulevard. The first—one of the first crack deals my friend made was to a cracked out mother. She was African American. She was holding her baby. She was trying to give the food stamps for crack. She—whatever. Whatever she had. "Take it, take it, take it." And I looked at the baby, and I just stared at that baby. And I turned to my boy after he did the transaction, and I said, "This ain't for me." And I came right back to the

Bronx. So I—you know, like I said, I sold crack for less than an hour. You know, I went on a few runs with them. They were showing me the operation. I didn't have the heart to do it.

MN: Now when you first moved to Creston, was there much drugs in the street, or—?

IS: No, I didn't start seeing weed and stuff until I was probably about ten, eleven.

MN: So that's the early 80s?

IS: The early 80s, yeah. '82, around there. And then cocaine, some of the older guys would use it, but I had no interest. I made a pact with my buddy in the book—you know, Ray—we'll never use cocaine. You know, if you use cocaine, the next stop is crack, and we don't want to be crackheads. So we—you know, we weren't interested in that. But I started smoking weed when I was about 12 or 13, and drinking 40s with my—my father of graffiti was Staz.

MN: Okay, now tell us a little bit about graffiti culture, and how you encountered that, and how old you were when you started tagging.

IS: Yeah, I had to start probably around the time I was 8 or 9. And my first—my first graffiti tag was Stud, S-T-U-D. And my mother found out I was writing Stud in the building. I don't know how the hell she found out, but she found out I was writing Stud, and she came upstairs and she said, "Are you writing Stud?" Maybe I had it on a notebook or something.

MN: Right.

IS: And I said, “Yeah I’m writing St—” Smack! She smacked the heck out of me, and she said, “Do you know what that word, “stud,” means?!” It had nothing to do with that I was writing graffiti, but the word stud, to her, was something that was inappropriate. So I went to Little Jive, and then eventually I became—

AT: What were you using to actually do the writing? Was it a permanent marker, or was it—?

IS: We used markers. Any kind of markers. We were taught how to use markers by the older guys when they, you know, they did something with the—They’d go to the bank and grab those, the carbon copy stuff, and then they’d put the carbon copy in the marker and mix them with something. And it would make a real—the ink, that purple ink that used to drip down the wall when you did the big tag. So they taught us how to make markers. But yeah, any kind of permanent marker we could get our hands on.

MN: So you went from Stud to Little Jive?

IS: Yeah.

MN: And what was your final?



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IS: Eventually I became Little Staz, because Staz was in my neighborhood. He was a well-known graffiti writer, and he had a crew called the BAR Crew, Bombing and Robbing. And one day he said, “Yo, little man. You want to write Little Staz?” And that was an honor. You know, I’m a little Somebody. You know, I’m like, I’m the little vice president of BAR, you know, the crew. And so I met so many graffiti writers through Staz, from Med, to Trim, to Cope, to all these guys. Tracy 168, you know.

MN: Now, where were you doing most of your tagging?

IS: When I was young, I was just writing on any wall I could find. Anything, you know, the fire—

MN: Were you artistic, or was it just--?

IS: I was. I was pretty good. When I was young, I loved art. I used to trace the comic books. And when I got my hand on the book *Subway Art*, you know, by Henry Chalfant, I traced every piece in there. And I’m pretty good. I’m a pretty good graffiti writer, but I never had exposure to the subway system, because I was too young. By the time I was old enough to stay out that late, you couldn’t even—you know, you couldn’t write on it.

MN: They had the—

IS: They had the buff system, and they had the—

MN: So where was the largest piece you ever did?

IS: The largest piece I ever did was on the rooftop of—actually the rooftop of my building. I did a big piece, I-V-E, Ive, because eventually people would call me Easy Ive, or Ive 1. So I went from Little Staz to Ive. And so I did a huge Ive piece, and I dedicated it to my girlfriend at the time: “I love you, Unera.” And my mother had pictures of that, which I didn’t even think pictures of that existed.

MN: Do you still have them?

IS: I have them, they’re gonna be in the next release of the Simon and Schuster edition of the book.

MN: Oh, okay, cool.

IS: So, those pictures have just turned up. My mother found them in a box somewhere. It was like, “I have these graffiti pictures for you,” so. I used to have a lot of graffiti pictures. When I worked in the World Trade Center, I was writing graffiti in the World Trade Center, in the stairwells. I wrote on the computer screens. I was writing on the computer screens, and my boss—

MN: Writing—using the computer?

IS: With the marker.

MN: With the marker? [laughs]

IS: With the marker I was writing on the computer screens.

AT: How long did you hold that job? [laughs]

IS: I had it—well, the job, I first worked at ADP, on 42 Broadway. I was fifteen years old. My mother firmed my birth certificate to make it look like I was 18, and I started working down there. But when I start—Yeah, ADP, they called me and they said, “Ivan, are you the one writing graffiti on the computer screens?” And I said, “No, I’m not.” And they said, “Are these your pictures?” I had left some graffiti pictures behind—under one of the keyboards, and they had graffiti all over it, and I said “Yeah.” And they said, “You really have to stop writing on the computer screens.” [laughter] It’s like, the guys—We worked the night shift. We were grunt workers, printed stock exchange reports. The guys that were our bosses were like dustheads and, you know, they used to smoke dust at work in the computer room. The used to smoke weed. So it was a, it was a weird environment, but it was cool. I learned how to, you know, I learned how to mess with computers. That’s what I do till today.

MN: So you picked that up, like, on the job, not in school?

IS: Everything was on the job, man. I mean, I don’t know, I was blessed in the regard, because I worked for ADP for a year. And all I was supposed to do was decalate. Like, burst through reports, break them into parts, take out the carbon. We ran these machines that pulled out the carbon. You

got very dirty. But whenever I had a free moment, I would go in the computer room, and hang out with the computer operators, and, “How does this work? How does this work?” And because they were getting high, they would teach me how to run some of the jobs. So that’s how I learned.

MN: Now did you ever had legal jobs in your neighborhood?

IS: In my neighborhood, I had the job in the clothing store, it was called Vitel Fashion.

MN: Oh yeah, right, the Korean place.

IS: Vitel Fashion on Kingsbridge. And, you know, the primary focus was to figure out how to break into that store. And eventually we—I found out how to break into the store. I got the alarm code. And we broke into the store. And we robbed it. You know, which, as an adult, it kinda hurts me, because the family took me in, and they treated me well, and those were probably some of the best days for me, as far as eating. Cause if I didn’t have money, they’d feed me lunch, they’d feed me dinner. And I completely backstabbed them, and robbed the store. But I had this mentality, “Hey, I can prove something to the guys in the neighborhood. I can prove that I can get money too, and maybe they’ll bring me on some of their jobs.” And that was my mentality: money, money, money.

MN: Now, when you—You know, this is the 80s you’re talking about. Did the kids on your block have dreams of going to college, or—?

IS: Man, we didn't hear nothing about college, school, education. We didn't talk about it. Most of the guys in my neighborhood dropped out, anywhere from the time they were thirteen to fifteen, you know, sixteen years old was late to drop out. Nobody had aspirations of going to college.

MN: Now, one interesting question: were there fathers on the block?

IS: Nah. I didn't see any fathers on the block.

MN: So there were no like strong men who were in the workplace who would come home from work and grab people and say, "What the fuck you doing?"

IS: Nope. Early on, on Creston Avenue, my friend Mark Mahoney—he was a Irish kid—his father was that working guy. You know, the Irish working guy. Worked for, I believe, *The New York Post*, one of the newspapers. He'd work the midnight shift. He'd come in, he'd take us to Shea Stadium. But that's—they left. They did what a lot of the Itialians and Irish did, they left in 84, 85. They all started leaving. So the few fathers that were in the neighborhood, eventually they moved out to Westchester County.

MN: So like most of the Puerto Rican families, the father wasn't there?

IS: We didn't have fathers. And if—You know, I remember one father, my friend Pedro's father Geekay, he'd come out of jail. And he'd be in the neighborhood, and he'd—I mean this guy would get into disputes worse than us. And he'd be walking down the middle of the street with a shotgun,

you know, looking to shoot whoever he had problems with. Those were the only Puerto Rican fathers we saw in the neighborhood.

MN: So you didn't have like, you know, strong male figures, you know, trying to encourage you to keep out of trouble?

IS: None. None in my neighborhood.

MN: Wow.

IS: The fellas I looked up to all wanted to make money the fast way, the easy way. I had guys in my neighborhood that could crack safes, guys that knew how to steal cars in, you know, ten seconds. Guys that had chop shops, guys that had shops where they—The Albanians, they were the first ones I ever saw that did the stash boxes in the cars, where they would, you know, build a stash into the car so you could hide drugs and guns. And you'd have to like put the car in reverse, put it on a certain radio station and put a quarter in the middle of the dashboard, and the stash would open. And out would come the drugs, and out would come the guns. Some of these stashes were so elaborate that the cops would have the cars impounded for months and never find the drugs.

MN: Wow.

IS: That came from the Albanians. The Albanians were smart.

AT: Were the Albanians always in the neighborhood, or did they move in later?

IS: They were always in the neighborhood. They were the first—They were there before—you know, when we got there, with the Irish and the Italians. My friend Mario and his father owned a whole bunch of buildings, and some of the buildings in the neighborhood. He was Albanian. And he was a well-to-do kid, you know, got the newest car whenever he wanted. So, you know, the other guy—But he also ran jobs with these guys too, you know, and—

MN: Now, now, so there was a whole lot of underground economy stuff that wasn't drugs, that was involved with cars and Break—B and E, and all that sort of stuff?

IS: No one in my neighborhood, in Creston, sold drugs—with the exception of Pedro, when he brought the Jamaicans in. And he made a lot of money off of that. These guys that I grew up with, the Albanian guys and the Puerto Rican guys, these guys would break into your bowling alley. I remember they robbed Fieldston. So I was hanging—

MN: [laughs] Fieldston. The high school.

IS: So I was hanging out—Yeah, well, the Fieldston Bowling Alley, down by Van Cortlandt—

MN: Oh, okay.

IS: —was Fieldston Bowling Alley, and then it became a pool hall. But I remember hanging out with these guys that night. And, you know, I was young. I was ten, eleven, twelve. And then I go upstairs, and the next morning there's two brand new Camaros from the job they had done. They robbed that night, you know, for 20,000 dollars. They went and about cars that morning. And they were in the neighborhood, sitting in the car.

MN: Now, there must have been kids on your block who didn't do those kind of things. What—were they left alone?

IS: Yeah, yeah.

MN: Like if there were kids who just went to school and minded their own business, did their homework, did you guys make life tough for them, or—?

IS: Nah, nah.

MN: Cause I wonder if there's a whole other story on your block, of the kids who just, were sort of straight?

IS: It'd be hard to find some, but I'm sure they're there [laughter], but we didn't even know they existed. You know, again, a lot of the guys—You know, we were criminals and stuff like that—but it wasn't until later, when we started disrespecting the elders. What I mean by that is: we would never smoke weed in the lobby of our building. But when we were 15, 16, 17, the elders would



walk into the building, we'd be sitting on the steps. They couldn't even walk up the steps. And we're rolling blunts, and we're smoking, and we're playing spades. We'd completely lost respect, you know. Even my best friend Ray, his mother, who I respected immensely—she was like another mother to me, growing up. I knew her since I was in the second grade. I'd be sitting there, she'd walk into the building, I'd be sitting there smoking a blunt. Right in front of her, drinking a 40. And, you know, barely move out of her way.

MN: Now what years did that—was that?

IS: That was '88—'87, '88, '89. This is when I'm 15-16, after my mother leaves the Bronx. After my mother leaves the Bronx, I was—It was the summer when I was 15 years old, right before I turned 16, that's when I completely just—

MN: So your mother just said, "I'm getting out."

IS: "I can't do it anymore." My mother was working at the VA Hospital, a VA Hospital officer had been murdered. This was in '88, I believe. And a friend of hers that worked in a VA hospital, her daughter had been raped and thrown off a roof. And this all happened in like a two week period. My mother was coming home from work, she saw me in the middle of the street, fighting back to back with one of my friends, Tyrell. And it was over a graffiti beef. You know, somebody went over my friend Tyrell. And he said, "Yo, this kid works on Kingsbridge." So we caught the kid on Morris, just off of my block. My mother was walking up Morris. And again, me and Tyrell, back to back, fighting with three kids, because this kid was with his boys. And my mother, you know,

she did—I don't know if you guys ever saw *Boys in the Hood*, but my mother literally broke it—broke up the fight—and gave this speech about, you know, why are we killing each other. You know, we're all, you know, we're all—This is our community. This is where we live. Why are we killing each other? And that day my mother decided she didn't want to be in the Bronx anymore. She, she had met a guy in the VA, who lived in Virginia in the past, and they decided to leave to Virginia. And that's what they did.

MN: And you stayed in the apartment?

IS: Yeah, yeah, with my brother and cousin, at the time. My mother did everything she could to try and get me to go to Virginia with her. And I was like, “No, no, no, no, no. This is my home. These are my brothers. That's my brotherhood.” You know, I'm not going anywhere. I got a girlfriend I love. I'm just starting to get involved with some of the fun criminal activities—at the time, I thought they were fun. I wasn't going. And my sister, who was 13, Tanya, she dragged her to Virginia. My sister ran away three times from Virginia to the Bronx. And eventually my mother was so worried that she would end up dead running away that she let her stay in the Bronx with her best friend Lorrie.

MN: Now what happened to your sister? How's she doing now?

IS: She's doing okay. You know, she works for—She's in Virginia now, too. You know, it went like this: My mother went out in '88, my brother went out in '90, I went out in '93, and my sister came out it like '97. So we're all out there now, you know, trying to help each other and trying to

do good things. So my sister's okay. You know, she's a mom, she has three kids, and she works for the State of Norfolk, or, you know, government agency. So she's doing okay.

MN: Now when did really big money start coming on your block?

[END OF SIDE ONE]

[START OF SIDE TWO]

IS: Big money started coming, I'm gonna say, late 80s, '89, '90. And what the guys in my neighborhood did again: They wanted to rob the stores where they knew there was a safe. It was always an inside job. They were gonna be able to get that big money: \$40,000, \$50,000, \$100,000. And these guys weren't interested in selling drugs. They were interested in robbing the drug dealers.

MN: Wow.

IS: You know, we had a guy named Congzolio. His brother was a cop on the NYPD. And that was his street name. I never even knew his real name. But these—You know, the brother provided these guys with NYPD gear and all that stuff. And they just started robbing, you know, drug dealers all over the Bronx, including some of the connects of the Jamaican guys who were doing business in our neighborhood. Pedro and these other people were feeding them information. “Hey, you know, there's gonna be \$200,000 over here. Hey there's gonna be \$100,000. This is gonna be 20

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pounds of weed over here.” And so these guys were robbing drug dealers left and right. And the cars just kept getting upgraded, the BMWs and the Benzs. You know, first it was the Camaros and all that stuff, and then you saw Corvettes, and BMWs and Ducatis. You know, if you—At certain points and times, you came through Creston neighborhood, you would just be like, “Why is there half a million dollars in cars sitting in front of this building?” [laughter] And it was literally like that, the cherry red convert—325 iBMW convertible, the Benz, the Ducati. You know, the Corvette convertible. At one time, you’d come through my neighborhood, and they’d be there. They’d just be sitting there. So, late 80s, early 90s, these guys started robbing drug dealers for big money, and anything else they could do.

MN: Now what happened, what’s happened? Where did most of these guys end up?

IS: I mean most of them ended up in jail. You know, it took Pedro a long, long time. He was like, he was beating the system so much, that we figured he had to be part of the system. And it’s interesting, because my cousin went to jail for some small shit, and he ran into a guy named Phil. Phil’s uncle was very well connected, made a lot of money in the drug business. Phil told my cousin when he saw him in the holding cell, “Tell everybody that Pedro’s working for the government. Tell them he’s working with them.” Because Phil went to meet Pedro with like ten kilos of cocaine, and Pedro never showed up. But the cops, you know, showed up. And Phil ended up going away for a long time. And that was happening, you know, over the course of ten years, everyone around Pedro was going down. But Pedro’s cars kept getting nicer, he started buying businesses. You know, he’s driving the Lexus, he’s driving the Mercedes 500 with TVs in it. First

guy in the Bronx really to be doing stuff like that. But it was at the cost of feeding these—whoever he was working with.

MN: Right.

IS: You know, his friends.

MN: Yeah, so, are any of these guys, like, dead?

IS: A lot of the guys ended up dead. But, you know, like Zef. Take Zef, for instance: Zef was a, he was a career criminal, you know. And I loved the guy like a brother, but he was just interested in making that illegal money. Zef did a job with some Jamaican guys, and the Jamaican guys set it up, and he robbed it, and it was, you know, 50,000 dollars or whatever. And Zef said there was only \$20,000 in the safe. Well these guys knew damn sure there was \$50,000 in the safe, cause they set it up. And they caught him in the lobby of my building that I grew up in, 60 East 196th street, and the Jamaican guy was arguing with Zef, and one of the other Puerto Rican guys we grew up with, named Moe, was instigating it. “Oh you gonna let him say that? Oh, you gonna let him say that?” And eventually the Jamaican guy pulled out a gun and killed Zef. He murdered him right there in the lobby of the building we used to play spades in, we grew up in. You know, Zen, like I said, was killed by a Fordham Prep student. He was—they were driving to White Castle—and I was with Zen and those guys that night, hanging out. And then I went upstairs, and they left. And they ran into a girl in the neighborhood, they decided they were hungry. So, they were coming to White Castle on Fordham. Well, apparently they almost hit this Fordham Prep student, you

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know, with the car. And the Fordham Prep student banged on the hood. And then my—Zen stopped the car, and started arguing with the guy. Zen was with Mahon. Zen was a big, big guy. Big Guy. So they got out the car, they walked around. Zen approached him. The guy took out a butterfly knife and just stabbed him, right in the heart. And, you know, and pulled it out, and ran on campus. And this is well documented in the newspapers.

MN: Yeah. No, I remember that incident.

IS: I have the newspaper articles. So, you know, Zen was killed, and the newspapers were saying Zen was a monster, and this, that, and the other. And, you know, Zen did what he did. We all did. But I never saw him as a monster. He was more of a unifier. He kept the guys together in our neighborhood.

MN: Now, was the mafia at all present in your neighborhood, or were they kept out?

IS: No, no, we had—You know, I don't know if you knew the chain Top Video. There was a chain of video stores back in the 80s called Top Video. And these guys had video stores every ten blocks, strategically—strategically placed throughout the Bronx. My mother started working for Top Video off the books. She dated a few of these gangsters, you know, the Als and the Tonys and these guys. Those video stores were just, only set up to run numbers. Again, it's very well documented.

MN: Right.

IS: The Top Video across the street from the VA hospital was busted many times, you know, for numbers running. My mother's friends ended up going to jail for numbers running. And it was the boys, you know, running the operation. I worked at that Top Video when I was 13, 14 years old. And a friend of mine taught me how to count the money in my head. So, if I'm renting three videos, I'm telling you it's, you know, seven dollars, but I'm only ringing up three dollars. And so, now I know, "Okay, there's four dollars in the register. There's four dollars in the register." So, I do it ten times, and at the end of the night, I knew those four—extra forty dollars that had not been rung up, the forty dollars would come out and go in my pocket. You know, one of the older guys taught me that. So, one day I walk in the video store, and Al—who I had known since I was kid. He dated my mother, and he was a gangster. He looked at me and he said, "Get the fuck out of here." [MN laughs] And I looked at him, and I said, "Al, what—" "Don't make me say it again. Get the fuck out of here." And that's when I figured he [laughter] found out, he found out I was stealing money. And I never questioned him, never said, "Hey, where's my back week's pay." [laughter] You know? I turned and I walked away, you know. And one day, they dragged a guy into the Top Video store, Al and his son and another guy, they were dragging a guy into the video store. And me and my friend Macho, who was a graffiti writer named Size, were working, and he said, "Shut the gate. Get the fuck out of here. Lock the gate from the outside." You know. And we were like, "Oh." We don't want to know what's gonna happen to that guy. But yeah, the mafia was ingrained, as far as that. They had jewelry stores on Kingsbridge, they had the numbers spots.

MN: Did people know not to rob them?

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IS: Nobody messed with those guys back in those days. You know, that's the early 80s. You know, those guys left the area before the 90s and before the big drugs and the crack and all that stuff. So, nobody messed with those guys.

MN: Now, what ultimately drove you to leave for Virginia? What was behind that decision?

IS: Yeah, you know in 1993, we were getting ready to go to a party, and I was taking too long. I was living with my girlfriend at the time, and I had a daughter. We were living over on Corlear Avenue—which is, you know, maybe 13 blocks away from Baily. And I was taking too long—

MN: Now Corlear, now where is that like located relative to—Is Corlear east of the Concourse or west of the Concourse?

IS: No, it's 236th and Broadway. Down in that area.

MN: Oh, okay, so it's right by Marble Hill.

IS: Marble Hill, Van Cortlandt, that area.

MN: Okay.

IS: So I was taking too long to get dressed, and my cousins and these guys decided to leave to the party without me. They said, "Look, if you want to go, meet us over there." I said okay. So, I called



a cab, and I was gonna meet them at the party. For some reason, my girlfriend started crying, and she was like, “Why don’t you stay home with me and the baby tonight,” You know, “Please, just stay home.” Well, I had already missed the guys. I didn’t really want to take a cab, so I stayed home that night. The next morning I found out my cousin Tony had been stabbed, and he was on life support. And my cousin Herman and Johnny and a couple of other guys were in jail. Actually, they arrested like the whole neighborhood, because after—Tony got stabbed on 228th and Broadway, it was—No, two, two—yeah, 220th, somewhere around there. There was a place called Twin Donuts, it was a diner right on Broadway, under the 1 train.

MN: Right.

IS: And Tony got stabbed because, you know, there was a big problem with the cook. And the cook got scared, and he called his cousins. So, his cousins came and they stabbed Tony, and Tony was the only one there. So then my cousins and the rest of the guys from the neighborhood went back to the diner, and they shot the cook, and killed him.

MN: Wow.

IS: And then they shot two innocent bystanders, which were two cab drivers. And the reason I heard they shot the cab drivers was because the cab drivers were staring right at them. But, you know, of course the cab drivers were probably stuck. You know, they were probably just shocked about what was going on. So you have, you know, you have four people die that night. And, again, the only reason I wasn’t there was because I took too long to get dressed. My wife—maybe she had some kind of instinct—she begged me to stay home. So she probably saved—She saved my

life. Because at the time I was always carrying a gun. And you know, only Lord knows if I would've used it that night, and what would've happened. Or maybe I would've been the Tony. You know, you just never know. But after that, I had to get out of here. I had a daughter, she was one years old. And I just didn't want to do it anymore. I didn't have the heart to do it anymore. So I decided. You know, I called mom and said, "Ma, I gotta get out of here. I'm gonna die here." I think I told her just like that: "I'm gonna die here." I had grown a really bad cocaine addiction at that time. So I knew either the drugs or the streets were gonna kill me. So I left.

MN: You said this was a cocaine—okay, let me switch the tapes.

IS: Okay.

AT: Yeah, that's an incredible story.

IS: It is.

AT: So these were the cousins you used to hang out with as a kid, right?

IS: Yeah.

AT: The people who were robbing the cars and the whole thing?

IS: They were like my brothers.

AT: And you still spent—pretty much spent a lot of time with them all the way through?

IS: All the—They were like my brothers. Literally, like brothers. You know, when you say cousins, it's not a strong enough word sometimes to talk about the real bond that was there. Because, you know, and also when I ran into hard times, I always ran back to Baily, to my aunt. You know, when I got evic—When I stole drugs. You know, my apartment eventually became a stash house?

MN: Right.

IS: I stole drugs from the Jamaicans. When I had to leave Creston, because they were gonna kill me, I went straight to Baily. And so I lived with my cousins and stuff like that. So yeah, they were like my brothers. And to lose everybody in one night was—was crazy.

MN: How are your cousins doing now?

IS: My cousins—You know, like I say in the book, and my cousin Johnny was very upset with me for saying it. He threatened to kill me and kick my ass and everything else. He was upset that I said he became addicted to drugs. The reason I said that was because before his brother Herman—Herman went to jail, my cousin Herman went to jail for that triple homicide in 1993. By all accounts, Herman wasn't the trigger-man that night. You know, another guy was the trigger-man that night. But Herman was the one they saw his face. He was the guy that—He went down for the crime, you know. And let's be realistic, if you're there, you're there. And that's what I talk to the

kids in the school. I say: you don't necessarily have to be the trigger-man to do the 15 or 25 years. You know, so realize that right now. If you're there, you can go down for it. My cousin Johnny, I think he had so much guilt cause he was there that night, and his brother was also there, and his brother had been sent away for 15 years, that he became heavily involved with cocaine, and smoking, you know, angel dust and drinking a lot of liquor. And he just became a monster, you know? To the point where I couldn't even hang out with him anymore. Cause he'd try to fight me, you know? So today, you know, my cousin Johnny has just finished doing a three year bit because of his drug addiction, and the crazy shit, shootouts and all that stuff. Herman's just come out of jail, after 14 years, for that triple homicide. So he's home now. He's working construction. He's in college. You know, he's trying to turn his life around. So those guys are—And also, my cousin Johnny's, I think, trying to go back to school to get his GED. So, now, at 37, 38, 39 years old, these guys have realized, "We better do something here."

AT: During this whole period, where were your brother and your sister? Were they in Virginia?

IS: My brother left New York in 1990. So I was, you know, 17, 18 years old when he left. My sister was always in the Bronx. She lived with her friend, like I said, from the time she was 13 years old, because she kept running away. And then she started living with her boyfriend, and lived with him until she moved to Virginia. My brother went to Virginia, and called me one day and said, "Hey man, you know, I can get my hands on some guns." You know, very easily.

AT: Yeah, Virginia's got running—

IS: Yeah, and you know, he brought this to me. And I quickly realized he's buying Tech 9 machine guns for 300 bucks, and they're selling out here for 11-1200 bucks. So we got involved in the gun running trade in '91, around there, in '92. But my brother talks too much, and he confided in a coworker out there in Virginia. And so after the third run of guns, this guy, you know, said, "You know what? These guys are taking these guns to New York. They're killing people." So he dropped in down on my brother. My brother was arrested by the ATF. And then I was arrested the next day by the ATF.

MN: Wow.

IS: But my mother called me, and she said—she told me in Spanish, "Your brother's just been arrested. They're coming to get you tomorrow. Stay quiet." My mother told me, "Stay quiet. They're coming to get you. Stay quiet." The guilty thing for me is that my brother called me that night that he was getting ready to get on the Greyhound and he said, "I don't want to do it. I have a bad feeling." And, you know, "I have a bad feeling something's gonna go wrong." And I said, "Dude, get on the bus. We need those guns." You know, we've got people waiting for them, 6000 dollars for 6 Tech 9's. I told my brother to get on the bus. I talked him into getting on the bus. And then I found out the next morning he was busted. You know—

MN: Did he do time for it?

IS: —did three—almost three years.

MN: Wow.

IS: Two or three years, yeah.

MN: So is he still—Is he angry at you?

IS: He was. He was for a while. When I first moved to Virginia, he came out of jail. He was living with my mom, and he had a real chip on his shoulder, man. He was disrespecting me in front of my wife all the time, you know. I had just lost my cousin Tony. My brother, he was gone for most of my—when I really got bad in the streets, when we were fighting and we were shooting, and when—I never shot anybody. I shot around them, cause I never was interested in shooting anybody. But my brother didn't know the stuff I had done, so he still thought I was this little punk that he could slap around. Remember, I told you, he used to abuse me.

MN: Yeah, yeah.

IS: And one day, I told him. I was living in Virginia with my wife. I said, "Dude, you need to start talking to me with respect in front of my wife and my child." And he's like, "What the fuck are you gonna do about it?" You know, he has the jail chip on his shoulder.

MN: Right, yeah [laughs].

IS: And I got up and I said, "Listen, I'm not a kid anymore." You know, and he took his glasses off. And I said, "You don't wanna do this." And he swung on my, and I kicked his ass. And I think I showed him [laughter]. I showed him I'm not the little brother anymore to get smacked around. After that, we've had mutual respect for each other. I think it needed to happen. I think he needed to learn that respect for me, and I think I had to get that respect back. So, now we have a good relationship. I was able to help my brother in the sense that, when I went to Virginia, I started working for the largest chainsaw manufacturer in the world, as a computer guy. And I got a good reputation. I've been there for fourteen years. The whole time I've been in Virginia, I've been working there.

MN: So you have the same job?

IS: So I was able to bring my brother in to the company. You know, he had a record. He could only get a job in Burger King. I had some inside connections at steel, I had got good relationships with people in HR. They actually took his record, when it came in, and shredded it. The girl got it in, his jail record, and she put it right in the shredder.

AT: Oh, really?

IS: And that's why my brother didn't want me to write about the gun running stuff, because he was scared he'd lose his job.

MN: Now, when did you decide to write this book? And why did you decide to write it?

IS: You know, my friend Manny—the one that was the crack dealer, that, you know, I went to Queens Boulevard with him—he was eventually shot in the Bronx, and I had called him and I said, “You know, I’ve been asking you to come out to Virginia for years. I can help you get a job.” I loved him, and I loved his family. I wanted him to get out of the Bronx. He eventually left to Florida, and started working as a cable guy. I went to Florida to baptize his kid about four or five years ago, and we started reminiscing. Now, here I am, I’m far removed from the Bronx. I’ve been gone, you know, at that time, ten years. I play golf [laughter]. I’ve been—I’ve been to Mt. Hood in Portland, Oregon. I’ve been to Mt. St. Helen’s. I’ve been to Seattle, to Chicago, to Mexico, to— You know, I’ve been around to places I never thought I’d go, in my life. So every time I go to these places, I’m like, you know, Pike’s Peak in Colorado Springs, I’m talking to God, like, “God, thank you for putting me here. I don’t know why you allowed me to survive these things, but thank you for putting me here.” When me and Manny started reminiscing, he brought me right back to the streets, a place I had left behind so long ago. And I said, “Man, you know, these are powerful stories. And I’d like to tell these stories, you know.” These guys died for nothing, and I owe them that much. The Zens and the Zefs and the Tony and the Freddie and the Chippie, and the Binkie. These guys—nobody would ever no who they are or why they died. And I felt it was my responsibility to do that. And so I started writing the book for that reason, and kind of as a diary to my kids. You know, my kids are the typical white girls. You know, you talk to them on the phone, you know, you’d think they’re just valley girls. They’re—they’ve grown up in Virginia Beach their whole lives. They’re cheerleaders, they play the violin. They do the—You know, they’re honor roll students. They don’t know anything about the Bronx. And it’s funny, cause I just gave my daughters a tour of the Bronx about two weeks ago. “This is where your dad did this,



this is where—“ They read the book, and they were shocked. “Dad, you tell us not to use drugs. You were using cocaine!” “Dad, you tell us not to do this. You were stealing cars!” “Dad, you robbed that store!” You know. But I did want them to know about the struggle. You know, I wanted them to know there was another side to life that they didn’t know anything about.

AT: Now was anybody upset with some of the stories that you printed in the book?

IS: Death threat after death threat after death threat. You know, the book—we only printed 500 copies in Virginia. We had a book release party in Virginia.

MN: This is the one of the 500?

IS: That’s the original.

MN: Woah. So this is a collector’s item.

IS: That book’s not coming back out. The new book, by Simon and Schuster’s a paperback, unfortunately. It has a Joe Conzo cover. It’s gonna be a great book.

MN: Now, did you change anybody’s names in the edition?

IS: The story in there that’s called “Beef with the Heath Cats,” the guy that came at me the hardest, his cousin Porky and Matzo were murdered by the guys on Heath. The guys on Heath were kind

of our enemies, even though they were never really my enemies. Cause I liked everybody. I got along with everybody. I was, you know. He was upset. He said, “You know, my cousins were murdered by these guys, and you give them a title, you know, ‘Beef with the Heath Cats.’” You know, it couldn’t be “Heath has beef with the Baily Cats.” He felt like I was putting them up on a pedestal.

MN: You were romanticizing.

IS: I was romanticizing them, I was romanticizing his cousin’s death. And, you know, he threatened the shit out of me. He said, you know, “I’ve got people in Virginia that could come see you right now.” And I said—I said, “You know, just do me one favor: Keep it in the streets. If that’s what you’re gonna do, I can’t talk you out of it. But don’t bring it to my house. I got kids here.” You know, “Keep it in the streets.” I’m in the Bronx all the time. I told him, just like that. “I’m in the Bronx all the time. If you guys wanna kill me, keep it in the streets. I’ll see you guys out there.” And then I said, “Look, Pete, I can’t let you threaten me into changing anything. Because if that gets out, then, you know—”

MN: Then everybody.

IS: “—I can’t go back to the Bronx.” You know? And then—everybody, yeah. Cause I got more threats. But I said, “Do you want to tell me why you’re so upset about it? And can we talk about how I can change it to try to fix it? Because I’ve known you since you were five years old.” And so I changed it to “Beef with the Heavyweights.” I changed the title of “Heath Cats,” to not give

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them that shine. And I changed Porkie and Matzo. I used their street names, when they were in the streets. Their other—Their other, other street names. So I did agree to change those names, not out of fear, but because I felt I owed him that. You know, he said his aunt had cried when she read the book. You know, and stuff like that. So that was changed. The guy, Hitman, who I say murders three people in the diner, the guy who was the actual trigger man, people started calling him, saying, “Hey, you’re gonna want to read this book, and you’re definitely gonna wanna kill Ivan when you’re done reading it” [laughter]. So when I heard that—There’s certain names you hear, you take them serious. Because you know, you know, if you hear one name, you say, “Oh yeah, that guy’s just talking shit,” because he’s been talking shit for 30 years. But you hear other names, and you say, “Wait a minute, I need to address this.” So it took me a long time to get Hitman’s number, but eventually someone—cause people are scared to give out that information—I got his number, he’s living in Florida. I called him. I said, “Look, man, I’ll send you a book.” I overnighted him a book. He read the book, he called me back, he said, “Look, you’re the only person that ever mentioned me. The only person that’s ever gonna remember me. Like, you know, I’m a part of history. I’m not mad. I’m not mad.” But other people were mad for him. You know, they felt like I put them out there. My cousin Johnny, again, said he was gonna kick my ass about the drug thing. Herman was upset. He read it while he was still in jail. He was upset about the way I wrote some of the stuff. And then there’s a guy named Moe, who’s a big time drug dealer on Kingsbridge, who I mentioned, who people were using *his* name. Again, cause it’s a powerful name. “When Moe catches you, he’s gonna kill you.” So I got his number. I called him. He’s in Vegas. I called him, I said, “Moe,” you know, “What’s up? I heard you got a beef with me?” “Huh, what are you talking about?” “I heard you got a beef with the book.” “Book? What are you talking about?” [laughter] “Well, I heard you’re upset I wrote about you.” “If you wrote about me in a book, I know you had

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to write about me as being a thorough dude, cause that's all I've ever been. I've only been real my whole life." This guy's been in and out of jail since he was twelve years old. [laughter] He said, just like that, "If you wrote about me in a book, I know you wrote—" You know, "You didn't write about me as being a pussy or anything like that, did you?" "Nah, hell no, Moe. I wrote about you being a thorough dude. A real guy, you know?" And he's like, "I got no problems with you." But that's what happens in the streets. You know, everybody's jealous. Everybody thinks I'm rich now. Tracy 168, the legendary graffiti writer from Wildstyle has threatened to sue me. Because of that, Simon and Schuster has taken all his graffiti out of the book. Which is sad, because it's a part of my history.

MN: So where was the—

IS: Some of the memorials that Tracy did, like the Zen piece, the Wildstyle piece.

MN: So these—you had to take all these out?

IS: I had to take them out.

AT: Could you hold that up to the camera?

IS: Yeah, I—

MN: Yeah, hold it up so—

IS: I had to take some of those graffiti pieces out, which broke my heart. Because Zen—I loved that guy more than anything. And now I had to pull his piece out of the book. Luckily there was a graffiti piece we had done for Zen that wasn't Tracy, you know, connected.

MN: Now what did—Did Tracy want money for the appearance? And how much did he want?

IS: He wanted—He wanted a lot of money when I first started talking to him. And this kind of messed us up, too. Because at first he was demanding tons and tons of money. And then, when he realized he wasn't getting the \$5,000, the \$10,000, then he came down to \$1,500. But by the time he got back to me, the book had already gone into production.

MN: Right.

IS: Now if the book does well, there's a chance we can put him in the second edition. Cause I—those pictures mean the world to me.

MN: Now this is what'll happen to us if we ever do anything.

IS: [laughs] That's right.

MN: Because in the Bronx, everybody—The first time we lined up and we talk about getting a grant, I'm sure that people are gonna come, saying, "Where's our money?"

IS: “You owe me money. You owe me money.” You say, “I have your release form. I don’t owe you anything!” It’s a jealousy thing. You know, a lot of these guys are still sitting on the corner. They’re still pushing little drugs. You know, they all have criminal histories now. They can’t vote, they can’t do this legally. They’re not educated. You know, I graduated college at 34 years old, last year.

MN: So this is in Virginia. Where did you go back to school?

IS: Well, first I went to a tech school, because I’m—I was in computers, so I went for a two year Associate’s degree in Networking and Security at a technical trade school out there, which is one of the best out there. It’s called ECPI. And then I went to Pheonix University, online. The reason I went to Pheonix was because the book stuff was already starting to happen, and there was no way I could go sit in a classroom for that many hours. So I’d literally—you know, the thing about Pheonix is you could be doing your homework at 3 o’clock in the morning. And most of the time, that’s when I was doing it. So that online school allows you to do that. I’ve gotten some, you know, some people say, “Oh, you bought your degree. You bought your bachelor’s.” I did a bachelor’s in management, and now I’m in a management position in my company. And, you know, it feels good. You know, but it is what it is. I thought about trying to get a Masters, but I’m just gonna try to play the book thing out, see how it goes. I’m writing DJ Disco Wiz’s memoirs, called *It’s Just Begun*.

MN: Really?

IS: Yeah, I'm almost done with that book. And again, it's another history lesson. You know, Wiz's book is a history of the Bronx in the 70s, it's the history of jail in the 70s and 80s. It's a history of the 5% Nation, which he, you know, had some things going on with. It's a history of hip-hop, of course, you know, him being the first Latino DJ. Whiz's book is a history lesson. I'm proud of it, and I hope—I know we'll get it out of there eventually, you know. Right now, Simon and Schuster, unfortunately, has passed on it, only because they say it's too much like *Next Stop*. It's nothing like *Next Stop*. So, it just tells me they just don't get it. You know, my book is a bunch of wild cowboys, you know, running around in the late 80s, early 90s.

MN: You know, it's interesting, the difference: when we interviewed Wiz, he looks like a teddy bear, but once he started talking [laughter] about the stuff that was going on in his house in his neighborhood, he turned—His face changed, and you saw somebody genuinely scary.

IS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MN: In a different way than you.

IS: Yeah, yeah.

MN: I mean, it was interesting, you know—

IS: I've spent a lot of time interviewing Wiz for the book. And you know, he's made me laugh, cry, and goosebumps, and you know, [crosstalk] the whole nine yards. When I finished writing chapter five of Whiz's book, like, I was literally shaking. You know, that's how powerful some of the things that have happened to him are.

MN: Yeah, no, no. I know what you're saying. Cause we just spent three hours together, you know, and you saw once he trusted us enough to talk about this stuff, it was intense.

IS: To open up. Yeah, it is. It is. So—

MN: But this is, you know, this is good stuff you're doing, man.

IS: Thank you.

MN: And this—And how'd you get the idea for the organization of “What's your next stop?”  
And How'd you meet April Hernandez?

IS: You know, when the book came out, it made its way to New York, and, you know, it was making a little bit of noise out here. But a friend of mine—actually, I write about her—my heart, soulmate, Lorrie, my ex-girlfriend, she said, “You need to put that book on Myspace.” And I said, “Nah, Myspace is for pedophiles and perverts and kids.” [laughter] I'm not putting my book on Myspace. I rethought it after a couple of weeks, and then a guy named Casper Martinez sicovered the book on Myspace. I didn't know he was partners with Louise Guzmán, who's been in *Carlito's*



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Way and all these other movies, and partners with April Lee Hernandez from *Freedom Writers*. I just knew it was a guy from the Bronx, reaching out. I sent him a book, and all of a sudden I start getting phone calls from all these people, “Hey, we want to turn this into a TV show,” or a film, or something. And, you know, I’m out here meeting with these celebrities. I’m going to red carpet events. I went to the *Illegal Tender* premiere. I met Frank Rayaz, John Singleton. Rosie Perez has read the book. Ramon Rodriguez from *The Wire*. Louise Antonio Ramos, who started out doing Spike Lee films. I’ve gotten a tremendous amount of support from the Latino acting community. It’s been overwhelming. With that said, I realized last year that actors don’t make movies. Actors don’t get projects greenlit, you know. As much as they love the book, they don’t have the money or really the influence to make a project happen like that. So we’re looking at some other avenues now, working with some people who actually are producers. A lady named Gina Rugolo, in LA, who produced *Just Shoot Me!*, and some other TV shows and stuff. So, that part of it’s been going good. We were in a meeting, we were talking about *Next Stop*, how to get the word out. And April Lee said, “Why don’t we do shirts that say, ‘What is your next stop?’” Why don’t we do a website that says, “What is your next stop?” And just make people wonder, “What they hell does that mean?” And then they’ll click in, and go in and find out about the book, and the film project. But a few days later, I told April, we had already talked about talking to kids and all that. I said, “Why don’t we use ‘What is your next stop’ as our slogan to talk to the kids?” And ask these kids everytime we get in front of them, “What’s your next stop gonna be?” you know, when you leave school, when you graduate high school, when you graduate college. We just spoke at Hofstra University, and we asked them the same thing: “What’s your next stop gonna be when you leave this university?” Are you gonna come back and make your society a better place, your community a better place? Cause that’s the first thing I did. You know, I tell people, I have a little name. It’s

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like this big. It's miniscule, but the first thing I did was run back here to use my name to try to get these kids to understand, you don't have to go this way. I don't know what you guys feel about the book, but I don't feel like it's written in a glorified manner, like a *New Jack City*, I'm the king of New York. I just wanted to educate people. Like, this is what was *happening*, and this is part of what's led us to where we are. You know, the Bronx history goes way back to the building of the Cross Bronx Express, when a lot of the Italians and Irish left, and the manufacturing jobs left, and they went to Queens and Westchester. I know the history of that going back to the 50s. But these progressions that have happened through the 70s, the 80s: the drugs, the AIDS epidemic, all this stuff. I wanted to educate people. Like you said, we didn't have fathers. We didn't have role models. You know, we didn't have money for food, sometimes. We were embarrassed into using food stamps, which is a degrading thing, even when you're a kid. My girlfriend's father owned a bodega. So I damn sure didn't want to be in there using food stamps. So I'd have to go in and make sure she wasn't in there. And one day she walked in as I was getting ready to pay, and I put the money back in my pocket, and said, "I forgot the money." And I ran out of the store. It's an embarrassment that eats away at you, and it plays with your head to the point where you say, "You know what? Fuck food stamps. I'm gonna go get real money." You know, I'm gonna go do whatever I have to do to get money and buy these things that these other guys have. So with "What is your next stop?", we're just asking people to think about what they're gonna do next, and try to make better decisions, so that we can try to make a change. It's like you said, it's hard. No one's gonna change 'til they're ready to change. With that said, I've had a few people read the book—I had a guy read the book, he lived on University Avenue, off of Kingsbridge. He called his family in Florida and he left. He read the book, and he said, "You know what, this is exactly what I'm stuck in. In order to get out of this, I have to leave the environment." And he left. And he's, you

know, he's going to school now. He's got a job. He's turning his life around. This was a criminal, you know, from the neighborhood. So, I'm happy about that. And then we hear from people where we talk, "You inspired me to work harder. I was ready to give up on my dancing. I was ready to give up on my singing. I was ready to give up on my acting or my writing. You inspired me to work harder." Cause I tell them all the time: the key to success is—it's like they hide it from us. They won't tell us what it is. It's this secret. And then you find out: the key to success is hard work. If I have to stay up till four o'clock in the morning to do college work, to write a book. You know, I get up at five o'clock in the morning, I go to work, I do the nine-to-five thing. I work more than eight hours. I come home, I'm writing Wiz's book, I'm staying up till two, three in the morning. I'm driving over here, you know, to do a TV appearance, or to do a meeting about Wiz's book, or to hang out with you guys. It's hard work, you know? That's the secret. And once you realize that, if you're willing to do the hard work, then what—you know, what can't you get?

AT: So would you say this is the main message behind "Next Stop," and what you're talking to the kids about right now?

IS: Yeah.

AT: So, taking responsibility, maybe some community development?

IS: Yeah, absolutely man. I mean, you know, show some compassion for one another, man. You know, I came out of a store the other day, and I saw two guys laughing at a really overweight guy, you know. And it bothered me so much, you know, that I wanted to go punch him in the face. You

know, I'm a peaceful guy. But these guys. I'm like, "Why are you being—?" you know, we're all human. You know, there's no compassion left. And I'm seeing that even with "What is your next stop?" You know, believe it or not, we have April Lee Hernandez from the Freedom Writers. We can't get any help, we can't get any funding. We can't—all the, you know, we've invested 3-4,000 dollars into this. You know, the DVD we made, and going out and speaking and paying for those speaking engagements ourselves, and you know—But we feel like it has to start somewhere. Somebody has to do it. Hopefully eventually we'll start getting invited to some of these schools and they'll be able to help us, you know, finance some of these things we want to do.

MN: One of the things, you know, you've got to get—The way to get into the schools is get yourself as a Department of Education Vendor—

IS: Okay.

MN: —because that's how they pay you.

IS: Okay.

MN: So, do you—you know, that's what I did with this project. And until they, they can't pay you.

IS: Okay.

MN: It's a—You know, so, if you know somebody in a school, have them work with you to fill out the vendor forms. And one you've got that, then any school can hire you.

IS: Okay, thank you.

MN: You know, cause they have money in there. I'll tell you how this goes afterwards.

IS: Okay, thanks.

MN: Because, you know, it was a whole process I had to go through when people wanted to do it. Then I got tired of volunteering, and I said—well, they told me—you have to become a vendor.

IS: Yeah.

MN: So, that's the way to do it.

IS: Well it's like Ernie Paniccioli told me. You know, I said—you know Ernie, the photographer, the hip-hop photographer? The book *Who Shot Ya?*

MN: Right.

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IS: I was tlaking to him for like two hours the other night. And he said—You know, I told him how hard this has been, getting this off the ground and everything. He said, “You know, Ivan, you can’t get on the bus for free. You can’t get a cup of coffee for free. You can’t get a stick of gum for free. So, you have to find that financing if you’re gonna survive. Otherwise, you’re not going to.” But, for now, we’re just gonna keep it going.

MN: Yeah.

IS: And we wanna try to change the thought process and kinda fight the brainwashing that’s going on with hip-hop, and the videos, and the—And let me tell you something: I attack hip-hop every time and every chance I get. I blog about Cam’ron, I blogged about Nas with using the “nigger” word. Because I had just read a article about, you know a black man whose wife was shot in Mississippi, and they called her “nigger” right before they shot her. And I’m thinking, how can Nas use this “nigger” word when the black woman was just murdered after being called a nigger? You know, I think it’s disgraceful. It’s that brainwashing that’s going on. If we don’t counter that—if we don’t start to counter that, it’s just gonna continue. And so me and April are trying to counter that with the positive side of things. So hopefully I can sit on hope and just eat up all these rappers. And they’re gonna say, “You’re not hip-hop. You’re not this.” I’ll say, “I been breakdancing before you, buddy.” You know, I was a B-Boy, I was a DJ, I was a MC. I was MC Hitz in Marble Hill. I had a group called Artistic Maniacs. I’m very much hip-hop.

MN: So this—Tell us a little about your MC. This was when you were in the Marble [crosstalk, laughter]—so this is a little later, when you’re 16, 17.

IS: Yeah, yeah, I was probably about—This is after I left Creston Avenue, I went down to live on Baily. And no one ever knew I could MC or anything like that. It was something I did behind closed doors when I would DJ.

MN: Now, did you freestyle?

IS: I did, I did.

MN: Could you freestyle for us a little?

IS: Oh, man [laughter].

AT: On the spot, right?

MN: We've done this with Rebel Diaz.

IS: Rebel Diaz I saw last night! I know they can freestyle! They do it all the time. Oh man, that's tough.

MN: You don't have to.

IS: It's been a while. It's been a while.

MN: If the spirit moves you.

IS: Yeah [laughter]. That's a tough one. If I had music or something, I would. But just off the top of my head, that's tough, man. But—but yeah, we did pretty good. We made a little name for ourselves. We were called the Artistic Maniacs. And I had—my DJ was Manny. We called him Small Wonder. Jimmy Jazz was our producer. And Kangol, from UTFO heard our tape, and he called us to Brooklyn. He said, "I'd like to work with you guys."

MN: Do you still have your tape?

IS: I have a few tapes, yeah, I do. [crosstalk] I can get you some.

MN: For archives, get us a tape.

IS: Yeah, we had a song called, "Put the Pressure on Them," and we had a couple of other songs. But yeah, it was—you know, we were doing okay. But Kangol, at the time, was working with a girl group. And they got a deal with Capitol, right when we started working with him. And so then he had to leave to L.A. for like six months. When that happened, Manny went into the crack trade. That happened all at the same time. And Jimmy Jazz, you know, went to engineering school or something. And I was just kind of floating out there. So the group kind of fell apart, which was sad. But we were pretty good back in our days. We performed at Kenndy High School. We performed at—on the Circle Line, with Red Alert.



MN: Oh, okay. MC Hitz.

IS: We were doing—MC Hitz, MC Hitz.

MN: H-I-T-S, or Z?

IS: H-I-T-Z. Oh, you had t have a Z, back in those days. Especially, you know, being 17, you had to be, you know, a little different. But, yeah, you know, it was cool man. I—So I am hip-hop. And I well never let someone look me in the eye and say, “You’re not hip-hop. You can’t talk to me.” No, I can talk to you about this. And when we look at the kids, it’s like, how can you not relate to me? You’re not gonna question me. You’re not gonna question where I came from. Look at the funeral cards, look at the memorials. You know, there’s no fluff here. This is not a –who’s that guy? James Frey or whatever.

MN: Oh the fake?

IS: The guy witht the fake memoir.

MN: Oh, the fake, right.

IS: *A Million Little Pieces* or whatever. This is not that, you know. And Simon and Sschuster had some concerns with that. I said—I told them where to go. Go to the 50th police precinct, go to the

52nd police precinct. Go to the ATF. Here's the funeral cards. Here's the memorial pictures, here's the—You know, people ask me all the time: did you exaggerate stuff? Did you make stuff up?

MN: The stuff after—

IS: You can't. You can't.

MN: —I mean, 1993 at Our Lady—At—Father Flynn at St. Martin of Tours officiated 25 funerals in one year, of guys from 17 to 25 years old, in the early 90s.

IS: 2200 murders. We averaged 2000 murders from '90 to '93. And now we average 600 murders. So, put that into perspective, you know. We—yeah, every three months, somebody was dying in the neighborhood. So I couldn't of made it up if I wanted to, you know?

MN: Okay, well listen, this was really—it was a real pleasure.

IS: For me too, thank you guys.

AT: thank you very much.

MN: And, okay—

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Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

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IS: What's the bill, for getting all that out of my system again? What—how much do you guys charge for—[tape cuts out]

[END OF INTERVIEW]