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Rooks, Valerie

Rooks, Valerie Interview: Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Transcriber: Danielle Lund

Dr. Brian Purnell (BP): Okay, that's perfect, and I'm going to turn the camera on here.

Excellent. Okay, today is November 29, 2006. Interviewing, for the Bronx African American History Project at Fordham University. If you could please start by saying and spelling your first and last name, if you're married your married name, or your maiden name, as well.

Valerie Rooks (VR): Okay. My name is Valerie E. Rooks. My first name is spelled V-A-L-E-R-I-E. My middle initial is E. Rooks is my married name, R-double O-K-S, and my maiden name is Dillard, D as in David – I-L-L-A-R-D.

BP: And what year were you born?

VR: 1954, July 29th.

BP: When you were born, did your family live in the Bronx?

VR: Yes. We lived in Sedgwick Projects. In fact I was - - I grew up there. My family moved there soon after the projects were built. They were built in the 1950s, and when my parents moved there, my two brothers, they were born already, because my oldest brother was born in 1949, and the next oldest brother was born in 1951, and my parents moved into the project in 1952, so I was - - that's where I was, you know, born and grew up in the project [Laughs]. We lived on the fourth floor of one of the first buildings you see when you come up the hill into the project, 150.

BP: The address was 150 - -

VR: West 174th Street.

BP: Alright, so where do you fall within the five children in your family? You said - - there's two older brothers, and then it's - -

VR: And then me - -

BP: And then your have - - and then your sister.

VR: And then I have a younger sister, who's two years younger than me, and a youngest brother. He's six years younger than me? 1962, yes. No, he's eight years younger than me.

BP: He was born in 1962.

VR: Right, yes.

BP: Perhaps we could start by speaking about your parents a bit and what they did for a living. I also know that when - - from interviewing your sister, we - - she, she spoke about how you also spent a great deal of - - or she spent a great deal of time with your grandparents.

VR: Yes. Our grandparents lived in 164 West 174th Street, which was a building further into the project, and they lived there, you know, as long as I could remember growing up, because we were sent there after school to do our homework [Laughter]. We thought it was punishment at the time, but looking back on it, it was the best thing our parents - - my mother actually was the forefront of sending us there to do our homework everyday, and our grandfather was just so intelligent. I mean he just knew everything about everything, and he had - - I don't know how much college he had. I know that he did attend Yale. I don't know if he graduated from there, but I always remember hearing about your grandfather went to Yale, but I don't know about any - - whether he graduated from there, because he did develop a serious Polio-like illness in legs, and it was very difficult for him to walk, and he had a special shoe that he had to wear, so one of the reasons why we also had to go over to our grandparents was because we all had to help him put on his shoe. You know, and he had this special shoe that had all these laces, and he needed help with it, putting it on.

BP: What was his name?

VR: John Avery Hagen, and my grandmother - - we called her Bessie B. We didn't call her grandmother, and there's a story about that. We never knew till we were older that she was actually my mother's aunt who took over caring for my mother and her sister and brothers when their mother died, and their mother died very young, and so, my grandfather had my mother's aunt come in, and she came in willingly to take over taking care of the children, and so, we didn't know that till we were older, but we always called her Bessie B., and she was our grandmother to us, and she never, you know, disputed that [Laughs] - - that she was literally our grand aunt, but - -

BP: Where was she from? Were they from New York or were they - -

VR: No. My mother was born - - she tells us she was born on a boat between Connecticut and Canada [Laughs]. She tells us that, but she was raised in Bridgewater, Connecticut. My grandmother, my mother's mother actually, and my grandmother, who was her sister - - they were raised in Nova Scotia. Yes, so, I don't know how they came to meet my grandfather, but Connecticut and Nova Scotia, Canada are things that I remember about my grandparents, and when my grandfather passed away - - did he pass away first? Yes, I think my grandfather passed away first. And when my grandmother, Bessie B. passed away, she had holdings in Nova Scotia. So, my mother and her sister had to actually travel up there to take care of the land, or whatever it was she had up there, so - -

BP: What - - I'm sorry.

VR: - - And being a teenager, I never really got into, you know, all the intricacies of it, and asked questions about it, because you know when you're - - when you're growing up at that time, it's like don't ask too many questions, you know, so [Laughs] - -

BP: And your father, what was his name?

VR: Robert Lee Dillard.

BP: Your father and your mother.

VR: My father's name is Robert Lee Dillard, and my mother is Helen Eugenia Hagen - - was her maiden name, and my father grew up in Springfield and Savannah, Georgia. And he met my mother when he came north. And it was prior to him going into the army that he met my mother, and I don't know how they met. I think they met at a dance or some friends hooked them up or something. I really don't - -

BP: In New York or - -

VR: In New York, yes.

BP: What brought your mother from Bridgeport to New York, and what brought your father from Georgia to New York?

VR: Well at that time, a lot of southerners were migrating to the North at that time in the - - I don't know, the '40s, '50s. There was a black migration to the North, and my father was coming up here to find, you know, I guess a better work, better opportunities, and so I don't know exactly why my mother was in New York. I really - - I don't even remember how they - - how she came to be there. Yes.

BP: But they met in New York. Do you know if they lived in the Bronx?

VR: Yes. They lived in the Bronx, and they lived over near Prospect Avenue. Yes. They had an apartment over there. And it could be that, you know, my mother's sister was about five years older than her. Estelle Hagen, and she came to be Estelle Sealy later on, [Bell] through her married name, and she came to New York, and she was working with the Department of Corrections, so I don't know if it was because of my mother's sister that she came, so I'm - - I'm not really sure, yes.

BP: What type of work did your father do? And your mother?

VR: Well, my father worked in the post office, yes, but prior to him - - well actually while he was working in the post office, he worked a lot of odd jobs. He worked as a mechanic in a garage. He worked - - in a - - a dispatcher. My mother was a dispatcher. He was a driver, cab driver. He had so many odd jobs that he did in addition to working in a post office, and I guess because they had five children, you know, and they had to provide for them, so, and at some point then he just stopped all of these other jobs and he just worked his post office job because he worked at night. Yes.

BP: And your mother, did she work too?

VR: Well she just had like part-time jobs. She worked at a telephone company. Like I said, she worked as a dispatcher for different car companies. She worked for the board of elections. Whenever there was - - election time came around they always called her. She worked for the census bureau at one time going around asking people various questions that they usually didn't want to answer, and she worked - - where else did she work? She worked in the post office also for a short period of time. She worked at Macy's. Yes, she had quite a lot of different part-time jobs, you know, just to help make ends meet. Yes.

BP: Did you say that your father served in - - was in the service?

VR: Yes. He was in the service. He was in the - - I guess in the 1940s, so I guess it was - - what was that? World War II or Korean - -

BP: Yes, World War II.

VR: Yes.

BP: Did he serve overseas?

VR: I'm - - I'm not sure. I'm not really sure. I think he did. I'm not - - I really can't - - yes.

BP: It wasn't - - was - - was his military service something that he talked about at home or - -

VR: My father didn't talk [Laughs] much.

BP: He didn't talk - - he didn't talk much about anything?

VR: [Laughs] He didn't talk too much. He was - - he was such a quiet man. He never really volunteered [Laughs] any information. You'd have to pull stuff out of him, and we used to - - one day, you know as we got older - - like how did they hook up, you know, because my mother was a talker. And I guess maybe opposites attract, but he really didn't talk about - - he didn't talk about, you know, his service. What he would talk about is his family in the South, you know, and he just loved taking us down there every summer, and they - - my mother and father would drive us down there as soon as school was out, they'd get us together and we would get in the car, and they'd load up the car with fried chicken and boiled eggs and our pillows and blankets and drive us down there, and then we'd stay there the whole summer, and then they'd come back, you know, before school started, and pick us up, the four of us, because my younger brother, Gregory - - he was too young to stay down there, so it was just myself, my sister, and my two older brothers. Yes.

BP: Since you - - since you mentioned that, I have a question. I'm just curious about when - - how old were you when you would take those trips every summer?

VR: Well, let's see. I was preteen, because, when I turned thirteen, I started getting little jobs myself, little part-time summer jobs, so I - - they couldn't, you know, we couldn't go down South, or I couldn't anyway. And I think around that time, they really stopped, because my brothers were older, so they weren't going - -

BP: So you were about, you know, seven, eight, nine ten.

VR: So it was yes, it was prior to me - - yes, prior twelve - - age twelve, yes, I would say we would go down there. I remember at least, at least three summers spending down there. I mean it starts to blend, you know, but - -

BP: Do you remember thinking that Georgia was very, very different from New York?

VR: Yes, I was - - I hated it. [Laughs] I hated it down there. It was so hot, and everybody - - it was normal to them to walk around with no shoes on, and I didn't want my feet touching the ground, and there were bugs and crickets - -

BP: [Laughs] Oh you were a city girl.

VR: - - and I was like oh, I can't wait till the summer's over. It was just so hot. That's all I remember. It was just so hot, and my aunt, who we stayed with, my father's sister - - she didn't want you staying in the house, so once you get up in the morning, you have your breakfast, you go out on the porch, and it's so hot, and you're like, there's nothing to do, and she - - I don't care, get out. You know, so - - [BP Laughs] We would - - and then we'd, you know, eventually during the day find something to do. Some games we would play with each other, and then we had cousins that lived near by, so you know, the summer would go by fast, but I just remember it was very hot, and I just, I just hated that, the heat, and the bugs, [BP laughs] and the mosquitoes. I just - - we would always come back with a lot of mosquito bites.

BP: What part of Georgia was this? Was this - -

VR: Savannah.

BP: Savannah.

VR: Yes.

BP: Interesting.

VR: Yes.

BP: I guess - - I guess it would be good to move into - - to speak a little bit about your early memories living in Sedrick, so - -

VR: Oh, okay.

BP: - - what was the neighborhood like? What was - -

VR: Well it was predominantly white. A lot of Jewish lived in the neighborhood, some Irish, not that many Italian, a few Italian. And we - - we had a close knit - - I guess African American community within the project, even though we all got along with everyone there. We all grew up together. There was no - - there wasn't this kind of thing I guess that goes on now, you know, this division. You know, we all just you know would have a lot of fun together. We played all kinds of games on the weekends, and in the summer. It was like, you know, everybody was outside all the time, and it was a real sense of community and camaraderie going on. And our parks, we had parks, with different - - like the money bars, and, and this - - these stone animals that were in the shape of like turtles - -

BP: Turtles.

VR: - - yes, [Laughs] and the - - we had the big structures that were like - - what do you call that - - like a hollowed out drum, and they were stone and they painted them. You know, they were painted in different colors, and striped colors, so it was - - you know, it was a really nice time. All we wanted to do was go outside and play, and we wanted to stay outside and play, till the lights would come on in the park, and then you know that it's time to go upstairs, and we had a lot of different games we would play. We'd - - we'd play Johnny-on-the-Pony, Kick the Can, Skelly - -

BP: Okay, so if you could, if you wouldn't mind briefly, what is Johnny-on-the-Pony? What, what is - -

VR: Well, you have two teams, and the team that is playing the pony part, they have to line up and, you know, kneel down, stoop down rather, like you're, you're a pony, and they all like are one behind the other. There'd be like six or seven people on the team so - - the other team would have to run one at a time to the pony and jump on it, and you try to jump as far in the front, to the first person who's the pony as possible, so your other team members can come and jump on, and they idea was, the people who were the pony had to stay strong, and hold up the other team that's coming and jumping on them, and if you fall - - if you fall before the whole team comes, then you lose, but if you stay up and that whole team has come, and they're on top of all of you, then you say, Johnny-on-a-Pony, Johnny-on-a-Pony three times, and then if you're still standing, then you're the team that won, and then you switch sides, you know. It was a lot of fun, it was a lot of fun, and that - - the idea was to get the pony to fall, so - -

BP: You mentioned that - - so was this a game that boys and girls played or - -

VR: Yes, yes. And they would, you know, like my brothers sometimes they would say, no you can't play, because then they would see who's on the team. They're like, no you all - - I don't want you being the pony with them, you know, I don't want them jumping on you and you know, so, it was, you know, it was fun. My brothers, you know, they tried to protect us and look out for us and - -

BP: What were their names?

VR: Clifford and Clayton.

BP: Clifford was older?

VR: He was the oldest, right, and Clayton. Clifford - - Clifford and Clayton, those were their middle names, and my mother had this thing about calling her sons by their middle names you know. Their - - their first name is Robert Clifford, and Clayton's name is John Clayton Dillard.

And even my youngest brother, his middle name is Gregory, and we grew up calling him

Gregory, but his name is Charles Gregory, so - -

BP: You said that, you know, as a child, you were growing up, say, the mid to late 1950s, maybe even early 1960s - -

VR: Right.

BP: - - your memory probably kicks in when you're seven, six, seven, eight, nine - -

VR: Yes.

BP: - - so then we're talking the early 1960s, and Sedgwick Houses was still predominantly white at the time.

VR: Yes, yes.

BP: And, so kids would just all play together?

VR: Yes, yes.

BP: Do you remember any close friendships that you might have had with some other girls, and if you played together in the park, would you also visit each other's homes and - -

VR: No, not so much, and I guess maybe that was something that I didn't even realize, you know, the division, and I didn't even realize that, because we would play - - everybody would play outside together. There were only a couple of people - - like there was one guy who my brothers were friends with. His name was George, and they would - - they were very close with him, and they would visit his home, and he would visit ours, and he would eat at our home. And the only other person would be our next door neighbors, the Fishers, and they had a son and a daughter. And their daughter - - well, their mother, the mother would come over to my mother's house and they would sit and have coffee or whatever, and their daughter was a little bit older than me, but we would still play together, and sometimes she would come over, but there weren't

that many that we had. It was generally - - our friends were generally black, but we would still, you know, play with everyone, talk with everyone. It wasn't this - - we weren't discriminated against, you know, as far as who they were, as far as whether you would play with them or not. I do remember that I got into a fight one, one day, with this white girl. I don't even remember her name, and she kicked my ass really, I'm sorry. Can I say that? [Laughs]

BP: Of course.

VR: And I was really - - I was trying to fight her, but she had me down on the ground, and the only way I was able to get up is my brothers came and broke it up and, you know, took her off of me, and I don't even remember what we were fighting about, but it wasn't a black, white thing. It was probably something about, oh you're on the turtle, and I want to get on it, or something like that, you know, something stupid, but I was so embarrassed and humiliated that she had me down, you know, on the ground, you know, and she's on top of me, so, but - - oh, you get over those things, but I remember at that time. Those are the memories that you keep with you, because I was - - I guess I was so humiliated that my brothers had to come get her off of me. [Laughs] And then I remember a time when my oldest brother, and I was - - I don't - - I think maybe I might've been seven or eight, and Clifford had gotten into something with a gang that was outside the project, an Hispanic gang, and they lived on the Avenue, on University. They - - actually, their families lived on the Avenue, on University Avenue, and they had come into the project one day, and they, they actually tied my brother up to the fence, and my mother saw that - - you know, she was - - our window faced the front of the building, so for some reason, I just remember hearing her call out the window, you know, what are you doing, and you know, yelling at these boys who were tying my brother up, and I guess when they - - she started yelling at them, and telling them she's going to call the police, they ran away, so she grabs me to go

downstairs. I don't know where my younger sister was, and we go downstairs, and I just remembered, like seeing my brother tied up at the fence. You know, we had those, those picket fences. They weren't white. They were like an orange color, and they had him tied up there, and so I remember my mother asking him like who did this to you, you know, and, and of course he probably told her because then the next thing I know - - I remember is that we're at one of the boys homes down on the Avenue and the way we had to reach their house was we had to go through an alleyway, and I just remember sitting there with my mother while she's talking to this woman, who's the mother of one the kids, and you know, telling her how outraged she was that this had happened to her son, and that her son was one of the gang members that had done this, and that's, that's just a vivid memory that I have of, you know, an incident [Laughs] that happened [Laughs].

BP: Right, but so - - but these weren't - -

VR: They weren't common. They weren't common things that would go on, because basically I don't, you know, that's not, that's not the fondest memories that I have of the project. I have, you know, I have really good memories of the fun that we used to have on a daily basis. And in the summer it was just nonstop fun. I mean we hated to see September come, and - - because right before school started, was when we had marble season. Yes, and that was like - - you know, if you would - - if one of these - - if an executive from a company would come - - would just go back in time to see like even like a stock broker would go back in time and see how we handled this marble season - - [Laughs] it was like everybody had like their own little area on the sidewalk at the gutter, you know, you're sitting at the sidewalk at the gutter with your own little type of marble game and you walk through the - - it was like a market, you know everybody - - there were people on both sides of the, of the street, sitting on the sidewalk, and everybody had a

little type of game, and you're walking through there, and you're trying to see how many marbles you can get - - jumbo marbles, and then the mid-sized marbles, and the little ones, and there were all different types of games, and it was - - it was like a market place with all these kids, you know, the kids were doing this. [BP laughs] You know, it wasn't adults, [BP Laughs] and it was just amazing. And you're making - - they were making some, you know, money there, you know. It was pennies, but it was just remarkable when you look back on that to see the type of, you know, business kind of sense that people didn't even know that they had at the time. [Laughs]

BP: What was the - - so what was the community of adults like in Sedgwick Houses? You, you described a very friendly community of children. What - - what was the - -

VR: Well everybody was, you know, the - - your door was always open. We never locked our doors, and everybody shared and helped out with each other. I know the - - the neighbors down the hall I was telling you about the Fishers, at one time the parents were having issues and my mother would, you know, go down and talk to both of them - - the husband and the fa - - I mean the husband and the wife, and, and then we had a, an elderly woman who lived right across the hall from us, and she was - - she didn't speak too good English. She used to speak Hebrew. And I remember every time there was a Jewish holiday, she would give my mother the gefilte fish, and matzah balls, and my father hated it, but my mother would accept it. I mean we wouldn't - - I mean I tasted the matzah balls, and the matzah bread. I would taste that, but the gefilte fish, [Laughs] I wasn't tasting that. Anyway she would do that, you know, every time there was a Jewish holiday, and well our whole - - you know, everybody knew everyone on the floor, you know, black or white - - you knew who your neighbors were, and your door was always open, and you can always ask anyone for anything and everyone tried to help everyone out, and you

knew that - - I guess our parents knew that when your children were outside that if you weren't watching them, somebody was looking out and seeing that, you know, they were on the straight and narrow, and if we did anything out of the ordinary, we knew it would get back to them, so we tried to - - I mean sometimes you stray, but we knew that our mother would find out anything, you know, so - -

BP: And what, what would happen if she did find out?

VR: Oh, we'd get a beating. [BP Laughs] We, we would get a beating, and, and it wouldn't be oh they're not telling you the truth. You know, the parents, the adults, they had this sense of community where they believed everything each one would tell them, and generally they were correct [BP laughs] in what they would say about us. And then we also had the housing cops that were - - they were like, like father figures, because they would, you know, they were like - - they would patrol, they were - - you know, it's not like the housing cops of today. I mean they controlled, and they also would talk to us, and you know, have conversation with us about certain things and growing up and if they saw we were, you know, doing something we weren't supposed to do, it wasn't like, you know, you were looking to be arrested or anything. They would try to make you see the error of your ways by talking to you. So, we, we looked up to them too. We feared them also, but we, we knew that we could always go to them, you know, in times of trouble, so - - we had a - - it was just a really great, really great experience growing up. It really was. And we had one - - when I - - I guess I was about thirteen or fourteen an Italian family moved into our building, and there may have been others there, but the reason why I know this Italian family is because the daughter - - we became very close. Eleanor. And so, we - - she hung out with all of us. She hung out with the blacks. You know, she was the only white person in our group, and she was - - She had moved from Soundview Projects to Sedgwick

Projects and we used to always wonder, because sometimes she would talk as if, you know, she would have that black vernacular [Laughter] in her tone, and she would tell us, you know, she used to hang out with black people in Soundview Projects, so. So she hung out with us all the way up through - - I don't know seventeen, eighteen - - until I stopped hanging out I guess. I guess when I went to college. Yes.

BP: What was her name?

VR: Eleanor, Eleanor Sevoia.

BP: Sevoia.

VR: Yes.

BP: So, as a child, playing Johnny-on-the-Pony and Kick the Can all the kids would hang out together, you know, everybody would just play together, but did, did groups kind of form along -

VR: Along race lines?

BP: Yes, just like little cliques and - -

VR: Yes, yes we did have that, yes.

BP: But it wasn't - -

VR: It wasn't like we would exclude if you wanted to be in our group, but if you didn't want to, and you wanted to be with your own then that was okay too. It was understood, you know, and Eleanor was the exception, because she wanted to hang with us, so [Laughs]. She just, you know, she just hung with us, and she had two older brothers, and actually she was the youngest. She had two older brothers and two older sisters. Yes, so.

BP: What - - what did you do with your friends when you - - as a teenager? I'm, I'm - - you weren't playing Johnny-on-the-Pony anymore, right, so - -

VR: No we were into - - sitting on the corner of the - - when you come up the hill to the project, there was a corner that you - - you turn the corner to go into the project, and right at that corner is where we would start congregating with our - - we would have our little - - it wasn't even called a tape deck then. It was some kind of box that we used to play forty-fives. It was a portable box, yes, yes. And we'd sit out there and we'd play our music and then we'd also make up dances to different songs and - - and then you're into who likes this one, who likes that guy, and this one likes you and, you know, trying to go sneak a kiss with somebody [Laughter]. Then we - - we changed around the - - there was a game called Run Catch and Kiss, so we would play that game, and the girls would you know run and try and hide and the guys would you know, try and find them, so, so that was, that was fun. And we had a woods behind our project. In fact it was behind the building that my grandparents lived in, so we were very cautious, my sister and I, about going in that woods, because we knew that my - - our grandparents window faced the woods, and periodically, they would look out there, and we didn't - - we weren't afraid of going into those woods, because everybody would just run back there, and we'd play back there sometimes, and in the winter, we'd have cardboard that we'd go down the hill on, on the snow so - - but when we were playing these kind of games, we didn't want our grandparents to see that we were back there, so my sister and I were really cautious about when we would go back there, so - -

BP: What - - what were your experiences like in school?

VR: Well in school I was - - I was the only black child in my class - - my grades, up until sixth grade, from kindergarten to sixth grade, and that was because I was in the - - what was considered the smart classes, the 1-1 classes. I was in first grade, class 1-1; second grade 2-1; 3-1, and that was the smartest class, so - - and I was the - - the only black child in those classes so,

I didn't have a lot of - - you know, I had my classmates, and they were my classmates, but you know they were all white, so you know, it's not like I could go home with them, or hang out with them, so it's just really in the classroom that we were close, [Crosstalk] so I felt a little, I felt a little - - separated growing up in, in - - I guess going to school than my other friends in the project, because they weren't in classes like that. They were in classes where they had other black students, so - -

BP: What school did you attend for elementary school or - -

VR: P.S. 104, which is still there, and they call it the Shakespeare School now, yes.

BP: And how about for junior high? Was it - -

VR: It was Junior High School 182, and that was - - it was in walking distance from the project, and it changed when I got into sixth grade, because in sixth grade I went to junior high, and I had maybe two other [Laughs] black students in my class.

BP: But still - - you were still in the accelerated course - - classes?

VR: Yes, yes so, and - - and then when I got into seventh grade, I was in what they call the SP classes, and from seven - - I skipped eighth grade. I went from seven, to ninth, and so when I actually went to high school, I went into tenth grade, when I went to high school instead of going into ninth grade, so - -

BP: Where did you go to high school?

VR: Taft High School, so - - so I mean I, you know, my parents, and my grandparents, and my aunt, they would all say, oh you know, you're going to be the lawyer of the family, you know, and you're the smart one, and you know and I - - I guess I let that all sink into me and I came to believe that I'm supposed to be the lawyer - - not, not realizing until I actually was in college that that's not really what I wanted. It's what they wanted. So, I made a half-hearted attempt to apply

to law school when I was in college, but I didn't put my all into it, so of course I didn't get in, and I didn't do well on the LSATs, so, but - -

BP: Where did you do - - go to undergrad?

VR: Lehman College in the Bronx, yes, yes so - -

BP: So your experience throughout your educational experience, being one of the very few African Americans in these accelerated classes, did that ever - - did you ever think about that or did that ever - - was that ever something that made you feel - - how did that make you feel?

VR: Well I felt - - I felt a little - - I guess disconnected, you know, because I felt I really didn't have anybody to, you know, talk to, you know I didn't have anybody who could relate to, you know, what I was going through in my classes, and I had an experience one time in seventh grade, where when I was in SP classes - - I think I was maybe the only - - there was one other person in the class that was black [Bell] and the - - this is the first time that I experienced - - I guess it's that second time really that I experienced racism, and didn't know that that was it until later. I had written this paper, and, and submitted it, and the - - I never - - I always felt the teacher had - - you know was very cool towards me, or stand offish or whatever, but then I thought you know that maybe that's just her way. But it wasn't until I had submitted the paper, and then she gave everybody in the class back their paper, except for mine. She gave them back with their grade on it. And when she gave mine back, she put "See me" at the top, and as I was leaving the classroom, you know, and I was very shy - - that, that's another thing, and I guess that's why I felt so disconnected because I was a very shy person growing up - - and, so anyway I went up to see her, and she asked me in a very disdainful way did I write that paper, so you know, I was shocked that she asked me that, and I was like, yes, I wrote it, so then she just shook her head, and that was it. I don't remember whether I gave it back to her and she gave me a

mark. I don't remember that, but I just remember the look on her face and how she looked at me. And I had written a paper about this group of people who had come up with this plan to rob Fort Knox, [Laughs] and I had this intricate plan, you know, and this whole story laid out of how they, you know how they did this, and I guess it could be [Laughs] a movie right now, but, you know, and I was very proud of that paper, so after she did that, that made me feel small, you know.

BP: Yes. You said that was the second incident in school.

VR: Right, and the first time that I felt it was - - it was when I was in - - I think I was in like fifth grade, and one of the girls in - - who lived in the project, Karen - - I remember her name, Karen Silver. And I liked Karen Silver. We would have, you know, we - - enjoy ourselves in class, you know, she was, you know, she never acted in any funny way towards me.

BP: And she lived in Sedrick?

VR: She lived in Sedrick. And so one day - - I think it was a weekend probably, I was outside with my friends playing Double-Dutch, and Karen came out with her little sister, so - - and you know, you know I saw her, and I waved to her, and you know, told her to come over, and she came over and you know, I asked her did she want to, you know, jump Double-Dutch. And she wanted to. You know she was, you know seemed to be having [Bell] a good time, and then all of a sudden, her mother came, and grabbed her, and just pulled her away from us, and so, you know, and we all looked at each other - - we're like what's that all about, you know, so - - I guess that, that's the other instance.

BP: And have you ever - - Karen - - Karen Silver you said? You never, you never - -

VR: No, I never spoke to her. I mean you're like - - you're young, you're not going - - I wouldn't question, because like I said, I was a very shy person so - - generally, we didn't go around questioning people about why did you do this or that, so - -

BP: As you got older did you - - did you venture beyond the neighborhood around Sedrick? Did you, you know did you and your friends - -

VR: Yes, well I was - - when I was in college I worked in Manhattan at East New York Savings Bank part time. Not my first year in college, because your first year, you usually get a schedule that you can't do anything with, but then the second year, I was able to work my schedule so that I got out of school early in the afternoon and I found this job downtown on 42nd Street at the East New York Savings Bank from three to seven to - -

BP: This was like early 1971 - -

VR: It was - -

BP: - - 1970?

VR: It was - - because I went to Lehman from '71 to '75, so it was like, yes, early '70s, yes. And I worked in the bank all through college. I worked part time there, and I opened new accounts, yes, so that - - you know, and I would have to take the subway home, the D train home, and I always remember that my mother - - because I would get home at about I don't know 8:30 at night, and I'd have to walk up from - - I don't know if you're familiar with where the project is.

BP: Not, not where Sedgwick is. I don't know.

VR: Oh, well there - -

BP: What's the stop on the D train?

VR: Number 4 - - well it's 174th Street on the D train, but it's Mt. Eden Avenue on the number 4, and you'd have to walk up that long hill, all the way up to the project, because there's no bus, so my - - I always remember every night, because - -

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

BP: Okay, continue please.

VR: Yes, I remember my mother would be looking out the window, because our window faced the front of the building, waiting to see me come up the hill into the project, so and then she would, you know, she would yell out to me, and I'd wave and she'd always have my dinner waiting, you know, and that was just, that was just great, you know.

BP: What - - what - - did you live in Sedgwick Houses until you moved to Co-op City in 1983?

VR: No.

BP: Your parents moved right?

VR: Yes. We moved. In fact we moved the day my sister got married. Two days after she got married in 1977. My father bought a house with my brother in northeast Bronx, which was not too far from Co-op City.

BP: Which neighborhood in the north - -

VR: It's - - Gunhill Road. I guess around the corner from the number 5 train station. I guess you would call that the Eastchester area of the Bronx.

BP: Was this with Clifford or Clayton?

VR: With Clifford, yes.

BP: With the older brother.

VR: Yes. He bought a two family house.

BP: Which of your brothers served overseas in - - in Vietnam?

VR: Clifford.

BP: I remember your sister mentioned that - - that experience affected him in a, in a major way.

VR: Yes. Yes it did. [Laughs] Probably, probably lifelong - - that it affected him, and he - - well he wasn't the same when he - - came back from there - -

BP: What was he like before the war and - -

VR: He was you know - - he was a fun - - he was a fun kind of guy, you know. He always liked to play jokes on people and he always would try to do stuff to his younger sisters and brothers.

You know, little pranks. And just a, you know, a fun person. When he came back from there, he was a different kind of, and maybe he was - - maybe he was maturing, you know. Maybe that matured him being over there and seeing all the things that he saw, but he was different, you know. I just can't put my exact finger on it. You know, his personality, and you know, we still, you know, we're still family today. We're still close and everything, but he was - - he was a little, a little off. [Laughs]

BP: Did Clayton serve over - - No he was - -

VR: No, no. He went to college. He went to college in Minnesota, and he went to another college too. He went to Gannon and Lee College, and I don't know which one was Minnesota.

One was Pennsylvania and one was Minnesota. Yes, so - -

BP: So you leave - - you left Sedgwick Houses - -

VR: Well I left with my family to move into the two family house.

BP: Nineteen seventy - - seven.

VR: Seven. And I moved into Co-op in '83 because I - - while I was - - before I left Sedgwick Projects, I started seeing my daughter's father who wouldn't be her father, and we were high school sweethearts. I met him when I was sixteen, and - - so when I was seeing him for up until

- - up until we got married - - we were seeing each other for ten years, before we actually got married, almost ten years, yes. And - - and so we were - - we were boyfriend and girlfriend longer than we were husband and wife [Laughs]. We only stayed married a couple of years, but yes, so anyway, when we lived in the house on - - off of Gunhill Road - - Sexton Place, that's the street the house is on - - which we still have the house in the family - - I was seeing him all that time, up until the time we got married. Yes, so - -

BP: What - - in the twenty-three years that you lived at - - in Sedgwick how had - -

VR: Well actually it wasn't twenty-three. It was - - well '77 you're right, yes if I was '54, yes, it was twenty - - I was twenty-three. I didn't even realize it was [BP laughs] - - I thought I had - - you know what - - you know what it is, my sister was twenty-one, and I keep thinking of her age [BP laughs] when, because she got married and moved to Queens. Yes, so I was twenty-three, yes. I didn't even realize that.

BP: How - - how had the neighborhood and how had the area changed - - [Crosstalk]

VR: Oh it was changing before we moved out of there. Because, like I said, when Co-op City opened in 1968, you had that flight from the Bronx - - everybody going into Co-op City, so we could see like the, you know, the different quality of people coming in, and the, the sense of community was going, you know, everybody was just looking out for themselves. It was, you know, people with a poor - - lesser income level was moving in and so I guess that's why my father decided, you know, we need to - - he always wanted a house anyway, because, you know, he grew up in the South and he always wanted a house with some property so - -

BP: On Sexton Avenue in - - in the Gunhill - -

VR: Sexton Place.

BP: Sexton Place.

VR: Yes.

BP: What was that neighborhood - - what was it like moving there, and who lived in that neighborhood?

VR: Well that was a diverse neighborhood. There was white, black, a few Caribbean, West Indian, and even on the Avenue, on Gunhill Road itself all the shopkeepers, you know, they were basically white. There was one store, a record store, that was around the corner that was owned by a black guy. And my husband came to - - well he wasn't my husband at the time, but he came to work in that record store for a short period of time and, and then there was a, a beauty salon, and I don't know if it was - - it was probably owned by someone who was white, but the staff was black.

BP: What was your husband's name?

VR: John - - John Rooks.

BP: And did he live in Sedgwick as well, or - -

VR: No. He lived on Undercliff Avenue, which was like two Avenues down from Sedrick, and actually I knew him from - - you know, we met in high school, and at that time, he didn't live near Sedgwick. He lived over on - - in Claremont Projects on 169th and Webster, off of Webster. He lived over there, and it wasn't until - - I guess sometime after I graduated high school that his mother and father moved to Undercliff Avenue. Yes.

BP: So the new neighborhood on Sexton Place is - - it sounds like it's similar to what you grew up with.

VR: Yes, that's why it was, you know, it was easy to get comfortable around the neighborhood. The only thing that we found strange there was that we weren't used to it being so very quiet at night, you know, you couldn't hear anything. I mean sometimes you would hear a cricket, and

that - - that at first we couldn't sleep, [BP Laughs] because it was so quiet. Because when we were in the project, you would sometimes hear, you know, sirens and the cars screeching or people outside, you know, talking, because we lived on the fourth floor. Yes, so, it took me a long time to get used to the quiet up there. Yes.

BP: Growing up and even when you moved, were - - did your family attend a particular church?

VR: Yes, we attended the church across the street from the project. Featherbed Lane Presbyterian Church.

BP: Featherbed Lane Presbyterian.

VR: Yes, and that's the church I went to Sunday School, and if I didn't go to Sunday school, I couldn't go outside and play, so you know you had to get up and go to Sunday school and, and then we'd come home my sister and I. It seemed like my sister and I were doing a lot of the work, but my brothers said they used to do it when they were our age, but we would have to come home and help my mother do the cooking, the Sunday dinner, and, but - - and that's all good too, you know, because, you know when I became an adult, I realized how that was very helpful to me, and my mother having us do that, and my father would you know, he always made sure every Saturday, like he cleaned the whole house, you know, so, you know, we had that ingrained in us, you know, that cleaning thing, so, and he didn't care how tired he was. He would just get up and clean the house. And if he, if he had slept longer than he should have, he would clean it, and it would be like ten o'clock at night - - he was cleaning the house, you know, so - - but yes, we went to the church. We went to Featherbed Lane Presbyterian Church, and most of the African American families in Sedgwick Projects, their children attended the church. Some families did attend the Catholic church that was further down the block, but most of them -

BP: What was the name of that church?

VR: St. Francis of Assisi, but most of us attended Featherbed Lane Presbyterian.

BP: Which is still there.

VR: It's still there, yes. In fact after my mother [Bell] passed away in '99, my younger brother and my sister and I went back to the church, and we had been gone for over twenty years, and we went back and we became very active in the church, and now I'm the elder there, and I'm also the treasurer, and my sister is a deacon, and my younger brother he was the chairman of the deacon board before he moved to Georgia.

BP: Gregory.

VR: Yes, yes.

BP: Do Clifford and Clayton still live in the Bronx?

VR: No. Clifford lives in Brooklyn now, and Clayton recently moved to Maryland. He remarried, yes.

BP: I'm just curious. I wanted to hear a bit about moving to Co-op City.

VR: Okay.

BP: So, 1983 - -

VR: Well I had - - I had separated from my husband in 1981 and I moved back home to the house on Sexton Place with my daughter.

BP: Where were you living with your husband?

VR: We were living in - - what do you call that? Eastchester Houses, on - - off of Boston Road, and I moved back with my daughter and for two years I stayed there, you know, with my mother and my father and I think my cousin was living upstairs and we had a tenant downstairs, and, and you know I say - - you know, I was working towards getting my own apartment. Of course my

father, he depended on me a lot. Not monetarily-wise, but just depended on me emotionally-wise to be in the house. I was like - - I guess I was like the - - the peacemaker and the - - the financial advisor, and you know, I would just help him out with certain things regarding the house, and interpret certain things for him, or explain certain things for him, in a business kind of way because my father - - he is a smart man, but he - - he only had up to a sixth grade education, and he taught himself a lot of things and he was a very - - he's, he's a very Christian person, because he would read the Bible every - - everyday he would read the Bible, but, so anyway, he did, you know, he depended - - he didn't want me to leave. He didn't want me to go to Co-op City. I mean he didn't want me to get my own apartment. You know, he told me you know, you can stay here as long as you want, you know, and I was like I know I, but I just need my own place, and at that time, my daughter and I, we were in one big bedroom. It was a huge bedroom.

BP: What is her name?

VR: Astria. And so, you know, I told him you know, we need to, you know, she needs her own room. I need, you know, my own apartment, so anyway. I applied there, and it took a year. I was on the waiting list for a year, and then '83 [Siren] they called me, and I came and looked at the apartment, and so I moved in.

BP: What - - what kind of work were you doing at the time?

VR: I worked in the post office from 1979 to the present.

BP: To the present, right?

VR: Yes.

BP: Your sister mentioned that.

VR: Yes.

BP: And so moving to Co - - was Co-op City - -

VR: And at that time, Co-op City was like 60 - - I would say like 70:30 as far as Caucasian to black.

BP: Was - - again did you see a - - were the relationships between your neighbors similar to what you saw - -

VR: It was good. It was good, but you know, the times, because of the times - - the way they were in the '80s - - it wasn't as such a thing where you could keep your door open or anything like that, you know. You know, crime was increasing, and you still had to watch yourself, but you still felt very safe there. I've always felt very safe there all the - - the twenty-seven years that I've lived there.

BP: Did your daughter - - I mean - -

VR: She went to all the schools there. She grew up there. [Crosstalk]

BP: Truman. Was Truman there?

VR: She went to Truman. She went to the elementary school, the junior high, and she graduated from Truman.

BP: What was her experience like with the kids, and with you know - -

VR: Oh yes she had - - she had a good experience there. She went to the - - we went to the community Protestant church there. They had an after school center. They would pick up the children from the schools and bring them to the church, and you know, then when I get off from work, I come and get her, and she was in a theater program they had there, and they put on shows. She was really involved, and when she was in school I was involved in the P.T.A., and selling the candy and doing the pictures and all the stuff that, you know, parents do that we need to do, [Laughs] but it was good. It was a good experience, and you have to that for your children, and you have to show them that you, you know, you're involved in what they're doing,

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and you, you just want to see them come up right, so. I mean she got in a few little things in high school, but not anything serious, but, you know, she's - - she's a good kid, yes.

BP: I guess just one last question for, for this interview, and if you think of anything else, we can schedule another time to talk, or - - would just be, you know, if you were to summarize your - - and you've lived in the Bronx your whole life, so, if you were to summarize the experience of living in the Bronx in both, you know, mixed communities, and you know, going to predominantly black church, and going to school in the Bronx, raising a daughter in the Bronx. If you were to summarize that experience I guess succinctly, what would you say about it? What do you take from living in the Bronx?

VR: It was - - I look back on my experiences growing up in the project and, to being an early adult, and that was just like the, you know, the best experience. I didn't even see children in Co-op City having that same kind of experience that my sister and my friends had growing up in the Sedgwick Projects. It's not - - I mean they - - they feel they had a good experience growing up, but when we talk about the things that we would do growing up in the project, they, they didn't have that. I mean the life wasn't like that, and I - - I don't know if you could ever capture that kind of sense of community ever again, because of, because of the way the world is. I just don't - - I don't see it anywhere, and it's just a time that, if you could encapsulate that time and you know, and show it. You know, if, if somebody, you know - - one of our - - Joanne in California, she - - her father would take home movies of us growing up, and if her father still had those home movies and you were able to I don't know, adapt them to the type of equipment we have today, it would just be, you know, be a wonderful thing to see. Because we used to go over to her house sometimes, and he would show the movies, and we'd sit there and laugh at each other, you know, but [Crosstalk] - - but looking back on it now, I'm wondering can we still - - can you

do that. Can you - - can you get those movies, and show them, and so people could see, you

know. It was just a beautiful time, so.

BP: Well excellent. Thank you.

VR: Okay.

BP: I'm going to turn this off.

VR: Okay.

BP: And turn this off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]