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Singleton, David G. Interview: Bronx African American History Project  
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**Interview with Victoria Simmons-Good  
By Dr. Mark Naison**

*Victoria Simmons-Good is from Hempstead, NY. She's a Fordham Alumna and this is one of the first interviews with the Bronx African American History Project.*

Dr. Naison: Victoria, when did your family move to the Bronx?

Victoria Simmons-Good: Around 1950, from Harlem.

N: So they moved from Harlem. Do you know why they moved from Harlem?

SG: From what I remember it had a lot to do with housing. There wasn't a lot of affordable housing. And <phone ring> umm I'm sorry. Hold on a sec ...

N: You're saying the affordable housing issue was the big incentive to move?

SG: Yes, I'm not sure how long my parents were on the list for housing. But I do remember her saying that they were living in one room in my grandmother's house. And by the time we moved from Harlem to the Bronx, I was born, my brother Tiny was born and my mother was pregnant with a third child. So they needed the housing.

N: And this was in the William Patterson houses or the Patterson housing?

SG: Patterson, yes.

N: Now was your family originally from the Caribbean or from the South?

SG: No my maternal grandmother was Jamaican, my maternal grandfather was Portuguese, my paternal grandfather was Panamanian and my paternal grandmother was born in the South.

N: So you had a mix of nations and cultures in your background?

SG: Yes.

N: Now what are your earliest memories of the Bronx?

SG: Going to PS 18 which was right around the corner from the apartment building that we lived in. The children, I mean, there were kids everywhere my age. Umm, we all went to the same school and we didn't have to cross streets, which was nice. But for some reason we always ended up at the candy store that was owned by Mr. Levi, who was a Muslim and I always got to school late. Right around the corner from the school and late. And my teachers would ask my mother, "Well what's going on in your household that she can't get out on time," and she's "Oh she gets out on time". But my first stop was the candy store, for breakfast.

N: For breakfast.

SG: We had candy for breakfast. We ate a lot of sugar.

N: Mmhmm

SG: And we had a lot of fun. We also had a vacation day camp, every summer. There was a day camp for the children in the projects. And we went to umm the museums on a regular basis, every single museum you could think of, umm Coney Island to baseball games every week. Umm the planetarium ... It was umm a time there was a time during the summer that it didn't seem like we could relax, cause there was so much going on there were a lot of activities to keep us busy. Umm and I started going I guess from kindergarten. And then my sisters and brothers

went, and even my own children went. And and they thoroughly enjoyed it. Sometimes I got tired of going to the zoo every week, because it seemed like I knew the zoo, the Bronx zoo that is, like the back of my hand. We went to Prospect Park, we went to uh what is that place, right near Fordham, I can see it, but I can't think.

N: Botanical gardens?

SG: Yes. The botanical gardens. I don't think there was one spot in the city that we didn't cover. Ummm I remember also going to the Guggenheim dental clinic, which I think probably traumatized many of us in the Bronx. And it wasn't because umm the treatment was so bad, there were Indians who were dental students who treated us like, how can I say this gently? I can't be gentle about this. They were they were very rough. They couldn't speak the language they couldn't really speak English that well so they had a hard time communicating with us. So they'd show us what they wanted us to do by squeezing our neck or pinching our face or or, or you know, they were rough, moving our head from one side to another and but it was free dental care.

N: Was this in the Bronx or in Manhattan?

SG: It was in Manhattan. There was a time when we'd get dental check ups right there in the umm elementary school, in PS 18, but I don't know what happened or whether they stopped doing them. I don't know why they stopped doing the check ups, we didn't actually get dental care at the school but we got check ups, cause you had to have those completion notices in order to move on to the next grade. So umm, they sent us to this dental clinic in Manhattan and I don't know how that came about but it was the Guggenheim dental clinic on York Avenue and 71<sup>st</sup> street. And umm many times I played hooky. My brother Tiny and Frankie and I would go and we'd be on the train, and I'd say, "Listen, do you really want to go to the dentist?" and they'd say, "No" cause they were as afraid of these folks as I was. And umm we'd buy ice cream and candy and come back home. Walk back home, cause after we bough the ice cream and candy we didn't have anymore money. So ...

N: Right.

so: And it took me a long time before I could tell my mother that I played hooky from the dentist. But those are some of my earlier memories of the Bronx. Umm that was I guess that had to be early '60s we're talking about.

N: Right, so you were actually, how old were you, were you born when you're family moved to the Patterson houses?

SG: Yes, I was I was three, I was three years old.

N: Ok so you were ... You went to elementary school in the late fifties and then junior high in the early sixties. Uh, what was the atmosphere in the Patterson houses like in the 50s and early 60s, did it feel like a safe place at that time?

SG: To me it was a very safe place. I mean we could sit out on the bench until the sun came up and nobody would bother us. Everybody in the building would know who was on that bench. And they'd look out for us. In fact everybody looked out for everybody. Umm no body had any real money so the children would taken to umm clinics. And my mother used to go to the Lincoln hospital clinic, and when she had to go with say my younger sisters and brothers, and in wasn't able to baby-sit, and I usually wasn't because she would be going during a school day. Some other neighbor would baby-sit and then she would reciprocate and baby-sit for that neighbor. And that's what it was like. I remember the camaraderie and the supportiveness and the nurturing that I got from not only my own family but from folks who weren't blood relatives in the building.

N: Yea. So the comment, it takes a village to raise a child ... ?

SG: It was absolutely true in Patterson.

N: Uhhuh

SG: Yea. But they also let you know when you were doing something wrong. I mean they did not hesitate to tell you that if they had to speak to you, they would speak to you once about dropping garbage in the hallway or or or talking too loud or skating in the hallway. And all a neighbor had to do was say, "Don't let me tell your mother." And that's all it took for us to come back to reality and rethink what it was we were doing, cause we knew we were gonna have some problems if it got to our mothers. And usually they didn't. But there were a few that were kinda busy and I think they lived to get other people's children in trouble and umm, I don't know, should I name names I mean ... ?

N: Yea yea sure ...

SG: And one of those people was ... although now, now I realize Miss Charlie-Mae was just just looking out for us. Umm she used to stand in that hallway or or in the window or on the bench and everybody knew what was going on in 414, that was the building I lived, because of Miss Charlie-Mae. But Miss Hall, who lived on the first floor, she didn't miss much either. And umm she had umm this was one of the few white residents. And I I can't say few I I can't say few but in my building there were three white families. An Irish family and I'm not sure what Miss Hall's ethnic background was. My best friend growing up and that was from elementary school through to to junior-high school, was Theresa DePaulo. And I haven't seen her in I don't know how long. But we were so close. And we loved each other dearly. And she, her parents were kinda elderly and in junior-high school, when we were in junior-high school they died. And the whole entire project came together to make sure that she had food and money to help bury her parents and clothes and shortly after that ... She was she was an only child. Actually she wasn't an only child but she was the only child that was living with her parents when we were growing up in Patterson. And she left and I haven't seen or heard from her since. Ummm but I remember, that her parents were sick for a ... because they were kind of elderly. And I had to be 00, maybe 14, and she asked me to go to Manhattan. She had to get some money and food and, I think this was her brother's house, and I went without permission, and I was punished and couldn't attend her parents' funeral and I must've cried for a week. But umm our parents were the kind of, I can't speak for anybody else's parents actually. Mine were you do as you're told, and if you step out and do something you weren't supposed to ... I wasn't supposed to go anywhere during the school week in junior-high school. To the library and back home and that was it. And when my mother found out that I wound up in Manhattan with Theresa and her family, and I thought I was doing a good thing cause her parents were ill and you know she was gonna get money and food. But it probably pained my mother to punish me because she knew how close we were and I couldn't go to the funeral. And it's something that I've I've always regretted. But the the projects the folks in the project... They took up collections when her parents died, and that was typical of what went on in Patterson. Somebody died it was umm it was customary to bring a card with some money because people assume that there was no insurance.

N: See what now is very interesting is that today many people don't want to build high-rise public housing because they say its alienating you know, you're saying your describing ... how how tall was the building?

SG: It was just six stories

N: It was just a six story building but everybody looked out for each other?

SG: Yes.

N: Umm were there any Puerto Rican families living in the building when you moved in?

SG: Do you want me to name names?

N: Sure

SG: Ok the Perez family lived right across the hall from us on the fourth floor. There were the Bonitas too on the fourth floor but on the other side. Umm there was the Suarez family, they didn't live in the building but I was good friends with Geraldine Suarez. And the Bergales family ... yea yea there were quite a few Puerto Ricans.

N: So you grew up in an environment where there were people from many different backgrounds ...

SG: I thought it was very culturally diverse, yea.

N: And uh, that was what, part of what made it enjoyable.

SG: For me, yea yea.

N: Uh huh.

SG: And I don't remember there being any friction or strife. I mean the usual kids playing in the hallway dropping garbage. But for the most part I think that it was a very tight-knit community, especially the building that I lived in. I remember Mr. Bonita used to make donuts for everybody. And he he had this big pot of oil, and we would just like sit out on the stoop, because we could smell 'em, you know from the stoop. And he would call us up and everybody would have a freshly made donut and it was a lot of fun. He used to also have this ... I think they used to call it, Puerto Rican beer, sitting on his window sill. And it looked like apple juice, you know, and it was very foamy on the top. So he he made his beer, and the donuts to keep the kids happy and quiet. Umm and he drank a lot of beer. Haha

N: Haha. Umm, what was that atmosphere like in the elementary and junior-high? Were the teachers responsive or were they rough and distant or did it vary?

SG: They were only a few that I would describe as being rough. Umm and those were the black teachers. Very rough very rigid. And I probably appreciate it now more than I did because they were gonna make sure that we learned, that we came in to get an education. I mean they weren't physically rough there was no corporeal punishment but in elementary school and junior-high school you know, as a kid you just think that they're all just trying to get in you business all the time why don't they just leave us alone? You know, "We don't wanna read, or do our lessons or .... That should be our business". You know but they were very much a part of the community you know in that they didn't hesitate to call your parents if you're weren't reading up to your potential or doing your homework. Umm the white teachers were just as ... I'd have to say they were they had a gentler approach to education. Theirs wasn't that I'll hit you over the head with a stick if you don't do your lessons and do them quickly. Umm I think they were more patient. And that wasn't all the white teachers or all the black teachers, there weren't none of them were bad teachers that I remember. But it was especially in an elementary school it was an environment where they they told you you could do just about anything you wanted all you had to do was make sure you got an education first. And that came from both the black teachers and the white teachers.

N: So there was this optimism being projected to the kids, you know you can go as far as your effort takes you.

SG: Yes. In junior-high school as we uh entered puberty, I guess that was uh middle middle puberty stages uh I don't know. And people was feeling their oats. There's this pizza store across from the high school that I went to and we were always late coming back from lunch. And there was this one teacher, uh Mr. Blackman, who said that he was not only gonna teach us, he was our earth science teacher, he said that he was gonna teach us about life on the streets. And how it could destroy and have a negative impact on what we were attempting to do or as we attempted to rise through the educational system. And I I just remember him calling us from the window, by name, "Victoria, aren't you finished that pizza yet?" "Yes, Mr. Blackman I'm coming". Because I knew all he had to do was call my mother and I was in trouble.

N: Yea. How far was the junior-high from where you lived?

SG: The junior-high school was also within walking distance. It was maybe 2 blocks and you had to cross the street but it was very close.

N: Now I grew up in the same time in Brooklyn, and have vivid memories of rock and roll and listening to the music and singing it. What was your first memories of music as you were growing up?

SG: Probably people like Sara Vaughn and Joe Williams, because that's who my parent's liked. They didn't necessarily like the music that we listened to. They didn't dance to the Temptations and the O'Jays and the Four Tops. Umm their musical orientation, was I guess, umm a generation before.

N: Now, now before the Motown, did you get into the Doo Wop? Or were you a little too young for that?

SG: No I did. I guess Frankie Lyman was one of my favorites. Yea and some of the other groups I don't remember. The Deltones and ... I loved all the Doo Wop groups. And umm but that was ... I guess we might be talking late fifties early sixties, so I was still a little young to have a real appreciation for the kinds of music they had out. But I loved music, I loved all kinds.

N: Were their kids singing in the project hallways, you know, was there a lot of that kind of thing going on?

SG: We had the talent show and somebody volunteered me and I froze, cause I didn't think I could really sing. And umm I got on stage and I just left you know. But yea, they were singing in the hallways they were on the street corners. There was a talent night at the community center which was the elementary school at PS 18. And in fact, I guess I had to be in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade when I was introduced to Latin music. Before then I'd hear it because there were a lot of Latinos in the building but I didn't really dance to it. And it was sorta foreign to me to see black people dancing to Latin music and they were good. They used to dance semi-professionally at umm umm the Palladium, places like that. And umm we watched these folks who also lived in the Patterson, who were maybe I guess they were high school age. And it was just. .. we fell in love with the music. And a lot of us had, umm because we grew up with, and they were mostly Puerto Ricans like there was one Cuban family in the building, but most of the Latinos that we grew up with were from Puerto Rico. And I don't know if you've ever heard the term, Buddarican ...

N: <chuckle> No ...

SG: Well my husband and I when we first came together we'd talk about the Buddaricans in the Bronx. And he'd say, "Ok ... " because he came from Amityville, "Now what is a Buddarican?" And I said, "You can't have lived in New York and don't know what a Buddarican is and you're black". And he said, "No Vicki I don't know". But what he urn ... he lived in a neighborhood where there were black people and there were white people. There was hardly any cultural diversity where Harry lived. Now I don't know how the term, I don't know how it came about but it describes somebody who is black and Puerto Rican.

N: Right

SG: So, umm, we'd be somewhere, and we'd hear somebody speaking Spanish, somebody who looks just like us and we'd say "Uh, buddarican" . We just, Harry and I just recently went to a dance, actually it was about a year ago. And Eddie Palmieri was playing. And I love him, and I'll go wherever he is, I'm going. And there was a woman there, India was her name. Not India Arie this is India from Puerto Rico, when she said, "And all ya Buddaricans out there ... " Hany said, "You weren't lying!" I said, "Why do you think I would lie? There is such a word, it may not be in the dictionary," But folks, and this woman was younger than I am, she had, she was maybe in

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her forties. But anyhow, Buddaricans describe some of the people I grew up with who either had either a Puerto Rican mother and a black father or vice versa.

N: Right so there was a lot of intermarrying?

SG: Yes. Umm and the ... now Theresa was Italian, Marilyn Fes was Italian. In fact I think there were mostly Italians, from, that *white* ethnic group. Umm they were there were more Italians there were a few Polish families there umm a few Irish families, and uh there was a lot of intermarriage, yea.

N: Yea it's interesting, because a lot of people say that the Bronx was much more multiracial multiethnic in a harmonious way ...

SG: Yes it was.

N: ... than a lot of other places in New York City, and certainly in the country

SG: I thought so mmm hmm. And I might be a little prejudice because that's where I grew up

N: But but you have very positive memories of it. Now umm where ... New York City in the fifties was known for these colorful gangs. Were you aware of gangs when you were growing up?

SG: They didn't call them gangs, they called them social clubs. And I remember some of the guys I grew up with. They were always fighting somebody somewhere. There were a lot of projects in the Bronx. And there was there were all these rivalries all the time. Now it seemed that the young women could go to parties and dances practically where ever they wanted to. But the men, I'd be sitting on a stoop or on my window, and all you would see is the guys from the project, running through the projects and you knew someone was chasing them. Either from the forest projects or the Melrose projects or umm, I forget the name of the projects off Willis Ave, or St. Mary's projects. They were always on the run.

Both: <laughing>

SG: Always. And so so there were they didn't call them gangs, but they were gang-like, you know. But they didn't use clubs and bats and guns, you know. I mean they fought with their fists.

N: So people weren't getting killed?

SG: No. Umm no. There were, umm, the guys in these clubs umm crews, I think they described them, they referred to them more as their crew, then a gang, were very protective of the women in the projects. And umm no matter where we were, we knew that somebody was watching our back. I don't know if you know about the booty train in the Bronx ...

N: Db no ...

SG: Anybody ever tell you about the booty train? Well. I went to Walton high school, all girls' school, and it was one stop before Clinton and Bronx Science. And guys who didn't even attend those schools used to get on the train and pull the emergency cord, the lights would go out the train would stop, and and feel women up. Well I never had that problem. All they had to do was hear that I came from Patterson and umm also that my father was insane and umm they they didn't bother me. But urn it was problematic for some young women on the train. I heard later, and this was after I had moved form the Bronx that someone actually got raped on the train. This was the Woodlawn-Jerome.

N: Now uh was it your impression that most of the families in the Patterson houses were two parent families when you moved in?

so: That, **I** think, you know the housing authority had a law, you had to be married in order to live there. And initially there were, you know, two parent families. And that, it stayed that way for a very long time. Umm I think mine was probably one of the few that was fractured and I guess I was coming out of high school when my father left. But most of the families were in tact, and those that weren't a parent had died.

N: Right so uh when do you recall you know families moving in with, which were single parent families because the father wasn't around?

SG: I don't. I don't.

N:Mmhmm.

SG: Umm that I don't remember at *all*. Because when we moved in in the fifties, and I only know this because my mother told me because I was too young to to remember. Urn most of the families who were there when we moved in in the fifties were there when we grew up and went to college or went to work and ...

N: So there was this tremendous stability?

SG: I felt so.

N: So this was a community, it was stable, it was nurturing and everybody looked out for everybody else.

SG: Yes

N: So you would say it was a great place to grow up?

SG: Yes I thought so. I did. And there were a few little negative things, but urn for the most part, people were kind and generous and nurturing and supportive. Umm and it was a stable environment. You had a ... I guess I acquired a sense of stability not only in my own house but in the other families, in the way they kind of came together in a crisis and I don't remember that many crises. Umm but there were some people who had died from various illnesses. After I left I started hearing you know real horrible stories about the siblings of some of the people that I grew up with getting murdered in elevators. **In** fact in the Gordon family, there were two twin girls and they both got murdered the same way in an elevator by their boyfriends.

N: And this was after you had moved out?

SG: Yes

N: Now, did you move directly from the Patterson houses to Long Island or did you move somewhere else in the Bronx first?

SG: I went from the Patterson houses to Billingsley Terrace, which was the Northwest Bronx, right overlooking the Hudson River. And umm that was that was also it wasn't too far from Fordham road it was a very diverse community.

N: And when was this?

SG: This was in the late sixties. I was already married ...

N: Alright so uh yea so you uh moved so was that like near NYU? Or was it further north?

SG: Yea it it wasn't too far, I guess it was 182<sup>nd</sup> street.

N: Now now what about entertainment? When you were in junior high and high school, did you



mostly go places in the Bronx or did you feel comfortable going all around the city?

SG: Umm by the time I got to junior-high school my mother allowed me to get on the train. And a bunch of us, we had a social club called the Socialettes ... And we would get on the train, and on Saturday morning we'd skate at central park, we'd go to Coney Island you know by ourselves. Umm we didn't do Queens too much. But Coney Island was one of our favorites because there always seemed to be cute guys there, and at Central Park at 9 o'clock in the morning. I don't know where these guys came from but we weren't real good skaters and you know, they'd have to kind of help us. But urn by the time we got to junior-high school we were able to take the train and safely go to just about any place there was, you know, that we were allowed to go in the city. Umm we were starting to go to some dances by the time we were in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade in Manhattan. But there were still quite a few nice clubs in the Bronx. The Embassy Ballroom was probably one of my favorites. Savoy Manor was within walking distance from where I lived place.

N: Right now the Savoy Manor umm what street was that on?

SG: 149<sup>th</sup> street. And I lived at 144<sup>th</sup>.

N: And what sort of ... did they have live music?

SG: Sometimes, but most of the time it was a disco.

N: Uh huh. And this was in the sixties?

SG: Yes

N: And umm that's interesting. And where was the Embassy Ballroom?

SG: On 161<sup>st</sup> street and uh like Central Bronx. And that was also within walking distance from where I lived. Urn but at the Embassy that was where you had you're live Latin music. You'd see Tito Puente and Celia Cruz, and Orchestra ... Broadway Orchestra Harlow. It was a lot of fun ... and cheap! Really cheap.

N: And what about movie theaters? Were their movie theaters within walking distance?

SG: Urn two and I think one was the Loews's and one was the RKO, I'm not sure about that. But everything seemed to be ... like 149<sup>th</sup> street was the main strip in the Bronx, a lot of shops, movies dancehalls, restaurants, and uh sandwich shops. And there was this Italian sandwich shop that I mean we'd save up in order to go. They had these Italian sandwiches that would knock your eyes out. And and he's still there. Still on the corner of 149<sup>th</sup> and ... no it's not Ferret it's Morris corner of 149<sup>th</sup> street and Morris. And umm when I moved out here, and I asked for an Italian sandwich, the guy said urn "I'm gonna have to charge you like a dollar for each different meat or you know" and he said "Where do you come from? You come from the Bronx don't you?" And I said "Yes I do." "Here we charge for every single item that we add". And I told him what kind of sandwiches I got from the Bronx, and he said, "Yea we don't do that here". But umm so in umm what was the name of that pizzeria, urn no I don't think it was Tony's, I I forget.

N: Wow. Urn now do you have recollections of the Vietnam War affecting young men that you knew of people being concerned about the draft?

SG: YES. My husband. I married a Vietnam vet and I think that he's still suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. He's probably gonna read this too, but that's ok. And I urn I try to encourage him to get help.

N: Did you know him before he went to Vietnam?

SG: Yes I knew him in high school.

N: Was he from Patterson houses also?

SG: No um he was from 169<sup>th</sup> street... 167<sup>th</sup> street, Central Bronx I guess.

N: Now Walton was an all girls school, so where'd you meet him?

SG: Um actually, I had a friend, Vita Jamison who met him before I did, this was my second husband. Vita Jamison met him at a dance or something at Bronx Science, she went to Bronx science. And she brought him and some of his friends, you know, to Patterson for a dance and that's how I met him.

N: You had dances in the Patterson houses?

SG: We had dances big time in the Patterson houses. The Socialettes had 35¢ dances; we bought wardrobes with the money we made from dances!

N: So so where did you, where did you have ... ? Tell me about how the socialettes organized dances.

SG: <chuckle> Well there were 12 of us and each one of us had to have a dance every couple of weeks, or it depended on how much money we needed to buy clothes. But we would have them in the apartment and parents were always there and it was a round robin kind of thing. And every time we'd have a dance we'd charge 35¢. We had a little can at the door, and people would pay 35¢ to come to our dances.

N: And people came from all over the Bronx?

SG: All over. And sometimes a fight would break out because some guy that was dating somebody in the Socialettes came from Forest or S1. Mary's and he had to be very brave because he knew some stuff was gonna get started at these dances, but they came. At one of the dances at my cousin's house, she lived on she lived off Willis Ave, I forget the exact street but not too far from where I lived, within walking distance. And umm somebody who we didn't want to come in because they had caused a disturbance where the cops were, well we very rarely called the cops ... Because somebody's father said "Alright you can leave quietly or we can escort you out". And before we knew it quite a few fathers were standing at the door. This guy he didn't give them a problem, he just left, but the next dance that we had he set fire to the door. Set a fire in front of the door.

N: Wow. Were there any big projects that had a particularly tough reputation? Or were they all pretty much the same?

SG: Lincoln in Manhattan. Mm hmm. And that's where they had the finest guys. <chuckle> Yea the most handsome guys were in Lincoln yea. So but I met a lot of the guys in the Lincoln projects because I ran for the PAL. And umm I ran for the 40<sup>th</sup> precinct in the Bronx and then Web-Churchill in the Bronx, which was near the Melrose Projects. And as I got older I found out that some of the women I grew up with didn't want to run anymore and sometimes we couldn't get a team together, so I joined the 32<sup>th</sup> precinct in Harlem.

N: So they had girl sports when you were growing up?

SG: Yea. It was a really good track team. The Williams sisters, Marilyn Fes she ran for a while.

N: So where was the track team organized from?

SG: The Junior-high school actually but it was the PAL.

N: And where was the PAL located?

SG: On 13S<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, where the 40<sup>th</sup> precinct was, I think that's where they were.

N: And they ran the track program?

SG: Yea and Mr. Cousins he was the track coach, and I'm not sure what his affiliation with

the police department was, but that was our track coach.

N: And umm did Tiny also start playing basketball at the PAL? Or basketball was a different more informal kind of culture? Was there school yard basketball?

SG: That's what he played mostly, but he also played for urn Milbank. And different projects would have you know tournaments and you know the most well known was Rutgers.

N: Right now were the Socialletes aware of guys playing basketball and going to the schoolyards to watch them?

SG: I didn't go to schoolyards too much, but there were a lot of games at either Clinton or Franklin and we used to go to them because you know, I went to an all-girls school so we weren't gonna have any basketball games there. But actually we did try to play basketball and my gym teacher told us we weren't the most graceful basketball players she had ever seen. But umm we used to go to the Garden to watch them play.

N: Was it a sense that you know that sort of if you were a basketball player you know that that was a big deal? And that women you know were gonna be interested in you, more so?

SG: Yes yes. That was my experience growing up.

N: So that was an added incentive if you were a basketball player.

SG: I think so. And there was always a game going on either at PS 18, which was right around the corner from me or on the other side of the projects. There was a big open area where they had a lot of baskets. And we'd go and watch the guys play there.

N: So women didn't play much basketball, the sports they would do would be running?

SG: Actually I can't even say that. I ran and there was a small cadre of women that ran with me but urn for the most part, urn thinking about the 12 of us, probably just me and Gloria ran track.

N: Ok, now going back to Vietnam again do you remember a point at which guys you knew were worried about being drafted? That that became an issue? And how did that come up?

SG: Yes. Well many were talking about going to Canada. And those that I met that were talking about going to Canada didn't believe that they could fight for a country that still discriminated against them in a lot of ways. So umm I guess these were the more militant brothers that I remember growing up. I don't think any of them went to Canada and quite a few were drafted. I don't know any personally that died but I did hear from some of the guys that went to Vietnam. Many of those guys that came back didn't ever seem to be the same. They were the ones that got hooked on heroin, many of us believed that they were already hooked before they got back home.

N: Wow. Were you and your friends very aware of the civil rights movement in the South and that whole phenomenon? You know, the march on Washington, the freedom rides, the sit-ins, was that something that was you know on your radar screen as you were going into junior-high and high school?

SG: Yes. And I think it scared a lot of us because urn we were so young and it was traumatic to watch people get hosed down and die and get you know hung. But we hadn't been told of the personal experiences that a lot of folks in the building had, many of whom came from the South.

N: So in other words your parents had sheltered you from America. That was my experience growing up also, people didn't talk about, they didn't talk about the Holocaust about the South.

It was like they were starting over with us. And when we discovered that these horrible things had happened it was it was a shock.

SG: That was that was my experience. And although my parents were urn I think very in-tune with what was going on in the South, their's was not a Southern orientation either. It was their it was actually my paternal grandmother who also didn't talk about it. And then she married someone who was Panamanian so urn ... But she left the South but it didn't seem like the South left my paternal grandmother. We used to go to her house and she'd layout cake and cookies and I remember distinctly her saying one day she says, "You know I didn't make that cake it's a sto-bot cake". And I said, "Gee I wonder what kind of cake that is, sto-bot - that's a new one for me", And I said "Well how is it made?" "You've never had sto-bot cakes before?" "No grandmother I haven't". She says, "It's a cake that you buy from the sto". And I said, "Oh sorry" you know. So she had a Southern accent sometimes. Which was really kind of strange because I would've never known that she had that tie.

N: Now did you grow up eating Southern food? Did you eat like ham hocks and collared greens and chitlins and that sort of food? Was that part of your family's diet at home?

SG: Umm my father had an ulcer so my mother didn't cook a lot of spicy foods or a lot of fatty foods so I felt somewhat deprived in the food department. So I'd smell that fried chicken being fried or umm chitlins being cooked, and you know they can stink, they really stink. And I'd sit by somebody's door until they opened it, especially my next door neighbor's Miss Eileen, the the Christopher's she fried everything! And sometimes she'd knock on the door and say "Just fried some chicken you want some?" And I'd look at my mother and she'd say, "Go ahead go ahead," because she fried very little. Anything that was spicy or fatty we we'd probably get it from somebody else. Or if she cooked it nobody'd want it, because we'd have to season it up ourselves. But my grandmother on Mondays would come with her care packages, and because she was Jamaican that's what she brought Jamaican food. Rice and peas, somebody out here called it wet chicken or fricassee chicken, she never called it that she just called it chicken. But it was chicken that was *fried* and then like smothered in a gravy and somebody here said that's what we call wet chicken in Jamaica. So it was fried chicken, smothered fried chicken, rice and peas cooked with coconut, it wasn't real rice and peas if it wasn't cooked with coconut milk, and urn these these pones. And it took me a long time to fmd out what a pone was. What it is a very dense pudding and it can be made from sweet potato or coconut so most of the food that we ate probably was a mixture of a Jamaican Southern kind of cuisine.

N: Was there a point at which you and your friends, you know looking at what was going on in the South began to kind of apply it to what was going on in New York and your own lives, and start thinking that civil rights was something that spoke to you in terms of your life?

SG: Because we were born and raised, well I had an opportunity to go to Tennessee State. Nobody thought that I would be able to survive Tennessee State. And my mother kind of left the decision up to me, but other folks, cousins, aunts and uncles have said, "Now you know coming form the Bronx, living in New York, there's not a whole lot that you're going to take from anybody in the South, you know. And we're concerned about you being there". And I don't think I was the most militant person on this earth in the South Bronx at this point in time but I think we we're so used to our movement not being restricted. We could go to any movie we wanted to, we could shop on 34<sup>th</sup> street or Greenwich village wherever we wanted to go in the city. Umm I don't remember there being any kind of slight, I remember people asking us if they could help us and thinking we couldn't afford anything that was in the store. I don't remember being humiliated by store keepers or people working in movies or. .. That I don't that's that's never happened. And I think it was because it was New York and they weren't surprised to see black women and black men shopping at Lord and Taylor's or Macy's you know. And so our our treatment was umm it was respectful.

N: Now do you remember people in the Nation of Islam in the Bronx and when did they start to appear?

SG: Yes. It had to be early 60s. And urn because they had a distinctive way of dressing they stood out ...

N: Right with the bow ties ....

SG: ... well respected umm they there was no mosque in the Bronx that I remember. So if you were Muslim living in the Bronx you probably went to 125<sup>th</sup> St. to worship. Occasionally we'd go to the restaurant and buy bean pies.

N: Now did they have a restaurant here in the Bronx?

SG: I don't remember there being ....

<Cassette side two>

SG: A restaurant in the Bronx. Oh wait a minute, Mr. Levi's! He was a Muslim he was right directly across the street.

N: Was he a Nation of Islam Muslim?

SG: Yes. Yes he was. And urn he had this little tiny store called the Kitchen. And we could buy hamburgers and French fries and he had the biggest assortment of candy. And that was that was my breakfast place.

N: Right, you told me. But he was in the Nation of Islam?

SG: Yes he was.

N: Wow, ok.

SG: And he had a candy store. And of course he didn't sell any pork products.

N: Now do you remember the Black Panther Party ever ... ?

SG: I remember reading about them but I didn't have ...

N: ... you didn't have friends who went in that direction.

SG: No no I think that was strictly a west coast thing in the early 60s from what I remember.

N: Right until probably like 1969, 1970.

SG: No I didn't know anybody.

N: Now when do you remember heroin coming into the Bronx? And how do you remember it really, you know, shaking things up?

SG: Early 60s.

N: Early 60s?!

SG: Early 60s. And actually Vita Jamison's brother was the first person that urn that I remember. Actually, my mother came upstairs and she said, "Have you seen Iva?" And I said "No". And she said "Vicki you need to talk to Vita about getting her brother some help because he's he's wasted." And I forgot what the terminology is that people strung out they used ...

N: Strung out.

SG: Um anyway, so I saw him standing in the building and he greeted me. And this was a guy, bright smart, oh was he smart and all of a sudden he's strung out. So, and because he lived right next door that's something that I didn't miss. All of us were so young that we wondered, "How do we help these guys?" Well it was only at this point it was really just Iva, in 414. But his sister did everything that she could to encourage him to get treatment to get counseling. And then I started hearing more stories about brothers and sisters and other folks in the projects and different buildings. So from what I could see there was major epidemic happening.

N: Mm hmm. And this was what, what years would you say that we were talking about here?

SG: Middle 60s.

N: Right so this was before you were at Fordham?

SG: Yes.

N: And this is you were in high school or out of high school at this point?

SG: I was still in high school.

N: So you're aware in high school that there was this drug epidemic and that it was really starting to bring people down.

SG: Yes. And I think it had a lot to do with bringing .. I think that's when the community the projects probably started to go into a decline.

N: So you see heroine as being a major factor in dissolving that sense of community that you grew up in?

SG: Yes. That and alcohol. Umm I started to notice, in my very own family, you know, that it was taking a huge toll on families.

N: So I mean if I can extrapolate, you've seen people are starting to crack. Was this mostly men?

SG: Mostly men yes.

N: Mostly young men or men of ... ?

SG: Young men. Young men.

N: And it was middle 60s ...

SG: Yea, I'd say middle 60s like it started probably early 60s, and the mid 60s was when I started to notice that umm ... I guess we used to call them grimy. Some people were able to you know do heroine and still stay clean. And you know, cause I think it was relatively cheap, so they could still maintain themselves. But I I don't know what happened economically you know, but all of a sudden now you could actually tell who was strung out because they were dirty, their shoes were run over, they were unkempt.

N: Wow ...

SG: Umm so this was a new breed of heroine addict that I wasn't used to seeing.

N: So there's this sense of something's changing and it's not good.

SG: Yes.

N: And did you feel like you know, you'd sort of entered a time that you really had to think about

what was going on that this is not the world you grew up in?

SG: It was so completely different, I felt like I umm it felt like a dream that I was living in a dream. And I guess I wasn't the only one. But then you started hearing about the break-ins and it was hard to break-in to a project apartment, because the doors are metal! But so people were thinking that they were inside jobs. That somebody was letting these folks in you know to to burglarize people's apartments. Then I started hearing about folks that I grew up with getting thrown off rooftops because they were dealing.

N: Wow! So you're starting for the first time to feel fear?

SG: Yea. Yea. Yes.

N: And this is while you were still in high school?

SG: Yes I was still in high school. Vita and I we were going to, we were walking to the Lincoln projects actually. And where Patterson is its maybe 5 blocks from the Willis Ave Bridge and we used to walk over the bridge periodically just to go shop over on 125<sup>th</sup> St. And here is this guy probably around our age, banging on the top of this car. And umm we were still in high school because she did a report, about addiction about heroine addiction. And we just stood and watched this guy, who was probably gonna have a problem getting his next fix. And he was pummeling this car, he was kicking he was crying he was sweating. And we we tried to be kind of you know, uh it's kind of hard on a street where there are lots of people watching, you *try* not to be too obtrusive but we watched him for a good while. And I remember feeling very sad umm about where the Black community might be going because of this heroine.

N: And you were thinking about it this as an issue for the Black community particularly?

SG: Yes.

N: That you know, that was something that crossed your mind. That this was hitting us harder than other folks?

SG: I hadn't known of any white addicts. I didn't see any other urn, I didn't see the effect that heroine was taking, and I imagine that it did. But here I was in this huge housing complex and there was a story every day about somebody who Oded or or or was thrown off a roof. Because not only were they addicted but they were trying to sell the drugs and use the money to buy their own drugs. And so yea, it was a troublesome time for most of us.

N: Now did did was this a time when people said we gotta get out of here. Were people starting to say it's time for us to move?

SG: I think yes. Umm yes. My mother didn't leave the Bronx until 1973 or 4.

N: And where did she go to?

SG: Long Island. She came out here.

N: Oh so she came out here before you did?

SG: Yes.

N: So was she talking about leaving the Bronx before then?

SG: Yes. My mother got mugged on her way home from work. And Tiny knew the guys and ...

N: What year, do you remember what year this was?

SG: '72 maybe ... ? Anyhow it wasn't the sixties, it was early 70s, it was in the early 70s. And um she got pretty bruised and battered and that's when she said, "Ok I'm ready to go". And I don't think she wanted to leave the Bronx but she was able to because Tiny could afford to move her out of there.

N: Ok now when did he go into the NBA? What year?

SG: Well, it had to be early 70s.

N: So it was early 70s?

SG: Yea, I think so.

N: So you have this clear idea: you grew up in this really wonderful supportive environment, and in the middle 60s it's starting to fracture, and fracture pretty badly.

SG: Yea. Yea.

N: And then you were able to move to the West Bronx?

SG: I yea I was in the West Bronx. By the time my mother moved I had I was living in Yonkers by the time she moved out here. But before she moved there was already a migration from people who had already saved enough money to move to the north I guess that would be the North West Bronx, the North West Bronx.

N: So you had this sense that people were getting dissatisfied and frightened, they were looking to move further northward in the borough?

SG: Yes. Umm I think that these same families, they were I guess they would be described as approaching middle class status because they were owners of barbershops and they were nurses. And umm as soon as they had the where-with-all to get out, they got out.

N: Now was this going on even in the 50s, families moving out when they started making more money? Do you remember or was it really a rush in the 60s?

SG: I think it was a rush in the 60s because in the 50s I think they were just getting established. I don't remember that many people moving before say I was in junior-high school. So we're still talking the early 60s.

N: Now when you were living in, what terrace what was the place called?

SG: Billingsley.

N: Billingsley. Were you coming back to visit your mother? And friends, did you still have friends there?

SG: Yes. Always. We were fused. Yea always coming back for one reason or another. If it wasn't to visit family it was to visit friends.

N: So you still kept those ties.

SG: Yes.

N: Were you very aware, growing up, of Concourse Village?

SG: Yes. The high-rent district.

N: The high-rent district.



SG: Yea. In fact urn the sanders moved to Concourse Village. And when they moved in they had a housewarming. And it was like, "Wow you know, this is nice". But it was like being in the projects again. But it was nice the rooms were kind of spacious. But we knew that they had arrived, you know they were able to get out of the projects, yea.

N: Why don't we take a break and maybe we could ... ?

SG: And eat?

N: Yea.

<Pause>

N: Ok umm one of the things that you were mentioning is how being afraid in the projects manifested itself. What were the things you couldn't do there that you did do when you were *growing up*? You mentioned not feeling safe sitting on the benches ...

SG: Umm your movement was restricted. You couldn't go anywhere late. I remember one incident where, I think I was a senior in high school, and for me midnight wasn't late walking home from the train station. Even at midnight that part of the Bronx was, it was in the summer time, so there were a lot of people in the street and on the benches and I got to my apartment building and there was this guy who I didn't know. He came in, and I didn't think anything of it. But I, cause I lived on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, I went to ring the elevator and I see him looking in the mail box, so I'm watching him he's watching me. Then when the elevator came I felt so unsafe I decided not to go up in the elevator. Now Patricia's apartment was on the first floor and you could just knock on their window from the stoop so I knocked on the window and Bubba came to the window and I said, "Tell Tiny that I'm downstairs and I think somebody followed me in the building". Bubba called Tiny, Tiny came down to his apartment and by that time there were about four or five guys and they just chased this guy, cause he was up to no good and they knew he was up to no good. And ordinarily I would've gotten on the elevator with this guy, even though I didn't know him and you know this 6<sup>th</sup> story building was a building where people had a lot of folks coming and going and you know. But umm I remember feeling very afraid to get in the elevator, and that just wasn't me. So I stopped walking from the train station by myself, I'd get somebody to walk me or meet me.

N: So this is when you were a senior in high school?

SG: I was a senior. I believe I don't think I was out of high school yet.

N: And what year would that be?

SG: Ummm '64.

N: So you were feeling if you came back late at night that you needed somebody to walk you from the train station? Did you ever have the experience of people yelling out stuff to you as you were walking down the street?

SG: You mean men? Yes.

N: But that was even when you were feeling safe?

SG: Yes.

N: So the the repartee in the neighborhood was a feature?

SG: Yea but you know what, urn they weren't disrespectful and because everybody knew everybody. And all you had to do was perceive that somebody was being disrespectful. Or uh

trying to, I forget what the terminology was, they were trying to push up on you and you really didn't want to be bothered, all you had to do was mention it to one of the males in the family and they would handle it. You know and it wouldn't happen again. But I had more men calling out to me when I worked on Wall St. then when I was in the projects. Men in suits ...

N: Yea except they didn't say, "Mami" they had different terms.

SG: <chuckle> No! Now urn there weren't that many Latinos that would do that. The brothers they'd look, they wouldn't say too much, but no that wasn't my experience they would look but they didn't verbalize a whole lot, no that was the Wall St. crew.

N: Uh huh ok. Now did your family go to church and was that an important part of your childhood upbringing?

SG: If I didn't go to church I couldn't hang out on the weekends. So I sort of went to church, which means that I'd go but I'd sit in the donut shop next door sometimes if I didn't feel like going to church. And by tht time it let out I'd be standing outside the church.

N: Which church was this?

SG: It was Willis Ave. Methodist.

N: So your family were Methodists?

SG: No, Episcopalian. Haha

N: So how'd you end up at a Methodist... ?

SG: It was close and I didn't have to get on the train. And my mother said, "Any church, I didn't care what kind of church but you're going to church or else you do not go out on the weekends".

N: Ok so, the whole family didn't go together? You just got to pick and choose your own church?

SG: Right. But my brothers, and I don't know how this happened, but my grandmother... Both Tiny and Frankie were, they still called them altar boys back then, they were attending St. Andrews in Harlem ...

N: That was an Episcopal church?

SG: It was an Episcopal church. But umm I was allowed to go to Willis Ave Methodist. I guess maybe because I was the oldest, I don't know but I'm baptized Episcopalian.

N: And was that a multi-ethnic church when you were going there?

SG: Umm, not really. It fact one of the assistant pastors was Indian, but no it was not multi-ethnic. There were I don't remember. No no let me take that back there were a few white folks that went. But most of the people that we grew up with that were either Irish or Italian or Latino were Catholic.

N: And was the minister black or white in that church or neither?

SG: He was umm the first one was white and then later on there was a black minister if I'm remembering this correctly. But urn many of my friends went to St. Rita's which was right around the corner from where we lived in the ...

N: And that was a Catholic church?

SG: That was Catholic, yes.

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Victoria Simmons

Date: N/A Page 18

N: Now do you have any recollections of the fires that started to burn in the East Bronx in the early 70s or was that something that was you know off your radar screen because you lived in the western part of the borough?

SG: Nope I don't remember any fires. They kept a pretty close reign on folks in the housing projects; they would fine you for everything: for dropping garbage in the hall, for dropping garbage on the stoop. So if your parents didn't remind you about not dropping garbage or talking loud or roller-skating in the hallway neighbors would. So I don't ever remember there ever being a fire anywhere in Patterson.

N: But see I guess what I remember when I first, about 1972, when I was taking the Third Ave EL, and I'd look off the EL and see buildings burning.

SG: And you now many of us believed that the *people* that owned those buildings were burning *them* up to get the insurance money for them.

N: Well that's what actually the historians have concluded also. But was that something you were seeing or was it something you were just hearing about?

SG: Just hearing about. And I'd see after stuff like that burnt, but I don't remember ever seeing a fire growing up.

N: Uh huh, ok. Well pretty much I've asked most of the questions that I wanted to ask. If you're thinking of this as talking to the broader public what would you want to leave them with talking about your Bronx experience? What are the most important memories, the most important points that you'd want people to be left with?

SG: I think the fact that it was such a positive experience and helped to shape who I am today, and probably umm influenced my interest in social work. I didn't, I guess it was high-school that I was kind of leaning towards the social sciences. I didn't really know what I wanted to do. Most of the parents that lived in the South Bronx, really, I can't say they didn't have high hopes for us getting further educated and that there would be college or technical schools. Many of them just wanted us to get out of high school and survive the Bronx. Because by the time we were graduating in the late 60s that's when urn the urn the addictions and heroine, mostly heroine talking about heroine now ... And we started to see at the end of the late 60s this this not a crack epidemic, because we didn't know what crack was, but we heard that people were urn smoking heroine and not shooting it up or snorting it anymore. So it was kind of a new phenomenon for us. But it was a positive experience that I'm glad that I had I think about some of the people that I grew up with who who who did very well. Nurses and telephone company administrators, and many got college educations and we never even talked about this when we were stuff growing up. I don't remember anyone saying you know I wanna go to college when we were in junior-high school. You know they said lets apply and see how far we get. And Fordham was the only school I applied to. So urn I I wasn't real sure what I wanted to do but when I thought about the choices that urn my parents didn't have and my grandparents didn't have, so why wouldn't I get a college education? Why wouldn't I encourage my peers, my sisters and brothers, to get a college education?

N: Did you have any teachers who particularly stood out for encouraging you or inspiring you when you were in junior-high or high school?

SG: Yes. Mr. Blackman ...

N: Haha. The one that yelled at you from the ... ?

SG: Actually he never yelled he wasn't the kind of person who would yell. But he was very deliberate and precise he gave you the look and the finger. So Mr. Blackman, Mr. Bonamiere ...

umm and all males. In high school, I remember one teacher Mr. Eisentracher. And the other teachers they're blurs, and I don't know exactly why. Because it wasn't an entirely negative experience, you know the Walton experience. And I chose Walton because I didn't want to be distracted by guys. But anybody riding past Walton would've thought it was co-ed because they'd be standing right at the gate. Umm what was your question again?

N: Now now these Bronx reunions at Crotona Park, how long have you been going to them?

SG: Oh for the last several years. And I hadn't been going because when I was married I was under house arrest. So I didn't go anywhere, because everything I did, everybody I interacted with, it was problematic for my husband at the time. So um folks would see me at a Bronx re-, past I guess I've been in this building for uh 10 years I've been going for the last 10 years. Folks I had grown up with would see me and say "Gee, we thought like ... " "You thought I was dead right?" "No we knew you weren't dead but what happened?" Then I'd explain what kind of marriage I was in and move on from there. But umm you would enjoy the Bronx reunions.

N: Yea I plan to go back. How many people show up at these?

SG: Oh I would say thousands.

N: Thousands of people wow!

SG: At Crotona park. And if we don't bring any food we will move from Crotona to the Forrest Projects because there's always some really good uh basketball going on.

N: Right yea Forrest is the basketball place.

SG: Yea sometimes celebrities will show up. And you know everyone is always on the look out for Sean "Puffy" Combs; well he's now what, P. Diddy?

N: P. Diddy so he used to come to those?

SG: Somebody said his, my brother said to me "Didn't you know Pat Combs was his mother?" and I said "No, Pat Combs I don't think is his mother; she may be his aunt buL."

N: Now Pat Combs was ... ?

SG: I think she's um P. Diddy's aunt.

N: Was this somebody you grew up with?

SG: Yes. And I said "Well nobody told me". And he said, "Well everybody probably thought that you knew". But he usually sponsors a table at the Patterson reunion, well he gives out t-shirts.

N: So you have a reunion at the Patterson houses?

SG: At the Patterson too.

N: So that's a separate reunion?

SG: It is a separate reunion.

N: And when is that?

SG: Um this past summer it was in July I believe.

N: And is it at the Patterson houses or do you get a hall?

SG: Yes. No what they do around, I guess around Easter, is have a dance. And the funds that they raise from the dance they use it to buy food for the Patterson reunion and t-shirts.

N: And so it's at the houses?

SG: Right. Right there at the basketball court. There's usually a game going on and some music and people are selling food and taking a lot of pictures.

N: Well you know this is something I mean, Claude wants to do all this stuff with videotape, you know for the project. So go down to you know, have a whole thing about the Patterson ...

SG: You would get so much tape, so much tape let me find a picture for you ...

N: So we're saying there two reunions that we should ... There are two reunions that we're going to: the Patterson reunion at the Patterson Houses and the Bronx reunion. So I'll show up at these with my students ... Haha.

SG: Ok it'll be fun. It's been an experience that I would not miss.

N: And this is every year?

SG: Every year. And it gets bigger and bigger

N: Each year? Both of them? That's exciting! See this is why we're doing this project, there's this whole story that you know has not been told. The Bronx is off the radar screen in terms of you know African American culture in New York City. You know one of the reasons we did this is the Schomberg center put out a book on blacks in New York and there are 100 pages in Harlem, 40 in Brooklyn, 40 in Manhattan, and 3 in the Bronx.

SG: Stop! Three? At the Schomberg?!

N: Three. At the Schomberg. So this is why we're trying to fill the gap here. So all these reunions I mean again my mind is starting to click about ...

SG: And we we have our little separate ones too. I mean we didn't do one last year but and right here in this little small apartment. In fact one of them Aubrey and Alvin came to. I think Claude was there.

N: Now did Aubrey and Alvin grow up in the Bronx also?

SG: I think Aubrey did. I think he grew up on Teller Ave, off Teller Ave.

<end tape>