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Walters, Delores

Bronx African American History Project
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Transcriber: Angela Dugan

Mark Naison: [unclear] 4th interview of the Bronx African-American History Project. We are at Fordham University on November 19, 2005 with Professor Delores Walters who's a cultural anthropologist, who grew up on Rogers Place in the Bronx and then lived in Soundview. And as we always do, we'd like you to talk a little bit about your family background on both your mother's and father's side. So –

Delores Walters: Well both of my parents grew up in Harlem and moved from there I think sometime in the 40's. On my father's side the family was originally from South Carolina. A very small town in South Carolina actually and I've been able to identify some of the ancestors that go back at least to the late 1800's. And they must have come to New York in the 40's, as far as I know. On my mother's side they were primarily located in the North: Philadelphia, New Jersey, New York. I don't see any evidence that they were ever enslaved. They were - -my grandmother always said that her mother and that generation before her were, the women were Quakers married to black sailors. Now where the sailors emanated from and what kinds of ships they were on - -but I think that was one of the occupations that were open to black men, being sailors on ships and all. So it's a very interesting story in that there's a lot of ethnicities represented in my family. On my father's side, my mother when she married into the family was told that they were Native Americans, and as far as I can tell, possibly Cherokee. That's a very common claim for African-Americans coming from that region, but it seems to be accurate in our case. And then on my mother's side there definitely was European background. My

great-great grandmother was probably of Scottish descent. We can tell from her pictures whether she was - -she looked like a little old Irish or Scottish lady. But from the name Watson, I think that is a Scottish clan, and it would take a little bit more research to actually verify that.

MN: Now where did your parents meet in Harlem?

DW: That's a - -you're going to give me questions and I'll have to go back and ask my mother. I'm not sure where they actually met. My mother told me she was very eclectic in her choice of churches in Harlem and her mother, my grandmother, didn't mind. My grandmother went to St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Harlem, but my mother pursued all kinds of churches and was also someone who invited all of her friends, regardless of background, into the home, something that her brother, my Uncle Reggie, could not understand. But my mother was always very, very interested in, and found having a variety of people around her. And she did the same with her church, with church membership. She would go from one to the other. It was an experiment. Now whether they met at a church function I would have to find out, but my father was very active in the Convent Avenue Baptist Church.

MN: Right. Now your - -when did your father move to New York?

DW: I think the family, he was part of a big family - -they moved to New York probably in the 1940's, and they lived on West 143rd Street about, 7th Avenue in Harlem. My grandmother on my mother's side lived at 1893 Seventh Avenue, corner of 115th Street [in] a really spectacular apartment building, on the third floor, so you can actually go out on the balcony and see the parades. The tremendous parades that they would have on, I

don't even know what the occasions were. We could go out and see these parades. So it was a fabulous apartment, huge. It was two apartments actually built in one, but she lived there over 40 years.

MN: Now was your father college educated?

DW: My father was a really bright guy and he did go to City College, I'm not sure for how long. He did not graduate as far as I know.

MN: Now had he gone to high school in the South or had he gone to high school in New York City.

DW: I'm not sure about that really.

MN: And what about your mother? Where did she go to high school?

DW: She lived right across the street from Wadleigh High School.

MN: Right.

DW: So most of the kids lived there, but my mother wanted to have a little more adventure I think and wanted to go downtown to Central Commercial.

MN: Right.

DW: And so she graduated from Central Commercial High School.

MN: Now was Central Commercial considered a very strong school for secretarial work?

DW: As far as I know yes. Yes I'm pretty sure it was at that time, because of course there wasn't that many occupations that young women could go into.

MN: Right. Now how did your parents find the Bronx? Did a number of their friends make a simultaneous move? Do you recall other - -your parents having other friends and relative in the Bronx?

DW: Oh yes, there were certainly other friends that were there, and my mother mentioned some of those, and also friends of my grandmother also who lived in the Bronx, on my mother's side. But the actual transition - -I tried to ask my mother a little bit more, but I haven't gotten that much detail about it.

MN: Right. Now was the building in Rogers Place the only apartment that - -

DW: Oh no. No, there were apartments there. Now my memory goes back as I lived there the first nine years. I was born in Lincoln Hospital - -

MN: Right.

DW: which no longer exists. 944 was close to the corner of, I think 163rd and Intervale. I think that was the - -

MN: Right.

DW: The intersection there. There was a larger apartment building across the street. I remember a store that was up the corner, and maybe some private residences as well. There weren't that many.

MN: Right. Now that's fairly near Thessalonia Baptist Church? Do you remember that at all?

DW: I don't know. I don't know Thessalonia. We did go to St. Augustine's.

MN: When you - -

DW: When I was very little, before we moved.

MN: Right. So when you were living in Rogers Place the family's church was St. Augustine's?

DW: Well that was a local church.

MN: Right.

DW: My father was - -

MN: Convent [unclear]

DW: a very prominent member of the Convent Avenue Baptist Church.

MN: So eh was going back to Harlem –

DW: Oh yes.

MN: and remained active while you were living in Rogers - -

DW: Oh and we also did too.

MN: Okay.

DW: On Sundays we would visit one grandmother and then go visit the other. So we would take the train.

MN: So Harlem was still an important part of your family's cultural life.

DW: Well it was also our transition into growing up. When you were old enough and could take the subway by yourself, then you took the trip to my grandmother's house. And that was one of the first things that we could do on our own.

MN: Now was a sense of history part of your family's discourse - -was there a lot of storytelling going on growing up about people who came before. Or is this stuff you learned later.

DW: There was I think some talk about previous ancestors. I would hear a lot of names, and of course my father's family was very large and sometime on Sunday we'd see a lot of those folks. And there'd be stories. I know that my grandmother must have been very conversant in healing remedies, so there'd be talk about that. I don't know what he

would say, a sense of histories so much per se. But certainly some of the older folks were talked about, yes. Now I don't know that I can be more specific, but maybe with other, more will come to mind.

MN: Right. What are your recollections of the block in the neighborhood and the street atmosphere on Rogers Place?

DW: On Rogers place. Now you know I was very young, but what I remember is having very active playing, playmates and we definitely had our games. A lot of them were –

MN: What were some of the games you'd play?

DW: Definitely running. Probably if I grew up in a little later era, I would've been on a track team because I was pretty fast.

MN: Right.

DW: And the games were integrated, both boys and girls played. We had a high water, low water which was jumping over the highest - -who could jump over the rope the highest and I was good at that. I was pretty speedy. There was a red light, green light.

MN: Right.

DW: You remember, yes red light, green light was definitely one of our –

MN: Did you play any ball games, throwing balls against the wall.

DW: We did jump rope. I wasn't that great at double dutch, but we certainly had people who were double dutch jumpers. We played a game in the street called skelzie.

MN: Skelzie, a lot of people mentioned that.

DW: yes we played skelzie. There was stickball, but I wasn't so much involved in ball games, I was rreally never that good with ball, stick - -

MN: Hand-eye coordinate [laughter]

DW: not really.

MN: Now what about –

DW: I did my best [laughs]

MN: What about ringaleevio and **catch the flag***?

DW: Oh yes, absolutely. Ringaleevio was definitely one, red light, green light, hide-and-seek of course. Yes we had a very active street life.

MN: Now was this street community predominantly Black at that point? Or it was racially mixed?

DW: Well at that point it was predominantly Black. Now the building itself was run by a Caribbean family. Mr. Coley and his wife, and two daughters I believe, who really did a great job of keeping the building up. And my mother could tell some stories about not wanting the kids to be playing ball in the courtyard, and so we had to refrain from doing that. What I remember about going to school, to P.S. 99 - -my mother said that, and of course I was the first one to go to school, and she wanted to bring her first child to school, but I felt it was my responsibility to do that. [laughs] So I think I really, in some ways, hurt her feelings a little bit by not, and I don't know why I did that because the school was not that close. You had to walk through the park, I'm not sure what that park was called –

MN: Okay I know - -you mean up the hill to the –

DW: Up the hill - -it was a nice, it was a really nice park.

MN: Beautiful park.

DW: Beautiful park. It had the slate –

MN: Right.

DW: blocks in the walkway.

MN: It's still there, and they fixed it up. So you had to walk up the hill, through the park

–

DW: Through the park –

MN: and then turn right to get to P.S. 99.

DW: I think that's right.

MN: Yes.

DW: I have a vivid memory of one rainy day, the teacher letting us out of a different exit.

MN: Right.

DW: And I was totally lost. So even then I didn't have a good sense of direction.

[laughs]

MN: now you remember the sounds of the Tropicana Club?

DW: I do, I do.

MN: And how far was that from where you lived?

DW: To me it just seemed like a few block away [laughter] because the music could be very well. I think we had bunk beds which my brother and I alternated, must've alternated being up on the top, and then you could really hear very well when you're up on the top. [laughs]

MN: Yes.

DW: But yes, I don't remember anything else about it other than the sounds coming from there, and then there was a light, a marquis that said Jesus Saves. Now that I recall.. The other thing about --yes we did go to St. Augustine's, but my father would also bring us to Convent Avenue Baptist Church.

MN: Right.

DW: And he was --he had four sons eventually, but he was very proud of me and he would show me off to his friends at Convent Avenue Baptist Church.

MN: Now were you intellectually precocious, like reading early --

DW: Yes, yes.

MN: and was that something that was emphasize in your family? Was this a family of readers? Did people --

DW: Oh yes, let me tell you, that's a really good question. One thing I remember about this --Prospect Avenue was not that far.

MN: Right.

DW: And my oldest brother and I went to the theater, to the movie on Saturday, and they were double headers. But we would always go, the two of us to this, I think it's the Prospect Theater --

MN: The Prospect Theater, yes. On 161st Street.

DW: Yes, I don't --we knew how to walk there and we could go ourselves, but there was also a library not far from there off of Prospect, and I remember going there very early. It was a magnificent library. I don't know whether it's still there, but it was a wonderful place.

MN: Now did your mother or father read the newspaper out loud? Was there a dinner table discussion of issues? Did you watch people -- your parents sit and read?

DW: Well I don't know so much about that, but I'm told, that even people who run into me from the past ask me if I'm still reading all those books. [laughter] So apparently there must have been [unclear] [Laughter] people even then. But I was pretty studious, and yes we come from a background of self-educated folks. On my father's, well probably on my father's side too in some ways, but I particularly remember my mother's side. Some of the great uncles would ask what grade you were in, and then recite for you what would be the requirements for that grade, and they would say, are you in -- you say 4th grade, 1st part of the semester that's 4A and 4B, and then they would recite for you what you should be learning in that grade.

MN: Now when you're talking about reciting, did anybody recite poetry, or speeches, or that sort of thing.

DW: Well yes. Some of the great uncles were great orators actually. And they -- I liked to hear the sound of their voices [laughter] but they also were very, in some ways, very intellectual in what they were saying. And also, the other thing about this being self taught, some of the uncles -- we had a place in Pinebrook, New Jersey and we would go to the shore. We would have two or three weeks to go away to New Jersey.

MN: Now was this an African-American resort area, or was it racially mixed?

DW: No it was no racial -- I didn't learn until later that it was completely segregated. In fact there were only certain parts of the beach that black folk, even though my grandmother's siblings were very fair-skinned, but of course we were not. So there's no

integration of those beaches, I didn't realize. And there's also - -the older folks would go to a place called Greenbrier, it must've been some kind of bar. But also it was very, it was segregated. We were too young to be involved in that. But one of the uncles, Uncle Clarence, built the houses in that area of New Jersey and people remember - -and we have pictures of the house that he built. All the plumbing, the electricity, but that was all self-taught.

MN: Really, wow.

DW: That was all self-taught. But I have not met, even now that I'm way up there in age, but I have not met people who respected people education as much as those people on my mother's side of the family.

MN: Did any of the people on your mother's side of the family, or your father's side, end up becoming political activists either in conventional mainstream politics or Left Wing organizations?

DW: Not really, not really. And I, sometimes I wonder about that because I did tell you I'm the oldest 5, four younger brothers, and one of them killed in Vietnam. I think my mother felt that for us to make our way in society, we had to be educated. And that included - -what she said was that we had to complete high school, and we had to go to church every Sunday. So as my brothers got older, they were some pretty tired boys going to church, but she said as long as you're living in my house, you had to go to church every Sunday.

MN: Right.

DW: But, there was really not that kind of activism; active, knowledgeable about current events. But for example, my mother did not want to go back - -did not want to go South.

MN: Right.

DW: She was not from the South and I guess she could see what was happening there, the discrimination and the hardships. She was not interested in going or taking us. We were free to go if we wanted.

MN: Right. Were there African-American political or cultural figures who were held up as examples in your youth? That were mentioned a great deal?

DW: Oh sure, yes there were. I remember my great uncle reciting the [unclear] Dunbar, poetry, Langston Hughes. Yes it was that kind of [unclear].

MN: Was Paul Robeson a figure or W.E.B. DuBois?

DW: Well Paul Robeson I would say more so than W.E.B. DuBois.

MN: Did they have ropes and records.

DW: Oh yes, my grandmother always had ropes and records, so much so that I became very, very knowledgeable about it and committed to understanding more about him, and promoting him to my students when the time came.

MN: Right.

DW: Yes. Marian Anderson, music wise, they seem to have been pretty knowledgeable too, but I can't really fix a certain music type on them or say that they were really tuned into jazz more than anything else [crosstalk] –

MN: Now your family had a piano.

DW: Always, always.

MN: Was everybody required to take piano lessons?

DW: My mother taught us the scale, worked with us, so that we could read music. I think there came a point, especially when my parents separated, and that was just at the time that we moved to Soundview that our parents were no longer together. So that meant that she was the sole income and since she had been primarily taking care of us, she was not working, and so there was a transition for her to find a full paying job.

MN: So your father was the sole supporter of the family on Rogers Place, pretty much.

DW: Yes.

MN: And what was he doing for those years?

DW: He worked for a place downtown called Ignaz Strauss, and I think they were an importing company. I think that's - I don't know exactly what he did, but I think that's where he worked. But he developed a problem with alcoholism, and he died at the age of 45.

MN: Oh boy

DW: Yes, so I was only 20 at the time.

MN: Now what about P.S. 99? What was that like when you first started? What are your earliest memories of P.S. 99?

DW: Well the story about going there, which was something that of a traditional memory, but my brother has the same memory so I'm not sure - -but I think it applies to me. It was a very rigorous school, an all Black school, very competitive. The teachers were committed to teaching, and the students were there to learn.

MN: Now were you in the 1- -usually in the 1 or 2 classes -

DW: Yes I was usually in the 1.

MN: Okay so if you're in the 1 class, do you --this is a question we've been asking people --do you think the same experience would have been true in the 8th class? That they would have felt the same passion and commitment of teachers in the same competitive atmosphere.

DW: I think I know people, maybe two or three, and I don't know that there was that much of a difference.

MN: Right.

DW: I don't know about the going into the higher numbers. I suppose I remember kids that weren't that interested in learning, they were more interested in fooling around or fighting. But that --I didn't hang out with those kids that much, and they knew what I was about so --

MN: Right.

DW: we didn't communicate --

MN: Right --

DW: to that extent.

MN: So your friends were pretty much among people of similar interests and commitments?

DW: Yes. I would say so.

MN: Now was there much talk in that neighborhood about gangs or any sort --did you ever feel any sort of threat from tougher kids when you were growing up?

DW: Well just school fights and people who were sort of bullies. That wasn't - -didn't seem like a big deal.

MN: Were they girl bullies?

DW: Oh yes. Those are the ones I remember, the girl bullies.

MN: Because we interviewed somebody who lived on Kelly Street who remembered girls from tougher blocks following her and shoving her.

DW: I didn't really have any difficulty really. But really I completed the first four grades.

MN: Right. But you never remember any experience of being physically intimidated or harassed?

DW: I remember some threats and some bullying, but I don't remember that it ever came to anything.

MN: Now was this in the school or on your block?

DW: I think it was coming from the school, in the school vicinity pretty much. Now our block was a haven. We had a great time [unclear] our games [laughs].

MN: Right. So you remember your block being like a safe zone where everybody was watching over you –

DW: Absolutely –

MN: And you had complete freedom.

DW: Yes. One of the things I remember, because kids call each other names and all that, but in those days you didn't call someone Black. Black was considered derogatory. So you didn't say Black so and so, which was the kind of threatening [unclear].

MN: So what did kids call each other?

DW: Well they tried to get away with Black, but the parents would say well I will report you to your parents if you say that.

MN: So that was the worst epithet –

DW: So that was one, that was [unclear].

MN: This was all Black kids, and you were not allowed to use that term?

Natasha Lightfoot (NL): Today I know the word nigger is used a lot among young adults. At that time was that word used among young adults as well.

DW: Not in my upbringing. I consider that more of a Southern phenomenon mostly at that time. I didn't hear it that much.

NL: No?

DW: I didn't hear it being used. No I can't- -and of course people referred to themselves as Negro at that time too, that was the proper respected term to use in schools.

MN: Right.

DW: My grandmother always used Colored. Colored was considered alright. Those terms - -that gradually changed in the 70's and 60's, which is the way terminology does.

NL: It evolves.

DW: Yes it evolves, exactly.

MN: Anything else that you can think of about Rogers Place, in that neighborhood that we haven't really –

DW: Going through that little park, and I don't really know, but I know if you go up the stairs to go left, that was I think Tinton Avenue?

MN: Yes.

DW: Tinton Avenue. Well on Tinton Avenue there were two doctors, Vinegold and Nguyen, who did the circumcisions for my brothers and I would always go. I was interested in what happened to them. I was very committed to overlooking whatever they were doing. [laughter] Until my youngest brother was born and then I felt I had had enough experience [laughter] to be able to take care of him.

MN: You do the surgery on him? [laughter]

DW: No not to do the surgery. No, no, no. [laughter]

MN: So you were going to put [crosstalk] a synagogue and become a moil.

DW: But I can remember the little ritual that was sung over my brothers. I wanted to be a part of what was happening to them. But no, but he was nine years difference in our ages, so then I could really take care of him.

MN: Oh okay.

DW: And that was helpful to my mother because she –

MN: She was now working - -

DW: was now traveling between the Bronx and Brooklyn everyday. And he was very obedient. He was very easy to take care of. We moved to Soundview, my brother was actually too young to be enrolled in the nursery school, but because he was already toilet trained - -

NL: Oh, that makes a difference.

MN: Yes.

DW: They allowed him to go so that my mother could work. And then they had this strict rule about who could pick him up and all of that, but they allowed me to do that.

Princess Okieme (PO): That's good.

DW: Yes.

MN: Yes you had a question Princess?

PO: Yes I wanted to ask when you were in high school were Catholic high schools established then?

DW: Yes, oh yes. Because two of my cousins went to Cardinal Hayes.

PO: Wow.

DW: And they were older than me. Oh yes there were Catholic high schools, in fact there were Catholic schools because some of the kids at Rogers Place went to the Catholic schools.

PO: Oh did they get better education?

MN: Did they go to St. Anthony of Padua?

DW: I think they went to St. Anthony, that's the one I remember, St. Anthony's yes.

MN: Right.

NL: Did they get better education?

DW: Well that was always the rumor, but like I said at P.S. 99, I can't see that there was any better public schooling, public or parochial [crosstalk]

MN: Right. Now were your teachers African-American at P.S. 99?

DW: The teachers were, as far as I know, Jewish.

MN: And your Jewish teachers were completely committed to the education of their Black students?

DW: Yes, I don't remember having any Black teachers. In fact, I don't remember my teachers though other than the fourth grade. I don't remember the earlier teachers. I remember my fourth grade teacher, and I believe she was Jewish. Yes.

MN: Now what was it like to move to Soundview? Was this something you were excited about, or your attitude was damp –

DW: Well my mother was elated, and that probably was communicated to us because we were living in three rooms, she now had five children.

MN: Three it was a one bedroom?

DW: Yes.

MN: Five children in a one bedroom apartment. Wow that's a lot.

NL: Oh my God.

DW: Yes so she had applied, I think several times, before her application was accepted for the project. And so she was more than delighted, and we moved to a five room project apartment in Soundview, and one of the first families to move there, to 1704, one of the first buildings that was opened.

MN: 1704 what street?

DW: Stewart Avenue.

MN: Stewart Avenue okay.

DW: 1704 Stewart Avenue. One of - -in fact until just recently our name was still on the downstairs bell. [laughter] The grounds were wonderful. They were very - -I mean when we moved there, the grounds hadn't even been completed. That's how early it was.

MN: Right.

DW: But they landscaped the grounds, we could skate all around. And that's what I did. I remember skating all around Soundview.

MN: Roller skating.

DW: Roller skating, roller skating. Not rollerblading, that was later. Roller skating, yes. And then the school was right across the street.

MN: Wow so you just walked - -

DW: Just yes. But I do remember that I completed fourth grade at 99. Took the bus and whatnot to -

MN: And you did that by yourself?

DW: No I actually went with my father because he must have been going to work or something. We went together, yes.

MN: Now what was your recollection of - -how was the Soundview houses, other than physically, different from Rogers Place to a fourth or fifth graders imagination?

DW: Well, the whole complex of friends changed. I didn't have the same little intimate group that we had from the building in Rogers Place.

MN: Right. Because you had a much bigger building.

DW: Well we had buildings then.

MN: Right.

DW: We had the whole - -and these were not - -these were only seven stories.

MN: they were seven stories right.

DW: We lived on the fifth floor, 5E, actually right around the corner from Yaphet Kotto, if you know Yaphet.

MN: You know the actor Yaphet Kotto? He was on Homicide. He was the star of Homicide. It was a great TV series.

DW: He grew up there. He was a few years older. Guillards then. But what we had in that project was the same kind of people looking out for each other.

MN: Now did it feel different being in a multi-racial place than being in an all Black place?

DW: I think I noticed that later, the fact that, wow - -it was just kind of a feeling of wow, that 99 was pretty special and pretty intense. I can remember some of the kids and how ready they were to learn. I mean ready physically, they looked like they were well-fed, well-dressed, clean, and ready to sit down and get the books. Now when I got to P.S. 107, it was a totally different population. I remember having friends of all different backgrounds. And because the projects at that time, we had Jewish families, I remember having a good friend whose parents were from Russia.

MN: Right.

DW: We had middle-class families, and then we had families that were poorer, and then we had families that were poorer than us --

MN: Right.

DW: who lived upstairs, who were on welfare.

MN: Right.

DW: We were on welfare for about 6 months like that, during that transition. And I can remember the welfare agent coming and assessing, doing the assessment, and that kind of thing.

MN: I just want to stop for a second because I have to go to the bathroom.

BREAK IN TAPE

MN: You know it's interesting, because Princess and I were noticing that your description of these childhood years almost seems like a magical time.

DW: Yes, the most magical part of it was the fact that we could go away to the beach in New Jersey every summer. My mother would pack the largest suitcase I've ever seen for two or three weeks. She would try not to tell us we're going too early, but she would be ironing the clothes and so we'd know - -my brother and I - -my older brother and I, we knew what was going on so we would pretend so that she wouldn't think we were getting too excited. And then you'd leave early in the morning, go to Penn Station. I mean the old Penn Station.

MN: Right.

DW: Which was a magical place in itself.

MN: And so you'd go by subway to Penn Station.

DW: Yes.

MN: And then Penn Station you'd pick up a train for New Jersey?

DW: Yes, and we would recite all the stops: Perth Amboy - -my brother and I would recite the stops and sing about the weather.

MN: Wait a minute, you did this by yourselves, the kids?

DW: No, no, no. We were little.

MN: Oh you were little [laughter]

DW: Yes my youngest brothers don't know about this. They were just in the making, but this was the house.

MN: Right.

DW: The house that we - -yes that's our house.

MN: you know what's fascinating is there's a whole picture book to be done on African-American beach resort communities, because one other family we interviewed, the Ramsey - -she went to a section of Rockaway with a number of bungalows that rented to Afro-Caribbean families and there was a two block section there. So this experience of going to beaches was more common?

DW: I don't know, you were telling me something that I don't know. I know a lot of African-Americans who aren't really too intrigued by the beach.

MN: Right.

DW: It doesn't really mean that much. People who do live right on the Rockaways and don't go to the beach,

MN: No.

DW: That wasn't our experience. And for us we had someone who actually built those houses.

MN: Wow.

DW: It was part of the family. It didn't have a **menapees***, in fact it had an outhouse.

MN: Right.

DW: If you know an outhouse.

MN: You didn't have a running toilet in the house.

DW: Exactly, yes. We were given the [unclear] in a big tin tub. We would put on some kind of a head covering, get some pots, and go out and pick blueberries. And then my grandmother would make the best blueberry cobbler ever out of blueberries. This would be an outing for us as kids.

MN: Right. Now how long would you go to - -would it be a couple of weeks?

DW: Yes about a couple of weeks.

MN: Now you also went to Orchard Beach.

DW: Yes, now [laughs]. Yes Orchard Beach was after we moved to Soundview. After we moved to Soundview that became our beach.

MN: Okay so before that it was trips to New Jersey.

DW: It was, the magical trips to New Jersey. Yes, magical trips to New Jersey.

MN: Right.

PO: What beach was near your building?

DW: Was it South Shore. I see it was near Mt. Marmus, Pinebrook, Red Bank. Those were the main cities. Now I'm not sure what the name of the [unclear]

MN: It would be interesting to track that down because I'm sure you could with a little research.

DW: Well what I'm told is the area has been largely destroyed. The sand apparently is good for construction. The sand is shipped to Saudi Arabia for building. [laughter]

MN: Sure, oh okay. So your historic resort was turned into a sand pit.

DW: Another magical part about this, Mark, was that the train would go right by. Down the road, we'd go out on the road and watch and sing as this train passed us by. This is something else my brother and I would do. Somebody had a horse, and that was a magical thing to us as well that this guy - -

MN: Now speaking of horses, were there any horse-drawing merchants near Rogers Place? Do you remember any -

DW: No.

MN: Any markets you remember?

DW: Oh yes absolutely, absolutely. There was - -I have a vague memory of a trolley car.

MN: Right, right.

DW: Very vague. No horse-drawing anything.

MN: No horse-drawing or anything but what about [crosstalk] markets?

DW: Were there outdoor markets you went to?

DW: The market was that Simpson Street.

MN: Right the Simpson Street Market.

DW: That was a fantastic place. The thing I remember most about it was a huge guy with pickles. Wooden barrels of pickles. Those pickles were probably my downfall because I try to stay away from a lot of salt now, but can you imagine we had these huge pickles.

MN: [unclear]

DW: They were sour. Some of them were extremely sour. A couple of them were dill, some were partly and you had a choice and they were all these barrels. But that's where you did your shopping for fresh produce. But I remember the dill.

MN: Right. [laughter]

DW: I remember the pickles, but yes, that was a wonderful place, the markets. Down on Simpson Street, there was Soundview, there was Southern Boulevard, the Five and Ten stores.

PO: The Five and Ten stores, what do you mean?

DW: They were called Woolworths. Those were the names of Woolworth's, where the sit-ins took place just a little bit later. Because you could sit there and have a sandwich or something. And also the Horn & Hardarts. You remember the Horn & Hardarts?

MN: Oh yes the Automats. They were in the Bronx too? I only remember –

DW: Well see my grandmother also made my childhood memorable and magic, because she worked as a domestic for a pretty well-known Russian-Jewish pianist, as a domestic on the West Side of Manhattan. And do her wages, I think she spent most of them either putting it aside for her grandchildren, or taking me around to all the cultural things in New York.

MN: Did you go to museums a lot?

DW: I went to every place that my grandmother considered cultural and enjoyable. I went to opera, ballet. I went to Radio City Music Hall. We went to, yes, museums. We went to The Botanical Gardens, she loved the flower show. So I was like her companion for [crosstalk].

MN: Did your brother take advantage to this at the same degree?

DW: I was the oldest.

MN: Oh you were the oldest.

DW: I got more of it than anybody. [laughs]

MN: Right, right. Now you became kind of a scientist, with that sort of interest. Were there any things you remember about science that - -where did that interest come from?

DW: Well I think it was not so, maybe it was science, but science more peripherally.

What I really like was this whole idea of this cultural diversity as the idea of being able to be of help to people. I thought to get that, medicine would be the most logical way to do that.

MN: Did that come from a family tradition do you think? Or was it constant things you saw around you?

DW: I liked dance and when we got to Soundview, what was that Westchester Avenue and Boynton, there was a ballet school. But my mother couldn't really afford to send me. I knew she couldn't, but I really liked dance. And so I remember that maybe when I was about 9, maybe it was right around this transition from Rogers Place to Soundview, I was having this dilemma. Should I be a doctor or a dancer. And then I figured, well being a doctor you could be more helpful.

MN: Now at 9 years old, and this is in the 1950's when women are not exactly to aspire that high, and here you are at 9 years old and you want to be a doctor?

DW: As I told you, my mothers family, and we would see them regularly. My grandmother was a great cook. Cooked anything and everything. That's what she did for a living as well, but then she would exercise that expertise with us.

MN: Right.

DW: And we would have these huge family gatherings. The house was such that the third floor, when you came into a door, there was this long hallway that led into the other apartment where my aunt lived and various people. But it was a wonderful place for kids to run up and down this hall, it was huge. It severed her part from - -but anyway, she would have us over and then people would talk to me about going to school and education. They never gave me a sense in my age aspirations should be limited, ever.

MN: So you're a 9 year old girl that's told shoot for the stars. You could be a doctor.

DW: Well they just felt that education was key. I got that message without them even being direct. It was just their appreciation was something that was obvious to me, and I was studious anyway, so the combination just allowed me to think, I'll keep going with it.

MN: And your teachers in school were generally all supportive.

DW: Yes, I was like a model student. I didn't challenge. My youngest brother, he challenged. Very bright, but he didn't accept everything he was told. [laughs] He challenged those teachers.

MN: Right.

DW: And my mother would go in school, and I remember one situation that she was talking about. This was his French teacher, and my brother and this French teacher had some kind of a disagreement, and my mother went into school and the teacher was

getting all excited, and apparently Mark was getting excited too. And my mother said to the two of them, you know the two of you need to settle down. [laughs] But it was kind of a challenge, but I didn't - -the teacher to me was someone who deserved and got the utmost respect.

MN: Right. Now were you ever made fun of by other students for listening?

DW: No, no.

MN: You never got any negative?

DW: No, never. Not that I can ever recall, they just knew who I was and that's the way they accepted it.

MN: And you were fully accepted for who you were in all these environments.

DW: Yes we lived in the projects; I went to across the street to the public school right into junior high school. We walked to that junior high school, and then we took a bus to James Monroe, and after that, the train to college. I think there was some provision in the projects where I had to show I was attending college full time for my mother to get whatever rent she way paying.

MN: Right. You weren't working.

DW: I wasn't working, so I would always show that proof. But everyone assumed that I would continue to go onto school. They didn't necessarily tell me what my options were about the colleges I could choose. Now yes there was some negativity. I remember one history professor in James Monroe, when I told him yes I wanted to be a doctor, and he didn't think that was possible. I think it was more a sexist remark than it was racist, but he thought that the two women who were telling him that, it just wasn't within his vision

that women would do this. But I'm pretty sure that Brenda Marino went on to be a doctor, I'm pretty sure she did. I'd be surprised if I heard that she didn't. I think he said something about I would be a nursery school teacher or something like that. But it was very derogatory –

MN: Oh boy.

DW: And I was one of his best students. But it was more because his vision was limited.

MN: Yes.

DW: And so that meant that they weren't really encouraging us to think beyond the city colleges or other opportunities for education. We all thought Either Brooklyn or City College; those were the options, or Queens. That was it.

MN: Now when you were in Soundview, were you in any extracurricular activities in the community?

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DW: Now we went to camp even before we moved, I believe. We also went to Crotona Park to the pool. I remember we did that. But in Soundview, the Soundview Community Center was run by Iris Noble. You know about her?

MN: No.

DW: You know Gill Noble.

MN: Yes.

DW: Okay.

MN: That's his mother?

DW: Yes.

MN: Wow. Gill Noble from Positively Black.

DW: Anyway, she directed this community center. And so there were activities during the summer, all kinds of arts and crafts, ceramics, I'd never done ceramic. Making lanyards, day camp. They had a wonderful day camp teacher, instructor one summer. We kept in touch for years afterwards. My mother became a Girl Scout Leader. I was a part of the troop and she was a co-leader with a white woman. Because the house was on Metcalfe Avenue which were moderate income too, but they were more private houses rather than projects.

MN: Right.

DW: But I think she lived there, but some of these pictures are from the girl scouts. And that was a very integrated group as well. Some of the girls next door, lived next door from our house or - -came from the projects, or from those little houses. We called them little houses.

MN: Now was there any negative association from the projects when you moved there. You know, you're from the projects? Any stigma that you can recall?

DW: Well at Monroe, I remember again I was in the 1 classes, I think I was in 12-1 and then I was actually getting ready to graduate. We always had school lunches. When I learned what my mother's income was, I remember I was at City College, and I took a sociology class and there was this sociology book called Blooming Selznick. So I read it, came home and showed my mother and said you know mom we're poor. [laughter] It says in this book. So we always - -from 107 [unclear] too, I had a lunch pass. I didn't

feel any problem with that, because I thought lunch was necessary. [laughter] I had

never—

MN: I could go for that.

DW: And to me I never had a problem with lunches either. To me they were good lunches. 99, the lunches were excellent to me. You had a brown bread marmalade, they had spaghetti. I mean the lunches to me were excellent, excellent. But the teacher was very embarrassed when the monitor would come in, and I was the only person who would be handed this lunch card.

MN: This was the fourth grade.

DW: Yes I can remember her being very embarrassed about that. I felt a little strange because as you get older I guess you notice things and it's sort of - -and I don't know if I truly comprehended what it was, you know why someone would give me this [laughs], but I knew it was different, and I knew as I went on in school, the fact that there were these differences. In City College, most of the folks were white, but they were also working class.

MN: Right.

DW: They were upwardly mobile folks.

MN: Upwardly mobile working-class kids.

DW: A lot of them, their parents were taxi drivers, but they aspired to be doctors.

MN: Right.

DW: And they were extremely competitive. So I can remember the kind of tactics that they used in order to succeed. And then I went to Columbia, which was the ultra elite, the very wealthy young women. The wealthiest that I had encountered –

MN: This was at Columbia Nursing School.

DW: At Columbia Nursing School.

MN: And you [unclear] at Columbia Presbyterian?

DW: Absolutely. And it was also in the building that they've torn down now. There was a nursing residence for - -and that was my move away from home actually –

MN: Oh you were living in there –

DW: I lived there [unclear]. It was a fabulous building.

MN: How many years was that program where you were living?

DW: Two years.

MN: Two years. A two years residence program.

DW: '66 to '68, yes. I met young women who had traveled all over the world, who would then travel all over the world because that was now the late '60's and people who could afford to [laughs] became hippies [laughter] because they had money, and that's when how I understood that I could actually travel too but I had to figure out a way to do it.

MN: Right. Just now on another subject, the late '50's is a time when rock and roll was taking off. Were you aware of that? Was that happening around you?

DW: Well I was aware of Frankie Lymon and I heard the rock and roll. I heard all the music. I definitely heard all the music. But your study about it coming from, you call--

MN: Morrissania, yes.

DW: Yes I didn't realize that was a main of that section. I didn't realize that music was emanated from there and grew up form there.

MN: Yes.

DW: I wasn't aware of how intimately connected --

MN: Now were kids singing in the hallways at Soundview? Was it that kind of thing?

Was it visible with the guys out there serenading and trying to impress people.

DW: To me that was late. That was later when I noticed people doing that. Not in Soundview so much. Maybe if you talk to my brothers there would be something.

MN: Right. Now what about the events of the Civil Rights Movement? Was that something you were very aware of?

DW: Well in the '50's I began to hear about the sit-ins and all that, but still had these kind of restrictions in my mind about going to the South.

MN: Right.

DW: I figured that it must be a pretty awful place. [laughs] [unclear] We really weren't part of that as much as you might say. It's more when I went to college, I think, that I became aware of some of the things that were happening and people losing their lives.

MN: Did you ever join any Civil Rights organization?

DW: No not really. Not really, no. I participated - -remember when the bombing occurred in the church in Alabama --

MN: Right –

DW: that we went to a memorial service. But I never really joined Snick or I knew about them but I didn't really - -to tell you the truth I think I was aware of them, and I was aware that I had a choice about this, but I didn't think, as studious as I was, I wasn't someone who could get away with not studying. And I didn't think that there was anyway to move away from where I was other than to continue to at this proceeding that I was doing.

MN: Now did you see yourself as that this was in part motivated by your desire to move into better circumstances?

DW: Well in some ways, yes, because I could see that some of my friends, young women, were being distracted. It was a time when, I think in the 9th grade, Payton Place came out.

MN: Right. Yes I remember that.

DW: Payton place, okay. And I kind of wanted to remove myself from that because I could see that you could get stuck there, and some of the young women did. Now some of the women in those pictures, extremely bright. But they fell by the wayside.

MN: Yes, did some of them have children? So they had babies in high school?

DW: Yes. And very –

MN: Even younger.

DW: [unclear] I just knew that instead of going on with schooling, these women now with multiple babies to take care of, and not necessarily anybody to help them with that.

So they were stuck there in Soundview, and that's not a place you really wanted to be stuck in.

MN: Right.

DW: It's ideal for your pre-adult years, but after that it was time to figure out what to do with your life.

MN: Right. Now did it ever come a point where Soundview became somewhat dangerous.

DW: Of course.

MN: That was later after the 60's.

DW: Yes it was not that late when we were growing up.

MN: Right. Now when did you decide to join the Air Force? What year was that?

DW: Well after nursing school a friend and I, a friend from a working class family in Boston, a Polish family, decided that we wanted to head out West. And so we got out stuff together. My family actually traveled out to Boston, met her family, and we made our sojourn out to - -I thought we would stop maybe by Colorado. She wanted to keep going, so we ended up in San Francisco, got nursing jobs there. Worked all night on the night shift. At that time, nurses were - -there was a surplus of nurses.

MN: Really?

DW: Oh yes. So if you were a new grad, you had to work nights or evenings. So we worked nights, that became a drag, working nights. I'm not a night person, I'm more early, but there was no opportunity for me to do that. So we talked to this Air Force

person, and found my way into the Air Force. First in Texas, and that was not something I desired. [laughs]

MN: Right. The South. You found yourself in the South.

DW: Yes, well the training was in Texas for the Air Force. And I think for the Army it was in Alabama, and with that I wasn't having anything at Alabama. And Texas was not much better, I'm sorry to say. But it was only for a year, maybe a two year period. And then if you wie-opt, you signed up for another year, you had a possibility of being sent overseas.

MN: Now when all this was going on, what was your sense of Vietnam? Was this something laying on you? Was it something you knew a lot about?

DW: Who knew a lot about it? We were being lied to. We're learning that now. My sense is it seems to make sense for a young man, it was mostly young men then, to opt to go to Canada. But that was not an option in my family. We had been taught that respect for God and country, those were the primary things and what's hard is that I don't think my brothers could choose to make that decision, having this background. My brother who went away was an Eagle Scout. Has a picture of him shaking Hubert Humphrey's hand. I think parents to the best for their kids, and this was the way my mother believed. And thanks to the [unclear] education has come afterwards, unfortunately.

MN: Wow, so there was this deep identification of American and its promise in a sense that your family showed that Black people could be part of this.

DW: Right.

DW: So we should accept our obligations.

DW: But I think to some extent also, we always have the newspaper, always have the Daily News primarily, and you could see that those soldiers who were killed in Vietnam couldn't be buried in their local cemetery because they were Black. So I saw that. So there was this big contradiction, and so you do think about some of the choices that you make. I really did think to some extent that if I'm the oldest of five and I have four younger brothers, they're going to choose those brothers to be sent over there, so maybe I should go and I would have a better chance.

MN: Right.

DW: But it didn't really work that way because I hadn't been in the Air Force that long when he was killed.

MN: Wow and was he in the Army?

DW: He was in the Army.

MN: In Pittsburgh?

DW: yes, yes. He had gone to Bronx Community College, and then I think decided that he was the tallest the strongest and would be the best prepared. My oldest brother was working at the time and so the Army left him alone because he was helping to support the family. So you know, yes, it's hard. I was aware, but once I was in the Air Force, I couldn't really protest.

MN: Right. Now was this sort of –

DW: Although I did think about it.

MN: Was your - -was there a moment when you had a kind of political or intellectual awakening around all these issues?

DW: I think it was part of my education, as I continued to be educated, and continued to go to graduate school, continued to learn to think critically as part of that - -more graduate school education.

MN: So what led you from nursing to cultural anthropology, and when did you make this transition. It's not the kind of thing you see everyday. I've interviewed many people who were nurses which was seen as a, from working class communities, a very good occupation for a woman, but you're the only one who made the transition into being a professor of anthropology.

DW: Right. I think when I was growing up that, late '50's early 60's, the choices were very limited, even though my family was telling me - -

MN: Right -

DW: [unclear] a different message to me. But I think I maybe did some kind of a reality check and also realized that chemistry was not my best subject. I can remember being very disheartened with college chemistry and to see the benefit of going to school after open enrollment, was that there were remedial programs in place to help those whose backgrounds were not that great. Now my reading skills and reading comprehension were always superior, not so with my mathematic skills. I would have benefited a great deal by having some of that remedial programming around mathematics, but that wasn't to be had at that time. So I struggled because I was taking these science courses which was not my course, when I should have been taking more of the literature courses where I would get better than A's.

MN: Now, but was there - -you were a nurse for what?

DW: Ten years.

MN: Ten years. Did you start taking other course while you were still working? Or was it an epiphany like you said - -

DW: No there was a transition. I worked, like I said, I worked at a nurse clinic at the old hospital for joint diseases and the women that I worked with were very influential in a lot of ways. We did things like, I would be the organizer and I discovered the Alvin Ailey Dance Company for example, so I would organize that trip to City Center, which I knew about from my grandmother. But we also talked about our careers, and we were part of a nurse clinic, and it was a small group. But I had an opportunity to think about what I could do. I started taking courses at The New School in Psychology. [unclear] but they were kind of a revelation because it was really a time for me to really think about what this education might mean, and what you might do with it all over again. I was thinking that I would do more of Far Eastern since I'd been to Japan, but I didn't want to go that far away from where I was living if I would still be working, which I was. So I went down to lower Manhattan in Chelsea, and NYU was close to there so that's where I ended up going and I found someone who was teaching Middle Eastern. He was teaching at the colleges in the Middle East, discovered that I could be a good student again because I had to kind of try it out first after this long hiatus, and got rewarded for my efforts, found ways to go a]back full-time, became an anthropology graduate student. Had the GI bill to help with funding as well as scholarships to study Arabic first.

MN: Wow.

DW: So I studied Arabic and then did my field work in Yemen. That's where I did my dissertation on [unclear] Identified Groups in Vienna.

MN: Wow.

DW: And I lived there for about 2 years. Yes it was fascinating.

PO: [unclear]

DW: Yes, now this is going back to the early '80's now, so this is a while back. Yes, I had to speak Arabic because they didn't speak English, but now I could probably keep it up. I came back to New York at almost [unclear] delis [unclear] [laughs]

PO: Did they speak Arabic with you?

DW: I'm not fluent anymore, but it had to be done because [crosstalk]

MN: Now were there any friends from your old neighborhood who went this path? Or anything remote?

DW: Yes actually, anything remote. I have a good friend in [unclear]. Unfortunately I did lose contact with most of the folk from the Soundview area, but at City College I met a woman who was intent on being an M.D. She went the route of being a Phd in psychology first, she then got her M.D. Went to Morrissania High School, and led a kind of similar life in that her - -she was sheltered from the street life as well. I don't feel, I grew up in New York, but I'm not a street person. That was similar to her experience. So she is an M.D. today, in fact she's here in New York actually in charge of women's programs involving AIDS. And like I said, there's a reunion in Soundview every year. There's a fella that I met, I'd have to e-mail you his name, he says he wants to do an oral history of Soundview, and he made it into professional [unclear]

MN: Now is this is - -when you say a Soundview reunion, this is a Soundview houses reunion, or a Soundview neighborhood reunion?

DW: It's the Soundview neighborhood.

MN: Wow. And when does it take place?

DW: I think it's the last Saturday in July every year.

MN: If you could get me that information because this whole reunion phenomenon in the Bronx is fascinating. There's an Old Timer's Day in Crotona Park [unclear] from Morrissania that draws about 5,000 people. There's a Patterson Houses reunion.

DW: Oh wow.

MN: And I never knew about this. How many people come to the Soundview?

DW: Hundreds, hundreds. It's huge, it's huge.

MN: Is it multi-racial or?

DW: Multi. Because there were people who were talking to my brothers who went to school there before we did, and of course it was all white before.

MN: Right.

DW: So they were there talking about things that would be [crosstalk]

MN: What are you - -as an anthropologist what - -I grew up in Crown Heights, and to my knowledge there's not a Crown Heights reunion. There's high schools reunion from my old high school that are huge. But what do you think creates this reunion phenomenon. What is?

DW: Maybe the multiplicity of it. The variations, because they were talking about little league baseball teams that predated our arrival there.

MN: Right.

DW: My brothers were too young to be a part of that group.

MN: Right.

DW: The community was in so much transition. To me it's fascinating that all these people could come together again. What they did, they moved up and out, and away, but they came back. I don't know, maybe we have to talk to the organizers. This is the first year I ever went.

MN: How long has it been going on.

DW: My brothers have been to a couple of them, so it's been going on for a while.

MN: Now these are people who remember Soundview from the 50's and the 60's.

DW: Yes.

MN: Is there something people want to hold onto about this time?

DW: Well like I said I was really encouraged when this young man came up to me and said he wanted to capture some of the stories of people who had now become professional doctors and had done well. Many of them came from the Soundview projects, but he was impressed with the fact that there's so many, because he wants to tell that story. I'm not sure what it is.

MN: Princess, okay you grew up in the Bronx. Does this seem different from the way you grew up?

PO: Yes a lot different. The things are just so different. I can't even imagine the Bronx being the way you're describing it.

DW: In what way?

PO: I mean as far as your childhood. Is that what you're talking about?

MN: Yes does it feel safe?

PO: Like when she grew up?

MN: Yes.

PO: It just seems like the movies, like what I see on TV. I don't know I can't even explain it. It's just a [unclear] that you give when you tell your stories.

DW: You know there were very popular activities that we had then. There was the Police Athletic League that had some of the sports opportunities for kids, but nothing like the organized sports now. You couldn't have been on an organized track team when I was growing up. That wasn't available.

MN: Girls have much more opportunities now in sports.

DW: Oh my goodness. Nowadays girls take it for granted. That was not the case. Like I said, we made opportunities for ourselves, but there was nowhere to really go with that.

MN: Right.

DW: There's advantages and disadvantages. The whole world is much safer and much troubled and troublesome, and unfortunately young people are going through most of that.

PO: I just feel like the morals has – like the moral values of people now are a lot different than how they were before. Like you said before everyone watched, everyone sees. Just three weeks ago, some boy - -some man brought his son to fight my brother over money for some football that he is in charge of. He couldn't afford to pay for the equipment, and because of that he brought his son to fight my brother. Like I'm sure

something like that wouldn't have happened back in the day. People's reasoning now is totally different, and it just makes me –

DW: I don't know what explains that, but a lot of the people in the projects, in our building for example, because people who are more middle-class and upwardly mobile they didn't stay very long at all. They rapidly moved on, rapidly moved on. But in our building for example, there were younger couples who were just making it. There were Jewish families, like the Williams, whose father was a bus driver, but not always reliable and so they needed to have welfare. And my brothers and I had a sense that they were struggling, but if they got their welfare allotment, and they got more cheese than they needed, they would bring some down to us.

PO: Yes you see.

DW: And if my mother was making something, she would send some up to them. There definitely was the sense that you had to watch out for each other. There was definitely that sense that was communicated between people in the building, and that's something that I guess people remember.

MN: Right.

DW: They hold onto it. Because it helps them to survive.

MN: The trust and the sharing.

DW: It helps us all to survive.

PO: Someone told me three days ago, he's an old timer. He told me how times have changed here, and just two weeks ago, three weeks ago that this old woman was coming

off the bus, and that this young kid kicked her off and she fell on her face, and the bus just drove off with the woman laying there. People do crazy things.

DW: Well I don't know because I've been - -I'm a people watcher, I love the city. I go away for a while and I've been on the subways. Last week I was on the subway, and I was really impressed with the civility that I was observing between people. They offered me a seat. Not just one, this happened a few times. I just felt like a little camaraderie there when something would happen. Like someone would hold the door open or someone else. And it was not like a big thing was made of it, it was like a routine. Both of the person that got on the train, and the person that that held the door open. No one said anything, it was just done. I was impressed, the trains are cleaner, they're more orderly, they're more decorative and they're noisy and some of the noise is good because it's good music. [laughs] Maybe because I come in and go out so rapidly, I don't get to see the everyday and the every, everyday kind of behavior.

PO: You'd be very surprised how people do not care about other people.

DW: Right.

PO: They just don't. Everybody's out for themselves.

DW: Right.

PO: But it's scary.

DW: But you'll hear that phenomenon of looking out for each other, not only in new York. There's a book called All Our Kin by Carol Stacks. She talks about that too, so it's worth looking at her book.

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Interviewee: Delores Walters

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MN: Yes. Okay, well this was a very powerful experience and I don't want to keep you forever, but thank you so much for joining our project and contributing this interview.

DW: You're welcome.

MN: Okay.

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