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Tullis, Mercy

Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewee: Mercy Tullis
Interviewer: Brian Purnell
July 2, 2004

Brian Purnell (BP): Today is July 2, 2004. The Bronx African American History Project is conducting an interview with Mercy Tullis. Ms.Tullis, for the record could you please spell your first and last name?

Mercy Tullis (MT): M – E – R – C – Y and Tullis: T – U – L – L – I – S.

BP: Let's start out with your date of birth.

MT: October 16, 1975.

BP: And where were you born?

MT: I was born in Manhattan, Metropolitan Hospital.

BP: There's a story behind that right?

MT: Yes. Although my family always lived in the Bronx, my parents went to Metropolitan Hospital to get pre-natal care and so that I could be born there because supposedly, that was the only hospital that wouldn't report them since they were illegal immigrants - both of them at the time when I was born they were illegal immigrants, so they went there. But once I was born they got on a train and came back to the Bronx.

BP: They were illegal.

MT: Illegal, no they didn't have their green card.

BP: Where are your parents from?

MT: Honduras, Central America.

BP: When did they migrate to the Bronx?

MT: Mom came to the Bronx in '72 or '73 and Dad came in '74, so conveniently for them, my birth set up there papers and they were able to get their green cards, because I was born.

BP: Why did they move to the Bronx?

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MT: They moved to the Bronx because there were other Hondurans in the Bronx; they moved to the South Bronx – to Vice Avenue there were a lot of other Hondurans, black Hondurans in that area, and that's why they moved to the Bronx.

BP: Did they have family members here?

MT: They had family members. My uncle was already here, my mother's brother. My father didn't have any family in the Bronx. His folks are originally from Jamaica, so he had folks in Brooklyn, but my uncle offered them an apartment, I think that was the living situation so - - and of course since there were a lot of other Hondurans in the neighborhood, that's where they moved to.

BP: I want to get into your knowledge of the black Honduran community in the Bronx, but before that let's take a step back and talk a little bit about your parents history, as much as you know. What are you parents names?

MT: My dad is Ransford: R – A – N – S – F – O – R – D. My mom is Bertha.

BP: And your mother's maiden name?

MT: Guttienes

BP: Guttienes. Now how did your father's family from Jamaica arrive in Honduras? Are you familiar with that history?

MT: Yes. For work basically. My father's family was very, very poor and my grandmother worked for a food company, I think the company is called United Food Corporation, and [Laughs] OK, and they were expanding. So one of the places they expanded to was Honduras, and they needed workers in Honduras so my grandmother moved along with the company to

Honduras. So, I have one aunt who was born in Jamaica, but my other siblings - - I'm sorry, my fathers other siblings were born in Honduras.

BP: Your paternal grandfather; was he Jamaican as well?

MT: Yes, he is Jamaican as well.

BP: Did he migrate to Honduras to work?

MT: He did but then he went back.

BP: Were your paternal grandparents married?

BP: No, they weren't married, no.

BP: Now, did your paternal grandmother stay in Honduras?

MT: Yes. She did stay in Honduras. She never went back to Jamaica.

BP: Now your mother's family, are they indigenous to Honduras?

MT: From my - - from my grandfathers side, and my mothers mom is from Belize. So, my mother is what they used to call "Mulatta" because she was half black and half Indio, or is it - -

BP: Mestizo.

MT: Mestizo, yes, half black, half Indian, and - -

BP: Your mother is Mestiza.

MT: Right. So my grandmother is Garifuna and since my mother didn't really have a relationship with her father, my mother grew up in a Garifuna household.

BP: So now, your maternal grandmother, who's originally from Belize, comes from a Garifuna community.

MT: Yes, she does.

BP: What language did your parents speak when they came to the Bronx?

MT: Spanish.

BP: They did not speak any English?

MT: Well, my father spoke English because there were a lot of Jamaicans in the area he grew up in, so when he speaks English he speaks it in his Jamaican accent, but he still is Honduran, he still speaks Spanish so they speak Spanish with each other, yes.

BP: What region of Honduras did your parents live in?

MT: In Tela, it's by the coast. But that's not where my father is from. My mother is from Tela and in that city we have lot of Garifunas and where my father grew up there were a lot of Jamaican's. There aren't as many Jamaicans there anymore because they went back or they came to the United States or they died, but you know historically, that place did have a lot of Jamaicans, but he - - when they met, he was there, he went to Tela because of his job. He was sent there, his job needed someone to supervise something over there and that's where he met my mom, he met her at a party there in Tela and you know, blah blah blah - - so he moved to Tela.

BP: We have to get to the "blah blah blah." [Laughter]

MT: OK.

BP: What's the region in Honduras where your father originally came from? Where there was a Jamaican community?

MT: He was born in Porte Cortez and moved to La Lima, and in La Lima you have - - even when I used to visit my grandmother when I was younger there was a lot of Jamaicans in that area.

BP: In La Lima.

MT: La Lima yes. But he was born in Porte Cortez. "Porte" is port in Spanish, so Porte Cortez, but they moved to Lima when he was - -

BP: And he went to Tela, and Tela is T - E - L - A?

MT: Yes.

BP: He went there for work purposes?

MT: Yes.

BP: What kind of work did he do?

MT: He's a mechanic, he was always a mechanic.

BP: Automobile?

MT: Yes.

BP: Have you ever been to Tela?

MT: Yes.

BP: Can you describe what its - - what is it like; is it a city, is it - - ?

MT: Very - - it's by a beach, so it's very, it's a very laid back area. A lot of space, a lot of animals roaming around and - -

BP: It's not in the campo? Would it be considered - -

MT: No, no, in that it's not in the campo. No, it's not - - no, definitely not. I would say between campo and city. Because it's a happening place as well, people like to go there, people vacation there because it's by the beach.

BP: Hondurans, people in Honduras - -

MT: People in Honduras and other people, and Americans they come to Tela because they have great beaches there. So, it's happening, its up and coming but it's still not, you know, it's not like New York City or - - nor is it like a campo.

BP: Did your mother work?

MT: My mother was a teacher.

BP: What did she teach?

MT: She taught children. She was an elementary school teacher.

BP: And they met at a party?

MT: Yes.

BP: Does your family have a particular story as to how they met; do they tell a particular story?

MT: Well, what happened was - - I think this is what my dad, what I remember my dad saying: he was up there doing work and he knew the woman who was throwing the party, so she invited him to the party, and this woman was known to throw a lot of parties, she actually just recently passed away a few years ago - - she was known to throw parties, she had this huge house that was on stilts, so the parties were always under the house.

BP: What was her name, do you know?

MT: Her name was Yolanda, I don't remember her last name sorry [Laughs].

BP: Was she Garifuna?

MT: She wasn't Garifuna, she was from Trinidad, so - - and her husband was from Jamaica. So, my dad knew them because they were West Indians, and she invited him to a party, so he rode his bike from where he was staying - - he rode his bike over to the party and that's where he met my mom. And - - which across there's this big soccer field between my mother's house and

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Yolanda's house, so you can see Yolanda's house from my mother's house, you know it's the only house in the area up on stilts [Laughs] you know - - so my dad rode his bike over to the party and that's how they met.

BP: How big is the Garifuna population in Tela?

MT: Very, very big. Most of the Garifunas in Central America, in Honduras, and I'll include other places in Central America where they're located - -

BP: Such as Belize.

MT: - - Belize, such as Belize, and Costa Rica as well, Panama - - not as huge as in Honduras though. I think out of all the Central American communities, Honduras probably has - - Honduras and Belize - - probably have the largest communities of Garifunas. Because they come from, historically they come from the West Indies, a lot of them landed alongside the beach. So, many of them still are there. I mean of course [Laughs] not them, but many of their descendents still live in the areas where they landed. So Tela is a city that's on the beach, so of course there are many, there's a very huge population of Garifunas in Tela.

BP: And what are some of the characteristics of the community, in terms of - - start with language, what language do they speak in Tela, what language does the Garifuna community speak with in Tela?

MT: They speak, they call it "Morena:" M - O - R - E - N - A, and they call Garifuna as a dialect. And people, well from what I hear some people now are making it, are trying to make it into an official language and not call it a dialect, but I grew up listening/hearing it and knowing it as a dialect. It's Spanish, English, French, and Arawak Indian languages, all mixed up together in dialect.

BP: Do you speak Garifuna?

MT: No.

BP: Do you know any phrases?

MT: I have - - I know nothing [Laughs] Interesting story why [Laughter] Oh yes, when I hear people talk I'll know. I'm very much into the culture and you know, but I don't - - people can talk about me in front of me and I won't know anything. My mother was never proud of that part of her heritage because - - I think it's because Garifunas are known to stick very close to their traditions. So, a lot of the customs they have now are customs their ancestors had; like for instance when making cassava, cassaves, which is dried Yuka bread, they make it the same way the ancestors made it. You know, they still live in the villages their ancestors lived, so their - - how they live isn't as updated as the rest of the world. So, I think my mother was kind of ashamed of that, which is why she detached herself from that part and you know, would always say she didn't know the language, but I think she did, I think she used to lie to us you know 'cause how - - because my grandmother is Garifuna 100% and how can she not know it when it was my mother? But she detached herself and also my mother was mixed and she had that look like "Is she black, is she Indian?" So she was able to mix and mingle with other groups of people and it was easy for her to not really acknowledge the black side to her.

BP: What is some of the history of some of the Garifuna people; is there a historical narrative that you grew up with hearing as to how they arrived in Honduras or kind of what their origins are within the Caribbean?

MT: I've heard different stories. I know they're from St. Vincent. And I've heard that they were escaped slaves, that people tried to enslave them so what they did was they got a raft and

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just sailed away and landed wherever they could and Honduras was one of the places they ended up being. I also heard that they were there actually before Columbus came over, so these are different stories that I've heard and honestly I can't really tell you exactly what's correct or - -but this is what I've heard. And also, like I've said, my mother never really was a part of it too much, so it's not like mom was teaching me.

BP: Did you spend much time in Tela with your grandmother on visits?

MT: Yes. That's where I stay whenever I got o Honduras.

BP: Now is your grandmother of more African descent or of more Indian?

MT: More African.

BP: So it was your mother's father who was more of Indian Honduran.

MT: Right.

BP: Aside from the process of making Cassava, what are some other cultural practices that the Garifuna people connect to their ancestry - - the colonial period or even before?

MT: I can - - I can just tell you instances of growing up and I'm thinking back I'm trying to remember anything that may have stood out to me, that may have seemed distinctly Garifuna. When my brother passed away when he was 17 years old, we did a seven day prayer service for him and it was very weird because we had a woman, a Garifuna woman who came in and she was speaking in tongue and it - - it didn't even seem like Garifuna but it was something - - she was speaking in some language that none of us really could understand. So, every day for the seven days - - I'm sorry nine days - - she would come in to pray for my brother, she was speak in this [Imitates the sound of the woman's voice] and we were all like, you know, "What is she saying?" So, I'm thinking maybe that's one of the things of Garifuna culture. Another thing, we

have Punta Dance, which is traditionally a fertility dance, so the women move their hips a lot and the guys just enjoy it, you know [Laughs] Yes. And of course, it's become very popular - - well, it's always been very popular, but it's now, now it's become more pop and it's mixed with rock music and other things so it's not as authentic as it used to be. Of course if you go to the Garifuna villages you'll definitely hear really good, traditional Punta music and the instruments they use are instruments they get from the beach, like they'll use a conk shell as a horn and they'll also use turtles, the turtle shell as a - - you know to keep up the beat, and they'll have congo's as well and - - those are the basic instruments of the Punta music. What else - -

BP: What is, what are some of the cosmological or spiritual - -

MT: Spiritual.

BP: When I say cosmological, I mean - - what's a notion for - - is there a distinct kind of Garifuna creation story or are there distinct notions for how the world and the universe are organized from Garifuna culture?

MT: No. Garifunas I've come across have been Christian so - - and I'm sure there is something. I read somewhere, certain practices that they use to call up the dead. I don't remember the name of the practices but they have ceremonies. It's very similar to Santeria, where they have ceremonies and they call up the dead and they try to get messages from the dead, and they do the Punta dance as well and there's a lot of congo and people dressed in a certain color, and sacrifices as well. So I've heard about this, but I've never witness it, I just know people who have been a part of it, but generally they are Christian.

BP: Christian Catholic or Christian - -

MT: My mom was Catholic, so yes - - and the ones I knew were Catholic as well.

BP: Now this hybrid spirituality that you liken to Santeria, is it also like Santeria kind of rooted in Catholicism, you know Catholic hierarchy of saints and what not - - ?

MT: That I don't know. I wish I knew more about my Garifuna culture, but you know like I said, mom kind of kept it from us [Laughs].

BP: Now when they moved to the Bronx they were immersed in a Garifuna community.

MT: Yes. They were.

BP: So, did you grow up in that community in the Bronx in your early childhood? What was the Garifuna influences on your early memory of childhood?

MT: We moved out of that neighborhood when I was three years old.

BP: Oh yes, that's right you moved out - - [Crosstalk]

MT: It's actually Vice, I asked my dad yesterday and he told me it was Vice not Homes, which is not far from there, like a block over. But we moved from that neighborhood when I was three or four years old and that's when we moved to Davidson Avenue. And also at the time my grandmother who now lives in Honduras, my maternal grandmother was living in that area.

BP: Oh she came as well.

MT: Yes, she came as well. So she was living there for a while to help out and taking care of me and I had an older sister who lived here as well so - - I'm sorry - -

BP: Oh I was just asking a little about the Garifuna community in the Bronx and what you might have remembered of it.

MT: When I was three or four we moved from that neighborhood and moved to the concourse.

BP: Did you move to Davidson Ave?

MT: I'm sorry to Davidson Avenue, yes.

BP: How long were you live there?

MT: For two years. And then from Davidson we moved to the concourse.

BP: Yes. And then for how long did you live in the concourse?

MT: 19 years.

BP: This is the Grand Concourse and where?

MT: 172nd St.

BP: OK. So did you maintain any connections to the Garifuna community in the Bronx at all?

Or - - you said that your mother had an uncle here, did you still have relatives that were living in that community or - -?

MT: We - - yes. I still had relatives and we would only visit during holidays or if someone was sick. When my brother passed away we had a lot of people from everywhere coming in saying "I'm your uncle," or "I'm your cousin" and we're like [Laughs] you know?

BP: How many siblings do you have?

MT: There are seven of us all together.

BP: And you're the youngest?

MT: I'm the youngest, yes. [Laughs] So, I can't really say there was a real connection to them. I had my uncle, my mothers brother and you know, I - - the only connection I think I had to them, I had to the Garifuna culture is my connection with my Garifuna students now, when they find out I'm Honduran and then they ask me if I'm Garifuna and I say "Well my mother is." Because they have to question since my last name isn't Spanish sounding, so they wonder - - they always ask "Well are you Garifuna?" and then they ask if I can speak it and I'm like "No, sorry."

[Laughs] And also when I'm with my grandmother and she's with her friends in Honduras she'll take me to the villages, to the Garifuna villages and we'll have typical Garifuna dishes.

BP: What is a typical Garifuna dish?

MT: OK.

BP: Now we get to the food, which is my favorite part to talk about [Laughs]

MT: There's this one dish called Machuca.

BP: Machuca.

MT: Yes. [Laughs] And they take sweet planton and they put it in this bowl type thing, ive seen pictures of this thing - - I don't, I can't recall the name of it, but I've seen pictures of this same thing with women in Africa using this same thing and there's this long stick and they mash into it. So they you know, they mash and they mash and they mash and they make a coconut soup, coconut milk soup with seafood, usually with mostly fish so what you do is you have the mashed planton there in the bowl and you have your coconut soup and you take a spoon and you take some of the sweet planton and you dip it into the coconut soup and you eat it. Yes.

Machuca, very good.

BP: M - A - C - H - U - C - A?

MT: Yes. [Laughs]

BP: Is that a typical dish? It's not holiday season or - -

MT: No, no, it's a typical Garifuna dish.

BP: You celebrated the holidays - - sometimes with the Garifuna relatives in the Bronx?

MT: When my mother was alive.

BP: When your mother was alive. What was the - - was it Christmas season?

MT: Christmas, you know, someone's birthday - - we had machuca.

BP: Yes, what would be the typical kind of dishes also at a - - are there any special holiday dishes?

MT: Special holiday dishes? No, no - - just you know, typical - - no special holiday dishes.

[Laughs]

BP: OK. What was the community like where you lived on the Grand Concourse? So now we're talking about 1981.

MT: Yes. Well, I'd like to draw something, if you'd let me - - and to tell you how the buildings were set up. [Paper rustling] Now I lived in Roosevelt Gardens, on the Grand Concourse and it was set up like this: all the buildings basically faced each other. See how the entrance here - - [Points to paper] this is the Grand Concourse here. All the buildings faced each other, you went in - - see the entrance. We lived here; and you had the court yard here with trees and stuff and benches. So, they wanted - - I read about - - Roosevelt Gardens has a lot of history and I read about it later on, I think two years ago I read about it, how this was always there but because it was breaking down, they tore it down and rebuilt it. So, my family was one of the first members to move in here when it was rebuilt. And my dad said that we were the first family, but other families say that they were the first family as well so you know, [Laughs] whatever. But we were one of the first families to move in here. So, since all the buildings faced each other, everyone basically knew each other and every building had six floors. So, there weren't many people living there; everyone knew each other, everyone knew where everyone lived, even if we didn't really know each other by name, we knew oh, you know 1489 right. So - -

BP: Which building did you live in?

MT: 1489. [Laughs] Yes, that's how it was. There were a lot of Puerto Ricans there, there were some Hondurans there. There was one Garifuna family who lived there. Her name was Margarita and there was a Honduran family also, but they were West Indian Honduran - they were Jamaican Honduran. So, those were the only two Honduran families I knew of - - other two Honduran families I knew of in the neighborhood. It was mostly Puerto Rican and some Dominican families, but mostly, predominately Puerto Rican.

BP: Did the Puerto Rican residents - - oh, in terms of black families living - - was it mostly West Indian origin, Caribbean?

MT: No - - there were some West Indians; there was one guy I knew whose family was from Panama. But many of them were black Americans from the South.

BP: OK. What was your father's occupation at the time, was he still a mechanic?

MT: He was still a mechanic, yes.

BP: And your mother's?

MT: Well, my mothers papers could not be transferred over here, so although she was a teacher in Honduras, when she came here she was told that she had to go back to school to be a teacher again, so it was always her dream to be a teacher. She went back to school to polish her English and taking teaching courses, and she was a teachers aid at one time - - but she never really was a full blown classroom teacher.

BP: What did she teach - - did I already ask you this question?

MT: She taught children, she was an elementary school teacher.

BP: Oh, so she taught everything.

MT: Yes.

BP: What did the - - what were the occupations of some of the other families you lived with in Roosevelt Gardens?

MT: Well, working class. Many of them middle-working class, many of them were welfare as well. We had section eight, so a lot of the residents here were on Section Eight. And rent here was extremely expensive so the only way anyone could really afford to live here was through Section Eight - - And so there were a lot of welfare recipients here in this area as well.

BP: If you weren't on Section Eight housing, was it a [Inaudible] cooperative?

MT: No.

BP: Was it - -

MT: No, they would just charge you.

BP: Whatever the market rate was.

MT: Yes.

BP: So did your family pay market rate?

MT: When my mom passed away my dad paid close to market rate, he was only given \$200 from Section Eight. So when we moved out six years ago for a three bedroom, my dad paid \$2,000 in this area.

BP: So most of the families received Section Eight subsidies.

MT: Yes.

BP: Did yours growing up?

MT: Yes, we did definitely. My mom had a heart attack when I was in the second grade, maybe the first grade - - So she was told that she couldn't work anymore, so she had to get the bypass operation, so she couldn't work anymore - - So she was on disability which means that her

income was much lower than it was when she was working, so we were able to get a big chunk of Section Eight because of moms income.

BP: I should have asked you this earlier, but do you know your parents - - what years they were born in?

MT: I know my dad was in '66 and his birthday is April 12th. And my mom - - my moms birthday is August 13th and she was 52 when she passed on which was eight years ago.

BP: OK. We're going to move a little bit now into your personal entry. So when you grew up you lived in Roosevelt Gardens until you were 19 years old?

MT: Yes - - no. I lived there for 19 years.

BP: You lived there for 19 years, oh so from the time you were six until your early twenties.

MT: Yes.

BP: Who did you hang out with as a kid?

MT: Leda Ramiro.

BP: Leda Ramiro.

MT: Yes.

BP: Was she Puerto Rican?

MT: Puerto Rican yes. She lived on the fourth floor. I lived in 3b she lived in 4b. So, she was my first friend in Roosevelt Gardens. There was another girl who lived across the hall from her, Rosie, I don't remember her last name, she was also Puerto Rican. So, the three of us basically grew up together, but Rosie, she kind of started hanging out with a different crowd, so I think by 11 or 12 we weren't hanging out any more, it was only Leda and me. But she was my - - when I think of Roosevelt Garden I think of Leda.

BP: Yes, right. Did you grow up speaking Spanish?

MT: When my siblings came yes, but my parents did not teach me Spanish because they did not want me to go through what they had to go through living in America, so my Spanish is very broken up and you know, kind of Anglicized [Laughs]. But - -

BP: Spanglish? [Laughter]

MT: Spanglish, I am the queen of Spanglish [Laughs]. But I was forced to learn because my parents - - because my siblings came and I had to communicate with them because they didn't know English, so in order for us to communicate I had to try to speak Spanish, they would try to speak English - -

BP: I want to get back to kind of your coming of age experiences, your personal experiences in the Bronx in the 80's, I think this is very important - - a very important historical subject to talk about; the experience of Caribbean migration which usually, you know, as we were talking about earlier, happened in shifts - - parents came before children, sometimes siblings came to find that they had new siblings; so what was your experience like meeting your siblings - - meeting your siblings for the first time when they came to Honduras. Did they all - - and, did they come in shifts?

MT: They did, yes. It was first my sister Lily. Well actually, my sister Sandra was here already, she came up with my mother, so she was already here, my older sister. And my brother, my oldest brother, James the one who passed on when I was seventeen, he was - - we call it "embacado," which means he had a job on a boat and you know, when - - in Honduras when people say oh, you know "He's - - esta embacado," that means that he got a good job on a boat. And - -

BP: What kind of work did he do on the boat?

MT: Honestly I don't know. He was always a good cook, I'm assuming cooking because he's always managed to find a job with food, and so I'll make a big assumption and say probably cooking.

BP: This is James?

MT: James yes.

BP: Embarcado. E - M - B - A - R - C - A - D - O?

MT: E - M - B - A - R - K - A - D - O. Embarkado - - or is it C? You were probably right C yes.

[Laughs]

BP: OK so he was embarcado when your parents came over?

MT: Right but he came here on his own. Then my sister Lily came.

BP: Which sister was already here?

MT: Sandra was already here. Lily came and she was maybe thirteen or fourteen when she came. And then my two brothers came, Stephen and Michael, they came together - - they came maybe a year or two years after Lily came. And my oldest brother Bobby, he's actually only my father's son. My father had him before he met my mom. He came to New York when we were still living on Davidson Avenue but he didn't like New York so he went back to Honduras, and he's been living there since. So he stayed, but the rest of them came up.

BP: What was your experience, your personal memories of number one; meeting these siblings, and number two; getting to know them and forming a family unit with them as their younger sibling you know, who's the American.

MT: [Laughs] Right, yes. I can remember visiting them once before they came up, in Honduras. I remember visiting them once before they came up and you know, it was good - - of course we were younger, it was pretty good. I look back and I notice tensions because my siblings aren't my father's children. So, their father really didn't - - their father really wasn't a part of their lives and now when I look back I can sense some jealousy from their part - - understandably so.

BP: So your mother had children with another man?

MT: With a previous - - from a previous marriage.

BP: Are you the only child between your - -

MT: Between my parents yes I am.

BP: Do those siblings have the same father?

MT: Yes they all have the same father.

BP: Was he Garifuna or - -

MT: He was Garifuna yes. He was Garifuna.

BP: More Mestizo?

MT: No, he was Garifuna. As a matter of fact he's um, very, very big person - - a very important person in the Garifuna community in Los Angeles. So he's very well known - - very important. He's one of the people pushing for the Garifuna - - for the dialect to be considered a language.

BP: What is his - - can you share, would you be comfortable sharing his name?

MT: James. Yes, he's got my brothers - - my brother has his name.

BP: James Casebes?

MT: Castille.

BP: Castille.

MT: Yes. My mom's maiden name is Gutieres.

BP: Gutieres alright. Is there a Garifuna community - - are they spread out all throughout the United States or are they mostly in Los Angeles and New York City?

MT: Well I know that there's a big chunk here in the South Bronx.

BP: Right

MT: That is a definite. I went to New Orleans two years ago and met two Garifuna women there in a hotel. I heard them speaking and I'm like "Are you two from Honduras?" and they're like "Yes how'd you know?" and I said "Oh I know my people!" [Laughter] And of course they asked me "Are you Garifuna?" and I said "Well my mother is but I don't speak the language."

So that was - - it was weird finding them in New Orleans, you know of all places and I mentioned it to my dad and my dad told me there's an airport - - I'm sorry there's a flight that leaves, a connecting flight between Honduras and New Orleans which is why there may be so many Hondurans in New Orleans.

BP: How did the language barrier between you and your sibling's factor into the relationships that you were able to form with them? Because you didn't speak Spanish and they didn't speak English - -

MT: I think with my siblings they were in a situation where they forced to learn English. So, they were still relatively young, so we used to play, you know I remember wrestling with my brother on the bed and I remember my dad coming in and saying "Stop," you know, "you two better stop." And he'd walk out and we'd keep wrestling, we'd wrestle on his bed. When I was a child I don't remember much conflict. My brother Mikey was very, very - - he wasn't very

social. And he didn't do well in school because he was lazy, so it's not like he couldn't do well, he just didn't want to do well. And I remember him coming in and staying in the bedroom and not really coming out unless my mother made him stay out to eat - - but if he could he would take the food to his bedroom. So he and I never really - - we didn't really have a relationship. So I can - - I can remember the tension between us. And as a matter of fact when we were moving out of the apartment, when my dad and I moved out of this apartment everyone had already left and when my dad and myself left the apartment, we were cleaning up and my father found a journal my brother had when he was in high school and in the journal he wrote down how much he hated me you know, so it was like wow you know [Laughs]. It's that serious huh? [Laughs] I didn't know it was that bad - - but he wrote down in his journal "I really hate her - - I can't stand her - - why is she here?" So forth and so on. So you know, I read it and at first of course I was hurt because he's my big brother and of course he's god because he was big my brother but just in retrospect I can understand why he might have hated me, it may have been through jealousy, understandably so. I know my siblings tried to maintain communication with their father and their father really wasn't that much into them as my father was into me - - and so, also I'm the American, and my mother would take me to Honduras and you know "She's an American citizen," you know brag about that so forth and so on - - so I'm sure that may have caused some tension in the household with my father being there and being the only United States citizen in the household.

BP: Are you OK to keep going, do you need to take a break or anything?

MT: I mean we can stop for a second if I can just get a drink of water.

BP: So let's talk a little bit about life in the Roosevelt Gardens. What would you - - what would kids do to play?

MT: Double Dutch, tag.

BP: Do you remember any of the Double Dutch songs?

MT: [Laughs] Let me see - - there was this one game we played with partners and it was a competition between - - four people had to play this game, this one Double Dutch game, and it would start with one person jumping in: ten, ten, ten, ten, ten, ten, and then it would go up to 20, 30, 40, when the next person jumped in. So the first person jumps in ten, ten, ten, ten, then the second person 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90 - - [Sings]One boppity bop, two boppity bop, three boppity bop. So it was a competition between the two groups and the group that had the most boppity bops [Laughs] would win.

BP: Together as a team.

MT: Together as a team. And each person had three chances. Each person on the team has three chances to get as many boppity bops as they can get jumping Double Dutch.

BP: Now would the women - - I'm assuming this is played by girls - -

MT: Yes.

BP: All girls.

MT: All girls yes. [Laughs]

BP: Would the girls who were swinging the ropes, would they be on the other team?

MT: Yes.

BP: So they're swinging the rope for the team that they're competing on.

MT: Exactly yes. Exactly, exactly.

BP: Was there any incentive for them to try to trip you up?

MT: Oh no. No, no, no, never. It was never even a thought. You just turn the ropes for them and you know, it was never even a thought.

BP: So, what was the highest number of boppity bops?

MT: [Laughs] I'm a good Double Dutcher. [Laughs]

BP: You don't remember - -

MT: I don't remember - - I remember hitting the 100's. And Leda was an excellent - - I'm good but she was better. So we made a good team, she actually taught me how jump Double Dutch. So we'd get well into the 100's with her, well into the 200's you know.

BP: Wow. Now in Roosevelt Gardens there were park spaces within the apartment complexes?

MT: Yes. There's - - this whole thing here [Points]

BP: In the center, was all parks and playgrounds?

MT: Well it was a big courtyard, so a lot of trees, grass, and everything and this point right here would be where people would walk to get to all the buildings.

BP: It sounds like Stevenson Commons where my grandmother lived.

MT: Oh yes?

BP: Roosevelt yes.

MT: Oh OK, I've only seen it from the outside, I've never seen its inside. So you have, you can walk all around here [Points] but then you have all these trees and little entrances you know going inside of the trees, little walk ways I should say.

BP: Is that mostly where you spent your time as a child playing with your friends?

MT: Yes. And I had to be where my mother could see me - I couldn't be all the way over here [Points] because my mother couldn't see me with all the trees. So I had to be -- I couldn't go any further than let's say right here [Points] because my mother had to still see me.

BP: So Double Dutch, tag, what else?

MT: Hanging out on the bench and just talking; we used to eat pizza a lot. We used to go to 170th St and buy pizza and split the pizza, split the slice in half - - this was when pizza was a dollar. So some days I didn't have money and some days she didn't have money. So, if I had dollar we'd buy a slice and we'd ask the guy to split it in half.

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

BP: Yes, so a lot of half slices.

MT: Yes and during the summers we would go to Taft High School - - was it Taft? - To get free lunches.

BP: When were you allowed to venture beyond the gaze of your mother from the window?

MT: Never. [Laughs] [Crosstalk]

BP: Well how did you get pizza?

MT: Oh that's true. I would tell her, I would yell out the window "Mom, I'm going to get pizza." "OK," so it wasn't - - I mean I wouldn't sneak out, I would yell to mom from the third floor that I was going to get pizza and she would time me to make sure I'd be back. Maybe I'm exaggerating by saying never - - of course when I was older I was allowed to venture out and I was allowed to be outside, but my mother always preferred that I was where she could see me. When my niece moved in with us, my brother passed away, he had a daughter, my niece Jamie, so she moved in with us my mother took custody of her, my mother was her main guardian when

my brother passed away. She was - - so very young, and into going out and jumping and you know hanging out or whatever and I knew the area had changed, so - -

BP: What year was this?

MT: This was '90 - -? When did I graduate from high school - - '93. So this must have been '91 or '92. Yes. '91 or '92. So, I would stay outside with her.

BP: I want to get into this, when your niece moves in, in the 90's and I want to revisit the statement about how the area had changed, but if we could stay in kind of your coming of age.

MT: OK, alright.

BP: So, you know, did your friend and other girls that you would spend time with, did they - - did they have the same, did their mothers, was there the same kind of diligence - - vigilance, in terms of kind of policing or watching over the activities, did adults have that present among children in your coming of age?

MT: I know with Leda's family yes. I know her parents were as strict as my parents, and because our families were friends, you know they used to tell on us: "Oh I saw Mercy doing this and that," and "I saw Leda," and you know, we'd get mad but, it was - - our homes were like our second homes to each other. Now, in terms of how it was with the other families, I'd say, I think yes - - I can remember instances of adults in the neighborhood saying certain things to the children. Like if a child may have run across the grass and adult may something you know "What are you doing?" You know, but we also had security guards as well. And the security guards were there to make sure all the rules were followed. So, even though the adults were there hanging out outside, we also had the security guards. And also there were a lot of Puerto Ricans there and my best friend there in the complex was Puerto Rican but there still was that

division between the Puerto Ricans and the blacks in the complex. So there was a definite dislike between both groups. And what's beautiful about the relationship I had with Leda was that although I was black and she was Puerto Rican we didn't see that. You know, we just saw each other as Double Dutch partners you know, pizza sharer. And we would always hang out and she lived above me, so sometimes when she wanted to get my attention - - her room was right above mine as well, so she would put something on a piece of rope you know [Laughs] and like bang the rock or whatever it was on the window to catch my attention [Laughs] so I was, you know I would put my head out and look up and you know we yell back at each other - - but that's how it was between us, but there was still a definite division between both groups. As a matter of fact I'm remembering a story now when I was younger - - this is before I knew how to jump Double Dutch - - my mother was outside with me, I don't remember how old I was, I must have been maybe eight or nine - - so my mother was sitting outside on a bench, my mother used crochet a lot, so she was sitting outside on the bench doing her crochet and I was you know, looking for people to play with. So I saw a group of girls, Puerto Rican girls, you know jumping Double Dutch and I wanted to - - I didn't know how to jump but I wanted to play just so I could learn because I was determined to know how to jump Double Dutch. And they were all Puerto Rican. There was - - as I was approaching them, one of them - - well maybe all of them - - were yelling at a very dark girl and they said something like "You stupid black bitch," you know and "Yes you're as dark as a hefty bag." And I mean, just really harsh insults referring to how dark she was and referring to her being black. And she yelled back "Well fuck you too, I don't need to play with you," and she walked away and so you know, I witnessed that and you know, it didn't click in. So they knew that that was my mother sitting outside and my mother observed it,

so I walked over anyway and asked them to play and I think they said yes because my mother was there. And my mother said “No, you’re not going to play with them.” And the girls said “No, no, she can play with us.” And then my mother started speaking to them in Spanish and told them you know, “The way you spoke to that girl was wrong and how dare you people,” and you know, my mother like, completely scolded them and their thing was, well “We weren’t talking to your daughter, we were talking to her.” And mother told them “Well it doesn’t matter. The way you spoke to her is, was completely uncalled for and I don’t want my daughter anywhere near you people.” And my mother took me for ice cream afterwards [Laughs] because upset at mother you know. Here were some girls that were a little older than I was, you know they were eleven or twelve, you know and they’re letting me play with them, and of course I wanted to play with them, because - - and of course they said yes, but in retrospect I’m thinking they only were letting me play because maybe my mother was there. And I was mad at my mother for not allowing me to play with them. But of course I knew what mom was talking about; when I got older I knew why, why mom hadn’t let me play with them. And yes, they were surprised when she started talking to them in Spanish and telling them that you know, “That’s wrong the way you spoke to that girl,” and “I don’t want my daughter anywhere near you people” whatever, whatever, and their excuse was “Well we weren’t talking to her we were talking, we weren’t talking to your daughter we were talking to her, we weren’t talking to your daughter.” So yes, like I said there was, you know that’s a good example of the division there was between the Puerto Ricans in the neighborhood and the black people.

BP: Now did your parents socialize with mostly friendly Puerto Rican families like the girl that lived upstairs or - -

MT: Yes.

BP: - - did they socialize also with other African American families from the South, or other Caribbean?

MT: My family didn't really socialize with many people there. The only families they socialized with there were the two other Honduran families who lived in Roosevelt Gardens.

BP: Do you remember their names?

MT: The last name of the West Indian Honduran family is Bennett, B - E - N - N - E - T - T, and they had a daughter named Iula, and they had another daughter who used to baby-sit me but I cannot remember her name right now. She recently passed away. And a son named Contrado, and another son named - - what's his name - - I don't remember the other son's name. And they also had another son who looked like he was the oldest one, but I don't remember his name either, he looked a little disabled as a matter of fact.

BP: What - - that's a very powerful anecdote about the tensions between groups. What did boys do, how did boys play? If girls played Double Dutch and tag, what were boys doing at that time in Roosevelt Gardens?

MT: Boys played this game called "Slugs" - -

BP: Skelly?

MT: Skelly? What is it?

BP: It's on the concrete and there's little boxes and you use a bottle cap and you kind of - -

MT: Oh no, no, no. It's a handball game and I don't - - I can't recall the name of it but they would go out side and play it on the wall of Roosevelt, outside, on the outside wall of Roosevelt Gardens - - I don't - - I think it's called Slugs, I think - - but I may be wrong. And what they

would do it, there would be a group of guys lined up and they would play - - it was a handball game, so they were playing handball and whenever they would miss, the person at the end would go to the other side, so they would keep doing this.

BP: OK.

MT: So I know they played that, and we also had parks near Taft High School and also near Yankee Stadium, basketball courts, so a lot of them would go to these parks to play basketball. And a lot of them would hang out as well. We'd do a lot of hanging out, just sitting on the benches, sitting outside, just kicking it, and talking and watching people walk by. So there was a lot of that going on at Roosevelt Gardens.

BP: What was the free lunch program like in the summer? What was - - that was something that all the neighborhood kids could access?

MT: Yes. Typical cafeteria food, nothing special. But you know, for us it was like we were going to eat [Laughs] you know? And we were able to go because Leda's older sister used to take us, so that's how we managed to get out of the complex [Laughs]. [Crosstalk] So we'd shower up, get dressed, you know put on our best summer clothes and go to get free lunch.

BP: At Taft?

MT: It was - - I think it was Taft.

BP: Now would this be something that a lot of the kids in the neighborhood would do?

MT: Kids in the neighborhood would definitely go, yes.

BP: Did you ever venture, how far would you venture outside the Bronx as a kid? Let's just say in the summer time, any trips ever to Coney Island, or to City Island - - I mean to Orchard Beach or anything like that?

MT: Yes, when we were older we went to Orchard Beach, but as a kid, not really; our summers were in Roosevelt Gardens. And sometimes Leda would go to Puerto Rico and I would go to Honduras with my mother, but we never took the train to go anywhere, we were always in the neighborhood, so I mean sometimes we would maybe walk to 161st and then come back you know, but we'd just walk and talk and then come back to Roosevelt Gardens. And we'd sometimes go to the parks as well, the neighboring parks – Crotona and Claremont Park, but we never ventured out, outside of the block.

BP: Do you have any memories of what would now be called “Hip Hop Culture” developing in the Bronx in the early 1980's? And when I say what would now be classified as hip hop culture: people dancing in the street, you know breaking, writers, graffiti artists, or the presence of the you know, the early stages of hip hop music - - was that culture a noticeable part of the every day life in the Bronx during your childhood in, I guess the late 80's you know '85, '86, '87 - -

MT: OK. The other Honduran family, one of the two other Honduran families I knew of living in Roosevelt Gardens - - Contrado is, well was a DJ during that time. So he's my brother's age, which means that he was DJing - -

BP: Which brother?

MT: He's Stephen's age. So which means that he was DJing in his mid to late teens. And my brother Mikey was into DJing as well, so he purchased a lot of, he was the one who wrote the little journal entry, he purchased a lot of the hip hop music and had two turn tables - - We had all the equipment, like the complete DJ equipment and Contrado also had the complete DJ equipment and sometimes he'd come over to our house and use our equipment because our equipment was better. [Laughs] And of course, my siblings came to America wanting to be

American; so this is what was coming up, this is what was so popular, so they definitely you know, that question would be great to ask my brothers, especially Mikey because they were really absorbing the culture and since this is what is popular, this is what they saw other black kids doing, this is what they wanted to be a part of. And also, there is once again that division. My mom was very weird because although she was not proud of her Garifuna culture and there were certain parts of her blackness she wasn't proud of, she would say that she was black. So, she didn't necessarily appreciate the black music being played in the household. Well of course, it's not like she'd tell us "I don't want that black nonsense being played in the house." She'd never said anything like that, but it wasn't anything that was particularly encouraged or what should I say - - wasn't like - - I don't know how to explain but it wasn't anything that we can say we can be proud of knowing about or that we can say we know so much about, or that we - - do you understand? [Laughs]

BP: Yes.

MT: OK good, as long as you understand. [Laughter]

BP: No, I understand. So, you know was it - - so it was kind of big more among boys than it was girls?

MT: Oh yes. Definitely, it was definitely bigger among boys than among girls. Definitely. And I knew some people would do graffiti - - I can't recall their names, their tag names, but you know sometimes I walk around and I see their tag names and I'm like "Oh that's," you know, and also in high school I used to dance a lot. Not formal training, but I had a friend named Danny. We went to elementary school together, we went to Holy Spirit together and there was a group of us who were really good dancers, so we always used to dance and whenever we'd meet

up in high school - - he went to Mount St. Michaels which is, you know the high school up the street from ours, so whenever we'd - - I'd go to his dances, we would dance and we'd battle each other [Laughs] on the dance floor and have little circles and usually that would be down with either hip hop music or house music.

BP: What would you wear to these dances?

MT: Baggy jeans - -

BP: This was in the - - Late 80's.

MT: Late 80's right, late 80's, early 90's. Baggy jeans, new sneakers, you know big shirt - - never anything tight really, that wasn't the style at that time. Timberlands, I had a Car Heart jacket also, and I had a goose down coat - - so yes, that's what I would wear, those are the outfits I would wear.

BP: What was some of the music that you liked the most during this time? Do you - - that would define this era or period in your life, what would be some of the music?

MT: Hip hop definitely. I got more into hip hop in the eighth grade, that was eighth grade, ninth grade - - And I guess my brother would buy the latest records, Mikey would buy the latest records because he had this great DJ equipment system going on in his small bedroom [Laughs] So he'd have the latest things, but I think I got more into it in the seventh, eighth grade. And you know, of course into high school and - - [Inaudible]

BP: You went to Catholic school?

MT: All my life.

BP: Why didn't your parents send you to public school?

MT: I don't know. All my siblings went to public school, interestingly enough, but my - - well I kind of know - - my mother had a very bad situation with her ex-husband, with her ex-husband not really stepping up to the plate and taking on his responsibility as a father, so really he never really financially helped out in any way, so all of them were basically supported by my dad. So my dad - - my dad is the real father figure that my siblings know, and because of this situation that she had with her ex-husband, it think she was fearful of that happening again with my father, so she had said - - I heard her say this several times, how I have to take advantage of my father while he's still around, and one of the things would be to put me in Catholic school because that means he would have to put out money for my education. And that's why I went to Catholic school, and when it came to high school, it was the same thing as well, the same excuse, but I was getting older, my mother knew how I was and was learning about me, and she knew that I would not survive in a public school.

BP: Why not?

MT: Because I'm very you know, flighty and very out there, and not - - I need structure for me to be disciplined and be - - and do what I have to do, and she knew this. So of course, if I'm in a public school I'm going to do what I want to do, you know I'm not going to do what I have to do! [Laughs] And my mother knew this about me and interestingly enough, I didn't - - now I see this in me, but she knew this in me back then, so my aunt works for the Board of Ed, or the Department of Education and my aunt was pushing my father to put me in a public school, so of course my father wanted to save money and put me in a public school, and use my aunts advice, my mom was like "No we're going to put you on paper, you're going to Catholic school." and so forth and so on, and that's why I ended up in private school.

BP: What were your experiences like at Catholic schools in the Bronx? Elementary and Cardinal Spellman?

MT: Well, I went to a very, very small elementary school, first to eighth grade, but one class per grade level, and each class had about 25 students. I don't know if it's still like that today - - I know the school still exists, but I don't know if it's still that small. So many of the people I graduated with are people I knew from first grade, second grade, we all started out in the first grade and kept going on to each grade together. Now of course, some of them, some people moved in, came in, came out, so forth and so on, but I do have memories of many of my - - of my friends starting out in the first grade: with Ms. Williams and graduating from the eighth grade with Ms. Hescador.

BP: Was the student body predominately black African American and Afro Caribbean? Or was it mixed with Puerto Rican?

MT: Puerto Rican and blacks, black Americans.

BP: Pretty even mix?

MT: Yes. Pretty much, and some Dominican's, and some Afro Caribbean's, I can say but mostly Puerto Rican and black.

BP: Any white children?

MT: No - - I never - - None of us were white. I never - - What's so funny is that when I went to Spellman, my first day at Spellman, I was like "Look at all the white people." I mean it was amazing and I came home - - and I remember this, I came after the first day at Spellman and my mother was in the kitchen cooking food for me, "Oh honey, how was your first day at high school?" my first response was: "Mom, there's a lot of white people in that school." [Laughs]

And I just didn't know how I'd be able to really focus and do what I have to do in the school because my classmates were white and I never - - I wasn't used to that, I was used to the teacher being white but not my classmates being white.

BP: So your teachers at Holy Spirit were white?

MT: Most of them were white. Ms. Williams was black, Ms. Henry: black, third grade teacher - - I had seven teachers in the third grade so - - Yes. One - - Ms. Angoline died so they just kept hiring substitute teachers so we won't count that. [Laughs]

BP: So how would you describe your educational experience? Did you have a positive educational experience at Holy Sprit School? Were you a good student, did you struggle, you know, how did it go for you in elementary school?

MT: It was very good; I wouldn't trade that for the world. I mean we were all very close; this was like a second family because we all knew each other so well, because we all spent so much time with each other.

BP: Did any of your classmates come from Roosevelt Gardens as well?

MT: No, no. I was the only one who came from Roosevelt Gardens. I was actually, I came the furthest, they all lived in the area.

BP: Where is Holy Spirit School?

MT: It's on University Avenue. It's down the street from Bronx Community College. They all lived in that area and I was the only one who came from really far away.

BP: How did you get here?

MT: I was in a day care center that was not far from Holy Spirit, so the day care center used to pick up students from Holy Spirit School, that was - - I remember our day care teacher used to go

to three different schools and pick up students from each school and then take us to the day care center. So Holy Spirit School was on the route, so that's how I ended up in Holy Sprit School.

BP: This is a private day care center?

MT: No, no, no. No, my mother paid \$6 a week.

BP: \$6 a week. So it was subsidized by a city agency?

MT: I don't know how it worked; I just remember seeing her hand a five and a dollar bill.

BP: What was the name of the day care center?

MT: I don't remember but it's where Job Corps - - its right around the corner from Job Corps - - you know where - -?

BP: No. Yes where is Job Corps?

MT: Job Corps is right off of University Avenue. There's a street that kind of curves and goes down a hill and there's some steps there at the end of the hill and the steps goes into Roberto Clemente School, so the day care center is right before you hit those steps.

BP: OK.

MT: And it's a senior citizens home, but two floors of it - -

BP: Were a day care center.

MT: Right.

BP: I want to speak a little bit about the 90's. Now you had mentioned when your niece came to visit that the area had changed, so I'm curious as to - - and how did your brother pass away?

MT: Suicide.

BP: This was James?

MT: Yes. James - - well Jamie, his name was Jamie as well which is spelt Jamie, and his daughters name is Jamie.

BP: Right. Was there ever any explanation for the suicide or - - ?

MT: Well, he couldn't handle his wife not taking his shit any more basically, so his wife left him and that's something that he couldn't really handle. My brother was a typical Machismo Latin man who you know, he needed to be in control. And this was a situation where he lost control and as a result, he killed his wife and he killed himself; and Jamie was in the household. They lived on Jackson Avenue and Jamie was in the house, she was in the living room part of the house and the incident happened in the kitchen area of the house. What my brother did, he nailed the door shut so that my niece wouldn't come out and you know, he did what he did and my niece was five or six years old at the time and the neighbors heard gun shots - - and you know, with my niece yelling out she heard gun shots so she yelled out the window, and the neighbors called the cops and the cops banged the door down, tore the door down and managed to take Jamie out without seeing the carnage.

BP: Then she came to live with your family?

MT: Right. Soon after that she came to live with us.

BP: Now, you said the neighborhood had changed. How did it change?

MT: I didn't see girls jumping Double Dutch anymore. I saw little girls just hanging out, wearing little clothes and going after boys - - I didn't see children really enjoying being young, really enjoying doing the things I did and Leda did, what we did when we were younger. That's what I mean by the neighborhood changing, the neighborhood changes - - since I didn't see that, I didn't see what I was used to anymore, Jamie came in and so I looked at the neighborhood and

I'm like wow, Jamie won't be experiencing the innocence I experienced, so I would sit outside with her every time she would go outside, just to make sure everything was cool.

BP: Was there a change also in the relationship between adults and children at this time? I mean adults in the community and children, was there still kind of a diligence - - vigilance - - was there still an adult presence in young peoples lives now that you know, in Jamie's generation of living in - -

MT: Well, the security guards were still there, but - -

BP: I guess what I'm asking is did you have mothers watching their kids from windows?

MT: Not - - not really. Not as much as - - No. No because there was a lack of respect for the neighborhood. We used to take care of the neighborhood.

BP: How so?

MT: Well, we didn't run across the grass or you know? We wouldn't tag up areas in a neighborhood; the laundry mat was always clean and always well kept. But when Jamie movie in, things had changed. It wasn't as - - the neighborhood wasn't as on point I should say as it was when I was growing up. So with all these changes and you know, with the children - - not seeing the children play as much - - and seeing girls that I saw as babies grow up and or making out with boys in the hallways or outside so everyone can see - - you know that was a little weird, that was a little different.

BP: How was the area no longer on point? What characterized kind of the physical appearance of the neighborhood that was different from when you were a child?

MT: There weren't as many working class people moving in - there were a lot of welfare recipients moving in, and there were also people on welfare in the neighborhood, but I guess

working class people just couldn't afford to live there, I guess they figured you know I could pay mortgage with this and they - - many of them moved out and many more people on welfare moved in because they would get a big chunk from Section Eight because they were on welfare. So in that instance, I can see - - I saw the difference. There were a lot of people hanging out, a lot of adults hanging out outside in the middle of the day, not necessarily doing much - - I - - My father told me that he saw our next door neighbor sniffing coke you know - - changes like that.

BP: When you were younger girls wouldn't make out with boys in the - -?

MT: Oh no. No.

BP: OK. Did drugs influence kind of the social fabric of the area in a profound way in the 90's, particularly crack, was that a noticeable social factor in Roosevelt Garden?

MT: There was a vitamin store right around the corner from Roosevelt Gardens.

BP: Why did you insinuate/air-quote?

MT: Because there was no vitamin store [Laughs]. It was a front. And this vitamin store wasn't always there. That vitamin store got there I think maybe in the early 90's, but it was a front. And everyone knew it was a front, and we didn't understand why, we all knew it was a front and it was still existing. So, this area - - the street here really became - - [Points] This is 171st St. and then you have the main street which is 170th St, which is a shopping district - - but this street here became very, very hot. And it got to the point where my mother told me "Don't walk down the street" If - - you know whenever I would go to 170th, even as an older teenager, you know: "Now don't go walking down 171st St." You know, she'd always tell me that, just because it was very hot, and this area was known for drugs. It was very known for - - you know a lot of drugs - - and you have the vitamin store there which wasn't really a vitamin store and everyone

knew it wasn't a vitamin store and it was basically a front. So did this influence how things changed here? [Taps table] I guess time - - everything changes everywhere, so I guess this was just going along with the time, just going along with the changes that were occurring everywhere.

BP: Did Jamie move with you and your father to Co-Op City?

MT: No because my mom passed away and she moved to California where my sister was, Sandra, and then from California she moved to Arizona where Stephen lives, so she's still there now. And she's thinking about moving back to New York - - She's 19.

BP: So now you live in Co-Op City - - you moved from Roosevelt Gardens to Co-Op City, with your father?

MT: Yes, my dad.

BP: And what's the community like there?

MT: It's very, very mixed: black, black West Indian, Jewish, Puerto Rican - - very mixed. Of course at first that weird for me as well, living in the Bronx and having my next door neighbor be Jewish [Laughs] but just going back to - - going into Spellman the first day, that was weird having my classmates be white, but its very, very, very mixed. And what's interesting is that when we were moving out of Roosevelt Gardens the people there said "Oh you're moving out of the ghetto, you're finally moving up." But the people in Co-Op City feel like it's going down, they don't see this sense of moving up anymore, they see it as becoming ghettoized.

BP: Why?

MT: Well, maybe because once again, it's not like what it used to be, you know? But we thought we were moving up. And yes, we did move up. And of course the people there say "Oh

you're leaving us in the ghetto, you're going - - you know you're going to where the rich people are." But what's funny is the people in Co-Op City don't really see themselves that much up there.

BP: What happened to your friend - -

MT: Leda?

BP: Leda.

MT: You know what's funny I've been trying to get a hold of her because I know she was a huge Prince fan and I have an extra Prince ticket [Laughs] So I have, I found a phone number of hers and it's not working - - so I've been looking for her. We've always - - our relationship is weird like that because since we moved out of Roosevelt Gardens we'll stay in touch but then we won't stay in touch and then we'll touch base with each other again.

BP: Did she stay in Roosevelt Gardens with her family?

MT: No. She moved out with her boyfriend. He's probably her husband by now, they were engaged and everything. So, they moved to Queens and she was a funeral director for a long time, this was something that she's always wanted to be - - Yes I know it's weird right? [Laughs] I mean she didn't know the word "funeral director" or "mortician" she just knew she wanted to work with dead bodies when we were children. And my mother always goes "You're too crazy to do that! Become a teacher, why do you want to do that?" So, when I went to NYU she worked at a funeral home in the east village so I lived on campus and whenever I had free time I would go and visit her. I'd peak in and whenever I saw people I knew there was a wake, so I wouldn't go in, but whenever I didn't see anyone there I knew it would be OK for me to go in and hang out with her. So whenever she'd be there fixing a body, you know I'd be there hanging

out with her. You know we'd talk, whatever. But she's not doing that anymore, now she's an elementary school teacher now. [Laughs] So we kind of lost touch with each other, but I'm trying to find her now, that's one of my projects.

BP: I have two more questions. What was the climate in Spellman and even in Co-Op City with being in a multi-racial you know, of black, white, in particular, and Latino, what was that environment like socially? Did black kids only hang out with black kids?

MT: Yes. [Crosstalk] Well black kids hung out with the Puerto Rican kids and the white kids hung out with the white kids. So you went to the cafeteria and the black and Puerto Rican kids were on the right side of the cafeteria and the white kids were on the left side of the cafeteria. And you know, the Asian kids somehow find themselves in the middle somewhere you know [Laughs]. But there was definitely a division there as well.

BP: Did you develop relationships with any white peers?

MT: No. No I didn't. I developed relationships with my black peers and with my Latin peers, but not with any of the white people. I just had my high school reunion in October, my ten year high school reunion - - so yes, none with the white people, you know we - - I guess we didn't find a reason to - I guess there wasn't a need for us to really connect, to really mesh, so we just never did. And the few who did would be made fun of, like oh "She's acting white." Or "He's acting white." Or "She's trying act black, she's trying to be down." So of course they would be made fun of. So even if any of us wanted to, you know, we really didn't.

BP: Is it the same in Co-Op City? Is it the same kind of distance between groups?

MT: Well, I don't really see many people hanging out outside in Co-Op City, so I can't really answer that and I don't really know people in Co-Op City so that - - I can't really talk about the

culture of Co-Op City I don't really know much about it, I'm not really - - I live there but I'm not really a part of it.

BP: My last question I guess is just how has being, as you said in the e-mail, a Bronx girl your whole life, how did that shape your view of the world and your understanding of who you are?

MT: Well, I'm glad that I grew up in an urban, very urban neighborhood, in an area where people - - I did come from a working - - well my dad was the only one who was working for most of my life because my mother stopped working very early, very early in my life - - but just with the struggles that we had. I know they are not typical struggles that maybe someone in Co-Op City would experience, someone growing up in Co-Op City would experience, like for instance coming up with enough money to pay the rent, or searching all over the house looking for change just to buy meat for dinner that night. You know? Little things like that I know that those are things - - someone growing up in Co-Op City I don't think - - maybe - - but I don't see the connection there and there's more - - that experience is more connected to where I grew up. And the more I learn about Bronx history the more I love living here, the more I love being a part of the Bronx. And also, with all these negative assumptions and stereotypes out there on the Bronx, it's always great to be the person that goes against it. Whenever I leave New York City and people find out I'm from the Bronx and they're like "No." They get surprised and it's like listen, [Laughs] what's the problem you know? So that's always a good thing as well because I feel like I, in many ways, kill those stereotypes and kill the negativity because of who I am and because of what I have accomplished and because of what I've become and what I will become. So - - I hope that answers your question. [Laughs]

BP: It does, absolutely. Thank you so much, this is outstanding.

Interviewee: Mercy Tullis

Interviewer: Brian Purnell

July 2, 2004

MT: [Laughs]

[END OF INTERVIEW]