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Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Transcriber: Jon Ray Johnson

Brian Purnell (BP): Today is Friday, October 8th, 2004. We are conducting an interview for the Bronx African American History Project with Mrs. Ruth Stevens. Mrs. Stevens, if you can for the record please spell your first and last name.

Ruth Stevens (RS): R-U-T-H, Ruth. Stevens, S-T-E-V-E-N-S.

BP: And we'll just go from there into some basic biographical information, such as when and where were you born?

RS: I was born on the island of St. Vincent in the Gwenedines. 1950, February second.

Natasha Lightfoot (NL): And what was your childhood like?

RS: Loving [laughter], loving, caring, and fearless. Growing up in the Caribbean of course, because we do not have all of the distractions as the young people in the United States. You are at liberty actually to explore, however, there are limits because in the Caribbean, families just like here in the United States, families are very strict and therefore you learn very early in terms of your limitations. The church was very important to us and a great influence in our lives so most of our activities was built around the church and our extended family in the village.

NL: And what did your parents do for a living?

RS: My mother, as I was saying earlier, my mother passed when I was 18 months old and I was raised by my stepmother. And I didn't realize that until years later that she was not my biological, but she has done a heck of a job. She was what I call an entrepreneur. We had the only store in the village that sold from fabric to needle, and from sugar to cod fish. You name it, we had it. People would come from miles around the village to support. And in addition to that, she was a seamstress, so she used to then have

apprentice girls, predominately girls, and there she would make the wedding dresses, and the gloves and the hats and everything that goes together. And in addition to that, we had properties and she would have people working the land.

BP: What village was this?

RS: Prospect.

BP: The village was called Prospect.

RS: P-R-O-S-P-E-C-T, Prospect.

NL: Did you feel like your stepmother's influence kind of helped you to decide what you wanted to be?

RS: I didn't realize it then, but so much so as an adult, in terms of taking responsibility for one's own destiny, not sitting back and waiting for somebody else to do it for you because the strength actually came from within, and she was that.

NL: During your time on St. Vincent, how long did you spend there before moving abroad?

RS: I came here when I was 19 ½ years old.

NL: So you'd basically finished, completed secondary school. Did you work any time on the island?

RS: No, I said earlier that I was late attending high school because when I graduated from the equivalent of junior high school and passed my exit exam which is referred to as school leavings, I had a three year gap where I was just volunteering. Later my mother felt that it would be in my best interest and her best interest to attend secondary school. Because her best interest is that if I have a secondary education, I would be able to support her, because that was customary then. Therefore it was like an investment.

NL: What made you decide that you wanted to move to the United States?

RS: I didn't make the decision, she did. She was living in the United States I think when I entered high school I was almost 15, and she came to meet her sister, who came to the United States in 1922.

NL: Where was your aunt living at the time?

RS: 1296 Bergen Street, Brooklyn between Kingston and Brooklyn Avenue.

NL: When you came up to meet your family, you came to Brooklyn first?

RS: I came to Brooklyn first.

BP: I have some questions. What kind of work did your father do in St. Vincent?

RS: My father worked for the government department of, I forgot the department, but he worked for the government. Growing up, again back to the school leavings, because my father also passed the school leaving exam. He was afforded a government job. He started as a teacher he told me, and he then went on to work as a civil servant.

BP: What is his name?

RS: Walter Samuel.

BP: And what is your stepmother's name?

RS: Alexandria, that's her name.

BP: Alexandria

NL: Your aunt migrated in 1922, did you know what she did for a living when she was here?

RS: She was a domestic worker.

NL: When your stepmother came up, she also went into domestic work?

RS: She also went into domestic work. What a culture shock for her.

BP: Now why, as what seems to be a successful entrepreneur and established person in Prospect, why did she decide to come to the United States?

RS: When her sister left St. Vincent, my mother was five years old, so my mother did not know her sister. 20 years prior to that, my father passed away. Although she continued I guess maybe out of, she was curious, and wanted to see another side of the world, and her sister sponsored her. So then she then got her permanent residency, so she came to the United States with all of her hopes and aspiration and left the business in care of relatives. And I to stayed with the relatives until she settled. Maybe she might have returned sooner than expected, but she decided to stay. She stayed for 17 years. And too, she's still alive, she's 94 years old.

NL: And does she still live in the same place?

RS: After her sister died, the same one who came in 1922, she stayed around for about 10 years and then went back to St. Vincent.

BP: Mrs. Stevens was sharing an even more amazing story as to why her aunt first came as well. Could you recount that?

RS: Yes, my mother told me that her uncle went to Cuba, worked in Cuba. Then from Cuba when they were building the Panama Canal, he moved to the Panama Canal.

NL: Right, a lot of West Indians did that same kind of migration.

RS: And after that he moved to the South, and there was a problem with him looking at a white woman the wrong way, so he had to flee to the North. So that is how he ended up in Brooklyn. And he then sponsored my aunt, and she came in 1922 to the United States. So she was the first one after my uncle to come. And thereafter, everybody had started to arrive.

BP: Do you remember his name?

RS: If I remember later, I'll tell you [laughter]. All I know is that we all call him "Uncle" [laughter]

NL: So what were your first impressions of New York When you came here?

RS: First impression, I was a little bit disappointed, in the sense that you hear all of these stories about the United States and you try to sort of compare it to what your custom to and what you've heard. Even the relatives, when they come back, they, the highlights of the United States, they blow you out of perspective and therefore when you come here looking for the same streets paved with gold, and it was not so.

BP: What kind of stories did you hear before you had come to the United States. What were people - -

RS: Well, their description of the homes were not the description I envisioned. When they're talking about living in a high rise, and the high rise to me when I came was mostly projects. And when they talk about the freedom to move around, it's not there. The connections in terms of family and friends, like take a village where everybody knows everybody, it's not there. And it was a little culture shock to me, arriving and not seeing that connection where each one helped one, sort of the extended family that I was accustomed to, it wasn't here.

BP: You came in 1969 - -

RS: 1970

BP: Were you struck by anything you saw in terms of African Americans and kind of the cultural aesthetic, kind of the way people were dressing or talking, or the music that they were playing, was it very jarring compared to what you were experiencing in St. Vincent?

RS: Oh yes. Coming to the United States at that particular age, it was a culture shock and it was an opportunity to try to fit in. So to me the dressing was the first thing to go [laughter]. They're you're walking, coming up the avenue and you could be picked on. So I got the afro wig [laughter], I started to listen to the different types of music like "Hot Pants" by James Brown, and that kind of connection, so I tried connecting that way. In terms of African Americans, I realized that even the accent for African Americans was different in Brooklyn than a Caucasian, and I needed to filter the information and the words to get accustomed. So it took me a while to really acquire the accent from the African Americans and the Caucasians. We all have accents, so that too was a struggle for me. Also, black people in Brooklyn, to me, there wasn't a specific distinction, because we when I came to church again, Episcopal/ Anglican Church of which my family, this is like roots. So once you go to church, you see upper-class African Americans, you see middle class African Americans, and you get to connect to a lot of West Indians from the different islands, and you see how influential and that they were making it through education. And then you see younger people who were struggling to make it and that was obvious. But to me it was a culture shock. Too, I was impressed with the West Indians who actually brought with them a set of values and they were trying to keep their families together through a lot of those experiences to sort of Shepard them onto a better life because for most of them, it was 'you have to do better than I', [crosstalk] and therefore they used that to actually help the next generation.

NL: I wanted to pick up on something you mentioned about the church. I wanted to know what church did you and your family attend in Brooklyn and if you could speak to just the population of West Indians there as well as, maybe other ways in which you

accessed a Vincentian or larger West Indian community through different organizations that you might have been a part of.

RS: As I mentioned earlier, my aunt who came earlier, and I think she connected to a church very early. My mother came and followed her. And I came and I had no choice, I had to follow as well. But within the church, there were a lot of activities and opportunities for people to talk - -

NL: What church was this?

RS: St. Augustine Episcopal Church.

NL: And where's St. Augustine?

RS: This was I think on Macon, because the original St. Augustine burned down before I came, and this was a temporary home.

NL: This was in Bed-Stuy?

RS: Yes. Temporary home on Macon Avenue, but now I think they moved some place onto Flatbush Avenue, since I'm in The Bronx. But the church was very influential and the connections that you make there, through people, not only from St. Vincent, but also from the other Caribbean Islands, then you get to attend social functions and then get to see what other people are doing and they would talk to other people of similar background. And it wasn't just West Indians. It was Americans, predominately black Americans, and we all gelled. And then you see even in terms of marriage, they intermarried between West Indians and the Americans. And in terms of assimilation, they helped us, me, to assimilate faster in the church.

NL: There are 2 things I'm wondering about. Since you mentioned marriage, I wanted to know how you met Mr. Stevens and how you managed to eventually become married and start a family and move to The Bronx.

RS: This is my second marriage. I was married for 3 years and my husband died. When I was attending business school in Manhattan, I met a young lady, [Kentish], from Antigua, so we became good friends. When my husband died, she used to visit me in Brooklyn. And when I got married, it was the first time that I was separated from family, because we were raised where we stay with our relatives. Maybe later on if I didn't get married, I might have gone out on my own, but of course I didn't know how to deal with that. So at age 22, I got married and my husband died when I was 26. I had no children by him. My girlfriend, her sister I know was having a party in The Bronx and she invited me. To me it was like a shock. I have to go to the party and leave my home. I've never stayed out of my home and here I'm going to this place, to me it's like I was doing something I wasn't supposed to do. But anyway, I came to The Bronx and she said 'by the way, I have this guy who just came back from Vietnam and I want you to meet him'. I said 'meet him, for get it!' [laughter]. My husband died three weeks ago. How are you telling, she said 'no, just meet him I just want' - - So anyway, I came to the party and I stayed with her for the night and she introduced me and my husband said 'can you give me your number' and I said 'oh no'. So he, later on he gave me his number. I said 'you give me your number, I am not giving you my number'. [Laughter] So he gave me the number and I didn't call him but my girlfriend kept saying 'did you call him', two days passed, 'no'. A week passed 'did you call him?' 'No'. So it wasn't until like 2 weeks later, in order to please my girlfriend, I decided to call. So he said 'I was waiting for your

call'. So thereafter, my husband has an attachment of a very soft-spoken and non-threatening because of the tone of his voice, very low, and we would talk. And just from different things about family. And a week later, he invited me to The Bronx to a party, so I said okay - -

NL: I meant to ask you, sorry, why are all these parties taking place in The Bronx?

RS: In The Bronx because every Antiguan has a party in a basement someplace and most parties I've gone to is in The Bronx. When I lived in Brooklyn, I can count on one hand how many parties I've gone to. [crosstalk] Just like in the Bronx, the parties, that's where you meet people, that's where they come together - -

BP: What neighborhood, do you remember what neighborhood or what street the first party was on?

RS: It was in north Bronx, some place in the north Bronx section because that's where my girlfriend lived. And my husband had invited me for a party and he wanted me to come to his home first and I said 'Come to your home first, oh no, I'm going to my girlfriend'. He said, 'no, to meet my mother'. I said okay. So I went to his home and met his family.

NL: Where did he live?

RS: He lived over Kingsbridge Avenue. I met his family, and I guess maybe they were rather pleased with what they saw so it was no threat to me. Too, I wasn't looking for a husband, so I don't care. And we went to the party and then after the party, I went back to my - - of course he tried to get me to come to his place. I said 'no, I'm going to my girlfriend's house'. A week later, I invited him to Brooklyn, so he came to Brooklyn, and then I was attending Fordham at night, at Lincoln Center and he used to pick me up at

night. And then his mother then got involved, the mother would send me my dinner on and on. 40 days later he asked me to marry him and I said, 'okay, I'll marry you'.

BP: 40 days after you first met him?

RS: 40 days after my husband died., no, 40 days after I met him, I'm sorry. 40 days after I met him he asked me to marry him and I said 'I'll marry you, but you have to wait 2 years' because I just wanted to take my time and see if this was what I wanted to get into.

BP: What branch of the service was he in?

RS: He was in the army.

NL: And how long was he in Vietnam?

RS: I think he spent about a little over a year in Vietnam, but a total of 2 years in the service.

BP: Was he drafted?

RS: He was drafter. He lived in the Virgin Islands. He went to the Virgin Islands when he was 16 years old, on his own - -

NL: I was going to ask you how he went. [crosstalk] A lot of Antiguan seem to have gone through the Virgin Islands.

RS: Lived on his own, the sole, one of the supporters for his family, sending money back to Antigua, and entered the United States at age 17 and was drafted in to the service when he was 18, and went to Vietnam and survived. And then so we got married 1978, yesterday was our 26th wedding anniversary, and that's how I moved to the Bronx.

NL: Where did you move to first?

RS: Well what did 6 months before we got married, all the invitations and everything was set, we got into an accident coming back to The Bronx. Because we used to spend

weekends, he would come to Brooklyn and spend weekends and I would come to The Bronx and spend weekends. And one day we were driving to The Bronx and there was an accident and his car was totaled so we decided at that point, this is it, we're going to stay in one place. So I moved to The Bronx 6 months before the wedding. And that was 150 west 195th Street.

NL: I wanted to ask you also, what were you doing for a living? Were you still in school the entire time while planning the wedding, or did you graduated Fordham at that point, and when did you move into?

RS: Let me go back and try to inform you. When I came to this country, my mother being a domestic worker, she got a baby sitting job for me. So I was working for 45 hours a week with this Jewish family babysitting. And about a year later, I decided because my intention because with like a lot of my friends, I'm coming to America and I'm going to school. Within one year, two years, I am going to school. That's my aim. So the second year, I decided that, my mother wanted me to be a nurse because in those days, you go to nursing school on the campus of the hospital, but I wanted to be a teacher.

BP: Why did you want to be a teacher?

RS: Growing up as a kid, I was always there pretending I'm a teacher and the kids in the village used to come to the store and during my off time I am teaching and I'm directing [laughter]. My mother, she was very influential. She was always this leadership style and qualities.

BP: Do you have siblings?

RS: Yes, by father. Anyway, one year later I announced to the lady that I am going to go to school - -

BP: The lady that you worked for?

RS: The lady that I worked for. And my mother wanted me to go to nursing school so I went on the campus of Brooklyn Jewish Hospital and they told me that I needed a G.E.D. and I thought my high school would have been sufficient. So I went and I took my exam for the G.E.D. and I passed it the first time so I had My G.E.D. However, I met a friend of mine who went to high school together in the Caribbean and she said 'I'm going to this business school and I want you to come and visit'. So I went to the business school and I signed up to stay at the business school. So I stayed at the business school - -

NL: And where was this school? The business school was in Manhattan, New York Business School in Manhattan. So instead of going to the nursing school, I decided to go to the business school in opposition to what my mother wanted, but I would have preferred to go to the business school than going to nursing. But my mother then gave me her blessing and then I went to the business school and again meeting another set of extended West Indians from Antigua and the other Caribbean Islands, that was another network, this helped so it keeps branching out. So after that I left the lady who then encouraged me not to go to school because she said she was paying me well and I left her out because that's not my aim. Because my mother wanted me to do better and [?]. So from the business school, I got a job as a secretary and the company I was working with went under and one of the young lady's there told me that her husband worked for CBS and therefore maybe I can apply. So I went to CBS and while I was working there as a temp, they had a freeze on employment and however they opened up a position for me.

And the reason that I got in, the Irish, my Irish boss sent a letter to personnel and said 'I know that we are not hiring, but what this will do is to make our manpower report look better in terms of hiring women and minorities, so that's how I got the job, from entering CBS I was a secretary, and then work my way up. But how I got into Fordham, I'm sort of putting that back, let's say about 2 or 3 years later because I was working in a financial department, there was a position that was available for 2 months and I was doing the job although I was a secretary. So I went to him and I asked him 'can I apply for the job, the job then was paying like \$16,000 which was a lot of money in 1975, 1976 and he said 'Ruth I know that you can do the job but you don't have a degree'. I am thankful for that because if he had given me the job, I might have gone through my whole history working for CBS, probably not having a degree. So I was to the point where I said 'Okay, I'm going to show you that I am going to get a degree!' So I walked up to Fordham, Lincoln Center, and I applied because Fordham had a program called, it's a program, how quickly we forget, there was a program for adults, - -

BP: Adult Education

RS: Adult Education where you write in terms of your life experience. And I think I got 16 out of 18 credits for that, and therefore I was able to finish my undergraduate in three years at night while working at CBS, and CBS paid 75percent of it. And I think when I left Fordham, it was 84 dollars a credit, so I graduated from Fordham in 1976, 3 years 19, no, I graduated from Fordham in 1979. By that time, I got married in '78, we bought our home in '78, - -

NL: At 195th Street?

RS: No, we bought our home over Castle Hill Avenue where my son lives because I said to my husband, my husband was living in this home that was owned by his brother and his father, and it wasn't ours. And I was raised where we have our own home because my aunt had three in Brooklyn and when we lived in the Caribbean, we owned our home, so therefore, we have to own our own home. So even before we were married, we planned and [crosstalk] so we contracted to buy the house three months before we got married, and we got married November seventh and, October seventh, I'm sorry. I got pregnant November with my son, and we moved into our home in December.

NL: And what were your first impressions of Castle Hill?

RS: Again trusting. My husband, as a plumber, worked for this real estate person who also owned homes and he would always say to my husband 'whenever you're ready to buy a home, I'll help you'. So when we raised our very first \$10,000, which was before we got married, we went to him and he took us to the very first home on Castle Hill Avenue. We drove up the Sunday afternoon and he said 'Steve, this is the house for you'. So we never questioned because we are dependent on his expertise. We bought the house on Castle Hill Avenue without looking at the second house and I have no regrets. Very good. We paid \$62,000 and the house today, it's over \$400,000 so you can see of course we refinanced a couple of there after, one of my passions is real estate, that's another subject.

NL: Well we can get to that too. So now I'm just trying to figure out how the path went from working for CBS to ending up as a teacher. What happened after you graduated from Fordham?

RS: I worked for CBS for over 13 years as I said I started out as a secretary then moved into the finance department and various jobs within that arena. And then ended up as the supervisor of accounting to manager of finance and accounting, but at that point, being the first wasn't enough. First woman to get the position as manager of accounting, and a lot of turns at that particular time. My mother end up died, who was my right hand, took care of the kids. I never had to worry about my kids because my mother and my father lived with us on Castle Hill Avenue.

BP: How many children did you have?

RS: Two. My mother, when I leave in the morning, my kids are still sleeping. My mother would take care of them, prepare the food, the laundry, I come in the evening, the food is cooked, and because of my involvement with corporate America, going away for workshops, seminars, sometimes I go a week at a time for seminars, my mother was there. I love my mother. I mean I'm the only Person who can say that I love my mother. [laughter] Anyway, when she died, it was quite difficult for us, my husband and I. And I decided, maybe this is the time for me to start looking for a career change. Because we hired people to help with the kids but it wasn't the same and because I'd come home so late at night, sometimes eight, nine, ten o'clock and at that time, corporate America you have an expense account, you have staff working for you, you have to take out for dinner, sometime the system is down and you're home at nine, ten o'clock and my husband started to complain. This is too much for him. He had his mother and a whole support team and all of a sudden, you know, we don't have that anymore. So I started to toy in terms of leaving and a lot of people thought that I was crazy. I planned my exit for an

entire year and a half and a lot of people thought I was crazy. Here I am, in a position of prominence and now I'm leaving.

BP: What was the final position you held there?

RS: It was Manager of Accounting and Finance. And I left because I wanted to be with my kids, and two, I felt I could make a comfortable living as a real estate agent, because I used to do real estate on the side. So I decided I'm going to start my own business in real estate, and at the same time I would have flexible time for my kids. And I resigned my position. I went off to do real estate full time. But while I was doing real estate, I met a friend, one of my friends, and saying this is the life because you can leave and go to school and have time with your kids and go back to work. I want you to join me.[laughs]

NL: Now I have a question, when exactly did you make the final decision, when did you leave CBS to go into full-time real estate?

RS: In 1988 I think, in 1988, for 25 years, thirteen years later, 1988. I went into real estate for about two years and I was doing some research for a friend of mine who loves children, forgetting that I wanted to be a teacher, but I had suppressed that. So while I was doing the research for her, I decided, she said to me, 'but Ruth, you're getting this information from me, why don't you go into teaching?' I said, Ah teaching, I always wanted to be a teacher, but I don't know at this stage I should. Anyway, I put it behind me and never bothered for about two or three months and then finally I was listening to the radio one day on my way to work at to the real estate office because I didn't own the office, I was an associate in the office, and the [?] and I believed in the horoscope. The horoscope said if you have to make a career change, today's the day to do it.[laughs] So I turned around and I went to 65 Court Street, applied, and I met a lovely lady. She looked

at my resume and saw that I had real estate experience. She said ‘I’m so glad to meet you, I am trying to buy this house and my daughter, can you give me any insight?’ And we talked much more about real estate than we did about teaching and when she finished she said ‘You have all the qualifications. You can be a Business Ed. teacher.’ So that’s how I came into the board and then by the time September rolled around, you know filled out all the applications for the state, I started to work.

NL: And where did you start teaching?

RS: I started at Taft High School and I taught there for 11 years as a business [teacher].

BP: What year did you start?

RS: 1991.

BP: Okay, to back up to when you first moved to The Bronx in the late seventies and living there throughout the 80s and up until today, do you have any memories of the fires in The Bronx in the late 70s and the 80s?

RS: I remember I used to see on television, the fires. And I remember the discussions we used to have after a while in terms of who, we concluded, I’m talking about my husband and I, that these fires were set. They were not just accidents. That was all conclusion because of the frequency and the way they were done. They were using gasoline and I said if you’re a tenant and let’s suppose that there is a jealous relationship between a man and a woman, you would want to torch the entire building. And most of it, it was done through torching and we felt that maybe some of the owners of these buildings wanted a way out. That was my speculation, they wanted a way out and maybe they were torching the building.

NL: And having done real estate, did you later on in the 80s confirm your suspicions in that way?

RS: I confirmed my suspicions from informal conversations and from what I saw in the media, that every now and then you would see a little [blur?] that they had caught somebody and locked them up.

BP: That activity didn't spread up to Castle Hill?

RS: No, I think it stayed in the South Bronx.

BP: What was life like in the late 70s and early 80s in The Bronx? Who were your friends? A newly wed couple, a young child, who did you socialize with?

RS: I came back to the church. We joined the church, St. Andrew's Episcopal. And there again, we met another extended family, West Indians as well as African Americans, and there were a few white families still remaining. And that was all support based. I'm just saying, so a lot of the things that we needed to know in terms of location, we had to find things, who to connect to, best through the church and our support base.

BP: Did they have any social activities?

RS: Oh yes. I'm telling you, when you want to find social activities in The Bronx, there are the Antiguans. And because at that particular time, we were all having kids at that time, we were all getting married, so there was an excuse for having a pre-wedding, a wedding, a post-wedding party. Then we started with the children. It was the baptism, it was the christening, it was an excuse for a party and [?]. When we have confirmation, there's no party, it was silent. In Antigua, that party be full, the person then party after [laughter]. They are flying away to party [laughter]. And then too, we would take the kids, my sister and I you know because we all started having kids around the same time,

we would push the babies in the [party]. We would take our babies to the party, so we have a whole set of kids here, and we are partying while keeping eyes on our children. And even at the church, we had the social activities at the church, where we had, again, birthday parties, the youth group parties, the adult parties, and when ever we go, we take the children. And even as they were growing up with us as Natasha will tell you, there was a rule, the cardinal rule where all the kids would stay and look at the television and entertain themselves while the adults, we are - -

NL: In a major hall, partying.

RS: Yes, we are fellowship, we are adults. So our base was actually through the church and later on through the schools. As we got involved with the schools and activities of the schools and as we support the schools and what our kids are were doing, we branch out in those arenas. And branching out in The Bronx, my kids actually helped me to reach out and learn much more of the Bronx in terms of activities than when I just got married.

BP: One son or - - ?

RS: I have one son who attended Fordham Prep because I was on this campus for a long time, and I have a daughter who just graduated from [?]. She graduated in May.

BP: Congratulations, that's great.

RS: Thank you. I have pictures, which I'll show you afterwards.

BP: Did you find any child rearing patterns different from The Bronx and you raising your children, compared to what you experienced as a child in St. Vincent?

RS: Definitely. It's like the conflict, from one culture to another culture. Because we come with our set of ideas the way a kid ought to be raised, and we tried to impose that

on our children. And sometimes I wondered whether or not, I struggled with it quite a bit because I wanted the straight and narrow way, the way I was raised, and they were so influenced with so many things around them and I tried to control that up to a point. And I was successful in controlling that because I set boundaries and I tried to give my kids leeway, up to a point. And one of the things that I learned earlier on is that you give kids freedom in increments. And regardless to what it is, I was the boss and I was in charge. And because I was the adult, I made the decision some of the times. [laughs]

NL: Now what did you see in other children in the area that you thought was kind of maybe undesirable, the behavior that you might not have wanted to see in your own children?

BP: Yes, you said they were so influenced by everything around them, what were those influences?

RS: You mean in terms of my kids?

NL: Yes, in terms of what you were trying to prevent your kids from getting influenced by what other children you saw in the area being influenced by.

RS: There were kids who had too much freedom and they were not focused, and I wanted to avoid and prevent that.

NL: And how would you describe freedom? What exactly did you think was - -

RS: Which means they would be up 11 o'clock at night in the street with no supervision. The parents, many times do not get involved in the school system and they did not take advantage of the extra curricular, or seek extra curricular, to make their kids competitive with what was going on around them. And some families, I felt did not invest the time in their kids, that extra support, and mind you that there were a lot of families who had to

work so they didn't have the time to give but there are a lot of resources in the community like the Kips Bay and the YMCA, after school programs, the community center, the church, that there were all of these outlets that I felt families could've taken advantage of.

BP: What is Kipsy?

RS: Kips Bay! Kips Bay is where Jennifer Lopez used to attend.

NL: We used to go to dance school there, they had all kinds of things going on there - -

RS: It's a Boys and Girls Club - -

NL: It's a branch of the Boys and Girls Club on the corner of Randall and White Plains Road in the Castle Hill Section of The Bronx. People could play baseball there, stickball, if you've heard of Stickball Boulevard, it's right there. Stickball Boulevard leads to Kips Bay. You could basically engage yourself in any manner of activities, martial arts, sports, dance, swimming, there was an indoor swimming pool. A lot of the kids who came out and did something good, came through Kips Bay. A lot of the kids in Castle Hill, not just J-Lo.

RS: Not just J-Lo, many of the kids. As for me, what I did, because I worked in corporate America and I saw what the system required for a lot of the kids and future employees, I tried to create all of , some of the avenues so that my kids can have advantage, or experience in a lot of areas. Like in music, so again, my daughter and my son, they took piano lessons, and dance. Then I found a cultural place up in [Ollenville], called Mindbuilders Creative Work Center. Again, here on Fordham University, there was a program, there probably still is, for science and technology - -

BP: C-STEP.

RS: The C-STEP program. I discovered about the program, I found out about it, and I investigated. And Saturdays, we would go to the dance, the music, and then we'd come here. And I would bring my nieces and my nephews and we would all get involved here and at Kips Bay. Again the swimming and the other outlets, so I'd spend my entire weekend, not only with my kids, but a lot of the other kids, in terms of the kids. But back to your answer, in terms of what was different, is because of the frame we put in and the limitations for our children so that they could actually remained focuses on the [price?]

NL: I have a question about your experiences as an educator at Taft. What exactly was it like, being who you are, having the background you had, what exactly was it like interfacing with the children you were teaching and how responsive were they?

RS: Kids are kids no matter what, and for me, I was in a bad disposition. Coming from corporate America, raising two children at the same time I'm teaching, knowing what America, the society, the corporations are looking for, knowing what my kids are getting in the catholic school that's not in the public school, so I used those as teachable moments. So in addition to my subject matter and teaching technology, writing was difficult so I tried to infuse as much as possible. I tried to bring them current with current events for them to be aware of what's going on around the world. And I used those opportunities to try to get to the students. Even in terms of college, many of them have not really looked beyond just high school and the preparation that they needed in order to get to college, so many times I - -

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE A, BEGINNING OF TAPE ONE, SIDE B]

I said no problem, I'll pay the five dollars so they can take their PSATs and then come to places like Fordham and Bronx High School of Science where they had Saturday free

programs, bring information to them so that they can take advantage of the opportunity. I have paid for kids to go on interview, bring clothing for them, prep them for the interview, write letters of recommendation. I have gone on trips to LIU and other colleges to take the kids out of the environment for them to see how other people get into school and what you do in the [?]. I've gotten information in terms of financial aid, how you could go under the HEOP and the EOP, because a lot of the councilors, although a lot of these kids they can go to college with very little money, or no money at all, they were not encouraged. So, they were teachable moments for me and I was very happy that while I was with Taft and even today my girlfriend would say, students would come back looking for me - -

NL: So they were receptive to all of your efforts - -

RS: All of the kids, they want to, but just that they're not given the chance, they are not being exposed, they're not encouraged.

BP: This phrase, 'teachable moment', what does that mean, where did you acquire that or how - -

RS: The teachable moment, it's not only academic, but sometimes you're teaching social skills, and a lot of other skills that kids will use down the road. Teachable moment, in terms of how they spend their money, if a student is to walk in and they do not have a pen or a pencil, I would say 'well look, you have sneakers for 150 dollars and you cannot afford a 5 cents pen, and for that I am not going to give you my pen. You have to learn your priorities'. As another example, I said 'look at me, my shoe probably cost me \$20 because I buy from Payless and all the other places because I decide that I'm not going to pay 300 dollars, or 150 dollars for a pair of sneakers, when I can get the same thin, the

same comfort level, for half the price. You have to know your priorities'. So taking and then we would sort of bend to a budget, teaching a budget as to why it is important to postpone instant gratification, and then you can use that time and that money for something else in the future. So kids then many of the kids, they just want to hear it from the adults, and to know that you can model that you're not coming here with \$300 suits, I look at the sales rack and I go and I bargain, and I look at not guns or butter that I can postpone and use my money for something that is much more sustainable.

BP: Guns or butter?

NL: Yes, that's one of the economics terms. Butter melts away and guns, when you say guns it is much more solid, yes, the butter melts. So therefore, don't use immediate gratification because that is going to melt. Instead of using guns, maybe something much more solid, it is much more sustainable, like lead or gold, which is much more long term.

NL: I had a question about your children. I know that you made the decision that they were going to go to private school. Why was that and how do you feel that that changed their experiences while growing up in The Bronx versus going to public school?

RS: They were in private schools before I started with the Board of Education and looking back, I'm glad that I made that decision. Again, education for me, very very important and at that time working in corporate America and seeing what it takes as a person of color, not only do you have to be good, you have to be twice as good and not only do you have to come with an education, sometimes where your coming from in terms of school has a lot to do about you getting into college and such things, so I decided very early on that I'm investing in the private school. I was working where I didn't have time to invest in the public school by going and looking over people's shoulder. I figured if I

pay for it, and in addition to that, the other religion, the morality and all of that, they would get it, not only at the church, but in terms they would get it also at school, so I made that decision very early on to send my kids to private school. As a matter of fact, I came to Fordham Prep when my son was three years old to find out what I needed, or what he needed to get into Fordham Prep. So I knew that he was coming to Fordham Prep. And even when he went to Mt. St. Michaels for junior high school, and he took the exam, what is that exam they call it? - -

BP: The CO-OP?

RS: Yes, the CO-Op, he got into Mt. St. Michael, he got into Spellman, and he got into Fordham Prep, but there was no question where he was going. He was going to Fordham, and he tried to negotiate [laughter], which means 'I want to go to Spellman because a lot of my friends go to Spellman'. I said one, there's a distraction of girls. [laughter] You're going to Fordham Prep, so he ended up at Fordham Prep. My daughter went to an all girls catholic school as well, one less distraction. [laughter]

NL: I wanted to ask another thing about your children. I wanted to know how easy or difficult it was to maintain, I'm just thinking about my own experience, my mother was really instrumental in making sure we maintained, not just a black identity, but also a Caribbean identity. Every summer we got sent home to Antigua. We never lost touch with where we came from because of that. I wanted to know what were the steps that you might have taken to maybe make sure that they identified with where you and Mr. Stevens were coming from.

RS: I did not return to the Caribbean for the first 14 years - -

NL: That you lived here?

RS: I can remember it was the James Brown, the afro wig and all of that, everything else caught up into that, so the Caribbean was very distant - -

NL: Far away.

RS: Far away. So not until my mother retired and moved back that I decided well off course, the mountain don't go to Mohammed, the mountain has to go to Mohammed, so when I returned for the first time like in 1982, I think it was the first one, 1982. I rediscovered the beauty, how people are passionate about a country and about family, and I reconnected with a lot of my friends and saw the importance of a family and the [roots], that this is something that I need to pass on to my kids and expose them to. So I went back to the Caribbean when my son was three years old and my daughter was three months old on that first time. Thereafter, we started to go every two years. Then finally we decided to build a home, and we would go twice a year. So my kids grew up in the village, in the summer, or Christmas we would go, everybody knows them. They would go to the beach, they would go all over, they would catch the bus and go to the town, they know the [patwa], they know the food, and got involved with the food and the friends. So to them, they are no strangers there because they spend a lot of time there in the culture, and even now in the United States of America, it still continues where they would go to Brooklyn, to the Brooklyn carnival, they would go to West Indian Party weekends. A lot of the kids that they grew up with now are second generation and they maintain that. Because in addition to that in terms of black history, we need history and enrichment of the black experience in the United States and the Caribbean evolved over a period of time. I started to do research in terms of as I was talking about the [Caroline] about the disconnection. I started to do some research on that and started to look at

people's movement in terms of the migration to the South. I love channel 13, it was one of my biggest textbooks was on channel 13. And even when I'd go home, I started to go back home, I started to ask a lot of questions as to why, how, when, and so on. And I would pass that on to my kids because it would be general conversation of the table, so therefore it is not surprising now that my son is a social studies teacher. He loved the business of history.

BP: Where does he teach?

RS: He teaches at New York City Public School Truman High School.

BP: Where did he go to college?

RS: HE went to U Mass.

NL: I guess I'm wondering if you could just kind of give your take on what you think is beneficial to you about having chosen The Bronx as a place to have lived, just your general take on why this is still a good place, why you feel like you want to contribute still to life in The Bronx?

RS: The Bronx has a rich history, and again when I'm in the classroom, I use again my teachable moments because sometimes when you ask young people what do you know about The Bronx, many times they will tell you all of the drugs and all of the negative things. And I try to reverse that by eliciting from them the positive things, in terms of The Bronx Zoo, you know, how The Bronx got its name, The Bronx being farmland. Bronx, of course you still have [waste farms, bean factories] because it was a farm land. Boston Post Road. Think of post and the mail all the way to Boston. Then you go back to things like Major Daegan, there was a real Major Deagan. You go back to, a lot of rich history, you go back to Edgar Allen Poe, wasn't born in The Bronx, but he lived in The

Bronx, his house is still on Kingsbridge. And all of the pockets of things that went on in The Bronx and the people who are still alive today who were born in The Bronx, they may not want to identify or accept it, but were born in The Bronx and started out in The Bronx, and just like a lot of other places where they have a history, we have a history too.

BP: I'm curious if you could describe the people at St. Andrew's Episcopal, what were their professions?

RS: If you ask for the history of the Episcopalian Church, at that particular time if you were to go back to the history, it was more of a middle, upper-class congregation. And a lot of West Indians coming from the Caribbean and their friends, [?] they're going to come with their class system, and of course they merged into this congregation. Back to St. Andrew's, we then evolved and we accepted, because that's the type of structure that we were accustomed to. And good or bad in terms of all class systems, we tried somewhat to adapt and separate that you should not put people into class, and therefore you can pull people along with you and everybody gets to the finish line together, but St. Andrew's is a very pleasant place. Many of us, again we'd go to church in the front and then we'd go to the back to socialize and a lot of our interaction, social activities, get done through the church. We have a lot of programs there at the church. There was after school, summer camp, and AA, and senior citizens programs, and many of us were involved with the church. I am the treasurer because of my financial background of the church, and Natasha's mom, she too is involved with the bible study group and the Women of St. Andrew, and there you reach out in many avenues. For example, last week, Friday night, we had a fund raiser to raise funds for the victims of the hurricanes, Haiti, Grenada, and Jamaica. And we raised around \$3,000, of which we are going to

buy stuff and send it. So we not only take care of ministries within our surrounding area, but we do think of people outside of St. Andrew's, - -

NL: Particularly the home community that people are coming from.

RS: Yes, and we too reach out, we have an adopted church in Africa which we support, not as much as we should, but we do. I'm supporting a [world] minister right now, currently the minister is from Liberia and that's another American- Barbadian connection because of Liberia. Right before he came, I had to do a piece to show that the American-West Indian-Liberian connection so that our population could be educated and informed because they are not that inclusive, we are not that inclusive. We are not when people are not of the same [inclusion], they have a tendency not to be so open. That's one of the things that we're struggling with, that we are trying to change.

BP: So your fellow parishioners, most of them are, home owners, middle-class, working class?

RS: Yes, and most of them, they are West Indians, and most of them their kids went to catholic school and most of them, those kids went on to college, and most of them, their kids go through college, onto good professions, and what I'm afraid of, what I see, is when the next generation gets to a level where they find that they have made it, they have a tendency to move out, move out of the community. And right now, from the last census, I see a lot of Puerto Ricans, who have made it, they have moved to Westchester if you look at the census. Increasing Dominicans, the new immigrants, decrease in Puerto Ricans. And what I'm afraid of with this West Indian generation that they might do likewise, so we're trying to make it attractive enough for them to stay. And then too the price of homes in Westchester and other areas forces them to stay [laughter]. That's why

I'm hoping for them to stay and develop and not to move out because the grass looks green on the other side.

BP: My last question is, how many years did you work in the public school system?

RS: This is my 13th year. 11 years at Taft High School, 2 years I worked at John F. Kennedy, where I met Dr. Peril. And I worked as the teacher center coordinator, where instruction specialists for the teacher and now I am a mentor of new teachers where I have 17 new interns that have entered since then and I go to six different schools to try to, helping to develop to become an effective teacher.

BP: How has public school in The Bronx changed over the decades, long?

RS: Okay, I'm going to let you stop that while I hit the bathroom, just keep that question, public school system. I was amazed when I joined the public school system, the amount of resources being spent and how little we get from it. Because the amount of money that they spend in the department, let's say for books, for students, academic development, the after school long activities, and how it's being spent, it's amazing. Underutilize all their people within the system who would then use the funding for other things, for the modeling. You give the same amount of money to the catholic school and they probably could serve maybe 3 times the population with the money they have and get better results. And [?] consistently, this is what I see consistently, when I look at the staff and see how they treat particularly the kids of color, and their expectations of kids with color, very low expectations, and the way to direct the kids, not giving them the information they need in order to succeed, there needs to be much more involvement even from the administrators, or much more involvement from concerned people to get into the school system to make a difference in the school system. And I notice now the trend for small

schools because some people felt that the answer to this was to get small schools, but the smaller schools are even worse because you have a lot of these new principals who went for one year to the leadership academy, don't have teaching experience in how to develop kids and help them succeed, and their the leaders. And if you don't know how kids learn and how to manage a staff or hire a staff to help kids to learn, its impossible for your end product to be good. In addition to that, they hire a lot of new teachers who predominately, they're not from The Bronx, that also is a conflict. I had this discussion with one of my teachers, because I teach at Mercy College once a week so I have the same 17 teachers contained, and her view is if a kid is not behaving, or the kid is being verbal, he belongs in special education. I said "What criteria do you have to put a young man in special education?" "Because he talks too much". And I said I think you should go back to the history of special education and how 75 percent of the kids in special education are black males and Hispanics. Why so?" So we need to go back to redress and understand why these kids are in high school and they get in trouble. If he's going to get classified in special education from grades 2 or three, in addition to that, you're going to give him Prozac and other medication to control them, what do you think's going to happen when they get to high school? And that's the age when they start to connect to their peers, deal with general ed, they start looking at girls and they're coming out of the special ed room and the other kids are coming out of the general ed room, and therefore they have to face in the mirror, here I am where I have the equivalent of a fourth grade or fifth grade examination, and the result, they moved me up because of social promotion, and now I'm in high school and I can read maybe on a second grade level, and I'm on Special education, don't you think I'm going to act up? There are lots of reasons within

the special education and the school system that needs really badly, because a lot of the teachers were coming into the system culturally, they throw them off the case and they choose not to know, miseducation, and that means they need to get a zero-balance within the system, I think.

BP: Do You See public school serving some of the social and development needs that you described in Castle Hill coming more from churches and what was this [?] program -
- ?

NL: Boys and Girls Club

BP: What roles do public schools play in those kind of social and developmental - -

RS: Because of the separation of state and church, many, the public schools many times cannot partake on the church based programs. And many of us, from Castle Hill, the church where we attend, many of our kids did not attend public school because we were afraid of the outcome. So many of us did not attend the public schools system. But should we have? Probably, but we did not. But now that I'm in the school system and looking at the injustice within the system, I as am trying very hard to get as many young people in the system, like I told Natasha, get young people in the system because you cannot change the system from the outside, you have to change it from within. Because even the teachers, I have 17, they're from Kansas, they're from upstate, they're from Massachusetts, I have two young men, one from Louisiana, two men of color, and one went to Fordham, here and got into the mentoring program. I have two Hispanic and all of the other Caucasian. And I can see the fear in them and the way they talk about their experience in the classroom because we have this where you have to type a three page "teachable moment", moment that matters. Come and talk about your experience. So

you have to type it and you have to come to talk about it, and if we can find a solution, we talk about solutions and is for me, an opportunity to talk about my experience, what happened here in The Bronx in the school system. [But layer it] for them because they too were probably miseducated, and therefore they too need to be taught before they can help our kids.

NL: So you think maybe there should be some kind of Bronx oriented education?

RS: Yes!

NL: You know what I mean, just something that maybe culturally, I think get these people a little bit more aware of - -

RS: Just like when you're teaching young people, you teach them from the known, what they know, to the unknown in order to get them. It's not that they don't want to stop, but then when you're going to come into the system and you probably tell them that about Shakespeare, when you haven't taught them anything about their history, make connections to what they know before you can go along to some place you don't know. And if you don't know The Bronx, and you don't know the history of the people who you are teaching, you can't get the kids to buy into it. You know the kids, they're very upfront. [Snaps fingers] They would tell you 'I don't agree with you' and they will tell you where to get off. But if they see that you are genuine, you know much more about them, you know how to, they trust you more. Because when they found out the first year that I live in The Bronx, they go 'Ah, Mrs. Stevens you live in The Bronx?' I said 'what happened to The Bronx? I live in The Bronx.' They said 'But all of my teachers, they live in Jersey, they live,'. I said, 'well they don't know The Bronx like I know the Bronx.' So right away there is a connection there. And you don't have to live in The

Bronx to really get that connection. But know your population, know who you serve. If you come in the back door and you're afraid to go in through the front door, even to go to the store. And you come back through the back door, pick up your paycheck and you're out of here. The kids, they want that connection, whether or not you live in The Bronx, but please learn more about The Bronx, the history about The Bronx, the people of The Bronx, that we too are people and we care. And the families, they do care about their children and the future of their children.

BP: Well, we thank you for contributing to the history of The Bronx, not only through your life and actions, but also through participating in this oral history testimony and this project, which its mission is to create resources so that more people can not only know their history of The Bronx, but also share it with others and contribute to it and build off of it. Thank you Mrs. Stevens.

NL: Thank you so much.

RS: Thank you for having me.

[End of interview]