

9-16-2015

Smith, Carolyn & Jack

Smith, Carolyn & Jack Interview: Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

Follow this and additional works at: https://fordham.bepress.com/baahp_oralhist

Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smith, Carolyn & Jack. Date of Interview Unknown. Interview with the Bronx African American History Project. BAAHP Digital Archive at Fordham.

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Bronx African American History Project at DigitalResearch@Fordham. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of DigitalResearch@Fordham. For more information, please contact considine@fordham.edu.

Mark Naison (MN): This is the 65th interview of the Bronx African American History Project and we're here with Carolyn and Jack Smith. Carolyn, could you tell us a little bit about your family background in New York City? You said when we were eating lunch that you were a multi-generational New Yorker.

Carolyn Smith (CS): That is correct. I was born at 1927 2nd Avenue. My mother was born down at what is now Battery Park City and we migrated north from there to 49th and 9th Avenue, she grew up in Hell's Kitchen at that time. And then they moved a little further north to 86th St where I was born and 2nd Avenue and I was born Uptown in what is now called Metropolitan Hospital, but at that time it was called City General. It was across the water on Roosevelt Island, a big empty building with no roof that you looked for years on the other side of FDR Drive and from there then we migrated north to the lower Harlem area, about 110th St, 132nd St. My third year I knew I was on 135th St because I got lost and picked up by a policeman and I never forgot that because that was just one of the most delightful days of my life. I was going to spend a penny and he asked me "What are you getting ready to do out here little girl?" And I said "I'm going to buy cookies." And I had one penny and my mother had made the gross error of saying "Yes, yes, yes, go," like that. And so out I went. And from there we moved to the Bronx.

MN: What year was it that your family moved to the Bronx?

CS: We moved to the Bronx - - well, my early years, I was about maybe anywhere from 6 - - my first grade class in fact was near St. Anthony of Padua which was near 166th and

Prospect.

MN: OK so you went to the first grade in the Bronx?

CS: Right.

MN: So was this in the late 40's or the early - -

CS: In the late - - no, in the early 40's.

MN: So did your family know other families who moved to the Bronx at the same time?

CS: Yes. All of them - - there were a group of them. My mother, my aunts, in fact one of my former extended family aunts was the first African American female on the Board of Estimates which is now no longer in existence. They were all children who were at that time were without parents. My grandmother died when my mother was 16 and her neighbors mother died when she was about 17, so all of those kids - - there were four and five and six kids all by themselves and they all grew up down in Hell's Kitchen on their own, they didn't have all these societies to take care of everybody. So they all moved wherever the group moved, that's where they moved. And they all moved to the Bronx.

MN: They all moved to the Morrisania section?

CS: Actually, that was Boston Rd, Prospect Avenue, 166th, Morris High School - - in the pocket. Before the Forest Houses.

MN: So this was a whole group that lived in the area that eventually was cleared to become the Forrest Houses?

CS: Robert Moses razed that entire community and built the Cross Bronx Expressway. New York City Housing Authority built the Forest Houses and we were moved to the Melrose, which was a brand new housing development at that time of the building.

MN: What was the nature of the block you moved onto? Was it - -

CS: From Jackson?

MN: Yes.

CS: On Jackson - - Jackson Avenue was - - the left side of the street was all two family and three family homes and on the right side of the street was only one or two apartment high rise buildings which were really 5 or 6 stories and all the rest were private houses.

MN: This neighborhood, was it predominately African American when you moved there or was it - -

CS: No it was a melting pot, it was truly a melting pot. We grew up with - - I always remember the Gregorian's, the Eisenberg's, the Brown's, the Hay's, the Smith's - - and I happen to now be one [Laughs]. But at that time it was just a melting pot. We had Irish on Prospect Avenue and 166th. Kelly St on the other side, which we weren't allowed to go to. And then on this side, you had African American, you had whites and blacks in that entire pocket.

MN: Do you remember this as a place where different groups got along well with one another?

CS: Absolutely. You were monitored by everybody's mother or grandmother and that was the lean out the window on the pillow days, when they watched up and down and you played numerous games of jump rope, kick the ball, kick the can, do something but physically ,you were always busy and you were always monitored even though you were in the street you were allowed in the street because somebody had an eye on you.

MN: And you went to St. Anthony of Padua Elementary School. Was your family practicing Catholics?

CS: Yes.

MN: Did they also attend that church?

CS: Yes.

MN: What was the composition of the school, was it also racially mixed when you - -

CS: At that time it was, we had a very few Hispanics at that time, but you had - - one of my best friends was Etilia- - see how some things just come back to you? [Laughs] In fact, I got married in that church, St. Anthony. And you had a few West Indians, the majority American blacks, and like I said, the German side of Prospect Avenue where the Gregorian's and the Eisenberg's had Prospect Avenue Tailor Shop businesses.

MN: Where did you end up going to high school?

CS: I went to Cathedral.

MN: And that's in Manhattan?

CS: Manhattan. They were trying to send me to Harlem but my mother said "No, no, no, no; she's going to Manhattan." So then I went to City College, that's my Al Magmata now, City College.

MN: So you went from Cathedral to City College and all these times - - this was all when you were living in the Bronx?

CS: Oh yes, I've always been a Bronxite.

MN: What sort of music did you grow up with in your family?

CS: We grew up with jazz, a lot of jazz - - not as much blues, but I had a lot of jazz. My father was a jazz person.

MN: What sort of work did your father do?

CS: A man of many jobs. He worked for the New York City Metropolitan Transportation Authority as one job. And he worked for Macy's as a part-time job, and he worked for - - I'm having a moment here - - and - - Transit.

MN: Did your mother work?

CS: No my mother was a housewife.

MN: And how many children were in the family?

CS: The immediate family?

MN: With your - - how many siblings did you have?

CS: Actually, I have three. My mother had a second marriage, and so those two young brothers. And I had one brother who was of the same as myself.

MN: Were you in the Bronx when the whole rhythm and blues and doo wop thing was going on?

CS: Absolutely. I wasn't old enough for the Prospect Avenue 845 club, but my parents were old enough for that era. I knew of it.

MN: Do you remember people singing on the street corners?

CS: Absolutely. The doo wop crew? Oh yes. And some were great and some were not so great.

MN: Did you go to any talent shows or local schools? Or was it mostly stuff in the corner or in the school yard?

CS: At that time, we had Hunts Point Palace which was over there on the other side - - and all of our dances from St. Anthony were always held at Hunts Point Palace so you always knew - -

MN: Wow, so you had dances - -

CS: We had dances, even in the 8th grade we went to the dance, graduation was a dance, and even if it was something from the church was given, they gave it if they needed a larger venue they would use Hunts Point Palace. It was an acceptable area.

MN: Do you remember seeing any live music when you were growing up at the Hunts Point Palace? Did your family go to the Apollo at all?

CS: No, you know we were not really a Harlem group until I was old enough to get to Harlem. There was a dance school down on 125th St and as a teenager, I had a job of taking kids down to that school so I kind of got to the Apollo through that venue.

MN: But you felt that there was enough to do in the Bronx to keep you busy?

CS: Absolutely.

MN: What were some of the things you did for recreation?

CS: Well, sometimes for recreation, surprisingly, I would just ride the subway all the way to the end, I got to know all the trains. We would take ourselves and go all the way out to Brooklyn to the very end, and then we would take the ferry from Manhattan and go over to Staten Island and that was a day because it might have cost a nickel but it took you hours to do that.

MN: Were there a lot of movie theaters in the neighborhood?

CS: The only movie theater was up on Prospect Avenue, and I really was not able to go to a lot of movies.

MN: Was your family fairly protective?

CS: If you went out of the area, yes. I was the oldest child so I was always responsible for any of the younger children and the next senior to me in the extended family was also a female and the next senior to that person, there were five males.

MN: Did you have any very explicit experience with racism when you were growing up?

From a teacher, a police officer, neighbor, anything that really stands out?

CS: The most explicit activity I ever had was at Cathedral. And unfortunately - - actually, it was there that I understood that I was not who I thought I was at that time and it was a nun who told me I couldn't go to - -whatever they had, it was something - - the students were all applying to a summer job with the Bell Telephone, or AT&T and it was summer jobs, and all of my friends or most of them were Sullivan's, and Moriarty's, and I just didn't think that I was not included in that mix. And so when they all said we're going downtown to see about a job and got on the L, and they knew but I really wasn't as aware as I should have been that I was not going to be included in this mix and when we got down to lower Manhattan by Water St, and a woman put us in separate little cubicles and she put a clock in front of me and she said "I'm going to start the exam as soon as I turn on this clock." And I never realized what that did until after I was much older. But I didn't get the job and they all got hired.

MN: And this was in the 50's?

CS: This was in the 50's.

MN: But you didn't grow up with a high level of what you call Race Consciousness from - -?

CS: Not in that pocket because it was just so mixed in the pocket, you just really could not find any - - and in fact, you never heard of a black person working in a Chinese laundry, and I was one of those few people. My mother was so tight with the Chinese laundry across the street that she got him to hire me to just iron shirts and here I was a kid and I'm saying to myself "I'm working in a Chinese laundry? This is a great thing." But

I learned how to iron like nobody else can iron and I said wow. But after you think about it today it would never have been allowed because that would have been child labor.

MN: Were academics stressed in your house?

CS: Absolutely. You had to. Everybody had to finish - - at that time it was high school - - and I was the first high school graduate in the group, so after me, everybody had to do whatever I did.

MN: Was college also seen as a goal?

CS: College was seen as a goal; college was not as affordable, but college was seen as a goal.

MN: How much education had your parents had?

CS: My mother went to Julia Richmond, she didn't finish; she had me. My father went to high school and he went into the Marines. My brothers all finished high school and went into the service; Marines, Green Berets, Marines, and Army.

MN: City College - - you must have done very well in high school because City College was tough to get into in those years.

CS: And that was my second date with racism because they told me at the door that you have to have a 90 average and as a kid I thought that the person who greeted me at the desk knew what she was talking about and so I left with that - - I don't have 90, I have 80 something but I didn't have 90 - - and I didn't come back. And after years and years and years I kept saying why can't I go to that school? And finally one day I was at work and somebody says "You never went back because you thought you couldn't get in? Go back, sit down." And I went back.

MN: So in other words, you didn't go directly to college?

CS: No I went to work.

MN: And what sort of work did you do?

CS: Initially I worked - - I took all Civil Service tests, I was a test taker, I loved taking tests, it did something for my brain. So as I passed the test I go on and take the job so I worked in Internal Revenue, I worked for the - - I even worked for Transit because my father worked for Transit and he told me "You can go up the ladder if you get in the door." So I went and worked for Transit for a minute, believe me. And then I had left the Board of Ed as a teacher and went into health care administration because I could make more money. And at that time, once you have your license you have your license, when I retired from health care administration and running hospitals, I went back to teaching.

MN: Where did you meet your husband?

CS: In fact, I had a job then at a store called Franklin Simon, which no longer exists. And Franklin Simon was like a little, sort of a Lord and Taylor, on that level of ladies and men's store. And I worked there as a part time - -

MN: That was in Manhattan?

CS: It was in Manhattan. And he worked next door at a man's haberdashery.

MN: OK and was he also a Bronx person?

CS: He was from Brooklyn.

MN: He was from Brooklyn?

CS: That's how I wound up in Brooklyn.

MN: OK so you met your husband - - this was in the 50's?

CS: Right.

MN: Was this when - - were you still in high school?

CS: I was just finishing high school

MN: And you ended up getting married at St. Anthony of Padua's? Was he Catholic?

CS: Yes, my husband was Catholic.

MN: And where was your first apartment?

CS: My first apartment was in Brooklyn on 628 Lafayette - - because he was from Jamaica.

MN: Jamaica, West Indies?

CS: Right. And he came back from Jamaica one summer and he said I want us to move to Jamaica and I said no, that's not happening, we're not going to Jamaica. So we just went every summer and we went back and forth like it was going from Manhattan to Brooklyn and it was as easy to do as that if you had family and friends. So I was in Jamaica almost as much as I was in New York.

MN: And how did you end up back in the Bronx?

CS: Because they were going to move us into the project at Red Hook.

MN: Oh OK, so you were applying for - - here you are - - is your husband also a high school graduate?

CS: Yes.

MN: OK so this is a young, ambitious family and you're applying for public housing. Now explain to people what public housing meant in that time - - this is I'm assuming, the mid 50's?

CS: This was the mid 50's.

MN: OK to a young, ambitious couple, how did public housing appear?

CS: Public housing was the end all, be all for anybody who wanted to attain a better quality of life. You had to be married number one, to get into housing, you had to have a gainful employment, you had to be somebody to get into the development, and you passed all this different criteria of - - any criteria that the New York City Housing Authority had, you had to prove who you were and how you got where you are. And so to get into the project was the beginning of getting out of anything that was at the bottom of the rung.

MN: How large was the place you were living on Lafayette Avenue?

CS: It was a two family house and we lived right off the street in the first apartment.

MN: So you applied to the New York City Housing Authority, they initially gave you an apartment in the Red Hook Houses which you weren't thrilled about.

CS: I didn't go. I just went over and looked at it and refused the apartment and went and saw somebody who knew somebody who told me that he would speak to - - in fact, I went to my pastor at my church, and he spoke to someone who took me to see the president and chairman of Housing Authority and they said you can't see him and I said well, I have to see him because this is really an emergency. At that time his name Sydney Engolar and then he was a very nice guy. He sat me down and talked and I told him I came from New York and you're trying to send me to Brooklyn and I just can't go there. So next thing I knew I was moving into Patterson.

MN: Into Patterson or Melrose?

CS: No. When I was a teenager I lived in Melrose. I wasn't - -

MN: Oh OK, wait a minute.

CS: I wasn't married in Melrose.

MN: OK so let me go back a little bit, I didn't realize - - so your family, your mother and father moved into the Melrose Houses.

CS: Correct, from the Forest Houses sight.

MN: So when they started construction for Forest Houses, your family then moved to the Melrose Houses.

CS: Correct, we were the first tenants in Melrose.

MN: And what was the Melrose Houses like when you were living there?

CS: It was lovely. It was only eight buildings; four low rise, four high rise, and we had a Japanese world-renowned gardener and the whole center of Melrose was just beautiful gardens, which now is just concrete.

MN: So you had a Japanese garden in the middle of - -

CS: They wrote about him in the paper, that he was so famous that they brought him all the way from Japan just to do this center piece of this Housing Authority Project.

MN: And was this when you were still at Cathedral?

CS: Yes.

MN: So this was when you were in high school that your family moved into the Melrose Houses. And again, what was the racial, ethnic composition of the people who moved in?

CS: That was also mixed. Morris Avenue was Little Italy and we had to fight, but it was Little Italy. The project was sitting smack in the middle of what used to be a little community I guess of Little Italy, and on that side was Knowles which was Irish and Catholics, and on this side of Morris Avenue, further over by Brooke was German.

MN: So there was a German section, and Irish section, an Italian section.

CS: And in the middle here we come.

MN: And the Italian section was the toughest?

CS: Oh yes. Because they had PAL and I had come from a PAL background. I used to run with the PAL and do things with the PAL in a community off of Jackson Avenue, so when we came and we saw the PAL we were just delighted and these kids lined up and said you can't go in. You can't go into the PAL? No. And so it started and then we all became friends; Rocco became my best buddy. We lived - - we understood each other when it went down, we all understood each other.

MN: So eventually there was a [Inaudible] between the black kids from Melrose and the Italian kids from - -

CS: Absolutely. Well, you see now Cardinal Hayes High School, there was a bridge that went across from that part of Morris Avenue over to the Grand Concourse, well they have since closed that bridge but we used to lock [Inaudible] right at that bridge because had to go across that bridge to get to the subway at 149th St to go downtown to go to school.

MN: And the Italian kids would line up?

CS: Oh yes. And you're on your own.

MN: Were there gangs at that time?

CS: They weren't really gangs; they were buddies who banded together and they were not - - you didn't have to join anything and there were very few male children anyway in this group and when we moved into Melrose, I don't think that there were - - in fact, the Royal family was probably the largest number of African American males in that project because they had a family of seven and six of them were boys. So one, the girl, was my friend.

MN: Were most of the families in Melrose African American, or it was pretty mix?

CS: It was mixed, it might have been a 70/30 but it was mixed.

MN: Did you eat at the places in the Italian neighborhood?

CS: I learned to speak some Italian, I - - because when you're a teenager, you don't fear; you learn and you absorb and you melt and you blend and there's something that happens with teenagers but it's on the negative side sets in that somebody's just instilled that little poison that begins to make the feelings surface.

MN: Right. So when you met your husband you were living in the Melrose Houses and working downtown?

CS: And going to school.

MN: So basically you had a very positive experience in Jackson Avenue and a very positive experience in Melrose.

CS: Absolutely.

MN: And then you moved to Brooklyn - -

CS: For a minute.

MN: - - for a minute and then almost got Red Hook but was saved by the bell and sent to Patterson. Do you remember what year that was?

CS: 1956.

MN: So what were the Patterson Houses like when you got there?

CS: Patterson Houses is 25 buildings, low and high rise. It was in the midst of a transitional period then because the Mott Haven Houses weren't there, they were working on building the Mott Haven. St. Jerome's was down on 138th St, Milbrook was down on 138th St, and they were building a Concourse Village and I got involved in the politics of

the community and tried to find out why the project was just allowing certain kinds of elements to come in, so I organized the Tenants Council, which is now - -

MN: So when you were there in '56 you had a sense that the standards were being lowered?

CS: Absolutely.

MN: Even as early as '56?

CS: Absolutely.

MN: Describe what you saw; Patterson opened in 1950 so when the original families moved out, presumably to get something better, how would you describe the people who were coming in?

CS: They were not people who met the same criteria we were understood. They didn't have to have all that we had to have to get into the projects initially, and so you began to see a different element of people coming in. And even the services that the Housing Authority used to provide stopped and or came to real minimal services. So the elevators began to be really unacceptable, the hallways were unacceptable, things that you just didn't even that you would even have to live with. We came from a tenement area, and a private houses area and small pockets, and we didn't have that kind of problem in little pockets and here we are now in what's supposed to be the up and coming area with concrete high risers and it was terrible.

MN: And it was really different from what you remembered Melrose to be?

CS: Absolutely.

MN: At this time had Jack been born yet?

CS: Oh yes, Jack was born.

MN: In what year?

CS: '56.

MN: OK so was he born before Patterson or in Patterson?

CS: He was born before Patterson.

MN: In Brooklyn.

CS: In Brooklyn.

MN: And then you - -

CS: We came to the Bronx. Actually he was born right here at Fordham. [Laughs]

MN: You're youngest son was born in - -

CS: In Fordham.

MN: So here you are, 1956, you have two young children; what sort of work was your husband doing at that time?

CS: My husband was a dental technician and he had his own business.

MN: And were you working when your children were young?

CS: No. When I started working they were just about going into first grade.

MN: How quickly did you organize this tenant organization upon your arrival?

CS: It took a while because there were forces that were there - - the former president was kind of hostile about anybody new and young and articulate and she felt that maybe we should not come in and tell her what to her and that was an issue. So, we ran an election and I won.

MN: Do you remember what year that was? Late 50's?

CS: It had to be late 50's.

MN: So the things you noticed were the elevators, the halls - - what about the grounds?

CS: Grounds were going, businesses were going, across the street from us used to be the Smoked Ham Company, next to the fire house - - Plymouth Rock. They had a smoked ham company right next to the fire house, and that business left, City Bank left, Chase left, I mean the 3rd Avenue L was stopped and then they started removing the 3rd Avenue L pillars so that should be kind of documented.

MN: So do you have a sense that the city was kind of giving up on this particular - - or withdrawing support from that community?

CS: Absolutely.

MN: As well as businesses leaving. So you had a sense that this was going downhill. And this was in the late 50's?

CS: In the late 50's.

MN: Did you feel that this was not going to be a safe environment to bring up your children?

CS: Absolutely. And my goal then was to get us out of there.

MN: So you saw that even by the late 50's this was a place that was going downhill, where the quality of the families was different than what you had remembered in public housing.

CS: Yes. Families were moving north and south and different places, but they weren't staying there.

MN: They weren't staying in this part of the Bronx?

CS: No. They were moving up to Concourse Village, they were moving up to Vanderbus - - Co-op City had opened - - they were moving back to Harlem, but they weren't staying in that part.

MN: Now, in terms of the behavior - - were there things in terms of child behavior and parental supervision that bothered you also in addition to the physical grounds?

CS: Yes.

MN: And what would those things be?

CS: Because during our years, you were sort of the Pied Piper of - - if you took a group and we were going to the Museum of Natural History, I might take 10 kids with me and we would all go down to the Museum of Natural History. Later on you would notice that you were the only one doing that; where were the rest of the parents whose children also were looking into these activities? But nobody had the time to do it with their children.

MN: How many years did you stay in the Patterson Houses?

CS: Fourteen.

MN: So you left in 1970?

CS: Yes.

Jack Smith (JS): Actually, no we left in '73 - - so it was 17, almost 18 years.

MN: Now Jack, what are your earliest memories of Patterson?

JS: My father left us when I was 5 years old and abandoned us. My mother raised myself and my brother and it was through her sacrifice that we were able to become successful young men and it was at the time that there was a lot of negative stereotypes of young African American women raising single young males and that that was a - - it was the time of the psychological or sociological theory that black women by themselves, single women could not raise young men.

MN: The Moynihan Report.

JS: The Moynihan Report was very popular. And what she did was she made it a real article of faith for us that we were going to be productive members of the household or she would kill us. [Laughs] And it was - - there were a lot of drugs that came into the neighborhood, a lot of heroin. I mean, it was almost - - you saw waves of very destructive narcotics coming into the Patterson.

MN: Now, did you see this even as a young child?

JS: Oh sure.

MN: What are your earliest memories of - -

JS: I remember growing up and seeing as I do today, a resurgence of drug addicts in the street when they would be nodding.

MN: So as you're going to elementary school you remember them nodding?

JS: One of the things we had to be aware of was we had to protect ourselves from either the thievery or attacks or just to make sure that they wouldn't hurt us. So as they were killing themselves, they might be nodding and you would say well why is this guy - - well he's a drug addict that's why he's nodding. Then as we became older I had cousins that were growing up in the Bronx River Projects. I had friends that were growing up across the street in Mott Haven. I had guys that were older than us, cousins who got involved in it and who subsequently died. So one of the earliest memories I have is of my mother saying "Your cousin just O.D'd, do you want to go see and help out with this?" He wasn't at the project, he lived in Manhattan but from that experience - -

MN: This is in the early mid 60's?

JS: Oh yes. And it was really for me - - I won scholarships to go to school; I won a scholarship to go to high school, I won a scholarship to go to Harvard and law school. So

the scholarships were how - - it was like we had an understanding as a family: there's only three of us and if we don't get ourselves together and get out of here, we're not going to get out of here. So we went into what I think of as a survivalist way of approaching it; it was like being immigrants. And my way was OK, I can do this through school and I'm going to use that to get out. My mom was just like OK, I'm going to hook up your brother and he's going to go to California to get out and then I'm going use to the job and I'm going to get out. And when I hit graduation in '73 I went to Cambridge to go to Harvard, my brother went to San Francisco to go to school, my mom moved up to Riverdale, and we were out. And the year we moved out - - and we were going through the 60's, so I would say are we abandoning the community? What about the brothers and sisters we're leaving behind? And she would say, "Well, they threw a kid off the roof last week." There were gangs, the Spades were fighting the Kings, and she said "We want to help but the first thing we need to do is we need to survive and get out of here." And that's what we did.

MN: So by the time your two boys were ready to go to elementary school, you already saw that this was going to be a perilous venture?

CS: Absolutely.

MN: Now, you said Jack's first school was St. Rita's?

CS: Yes. It was St. Rita's.

MN: Which is right across the street - -

CS: In the Patterson, right on the - -

MN: Now what was that like?

CS: It was a community parochial school - - I don't even know if it's still there.

MN: It's still there.

CS: OK.

MN: What do you remember of that?

JS: They used to beat me because I would ask questions about black history. My mother was a teacher and my father when he was there, was a teacher, so in my house we weren't boob tube people. We read, I got taught about black history - - it was expected that you would come in and get A's, it was expected of myself and my brother. So when I went in I started asking them well how come Jesus can't be an image of a minority person? And they went off.

MN: And this was when you were in the first grade?

JS: Oh yes. And they really didn't like it. So they got very uptight and they were very physical back then, so we fought. And my mother, to her life credit, intervened and said what's going on here is not going to be helpful to him. So when the opportunity came for them to have a city-wide exam - - the Diocese set up a special school that they thought would become children from minority areas because this was like Vatican II, so they were going to take kids from minority areas, black and Hispanic kids, poor white kids, and teach them to become priests. So they set up with Monsignor Kelly as an incubator for smart kids that they could then train to become priests.

MN: Right, now what year was that set up?

JS: It was initiated in '66 and it lasted until '69.

MN: Now you were born in 60 - -

JS: I was born in '55.

MN: '55. So you were in Bronx parochial schools until fifth grade?

JS: Yes.

MN: So how many years of those were in St. Rita's and how many at the other school?

CS: Well, he only spent one year at St. Rita's and I took him out and put him in Immaculate Conception.

MN: Now Immaculate Conception was north of there?

CS: It was north of there, it was ten blocks north.

MN: Was that originally a German parish or was that an Irish one?

CS: It was an Irish - - it was the same school I went to and I felt that school was better than St. Rita's.

MN: So you went from St. Anthony of Padua to Immaculate Conception?

CS: Well, Immaculate Conception was the first year of Cathedral High School was in that building. And then you got to your sophomore year, you had to go downtown.

MN: So Immaculate Conception was not too far from Melrose?

CS: No, absolutely not, it was 6 blocks.

MN: So what was that like, what that better than St. Rita's?

CS: Oh, absolutely. They were not the - - they were the Sisters of Christian Charity and St. Anthony was the [Inaudible] Monks, they were Sisters of Christian Charity.

MN: So that was a more positive experience.

CS: Well, for me it was.

JS: For me it was - - well, they tolerated me is the best way I can express the feeling. They knew I was interested in ideas and they didn't get uptight about it. They would let me teach the class, basically. So they would have me standing in front of the class and that's how they would quiet out the smart kids is they would just have them become their

assistants to deal with the rest of the kids and then I remember when the exam came, Monsignor Kelly, it didn't have any requirements in terms of financial. So the Archdiocese gave one third to the black, one third Hispanic, one third poor white kids, full scholarships to go to the school, you could pay whatever you could afford. And the Christian Brothers that ran the school were from France, they had really adopted the idea that they were going to make a college for kids that were eleven and twelve and thirteen years old so it was like a junior high school that was like a prep and it was for boys. But they were really - - they taught us the Autobiography of Malcolm X, they brought us Latino history, they gave us calculus when we were eleven years old, we did Latin and Spanish and Italian and French but the standard was you were going to be committed to helping the community; if you wanted to be a priest you could, but if you didn't, you didn't have to.

MN: Sounds like an amazing place.

JS: So the Archdiocese got upset that it didn't produce priests, and so they cut the budget and they closed it. Then what the priests did, most of the brother's left the Brotherhood and got married and then they reinstated the school on a non-denominational basis as what is today De La Salle Academy; it's a very successful prep-school for kids from poor areas, but it was racially integrated but it was poor kids and it was - - what we found when I graduated was that most of us would do very well academically but had real issues in the Catholic high schools, so a friend of mine who was a Latino, a Puerto Rican, went into Spellman and the priests would call him names, they would put him down for speaking Spanish - - "That's just Spanglish" - - when I went in, initially I went into St Nicholas of Tolentine, I was the first African American in the building, I used to

get chased home - - kids from Patterson used to play, maybe they were at Hayes, and they would come up and play Tolentine, so it was really like a black squad against a white squad, and the guys from Patterson could play. So they would beat the guys from St. Nicholas but they would cheap so there would be fights afterwards, and at the end of the day, the next day, I would come to school. And it was right at the '69 or '70, so I left Tolentine and I got a scholarship to go to Walden from people who had children who had been killed in Mississippi in the Civil Rights Movement and I really felt honored that they would consider giving a scholarship to someone like myself and then from there, when I went to Harvard, I worked with the Latino and the black groups at Harvard and what we did was we would pool all of our numbers. So we would say, if we could recruit say 10% of the class would-be possible options, I went to Clinton and I recruited half Latinos and half of the blacks and we actually got them in. And so, I was actually recruited to Harvard as a Puerto Rican, I was recruited by the Puerto Rican organization to Harvard to get a scholarship and the African American organization recruited Latinos.

MN: Now, did you grow up in a time when African Americans and Puerto Ricans shared a lot culturally?

JS: That was the best thing I ever got in growing up in Patterson, is that there was the first wave when a large group of the Puerto Rican community came into Patterson that was - - I remember growing up as a kid and having a discussion with my friends with well, oh there's those Puerto Ricans coming in and they're on welfare, but a lot of African Americans were on welfare, they eat peanut butter - - well, a lot of us would do it. So, we merged and we grew up loving salsa and we grew up loving the Latino culture and we grew up seeing Latinos and blacks as one community and it was Lincoln

Hospital, I remember Latinos and blacks really protesting to make the old Lincoln replaced by the new Lincoln Hospital, and I just remember the people who really cared about us were both black and Latin, so it was - - and so we learned. I learned Latino history, I learned Puerto Rican history, they learned African American history, and it was a unity that helped us a lot when we got to Harvard, I mean, it was critical.

MN: Were you influenced with or involved with the political activism in the 60's?

JS: I was mentored by a lot of the guys who were - - like Nate Archibald - - a lot of those guys had guys that had gone and gotten scholarships to Harv U or the C, or the City College in Old Westbury, so a part of their summer jobs they got was money to come back and tutor kids in the projects, so they would actually come in and encourage us to learn law. They would encourage us to write poetry, Vinny Luciano and them, and what they would do was really encourage us to get into academics and so it wasn't like to be academic was to be white, it was like to be academic was to be hip. Because the guys who were at that point, who were really street guys, got into books. So that that mentorship was really, really critical, especially because I was like a young adult and I really looked on them like a father figure. They were into cultural things like martial arts, so instead of getting into like gangs with each other, they would show us how to use tae chi and - - but since they were the guys that were the no-nonsense guys, if they were into the Autobiography of Malcolm X, it made it the hip thing in the project to be into that. If you were into that, you were into something that as considered hip.

MN: So you could be academically gifted and not be an outcast?

JS: Yes, because of those guys - - at that time. When they went away, they got into the street and I went away to school.

MN: There was certain - - in the late 60's - - a political awareness that allowed you to be into books and academics and politics - -

JS: Demanded it. I mean those guys would - - when they came back with the Har U money and the C money, they would say listen, if you're going to go to college, this is expected of you, you have to know your history, you have to know math. So I was tutored by people who would have been considered - - I was tutored in math and in calculus by people that might have been considered hard core street guys but they would be sitting there going OK Jack, if you want to get into college and you want to go to law school, this is how you have to sit down and learn this. And because it was a group effort, you really get motivation and you're not estranged at all.

MN: The big question is why did the "gangsta-playa" element overcome ultimately the political impulse, because you had both going on in the late 60's - - the drugs and the gangs on the one hand of the political consciousness - - why did the drugs and the player culture end up winning out and the political culture disappearing?

JS: It's a valid question; I don't know. I know that as life - - when we hit 17 and 18 years old, I used to help friends of mine, we would set up black history classes in Roosevelt High School and I grew up watching kids that were smarter than me get put into the mental handicap class because they were asking for Puerto Rican history classes at Roosevelt or Clinton, and so when I got to be 18, I needed in terms of my commitment to my mom is that I'm going to get a scholarship and I won't be a burden to you; I'm going to get on my own two feet and that's when I got scholarships to Columbia, Yale, Princeton, to Tufts, and I said let me go to Harvard because the people that were there were very socially aware and committed to trying to help. So I went there; the guys who

stayed in the neighborhood, some of whom moved away and survived - - the ones who stayed and got into the drug culture never made it and as a result, it was just very sad to see some of the guys who were much smarter than me but that just didn't get a way to get out.

MN: Now Carolyn, when did you go back to college? What years?

CS: Oh I was an adult, I was working for - - at that time I was working for the City of New York at all the hospitals and in fact, Fordham had an adult return to Fordham as an education area down on 59th St and all my co-workers, they went and I felt I was just too smart for that, so I went to City [Laughs] and they finished here at Fordham, down there at the 59th St. campus and after that, I just stayed with City and I still am with City.

MN: Did you start teaching when you were still at Patterson?

CS: Initially I was with the - - they used to have a program called - - not College Bound, my youngest son was in College Bound - - Head Start. And I was one of the administrators for Head Start to hire the people within the community to work on the Head Start Program. And at Head Start I began to work with the Board of Ed and someone said to me "Well why don't you just go and apply for teaching?" So I went down to teaching, but I couldn't make any money with the kids, so I left that and I went into the hospitals and stayed there until I returned.

MN: Did you ever feel physically afraid going places in Patterson, or was there kind of immunity if people knew you - - or did you have to really be aware - - let's say when you're 12 or 14 years old?

JS: I never felt a fear in terms of physical danger, I felt badly because in some of the games we used to play in the building, kids would get hurt. Some kids would play games

in the elevators where you would jump between the two elevators, climb up on top of them - -

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

MN: You're saying that kids jumped behind the elevators and some people got crushed?

JS: Some got killed, sure. Because there really wasn't a heck of - - the one thing I liked - - it was a good thing that I liked what my mom did. They would try to organize activities for the young people, softball games where we would go and kids from the neighborhood - - all the kids, the rough elements, the kids that were academics - - all of us would go play softball, so Patterson would fight Melrose and have the games, and it gave us a sense of - - you got to know the different elements, so there wasn't a sense of danger from a particular element that might have been more street than you, because you all knew each other. Maybe you weren't that close, but you know each other, you know where each other lives, and there was a sense of a community. The danger that I ran into was more when I left and I went to other cities and I was expecting to - - that kind of community culture to exist and I just got slapped with open, physical violence when I went - - because I went to Boston, I went to Cambridge right at the first year of the bussing, and there was a number of us from Patterson that went up there - - some of us and some from the other projects - - and they were physically attacked, they were beaten. I was chased down the block by whites in a car, I outran the car, I outran the mob but I got away. One of the fellows from Melrose, he didn't get away; they ran him over, they ran him over one time, then he landed on top of a car so that the car would save his life, the car didn't even stop running, the car drove straight to Boston City Hospital and they put a plate in his head to save his life. So the violence that we ran into coming up to Cambridge, it was

a wide awakening for me because I had never seen white on black or white against black and Latino violence like that in the Patterson. I might have seen gangs fighting each other, but I had never seen whole - - I had never seen neighborhoods get up and [Crosstalk]

MN: And even the Tolentine stuff was not - -

JS: Not with bricks and bottles and bats and guns. No. Tolentine was with fists; you would get chased and you would just have to fight. But in Boston, it was mob attacks - - this was '73, '74, '75 and that sense of physical danger, that affected that whole class of us at Harvard because it didn't matter what college you were at, if you were black or you were Latino and you got caught, you could easily lose your life.

MN: Was there the kind of supervision that your mother was describing in Patterson when you were growing up, where everybody was looking out for everybody or the parents were - - everybody was bringing up everybody else's kids; was that still there or was it starting to change with the families that were coming in?

CS: No, I would say it was still there at that time. It really was. Some of the families, we are still in touch; some of them moved up to Co-op City, some of them stayed, some were with the Board of Ed at that time, one was in PS 1 with the Union, so we kind of kept in touch.

JS: I found that when I - - it was the 60's, we were into Jimi Hendrix and what have you, and there was a rumor that one of my mother's friends thought she saw my brother - - possibly somebody that might have been my brother - - maybe smoking pot. And when she came into the room she said "I'll kill you. I'll make you step out the window." And we lived on the tenth floor [Laughter]. And I remember - - and my brother was saying "I

don't even have a trial by jury; I don't know who saw, who told her what" - - but she was deadly serious. That sense of - - you don't know who of these elders actually are going to discipline you, was there - - I think that consent was there all the time. I don't think that - -

MN: So people were still looking out for each other all the way through. Now you're talking about - - was there much of an anti-war feeling - - anti-war movement?

JS: Sure. There was a big sense of concern about the war because a lot of the people who were older guys from the projects were dying or coming back shot up or drug addicts, or just mentally really or physically put through changes because of the war. And it was the height of the war.

MN: Was that something very visible, the older guys coming back, if they got back, in bad shape?

CS: They were in bad shape. And I made a commitment to myself that my children would not go.

JS: She was straight up.

CS: I was going to send them out of the country.

JS: A lot of people were clear on that; there was no - - and I know the draft number. She was like if this hits your draft number - - and I don't think it was just us, I think a lot of the people knew that if you got sent into that, the likelihood of you getting hurt or not getting back was very high and you had better chances running than you did going along with that. I also don't think it was just the war, it was also the health in the hospitals, it was a lot of the guys that were in Harlem were going through trying to stop the issues about the treatment of lead poisoning. We had Lincoln Hospital - - so there was a lot of

different - - you had the poetry, you had a lot of different activities that were going on that just really demanded that you be aware.

MN: Did you get involved in any of the arts activities, the poetry, the theater or any of that?

JS: I had friends who were involved in Harlem, in East Harlem especially, in the poetry and writing poetry and teaching poetry and the beginnings of what later in terms of Harlem became rap, was guys that would just stand up and start doing poems and really the thing that we used to like about it, again it legitimized you being into reading and writing. It meant that you weren't weird if you wanted to - - because some of the guys that were the hardest core street guys were like whipping out and writing poems and standing up there reading their poems. So that meant that it wasn't a flaky thing to be into at all and so that was really a powerful kind of reinforcement for us.

MN: Now Carolyn, you had mentioned in passing that you had some history of activism yourself? Could you tell us a little bit about some of your activism in Patterson and elsewhere?

CS: The first thing that we did was we organized like I said the Tenants Organization to have the tenants to come in and play an active role in changing the quality of life that seemed to begun to kind of be pervasive from building to building; 25 buildings is a large area and I knocked on every single door. I talked to every single person that I could talk to about why their role was important and even if they gave me a half an hour every day in the lobby to let the other element that they just couldn't come in and take over where we lived and it worked and it just began to be sort of infectious.

MN: Did you set up tenant patrols?

CS: Yes we did. We set up tenant patrols and we got as far as trying to get ready to wire up the buildings to make the doors become locked, which now they are, but - -

MN: So you had people sitting in the lobby's?

CS: We had to sit in the lobby and we had to take turns and we had to give it to management and management began to say well OK maybe I don't know. And I said if you don't do this, we'll get a new manager. We fought and we picketed and we went downtown and we raised hell up on that corner until that manager was put out and they brought in somebody who cared about what was happening in the Patterson.

MN: Did you get involved in local politics at all?

CS: At that time they had - - the local congressman wanted me to get involved to run for District Leader but they had a gentleman who was over the East Side Settlement House and he was the manager there, they ran him out in Brooklyn and he became the District Manager and now he's the congressman in New York.

MN: Oh wow.

JS: He's from Patterson.

MN: Congressman Edolphus Towns is from Patterson?

CS: He came down to that community, he's that settlement house which was right there on Alexander Avenue.

MN: OK so East Side Settlement had a center there?

CS: Center right there. Mr. Jones was the director and Edolphus Towns was one of those up and coming people and then he went out Brooklyn. When he got out to Brooklyn he ran from this pocket to that pocket and there - -

MN: Was there a local democratic club near Patterson?

CS: Yes.

MN: What was it called?

CS: The Bronx Democratic Club I think. I don't really recall what other name they had -
- but I know that a lot of those community local politicians were right there at the hub of
149th St off of 3rd Avenue and Melrose.

MN: Did most people in Patterson vote would you say?

CS: Absolutely. We were advocates about voting; we stood on corners and we talked
about voting such that when it came time for election, you just were scorned if you said
you didn't go and vote. That was something that we died for - -but they would go and
vote. And I still work with the Board of Elections.

MN: So there was a real civic consciousness?

CS: You had to understand where your power was. And it wasn't just in the election,
that major - - the primary was the important part of voting.

MN: Course there isn't that much in the Republican party in the Bronx.

CS: That's right.

MN: Before I ask some more questions, Patricia do you have any?

Patricia Wright (PW): I think you have already.

MN: Mark? OK well I always have more questions. Was there a Black Panther Party
organization in the Bronx at that time that was visible?

JS: There were a lot - - there was the Muslims, there was the Nation of Islam - -

MN: Did they sell *Muhammad Speaks*? Where was the local *Muhammad Speaks* guy,
what corner?

JS: The thing that was interesting, my mother could tell us how she used to see Malcolm X, she went to Harlem and actually heard Malcolm X talk and she would talk about how people would stand in the rain, which is so different from today, where crowds of people would - -

MN: So you saw Malcolm X when he was speaking?

CS: Absolutely.

MN: Where would he speak?

CS: 125th St right on the corner of 7th Avenue. We used to call it College on Lenox Avenue - - we used to say we went to UCLA which is the University on the Corner of Lenox Avenue. [Laughter]

MN: So what year is this, was that the late 50's?

CS: Yes that was the late 50's.

MN: And who else did you see speak there?

CS: I think that - - I just can't imagine that there's any of - - even when they were arguing about Wyatt Tee Walker and the groups of Congressman Powell - - just a lot of the politics that were happening then; if you weren't in Harlem and I was with Harlem in terms of Health and Hospitals Corporation, so a lot of that activity you just had to leave 135th St and go down to 125th St and there they were.

MN: It was right on the street corner.

CS: Right on the corner. We were there before they built the Schomburg and then we were very instrumental in being involved in the Schomburg so we were at the crossroads of that whole corner because the library was there, Countee Cullen, but nobody really paid attention to it who didn't know what the background of Countee Cullen was.

JS: See, I had a - - [Crosstalk]

PW: He asked about a group called the Black Panthers, are you familiar with the group called the Young Lords?

JS: Sure.

CS: Absolutely.

PW: How involved in the Bronx were they at that time?

JS: Tremendous, actually, because they were - - they along with - - you see, in some sense it was really all part of one. The Black Panther Party, the Young Lords Party, the Nation of Islam, the Peace and Freedom people, what later became ACORN - - all of them were involved in issues like the Lincoln Hospital. Because people who - - Patterson was right across the street from - - [Crosstalk]

MN: Were you part of the sit in?

CS: Absolutely. [Crosstalk] on 149th St we stayed out there on 138th St and picketed and carried on. We went up to Cardinal Hayes High School for a rally and I put my children across the street in Franz Sigel Park and there they stayed while we rallied and walked around Cardinal Hayes High School just to fight to get - - [Crosstalk]

MN: Do you have any pictures of those days, of those demonstrations?

JS: Sure.

MN: Because that's another thing that we would love to have for the project - - if you could - - pictures of those demonstrations and rallies and fliers and leaflets - - anything from those days of the political activism, or even records of the Tenant Council if you still have them.

JS: Absolutely. We were beneficiaries of them because a lot of them - - not only were they involved with getting a better hospital - - people were going into the hospital, women would go into the hospital to get an abortion and get killed, regularly. And so the neighborhood was like listen, either we're going to fix this or we're just going to keep being victim and butchered and that's not acceptable. And they got the doctors to help take over the hospital.

MN: Right the doctors.

JS: And the end result was we got a better - - I mean it's not perfect but it was at least - - I did a report when I was in high school on the hospital, on Old Lincoln and I went and I took a picture of the building that showed that it was built as a slave hospital that they had built in the 1860's and the teacher challenged me and said "Well how do you know that was actually built in 1865 as a slave quarters?" And I said "I'll show you the picture." It's etched into the side of the building where you can see 1865, this is what they built it for. And this is the hospital in 1970 that we're still living with and the quality - - and the products that these guys and ladies did that were the Latinos, a lot of the Lords were black. Some of the - - the different groups were really - - it wasn't so separate. The people were really much more involved as a community and it really fit what we were as Patterson because we were all in the same boat and it was like, we're going to do this because if we're going to get anywhere we're going to have to do something and we're going to have to do it together.

MN: Now, were you a fan of the Last Poets?

JS: The guys who mentored a lot of the poets and a lot of the guys who later became leading rappers, were guys that worked with the Last Poets and Latinos and blacks that

worked with them. And so we go to be mentored by them, those were the ones that - - and they weren't famous. They were just guys that were - - they had really been in prison, they had been in the street, they had been in the army, and they came back and they said listen, I'm going to college, and I'm going to do this. I'm going to teach you how to write some poetry and stand and do it to music and express yourself and what I did with it was I went and worked with the guys who were into law. And so they showed me how to set up legal clinics and to help people understand their rights. At that time, my aunt was the District Leader and she was the first African American woman on the Board of Estimate, but what she would do is she would sit me down and she would say OK listen - -

MN: What was her name by the way?

CS: June Sultis.

MN: I've heard that name.

CS: They had a complex over here that they were supposed to put her name on.

MN: That's your sister?

CS: That's my mother's sister in-law.

JS: But she knew about politics. And she would sit me down and say listen, the reason that this hospital is poor is because they did such and such with the budget. What are you going to do with your career? And I was like career, OK - - she said well you need to think about becoming an attorney, you need to think about becoming a prosecutor, so I did. And then she said but you need to think about coming back here; so when you're finished with Harvard you need to come back here and do something about this. And that's what I did. So it really was a responsibility that you were encouraged or nurtured,

but it wasn't just so I could buy a bigger car. It was to come back because I have a responsibility.

MN: This is very - - how important was winning open admission in the City Universities as a way of crystallizing this sort of intellectual of people that was going on. Because you mention the SEEK program - -

JS: That was key. It's like the hospitals open admissions, Columbia. Columbia was huge when we were growing up - -

MN: Did you guys ever visit the Columbia strike? Because there were people - - I remember - - I was very involved in that and there were a lot of teenagers who came over to visit and they were instrumental in keeping the football players from trying to take us out of the buildings.

JS: The guys - - to the credit of the people that were in the different organizations, they would come into the community and say all you young kids come up with us, we need to go up to Columbia. Don't follow the TV, you need to get involved in this, we need to go to Lincoln, you need to pay attention to open admissions. Because if you don't pay attention to open admission, when it's time for you to go to school, you're not going to be able to go. So they just - - and again, the fact that - - they galvanized and also the credibility. Because they were the hard core guys, they had legitimacy with everybody and that's a different - - it's different then just a politician coming in and telling you something if it's the guy who you've seen all your life - - it was the guy who used to play basketball with Nate Archibald and them coming to you and telling you, you have a responsibility to care about this, you take them serious.

MN: Did you ever get into sports when you were growing up?

JS: I wasn't as good - - I used to watch those guys, I used to watch them play. In fact, I remember watching them fight Jabbar, Jabbar came in and did like a summer [Crosstalk]. The street guys got into elbowing him and hitting him and punching him to keep him from winning and Jabbar is a Harlem guy, so Jabbar went into a street kind of ball and he beat them. But they almost went to blows out there because they were determined not to lose, but Jabbar was like 7'.

CS: [Inaudible] tenant schools, we had different notables come up during the summers and do programs and projects for the kids and there'd be softball teams - - I initiated one of the first girl softball teams in the Patterson houses and he was really gracious enough to come up and do something for us.

JS: It meant a lot.

CS: And now he owns the biggest, largest exhibit of the Buffalo Soldiers, and they just had that at the Schomburg. [Crosstalk]

JS: He came and talked to us, told us we had to go to school, you've got to think about being something, you can't just stay down here playing ball - - and we all knew he was for real. So the fact that they were not just sports guys, they were demanding that you be into something, was really a big deal.

MN: Part of this question, and this is something that nobody can do in one day, is what happened to all this incredible energy? Where did it go?

CS: I think it went to all parts everywhere. There are different pockets than benefited, there are those of us who moved let's say - - right now I'm working at advocacy for seniors, so I did a -- maybe another group I know they're working with students mentoring, reading, and math programs. Somebody else may have stayed in health care,

some of my friends are professors up at St. Joseph's teaching health care administration.

So I think the energies, although it may have been disseminated into a larger circle, it's out there, it's just a little fragmented in terms of where it is. But if you hear us individually, you know that each one of us, the fire - -

MN: The fire is still burning. And Jack your feelings about this?

JS: I agree. Some of the guys that were in different organizations went to Harvard and that's how I got recruited to Harvard was some of the first three Puerto Ricans at Harvard Law School were guys that had worked with Young Lords and had made it a principle that there would be more blacks and Latino's that would get into the law school from South Bronx and Harlem. And what I did, was I was able to raise 3 million dollars and set it up for people that had been dislocated by 9/11 and to help them get careers in public television and move public television to be a supporter of any and all means that were being developed to help the communities, especially low income communities, so that consciousness I think it spread, and also to the testimony or to the credit of a lot of people who were involved in it, black, Latino, and white, they set an example that others could follow and say well that's why I'm coming to school because I want to make sure I make a contribution like this person did.

MN: Mark do you have any questions? Patricia? Well, let's wind it up. This was really extraordinary. Do you have anything Carolyn that you would like to say that you didn't get a chance to say?

CS: No, I think I'm done. [Laughs]

MN: What about you Jack?

JS: I owe it all to my mother, no question.

CS: Thank you.

MN: Well, that's a great way to end, thank you.

[END INTERVIEW]