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## Wade, Chrystal

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Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison,  
Patricia Wright, and Daniel

Interviewee: Chrystal Wade  
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Dr. Mark Naison (MN): This is the sixty-third interview for the Bronx African-American History Project. We're here with Chrystal Wade, a long time Bronx political activist and community organizer and educator and let's begin with the beginning. When did your family first move to the Bronx?

Chrystal Wade (CW): We moved to the Bronx when I was five years old. I'm now fifty-five. We moved to 532 East 157<sup>th</sup> Street and St. Ann's Avenue. We were the second blacks in the building. The first were the supers. I'm trying to think of their names. I'll come back to that. My first night was calm. The second night my father and my brother-in-law - - they had an altercation with some of the neighbors. [Coughs]

MN: Your father and your uncle?

CW: My father and my brother-in-law, my older sister's husband.

MN: Had an altercation on the block?

CW: With the neighbors because since we were the second blacks. The first blacks, which were the supers, the DeWitts, which had a family of about fourteen - - they were very fair so at first we didn't know that they were black [Laughs]. Anyway, my father and my brother-in law, they were stopped before they could get inside the building on the second day and unfortunately they had a fight with a number of gentlemen in the block and we were inside - - my mom and myself and my baby brother and my older sister. We

were in the apartment. I won't say we were afraid because we knew my father and brother wanted to fight so after a little while the police came and everybody looked all bruised and what I remember is that the family under us, which were Irish, they were the Henns. They came upstairs because they weren't involved with the fight and they calmed everybody down. And the Henns family had a son that was a priest and a daughter that was a nun so they kind of quelled everything and after that we didn't have any more problems on the block.

MN: What was the building you moved into? Was it a five-story walk-up?

CW: It was a five-story walk-up. We were the first building on the block. There was another building up the block, which was a building that had a court. Our building wasn't. We lived on the third floor and our neighbors were Irish and Italian. You know, it wasn't unfriendly to me being a kid. I got to play with most of the children in the building that were allowed to come out. Under me, the Henn family again, Laurie, she was my age and Danny was about two years older than I. I got to play with Laurie all the time so I got to taste some foods that my mom probably didn't prepare.

MN: Where did your family move to the Bronx from? Where were they living before?

CW: Well, they lived in Harlem. They lived in Harlem River Drive. They were the first occupants of that project. My father, he didn't like that kind of setting. He didn't like the fact that there were so many people on top of each other. He felt like he couldn't breathe so what he did is he came home one day and he said, "We're moving" and we moved to Detroit because I had an aunt and uncle who resided there and my uncle and aunt worked in *General Motors, Oldsmobile*. So my father got a job. I think we stayed there two weeks and we were back in New York because he didn't like being in Detroit. My father

was an Indian, American Indian, so he's kind of a wanderer. If he didn't like something it was easy for him to say, "let's go." He really didn't think of the consequences at the time. We were just - -

MN: Did your parents come originally from the South?

CW: My father came from Somerset, Kentucky.

MN: And your mother?

CW: My mother came from Sumter, South Carolina.

MN: And did they meet in New York City?

CW: No, they met in Roncove, Pennsylvania. In Uniontown, which my mom used to go there and visit when she was a kid. She married my father when she was thirteen.

MN: Wow [Laughter].

CW: Well, you know, let me share a little more since this is history so I want to be truthful. My parents are really my grandparents and they adopted me at five years old and their oldest child had me at - - she was almost eighteen. So, you know, to insure that I would have a good life and a structured family life like she had, they adopted me. So when I saw my parents, you know, these are my parents by law - -

MN: By law.

CW: - - and love. But my biological mother was in fact their oldest daughter.

MN: The neighborhood was a predominantly Irish-Italian neighborhood?

CW: Irish, Italian, Greek. There was another black family. I was on 157<sup>th</sup> Street and the other black family was on 155<sup>th</sup> Street and St. Ann's Avenue. That was the Smarts. That was Joseph and Wilma Smart's children. Wilma, which I spoke to yesterday, she and I,

we were in every grade together from kindergarten up until the seventh grade. Sixth grade.

MN: Did you go to public school?

CW: I went to P.S. 38, which is now a high school on St. Ann's Avenue.

MN: So you went to P.S. 38 until what grade?

CW: Until seventh.

MN: Was that school predominantly white when you were going there?

CW: Predominantly white, yes. There were three, um, two black families - myself, the Wades, and the Smarts. I don't remember anybody else and then we had other cultures there, which weren't many, being Hispanics, Xavier Rodriguez and Natividad Rodriguez. They weren't related. And we had Diane Vasquez. That was it.

MN: Were your parents church people?

CW: Yes, we attended the Metropolitan Baptist Church in Harlem on 128<sup>th</sup> Street.

MN: So you continued to go to church in Harlem?

CW: I used to take the 29 Bus, get off at 125<sup>th</sup> Street, and walk to my church for just three blocks on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

MN: When you were on St. Ann's Avenue, did you spend most of your time in the street or in the house would you say?

CW: Well, at that time the neighborhood was kind of different than it is today. We were allowed to go out and play after school. Of course, we had to do our homework. We were under supervision because when I got home my parents, they were at work but there was a lady, an Irish lady, that used to watch us until my father got home at five. As the neighborhood evolved more to being black, then, Ms. Geraldine Chambers moved in.

She was the second, um, third black person to move in, of West Indian descent. She lived on the fourth floor so she would watch us if our Irish neighbor didn't watch us.

MN: On that particular block, are the buildings that you grew up in still there or was that one of the blocks which went through that whole arson-abandonment cycle?

CW: No, our block unfortunately was a block that went through the arson. The thing that was so painful was that I had never seen a fire other than talking about the fire in a school. We would see a fire engine because there was a fire company near us. Then, one Sunday we went to church and when we came back home we found that our home had been burnt down. Our building, it acquired a great water loss so we had to move. Our mom had just bought new furniture. I'll never forget the big TV with the stereo inside and I used to play it to death. I had a record by *The Marvelettes*, "Watch out Mr. Postman." I played it until my father went crazy. He threatened to take out the cord if I played it one more time. It was devastating to me to come home and find that our home had been waterlogged.

MN: What year was that?

CW: Oh gosh. I think I was in the seventh grade. I don't remember the year exactly. That's when our neighborhood started to really change because my neighbors, they no longer wanted to live there because of fire. I think that was the primary reason - the fire. They didn't want to be involved in that so some moved to Connecticut and it's a funny thing because there was a family that had moved in next door to us, which were the Changs. And my father, at one time, he had worked for them so he learned how to speak Cantonese. So, wherever we moved, they moved and they could afford to move

anywhere but Mr. George liked the fact that his name was George and my father's name was George so they said the two Georges - - they stayed together until they died, actually.

MN: What was your elementary school education like? How do you remember the teachers? Were they strict? Were they responsive?

CW: I remember that they were caring, no nonsense. We had one black teacher in the whole school. Her name was Margaret Elcon. She taught me in the third grade. She was very instrumental in Wilma and I doing really well in school because at the time we were the only two black little girls in the school. She kind of followed us and there were other teachers though that I have to say that gave us great care and concern. I was a good reader but I remember that at one time I had a little difficulty with my math and one of my teachers, she spent a couple of afternoons helping me so that I could do better. And I had another teacher whose name is Mr. Zawinski and he was in the sixth grade. I had him in sixth grade and he always encouraged me to write more because he thought I was a good writer. So I have to say that when I was in the lower grades there that the education was good. I did well and the teachers were concerned and the classroom - - we were a little talkative but not on today's level. Nobody was out of place and of course if the teachers said they would call your mom, everybody would be up in arms because they didn't want that because the parents and the teachers had a good relationship. I know my mom, she had a good relationship with Ms. Con and Mr. Zawinski.

MN: Were your parents involved in the PTA at the school?

CW: Unfortunately, my mom and dad they were because my sister who is thirteen years older than I, she - - they were working towards, and at one point she went to Howardson, so they wanted to assure that she, you know, could go and continue her education.

MN: Were your parents, did they have high school educations?

CW: No, my father he came from a family of sixteen. They left the reservation when he was a little guy and they moved to Ohio and my mom, she didn't finish high school, not even grade school, but she was a good reader.

MN: I take it both you and your sister did well in school.

CW: Yes.

MN: Was this something that was encouraged at home or was it something that you picked up on your own?

CW: Well, when my mom came to New York she could only do domestic so what happened was she always told us about the times that she used to stand in front of 161<sup>st</sup> Street and Grand Concourse. She showed us a couple of spots where women would come out and pick out who they want to come - -

MN: So she was part of that shape-up. They used to call it the Bronx slave market.

CW: Yes.

MN: So your mother used to stand on the corner and wait to be picked up?

CW: My mother and my aunt, yes.

MN: And this was going on until how long?

CW: Well, until somebody told her that they had a job for her at the Radio City Hall cleaning offices and the Empire State Building, so she went and she started cleaning offices at the Empire State Building. Actually, I believe she was doing that when we moved to 157<sup>th</sup> Street. She no longer wanted to be out on the Grand Concourse getting chicken-bones to take home for her family to make dinner [Laughs]. My mother, she was a very intelligent person even though academically she hadn't acquired a piece of paper.



But, before she left this earth she had a high school diploma and some college. She did very well.

MN: Were the schools tracked by grades, you know, 6-1, 6-2, 6-3, 6-4?

CW: Yes, SP-1, SP-2.

MN: SP. Were you in the upper track most of the time?

CW: Well, I was looking at my report cards last night. I was kind of a B student. I wasn't an A, but I was a solid B in P.S. 38. I was a good student because it was expected of me. And my white classmates - - they didn't think of Wilma and I as being black. You know, it's a funny thing. I really didn't get into that until in the neighborhood after that first fight when we first moved there but like I was five. I didn't really get to know I was black until I moved out the neighborhood and came back to the Bronx and we went to P.S. 80, Moshulu Junior High School. My brother went first and then I went and that's when I got to understand my color as an issue and some of the teachers didn't want to teach me, one in particular because she was my math teacher as well as my homeroom teacher. She had grown up in the Moshulu area and her father was a prominent position and her mom was a schoolteacher and she felt put out that, quote unquote, the nigger was in her class. When I went home and I told my mother - - my mother was a person that I won't say that she believed everything that the teacher said, but when I went home and I told her that, she knew I was very upset so it had to have some truth in it. So, we sat with the Principal, Ms. Stalla, and my mom and the teacher and we discussed my behavior and what the teacher had said and, you know, she said she didn't tell me that, she didn't say that, which wasn't true so that was my ninth year and it was a very difficult time for me.

It changed my behavior and I became a nuisance in that class because I didn't like how she treated me.

MN: Had you moved to a different neighborhood in the Bronx at that time?

CW: When the fire came we did a couple of moves. We went to Long Island and then we went back to Manhattan and then they had finished - - my father got a new job and he worked at L.K. Iron Works and they were building buildings then. He got to build where we lived, which was Woodstock Terrace on 161<sup>st</sup> and Trinity. They also did Co-op City and a lot of other places on Fulton Terrace because on Saturdays when my mom didn't have a sitter he would take me with him and check to make sure everything was okay.

MN: Was he an iron worker?

CW: Yes.

MN: So he was a structure - - was he in a union?

CW: Yes, he was.

MN: So did he do that - -

CW: Well, like, the Indian thing? [Laughter] [Crosstalk] He used to talk about that. He says he wasn't that kind of Indian [Laughter]. My father was - - his dad was Irish and Indian and his mom was a black Indian if you want to say that. His father was actually your color and I used to think that - - who is this white man visiting us?, because my father is very fair too. The sixteen children that my grandparents had they were different shades. The first one was very black and then in between they were mocha-colored and then my dad was very fair and then another fair and then as they went down the spectrum got a little different. At the end, my last aunt, who is still alive, she was very dark. I always thought my grandfather was somebody that they let come visit [Laughter]. My

father, he had a good - - his two bosses were really good with him. One was Italian and one was Jewish. Somehow or another my father said he got tired of being in the Chinese laundry. He was walking down the street because Third Avenue - - that's all it was was Chinese laundries. And he liked Mr. George but he wanted to do - -

MN: Third Avenue in the Bronx?

CW: In the Bronx. He wanted to do something else so what he did was he said he just started walking on his lunch hour and he met Mr. Seagle and Mr. Weiss. Those two gentlemen and there was another one and they asked him, you know, was he looking for a job. He said, "Yeah." He was a truck driver. So that's how he got that job with them. He had that job until he got ill.

MN: And they were structural iron workers?

CW: Yes.

MN: So, they were builders?

CW: Yes, they were builders.

MN: So this was a time when there was this blue collar economy for men in truck driving, working in stores, doing construction stuff. Your father was always able to find something?

CW: Always, he was a very - - he's an Aries like me. He was very loquacious. He would give these stories.

MN: When we're talking about this, we're talking about the late 50s and the early 60s?

CW: In the early 60s.

MN: Your father got the job in the iron work in the early 60s?

CW: Yes, I'm trying to think of what year. [Crosstalk]. We moved in Woodstock, I think the building was built in 1964.

MN: Okay, so your family moved into Woodstock Terrace from St. Ann's?

CW: well, indirectly. We were in Harlem in a room waiting for it to be finished.

MN: Woodstock Terrace is a middle income development?

CW: Yes.

MN: Your family had to have a decent income to get in.

CW: Well, at the time my mom had taken a test to work at Manhattan State so she had to elevate herself.

MN: So, she was in a civil service job?

CW: Yes. She took a test.

MN: So, it was a two-income family. Woodstock Terrace, for those of you who don't know is right near the Forest Houses, it's on - -

CW: Right in front of McKinley. Originally, my father said that when the builders were building it, they decided, because it had all the same makings as the rest of the project in the back except that they decided to put boxes on the end to make terraces to give it a little difference. [Laughs] It's the truth. So, it kind of changed the look of the block and I guess you could say we were middle income.

MN: At that time you were going to junior high up in Moshulu Parkway. That was pretty far outside from Woodstock Terrace. Was this part of the school bussing? How did that happen that you ended up in Moshulu Junior High?

CW: Because I also had an older brother and when he got put there my mom wanted me to go too so we went to Weeks Avenue and she talked to the District Office and she, you

know, told them, "Listen, I want my kids together," so, unfortunately, they didn't take me on the bus. I had to take the D train. I had to do a little traveling on my own to get there but I got there and so I made the fourth black in that school.

MN: And your brother was the third?

CW: Yes.

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

CW: I went to Morris.

MN: You went to Morris in the middle 60s?

CW: Yes.

MN: What was that like?

CW: It was okay when I was there. [Laughs] I went to a couple of others.

MN: You went to a couple of other high schools?

CW: [Laughs] I'm trying to think of all of them. I was - - my ninth grade was a destroyer for me academically since my homeroom teacher didn't like me and she was my math teacher. My math was a disaster. She would stand by me and tell me I'm too dumb to learn. And she said, "I know you're going to tell, that's how niggers are." And I had a math deprivation. There was a teacher there, Dr. Rooney. He taught English and he knew how she felt about me. My other subjects were strong but my math was just - - I would be in her classroom and I wouldn't know what was going on because she didn't want me to raise my hand to ask a question. If I did she really beat me up. So, I, as I said, I became a nuisance in that class. I couldn't learn so I decided I wasn't going to let everybody else learn.

MN: When all this was going on in school did you have other activities that you were focused on out of school?

CW: Yes, I was a girl scout. I was a church usher in my church.

MN: This is in Metropolitan Baptist?

CW: Metropolitan Baptist Church. What I got to do - - I got to tour, well we toured all the churches. I got to go to Adam - - I spent a lot of time at Adam Clayton Powell's Church and one of the greatest events was when he would come and all of the ushers, we would be ready, you know, standing in line. My pastor, Reverend Simms, he was the President of the Black Baptist Ministers and so my church had a lot of perks. We used to have Leontine Price come because he knew her. Mahalia Jackson used to come a lot. And this guy James Cleaver?

MN: Yes, great gospel singer.

CW: Our church used to rock if you want to say. [Laughs] You know I loved to go to church. It gave me - - I was comfortable.

MN: Were there any other organizations? You had girl scouts. You had the church. Did you ever go to after-school programs?

CW: Yes, I did. I went to an after-school program. One of the people in my building, she lived under me, she was a teacher and her name was Hetty. She taught in Harlem.

MN: This is at Woodstock Terrace?

CW: Yes, and I used to take the bus over to 135<sup>th</sup> street to the Lincoln Projects and she had an after-school program in the center. She started helping me with my math so that I would get better grades. Even at that time I was just so turned off. I wasn't interested.

MN: You were starting to get into trouble. Did you have other people who joined you in this? Did you have a little group?

CW: Let me say this to you. The trouble was minor. I would make noises in class so the teacher would turn her head. Not real trouble because my mother wasn't having that so understand that. I mean I might throw paper at her but being that kind of disruptive - -

MN: You never got into gangs or any of that?

CW: No.

MN: Were there gangs around when you were growing up? Was that something you very aware of?

CW: To tell you the truth, I heard about them, I think. Maybe the Baldies or the Eagles or something.

MN: The Baldies? [Laughs]

CW: But to say, in all honesty, that I knew someone, no. My life was different. I used to go ice skating, roller skating. I played stickball. I wasn't into basketball so much because we were Yankee fans. At that time I was pretty up on what the Yankees were doing and even though I was a female, I would be outside playing stickball.

MN: This is on St. Ann's?

CW: Yes. And even when I went to Woodstock because across the street was 120 and they had a field and I would go over there and we would play baseball.

MN: I want to go back to this whole thing that you didn't really grow up thinking you were black, which is something interesting. Was it that people just didn't talk about race?

CW: No, I can truthfully say that after they had that fight at the time I was five, my mother and my father - - my family didn't really talk about that much. They didn't make it a big deal. We didn't have any problems. My neighbor - I'm trying to think of the name of the Irish lady that used to watch my brother and I. They were comfortable. We would go to their homes and play with their children. They would come to my house. We shared books. At that time it was popular to sleep on the fire escape because that was okay.

MN: Now your block was a lot of five-story walk-ups?

CW: Yes, well, on my block there was my building on the left and then up the street there was a court building - a double building - and then when you came back across the street there was one building with fire escapes and then there was another one. They were twin buildings. And then there was a short green building, which was a club that Italian men went to and then on the corner there was another building. In the summertime the Italian men would come outside and they would play their games and they would buy us ice cream because on Brook Avenue was a *Yoo-Hoo* factory, the [inaudible] Factory, and something else. They would keep cold sodas and ice cream and give it to us and make sure we didn't get hit by a car.

MN: There were still factories?

CW: Yes.

D: A question about your perception of yourself vis-à-vis race. Your church was predominantly and exclusively black in Harlem, so - -

CW: What I'm saying by that is that nobody gave me an identity other than Chrystal in my block. I was socially accepted. That's what I mean. It's the same as in my church.



MN: So you were Chrystal both places?

CW: Exactly.

MN: Did you reach the point - - were you in sixth and seventh grade still living on that street, St. Ann's Place?

CW: Yes, after the fire.

MN: But you were reaching the point where boys and girls are starting to get interested in each other or did that not quite happen.

CW: Yes, you know, there was a guy in my class. A woman and I were talking about him last night. His name was Tommy Paris and he lived across the street. He was a white kid and I liked him for a minute but I had to stop because he used to put boogers on his sleeve and eat his boogers so I couldn't like him anymore. [Laughter] We used to call him Tommy the booger man. [Laughter] I think that because my mom and dad came from the South and we - - I don't know what the people of the area expected. I guess we weren't typical of whatever they expected so they treated us with kindness. I have to say that. The Hennis under us. I think they were the initiators because they had a lot of children and they were very strong Catholic folk and when I look back at them I see that they had to practice what they preached. They were kind of like the role models, I think. I talked to one of the [inaudible] yesterday to see who we could not like and I couldn't find anybody. We really had a good time. Those were the best times of my life.

MN: Those years on St. Ann's Place - -

CW: It was good.

MN: - - you have very positive memories about. We had this little debate on the Bronx African American History Project listserv. Are people over-romanticizing their

childhood and forgetting the bad things? Some of the things - - were there like winos on the block?

CW: Listen, winos gave the Bronx some aviance. [Laughter] They, to me, were just people who needed a drink. What scared me is when I started seeing people like [inaudible] coming out who used drugs because they didn't need a drink, they needed whatever you had. You had to hold your pocketbook.

MN: Was the drug stuff starting at St. Ann's?

CW: I think I started to see a change in the early 70's when people didn't hide anymore that they might be using drugs. When I was coming up, people didn't want you to know if they smoked marijuana. They didn't want you to know if they used drugs or anybody used drugs. That was taboo. Because people in my circle, they didn't want to be bothered with you. They were afraid of you. I had so many things to do. That's why I can't tell you about the gangs really. And I'm not romanticizing. I know it was real for me. That teacher was very outstanding in my mind because I had to learn to do my math even when I went to college and I took calculus and geometry I was catching hell because sometimes I regressed. So I know how wounded I was by somebody telling me something about your race because it's very demeaning. You don't lose it when you're a kid. The rest of my life I really think I had a good life. I traveled with my parents and when we went out of New York we understood black and white and we also knew that when we went there ourselves to Sumter that if white folks like you down there then you didn't have to worry and if they didn't like you, you knew how to behave. We were trained early on how to fake how to behave because that's how my parents were. They were conscious of that. And why I keep saying that I didn't know I was black on my

block, no. They didn't identify me like that because I still some of the people that are adults now and they have children and they embrace me and they say this is my friend, Chrystal. We grew up and remember when we had a water balloon fight and remember we used to spend the night - - we spent many nights in Crotona Park with my neighbor's children and they were white. It was safe and - -

MN: How did you get from St. Ann's to Crotona Park?

CW: Sometimes we walked and sometimes they would drive the car and they would have a tent.

MN: People slept in Crotona Park?

CW: Yes, I slept in Crotona Park. That's why today - -

MN: This is in the late 50s?

CW: This is for me in the late 60s early 70s before drugs started - -

MN: This is when you were in Woodstock Terrace?

CW: No, before then.

MN: It must have been the late 50s.

CW: Yes, I think I was ten years old when I went with Laurie and her brother and her mother up to - -

MN: It's got to be the fifties. I don't think somebody would sleep in Crotona Park in the 60s.

CW: You know why, because I'm thinking about my mom in 1959. In the 60s and 70s I was grown almost.

MN: You had tents and sleeping bags in Crotona Park?

CW: Yes.

MN: Do you have pictures of that by any chance?

CW: I wish I did.

MN: That would be amazing.

CW: I'm trying to find everything I can but you know it was safe.

D: You graduated high school in '67?

CW: No, I would have graduated - - I took my GED. I would have graduated, oh God, I'm fifty-five, you do the math.

D: '67 it should be.

MN: Well '66 or '67. [Crosstalk] So you had this whole communal childhood on St. Ann's Avenue where all the kids in the street played out in the street together. Everybody watched one another.

CW: I even had a friend - - I remember her name is Anne Marie. She lived on Eagle Avenue. I rode past her house the other day. It's still there. She was Dutch and whenever her family would go back they would bring me wooden shoes and I would say, "How am I gonna to put my big feet in these wooden shoes?," but that was just something to have.

MN: What does this neighborhood look like now?

CW: What does it look like now? It's devastating. My building - - my whole block is gone. The fire took out my building and so what they did was they put some new houses there. They took away the two bars that were around the corner from my house. They moved the drugstore that was on the corner of 156<sup>th</sup>.

MN: So this has all been burned and rebuilt?

CW: Yes.

MN: Would this area be called Melrose?

CW: Melrose or Morrisania or something?

MN: Or South Morrisania.

CW: Yes, something like that. It's not the same.

MN: That whole thing burnt and now they're putting the small houses there - -

CW: Yes.

MN: - - and the factories are all gone.

CW: They left a long time ago.

MN: You had this devastating experience in junior high school and then you went to Morris. Was Morris a tough school in the 60s? What was its reputation when you went to Morris?

CW: Well, I had a cousin that went there before me and she was Valedictorian. [Laughs] So I had to - - I couldn't follow her. I was just impossible. I wasn't that academically astute and definitely not in the math. Again, I really didn't do anything. I was just there. Sometimes it was just a revolving door. And then I went to James Monroe where Glover? Johnson went. And then - - revolving door. So what my parents did - - my sister was in - - she had graduated from Howard. My brother-in-law was in med school. And I went to D.C. and I stayed with them for a year and that was horrible. It was worse than the [inaudible]. They were trying to get me together and then I came back and I didn't fare any better at all.

MN: Was your rebellion something within you? You didn't seek out other people to organize them to do the same thing?

CW: I am and have always been kind of a loner. I can do things on myself. I don't need anybody. When you sit in the class and again, back to the math, and you're trying to get something and you can't get it because you didn't have the basics, you're not interested. That's how it was for me. And my mom, she really tried and she took me places and sometimes I'd be the oldest person in there trying to get the baby math. That's really what it was.

D: Throughout your life in the Bronx, did you ever live in a predominantly black neighborhood?

CW: Woodstock.

MN: Woodstock Terrace. Was that predominantly black when it opened up?

CW: Yes.

MN: Were there any white families who moved in in the beginning or was it virtually all black?

CW: No, no whites.

MN: This was a middle income development that opened up in '63 or '64?

CW: '64.

MN: That was all black?

CW: Yes, because where Woodstock sat was brownstones and at that time it was mixed. It was white and black.

D: What's the numerical street?

CW: Trinity, Tinton, Union, 163<sup>rd</sup>, 161<sup>st</sup>. Brownstones. Even today, I'm always annoyed that they tore them down because our neighborhood was still, you know, kind of mixed. But people were really afraid of the fires and they weren't going to take it.

MN: Were most of the people in Woodstock Terrace professional people or it varied?

CW: It varied. We had teachers. We had a professor that taught at City College. He lived on the first floor. His sister worked with me at Lincoln Hospital. She was my nursing supervisor. His sister was a librarian. We had social workers. We had a mixture of everything.

MN: Did you get into music at all when you were growing up?

CW: Well, I was an avid Apollo goer. [Laughs] I would play hookey to go.

MN: Who were some of the people you played hookey to - -

CW: Smokey Robinson, Marvin Gaye, James Brown, Patty LaBelle, Tammy Terrell. There were a lot of folks. Some I got to meet in different ways. Tammy Terrell I got to meet her because when I worked at Lincoln her aunt worked with me in the nursery so whenever she would come to town I would meet her. I would go down to the Apollo and she used to seat me or she would call me and I got to meet Smokey Robinson and Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye. I started working at Lincoln in 10-6-69. That's when I started working at Lincoln Hospital.

MN: At 10-6-1969.

CW: That was my second job.

MN: What was your first job?

CW: I worked at James Ewing, a cancer hospital. I worked in breast and [inaudible].

MN: When you got these jobs, had you gotten the GED by then?

CW: No.

MN: How did you end up getting them?

CW: I got them - - at that time they would allow you to have a job under the condition that you would get your GED in two years. I would have stayed at James Ewing - - they wanted me to stay, but working at a cancer hospital at that age was too graphic for me. I couldn't handle it because whatever patients you started out with that's who you kept until their demise and some mornings I would be going there and they would be waiting for me and I'd have to take care of them and I couldn't take that so I quit and I went to Lincoln.

MN: What were your recollections of the high schools? Were they places where you could easily get lost, which was I guess your experience?

CW: No, I wouldn't say that. I think that they were pretty in tune. It's just that I was very difficult. I didn't want to stay. I remember my mom going to the high schools and they would talk to me and try to work things out but I wasn't interested.

MN: The parents and the teachers were interested but you weren't?

CW: I wasn't.

MN: When you moved to Woodstock Terrace in '64, what was your feeling about the neighborhood that you lived in? And that's the harder Morrisania.

CW: I had relationships with a lot of the kids because some of them came from my school, P.S. 38. I knew some of the kids in 120. It's funny that when you're little - - when we would come to the hill we would actually go up it because it was like a big mountain to us so we stayed on our side. But, once in a while somebody would be brave and we might follow them up to 120 and I had a chance to be with my father, like I said, on Saturdays when he would go check the buildings so my fear of flying, so to speak, I didn't have it.



MN: Did you go shopping on Prospect Avenue when you moved into Woodstock Terrace?

CW: To the Jew Man, yes. [Laughter] We would go to the Jew Man.

MN: The Jew Man was what store?

CW: The Jew man is where you go and jew the man down to get your decks and seven-elevens and next door you would get - - your mom would get your box of underwear and your socks and stuff like that. The Jew Man was actually two. There was one on Southern Boulevard and there was the other one over there on Prospect.

MN: What about Club 845? Were you aware of the - -

CW: Yes, I think they used to call that the bucket of blood or something like that.

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

That was too much for me.

MN: What about the Hunts Point Palace? Did you ever go to events there?

CW: Never. No. I was strictly an Apollo person. I liked the feel of Harlem. I had friends there. I had relatives there and I liked to go to the penny arcade. I like to go sometimes to see Daddy Grace when he would come on his long [inaudible] and they would send out a thick, velvet - not velvet - but a roll or something and he would get out the car and walk on it and the ladies would hold his arms. It was exciting. Harlem was different than it is now and you know, you connect with people.

MN: You felt that you were more Harlem-centered in your social and cultural life than Bronx-centered?

CW: I think, no, but the church part of me because I'm really talking about the Sundays - the days I would go to the Apollo. We had good times in the Bronx too. But, the other

part, in Harlem, at that time everybody had to be dressed up on Sunday. You couldn't go to Harlem in your jeans and a t-shirt. You had to be almost spectacular because then if you wasn't people talked about you. Your hair had to be in place so that meant that Saturday or Friday my mom and I was in the beauty parlor all day getting our hair done. You looked almost - -

MN: Did you go to the beauty parlor in the Bronx or in Harlem?

CW: In Harlem.

MN: That's interesting. You go to the church in Harlem, you go to the beauty parlor in Harlem, you go to the Apollo.

CW: Those things - - we didn't have those things in the Bronx that we did. They had the arcade on 149<sup>th</sup> Street. I would go there most of the time with my uncle. He was in the Air Force. He would come in periodically and take me. I went to see *The King and I* there and some other movies but most of the time the events that we did, we did them in Harlem.

MN: How did you end up, after this checkered career in getting a GED, how did you end up getting to go to college?

CW: I guess I was so excited that I got a GED that I could pass the math. There's no other thing. What I did was I went to Roosevelt.

MN: High school?

CW: Yes, because the clock was ticking on my job at Lincoln and they said, "Okay Chrystal, don't forget now you have to get your GED." I'd go in there too for high school.

MN: You've been to Morris, Monroe, Roosevelt, did we leave anything out?

CW: Yes, I went to a high school in D.C. And I was a married person then.

MN: What year did you get married?

CW: I don't even know

D: Was it before high school? No, it was after high school.

CW: Yes, and so I was married. I was a mom.

D: What year are we talking about? When were you at Roosevelt?

MN: When you started getting the jobs in health care, was this after you were married?

CW: Yes.

MN: You got married before '69?

CW: Yes.

MN: Was this somebody you met in your neighborhood?

CW: Well, he was a smart man. [Laughs]

MN: He was what?

CW: He was smart so I thought at Evander Childs - - he was an honors student. He was supposed to be helping me with my math.

MN: So you got an honors student. He was assigned to you as a tutor?

CW: Yes.

MN: Were you also at Evander?

CW: No.

MN: So how did you know him?

CW: He tutored me in my math.

MN: Was he from Woodstock Terrace?

CW: No, his mom and dad had a house on 212<sup>th</sup> Street and Paulden Avenue. They were a different area of the Bronx. My family didn't own a house. Their family - -

MN: How did you meet him? Who found him for you as a tutor?

CW: I met him really at a bowling alley, at Webster Bowling alley and I knew him from when I used to go to the basketball games. He wasn't a basketball player. He was too nerdy for that.

MN: He goes bowling at Webster and where was this bowling alley?

CW: On 167<sup>th</sup> Street.

MN: There was a bowling alley there and he came all the way down from 212<sup>th</sup> Street to go bowling?

CW: Yes.

MN: Were the bowling alleys like social centers at that time?

CW: I would think so, for some teenagers.

MN: If you wanted to meet girls, would you go to a bowling alley?

CW: My friends and I used to go to the bowling alley because we didn't drink and we didn't use marijuana, and we liked bowling. We did it in high school and it was a really good place to go.

MN: It was a safe place - -

CW: Yes.

MN: - - for you to go if you didn't want to get into troublesome activities. So you met him at the bowling alley?

CW: Yes. I knew him before. I had seen him but I didn't really get a chance to talk to him.

MN: You had seen him where? At parties?

CW: No, I saw him at Evander when I used to go to the basketball games.

MN: When you were going to another school you used to go to Evander basketball games?

CW: When I attended Roosevelt he would come to our games and I would go to Evander's games but I didn't like him then. [Laughs]

MN: Where were you living after you were married?

CW: I moved to Teller Avenue, not too far from where I grew up. We had an apartment there.

MN: Teller, between where and where?

CW: 167<sup>th</sup> Street.

MN: What sort of work was he doing when you got married?

CW: He worked in a butcher shop. They wanted him to go to college. He didn't want to go.

MN: He dropped out?

CW: No, he finished high school.

MN: He finished high school and then worked in a butcher shop. Up there or in your area?

CW: In Harlem.

MN: In Harlem?

CW: Yes.

MN: When was your first child born?

CW: I had him in November.

MN: Of what, '68?

CW: I turned eighteen when I had him in November, in the same year.

MN: You were married, you were a young mother, and you went to work and then you got your GED.

CW: Well, something like that. [Laughter] I'll say it was put upon me to do that.

MN: Put upon you? By?

CW: By the job. I went back to Roosevelt and I had my second child. I had my daughter. I had her in May and my boss called me and said, "You know Chrystal we've been looking at your records and we know you don't have your high school diploma but you have to have it." I was like, "Oh my God, how am I going to do this. I can't even finish the - - I can't do the math." What I did was I decided that you can't run so I went to *Barnes and Noble* - -

D: Where? Which one?

CW: The one on Fifth Avenue, downtown on 18<sup>th</sup> Street. I bought every math book that I could find and I bought the GED book because when I went to Roosevelt the math instructor told us, he said, "All of you are going to take the GED and none of you are going to pass it," and I said "Oh shit, here I go again. I'm not taking this shit again."

D: A room full of black people?

MN: And this was a white teacher?

CW: And I said, "I'm not taking this shit no more. I'm not coming back and I'm gonna pass." I went downtown and got all those books. By then I had moved to 305 E. 175<sup>th</sup> and Cliff. I kicked James out.

MN: You kicked - -

D: Your husband - -

CW: I kicked my husband out. I would go to work at Lincoln. I would come home. My mom and dad they babysat. I wouldn't talk to nobody on the phone and I just ate the book. The more I began to eat it, I had to go from basics, and I thought "Oh, I can do this. This is not bad." After I convinced myself it wasn't bad, I went and I took the GED and I said I'm never going to take it again. This has to be it because I took four months out of my life and I isolated myself so that I could do this because I believed in the recess of my heart that I was not dumb and that I could do this. I took that test and when I got my letter I opened it up and I was screaming all in my hallway and my neighbors thought somebody was killing me. My children were a joy to me in birth, but that was the best ever. After that I started going to college because I knew I could do it.

MN: Where did you end up enrolling in college first?

CW: I went to City College. [Laughs]

MN: You went to City College?

CW: - - until I could find what's comfortable so then I wound up - - I met my second husband. I was working with him and I didn't like him either. [Laughter] I met him and he was telling me all the schools he went to and I said, "Okay let me try this," so I wound up being in Brooklyn College, which is now New York Technical College.

MN: You went to New York Technical College?

CW: Yes.

MN: Your second husband, where was he in school at that time?

CW: He wasn't in school. He had come from Howard. He had finished med school and he was starting his internship.

MN: So you got a doctor?

CW: Yes.

MN: And where did you meet him?

CW: At Lincoln.

MN: You were working in Lincoln Hospital and this was in which program?

CW: I worked in medicine and that's where I met him.

MN: Was he a doctor or an intern at that time?

CW: He was an intern.

MN: What was your position at that time?

CW: I was an administrative assistant. I was a clerk.

MN: You were a clerk there. When you met him and married him where did you live?

CW: We moved back to my neighborhood to 169<sup>th</sup> Street, 540 169<sup>th</sup> Street.

MN: Between where and where?

CW: Between Franklin - - Fulton and Third Avenue. He had an apartment in Yonkers but I didn't want to live there. I wanted to live near my mother because my father had just passed away from cancer.

MN: She was living in Woodstock Terrace and you were on 169th between Franklin and Fulton?

CW: Right and so I liked the neighborhood. I had a group of friends there that I had grown up with and we had formed a group called the Bronx Arts Cultural Center and we gave art shows at the [inaudible] Court House.

MN: This was called the Bronx Arts Cultural Center and this was in the early 70s?

CW: No, this was in the 80s. I think we formed it in '84.



MN: Where were you living at that time? Still on Franklin?

CW: Yes, 169<sup>th</sup> Street.

MN: Were you living in a private home or an apartment building?

CW: In a high rise.

MN: There was a high rise there and this was a middle-income high rise? [Crosstalk]

Do you have any of the documents from this Bronx Arts group?

CW: Yes I do. We're non-profit.

MN: It still exists?

CW: Yes.

MN: You are also associated with Old Timers Day?

CW: Old Timers Day comes about because of all the people who are at least thirty, maybe forty years older than I am who started having celebrations in the Park, Twenty-three Park. I would go by - - it was okay I didn't really like it when it was in Twenty-three Park and not Crotona.

MN: Explain where Twenty-three Park is.

CW: It's a park where they have benches and basketball courts.

MN: Is that across from the Forest Houses?

CW: Yes.

MN: Okay, it's that little park across from the Forest Houses. Why do they call it Twenty-three Park?

CW: I have no idea?

MN: Is that because there's a public school there?

CW: Could be. I don't remember why. I started getting involved when they moved to Crotona one year because they were fixing up the park and so it involves a lot of folks who lived in the Bronx at one time and they're scattered and mostly blacks and there are a few Hispanics that grew up with us that, you know, deemed themselves to be part of our group, which is a good thing because we grew up together.

[Naison steps out for a minute.]

D: I've got a question going back to when you first moved to the Bronx when you were five years old. Do you recall there being any differences between the apartment you moved into versus the apartments of your white neighbors? Did you ever hear of any differences from your family?

CW: No, the building was a well-kept building and I didn't see any difference. Our apartment was in good shape and like everything else, often times when things would happen my father would call the super who wasn't as good as my dad at fixing things. My dad, he really was a person who didn't allow us to live in an apartment that was in bad shape because he knew how to do a lot of things. He was a jack of all trades and he was a plasterer. We painted every year even up until the time my mom was in Woodstock and I have to say that's my habit. I don't do it now because I'm older and I have a house, but when I lived in my apartments, I painted every year because you know, you're taught to be clean and you appreciate your surroundings. I can see that apartment vividly. I can see my bedroom right now as I'm talking to you because my bedroom's on the front. My mom's bedroom was in the back and it was on the backyard where the cats were. I used to go down there with my friends and we would torture the cats and I would get scratched up. That's why I don't like cats today because they were wild alley cats

and I always tried to pet one so I could take it upstairs but my mother wasn't having that. But, our apartment was in good shape and their apartments was in good shape. What I remember is that they had more people in their apartments than we had in ours. We had three bedrooms and it seems like they were sleeping in the living room and all over. It was very cluttered.

D: You mean they had family members?

CW: Yes, well the Hennis downstairs had about nine kids and when you have nine kids in three bedrooms, that's clutter. My first experience of ever seeing a bunk bed was in their house and two of them would sleep in a bunk because they had a lot of kids.

D: There's two black families in this building?

CW: The DeWitts and the Wades.

D: And you being one of them, you had sort of a more spacious and a well kept apartment - -

CW: Yes.

D: - - versus your white neighbors who were more cluttered

CW: Yes, and the DeWitts lived in the basement. I couldn't live in a basement, even now. It was spacious but the basement, you know, smelly. They had I guess what you could call the cast-off furnitures that other people didn't want and she also had a lot of kids. It wasn't raggedy but smelly and she seemed to be doing okay with them.

D: One more question - -

CW: Oh, and she was a wino. [Laughs] Mr. DeWitt wasn't but she was now that I think about it.

D: How did your father learn about the Bronx housings opening up? How did he come to - -

CW: Because my father worked for Mr. George on Third Avenue about 165<sup>th</sup> Street. It's Muckers. I think that's the name of the hardware store still there. My father got tired of working for the Chinese laundry. That was hard grueling work. You had to go all over the city. You had to get bags of laundry. You know, it was hard.

D: When you moved from Harlem, how did he make the decision to come to the Bronx?

CW: Because that's when he found an apartment for us.

D: Do you remember how he found out about the apartment?

CW: No, other than - - like I said earlier, my father he was a friendly person. He talked so that's how he got his job with Mr. Seagle.

D: Word of mouth.

CW: Talking to them.

Patricia Wright (PW): Was there any resistance to your moving in to that particular building? I mean you being the only - - second black family in the building, what about the neighborhood? Was there any resistance from the people in the building or the neighborhood?

CW: The resistance that we got was the people who had the fight with my brother-in-law and my father. I think that they beat them up so bad - - my father and my brother-in law that if there was any, we didn't know about it after that. I mean I can't even tell you who they were. That's how - - they really didn't - - after the police and they settled everything and the Hennis came up and kind of squashed it everything, we didn't have a bad time and I'm serious. Whoever they were, I didn't get to meet them. I didn't get to see them

because my father and my brother-in-law didn't let us come out the apartment so the experiences after that they were okay. I didn't feel anything. I didn't feel like oh we don't want you on the block. I didn't feel like that. The only time I felt like that was when I came out of my neighborhood and went further up after we had moved to Moshulu Junior High School. That's when I got to feel that I was different because even then at Roosevelt for a minute they were popping - - after I left there. They would pop their antennas off the car the Italian people. They'd be "Niggers you all get out of here," because it wasn't a big group of us at Roosevelt but it was too many for them.

PW: And these were adults?

CW: Yes, they didn't want us mixing with their kids, you know, so the police use to be outside and make sure we could get to the Third Avenue L, which was the train that ran down Third Avenue or the bus.

D: The police were out there to make sure the few blacks - -

CW: That we were safe to get back on the train and get to the train.

D: This was during the 60s?

CW: Yes.

PW: Regardless of these people's objection to your being in the school were you able to successfully mix in with the other students? I'm assuming that the schools were predominantly white.

CW: Roosevelt at that time, I would say they were at least maybe 60% white. I'll say that. And the rest were black, a few Hispanics. It's a strange thing. Kids can get along with each other. It wasn't about the kids. I don't remember having to fight with any kid in the school. It was the adults that we had the problems with. I can't tell you how to

fight in the school. I don't know an argument in Roosevelt. I don't know that. I do know that their parents didn't want you to be outside or they didn't really want you to be inside and that they were menacing in their behavior and all that. So, I used to try to make sure I'd get home.

MN: Is that okay?

D: Yes, we're good.

MN: You sure? Okay, thank you very much.

CW: Okay

[END OF SESSION]

[END OF INTERVIEW]