

3-14-2005

## Washington, Valerie

Washington, Valerie. Interview: Bronx African American History Project  
*Fordham University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://fordham.bepress.com/baahp\\_oralhist](https://fordham.bepress.com/baahp_oralhist)

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Washington, Valerie. 14 March 2005. Interview with the Bronx African American History Project. BAAHP Digital Archive at Fordham.

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

Dr. Valerie Washington (VW): He has never been recognized by anyone. This past year he had someone go to the Olympics. That's how good he is.

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Wow!

Natasha Lightfoot (NL): I didn't know that. You're kidding!

MN: Natasha told me that your daughter is an actress who has had a big breakthrough when she played Ray Charles' wife in *Ray*.

VW: Yes, Kerry Washington.

MN: Could you get us a signed picture or something?

NL: She's gorgeous.

VW: Of course. She's on *Boston Legal*. She was on last night.

NL: I saw - - I was in the thing. I saw her and I think she's in the movie with Bernie Mac, right?

VW: No.

NL: She's not? Oh, I thought it was her. I swore I saw her face in that. She's not?

VW: No.

MN: Did she begin acting when she was growing up?

VW: Yes, that was her camp and after school and all that.

MN: *The Guest Who's Coming to Dinner* sounds like it should be pretty funny.

NL: With Sydney Poitier

MN: I remember that movie so vividly. [crosstalk]

MN: Okay, well, why don't we get started and - - hello, this is the 106<sup>th</sup> interview of the Bronx African-American History Project. We're here at Fordham University on March 14, 2005 with Dr. Valerie Washington who for many years was a professor of Education at Herbert Lehman College in the Bronx and has also been a lifelong Bronx resident. To get started – how did your family come to move to the Bronx? Did they move here directly from the West Indies or did they live in Harlem first?

VW: They lived in Harlem first. In fact my dad lived in Boston for a while before he came to New York City and my mom lived in Harlem and they came in the late 20s.

MN: What sort of work did your father do?

VW: He was a laborer.

MN: Did your mother work?

VW: Day work, but she was mostly home. There were seven kids. [Laughs]

MN: Where did they live in Harlem when they were in Harlem? Do you remember what streets?

VW: Edgecombe Avenue but I don't have an exact address or location.

NL: I was wondering - how did your parents meet? Did they meet on the island of Jamaica and come up? They obviously may have just come together somehow in the States.

VW: They came together in New York. They're both from an area in Jamaica called St. Elizabeth where my father lived in a little town called Ballard's Valley and my mother lived in Top Hill, which were about a mile apart but they all socialized with the same group of people here in New York and that's how they met.

MN: Was there a formal association of people from the same part of Jamaica?

VW: Not that I'm aware of, no.

MN: This was more informal ties.

VW: Just a social - - through church.

MN: What church did they belong to in Harlem?

VW: I don't know that they belonged to any.

MN: Do you know how they found the apartment in the Bronx?

VW: No, I don't. When my family lived on Wells Avenue, they were tenants in one of the buildings. When we moved to Simpson Street we were the superintendents so I think that's primarily how they got to that location.

MN: You don't have much of a memory of the Wells Avenue apartment?

VW: No memory at all.

MN: Okay, so this was on Simpson Street between where and where? What was the exact address?

VW: 1098.

MN: 1098. Is it still there?

VW: No, it's not.

MN: So this is 1098 Simpson Street?

VW: Simpson Street.

MN: What were the nearest cross streets?

VW: It was Westchester Avenue and I believe its 167<sup>th</sup> Street.

MN: When you were growing up, were there other African-American families in your building?

VW: None in the building but interestingly most of the African-American or people of color were the superintendents in the buildings.

MN: So this was a pattern that this was a neighborhood where you had a lot of black or Puerto Rican superintendents but not that many tenants in the building.

VW: There were lots of Puerto Rican tenants in the building, a few Jewish tenants in the building. The superintendents on one side of us were African-American. On the other side were Irish so it was an interesting dynamic.

MN: Was the ethnic mix in the neighborhood a friendly one or was there tension.

VW: It was a very friendly mix, very friendly.

MN: What is your recollection about sort of the street life of Simpson Street growing up?

VW: Everything took place on the street. There was playing ball on the street, hopscotch on the street, playing in the backyards. The backyards were like the playgrounds of today. During the summer it was playing in the school yard and there were not really day camps but the schools were open to provide kids with lunch and there were a few games – board games, knock hockey, some tournaments between schools.

NL: I had a question about the mixture of friends that you had. What was your social circle like? Was it very African-American? Was it a mixture? Was it some that you knew of other racial or ethnic backgrounds?

VW: My neighborhood friends were primarily Puerto Rican. I had one friend who was a combination of Ukranian and another Eastern European country that I don't remember

now - I think Czechoslovakian and Ukrainian - and another friend who I wound up going to high school with who was from - - her parents were from Malta and Czechoslovakia so there was a considerable mix in that way.

MN: Would the neighborhood play tend to divide by gender? Did boys and girls play different games or everybody played everything?

VW: Girls played with girls and boys played with boys.

MN: So you didn't play stickball growing up?

VW: No, didn't play stickball. Watched the boys play stickball. [Laughs]

MN: What were the girls' games that you played in the street?

VW: Stoop ball, you know, hitting the ball against the stoop and it would fly across the street and somebody would try and get it. We played hopscotch, basically, which was called potsie. Boy, this is digging deep. [Laughter] What else? I think that was it. Girls didn't play a lot of games. If you were lucky enough to have a bicycle, you might ride a bicycle. A lot of roller skating and the streets were paved so they were smooth streets to roller skate on.

MN: What are the stores you remember from the neighborhood? Was going to the stores and going shopping and getting things - -

VW: Well, I was right near Southern Boulevard and so almost a daily activity was taking a walk on Southern Boulevard and window shopping in all the stores. There was a five and dime store - Kresky's - and all kinds of shoe stores. I don't remember the names of the shoe stores. Lots of clothing stores all up and down Southern Boulevard. Southern Boulevard was the major commercial strip. There were three movie theaters, several

bakeries, all of the stores as I mentioned so that was an area where people went to entertain themselves. There wasn't a lot to do so just going for a walk was a big event.

MN: What elementary school did you go to?

VW: I went to P.S. 20 - -

MN: Where was that located?

VW: - - which is no longer there.

MN: It's no longer there. What was the street?

VW: Fox Street was their address. It was between Fox and Simpson.

MN: What was the cross street?

VW: 167<sup>th</sup> Street between Fox Street and Simpson Street.

MN: How far from your house was that?

VW: Across the street. [Laughs]

MN: It was across the street. Was the school tracked?

VW: Very much tracked, yes.

MN: And were you placed in the top classes fairly early?

VW: I was placed in the top classes from the very beginning.

MN: Was this done through reading tests?

VW: You know, I don't know how it was done in those days but I do know they did give intelligence tests back then so I think that a lot of it was through intelligence tests.

MN: Were your parents involved in the local PTA at all?

VW: Not at all.

MN: Was reading and academics stressed in your household?

VW: Yes, definitely. We went to the library regularly. There was always tons of books around. We didn't have personal books that we owned but weekly trips to the library were key.

MN: Was there a situation where the family sat down to dinner together in your house or did everybody eat together or the work schedule didn't permit that?

VW: There was a dinner time and you better be there, which was usually five-thirty and if you weren't there by five-thirty you came and found dinner gone either in the refrigerator or in a pot on the stove but it was absolute. There was no people just wondering in any time they wanted to.

MN: Were those times where your parents would ask you about school or dinner was - - was this the setting in which academic goals were set or was it done - -

VW: There was no setting of goals. There was an assumption that you were going to school, you were going to learn, you were going to do your work, and you were going to bring home good grades. There was no discussion. [Laughter] That was not an option.

Brian Purnell (BP): What level of education had your parents received? I noticed you said your father was a laborer.

VW: Yes, which had nothing to do with his education actually because he was the oldest of I believe eleven children and when he came here it was for higher education, which he never wound up doing and that was the kind of work he was able to do.

MN: Did he work in the Bronx at all or mostly in Manhattan?

VW: No, mostly in Manhattan.

MN: Was he a union member.



VW: I don't think so. I don't think he was. He started out working as an elevator operator, which was kind of an entry job as well. He wound up being injured at one point and he started working for Port Authority and while working as a kind of watchman laborer on the docks, he drowned.

MN: Oh! And how old were you when this happened?

VW: Fifteen, yes.

NL: I did want to ask a little bit more about your parents in reference to their Caribbean background. I was wondering if the people they socialized with - - did they socialize with a lot of people that they knew from the island and did you socialize with their children? Was it kind of an environment that - -

VW: I think when we attended family things we did with the people from the island but we were very much involved with the kids on the block. When we did family things it was people from Jamaica. There wasn't a lot of that because you don't take seven children necessarily with you everywhere you go so if my father was going somewhere, he'd take maybe one or two of us and the rest would stay home. It was kind of fluid in that way also.

NL: Did they correspond a lot with their family in Jamaica or bring other family members up here?

VW: My father did but once he died we lost contact with his family completely.

MN: How important was St. Margaret's Church to your family when you were growing up? Did you go every Sunday?

VW: We went every Sunday, yes, absolutely.

NL: Was your family involved with organizations in the church?

VW: No, my mother sent us to church.

MN: So the children went to church?

VW: The children went to church.

MN: Were there any clubs or activities that you were in through the church or was it basically just going to the church?

VW: When I went to St. Anne's I was in the choir for a while, not because I could sing, but because you had to be in the choir [Laughs] and I taught Sunday school and directed the Sunday school and was involved in that way.

MN: How did you feel about the level of instruction you received in P.S. 20? Were there teachers who even today stand out to you as - -

VW: Absolutely. I had really excellent teachers that I had very good relationships with and I guess also when you come from a large family, they knew the family and so there was a family - -

MN: Where did you fit in the birth order?

VW: I am the third from the youngest and so the teachers in the school knew the older siblings and so, "Oh, you are the Moss child," so that was something good and they knew they could expect something good.

NL: All of your siblings had done very well - -

VW: Yes.

NL: - - at P.S. 20.

VW: Or if they hadn't been at P.S. 20 – those that had – because the older ones didn't go to P.S. 20. They were on the junior high school by then.

MN: Were there any extra curricular activities at P.S. 20 – clubs - or was it just basically just - -

VW: Just school.

MN: - - academics.

VW: That was it.

MN: Did you go to after-school programs or night centers in the schools?

VW: When I was in junior high school I went to an after-school center and I went to Junior High School 98, Herman Ritter, which was a distance from where we lived because I was in the S.P. class.

MN: Oh, so you went to that big - -

VW: Beautiful building on 174<sup>th</sup> Street, yes, and there was an after-school center in the elementary school near there, which I attended.

MN: When you were going to Herman Ritter, how many other black students were there in the school?

VW: Not many. Not many at all. As far as the S.P. classes go, there may have been three or four of us and the other black kids – as opposed to S.P. – were in like the 14 exponent or the 13 exponent. That was a sad situation so the tracking was evident even then.

MN: Was Herman Ritter within walking distance?

VW: No, it was a bus ride.

MN: Was music important in your household?

VW: Not really, no. I mean, there was music on Saturday while we cleaned the house.

MN: What sort of music was this? Just from the radio?

VW: Just from the radio.

MN: Did your parents have records of Caribbean artists?

VW: Not at all. I don't even think we had a record player.

MN: You were going to school in the middle of some of the Rhythm and Blues and Doo-Wop. Is that something that got your attention?

VW: Absolutely, sure, especially when I was in ninth grade and beginning high school. That was when it was really peaking I guess.

MN: Did you ever go to the night center at P.S. 99 where they had the - -

VW: No.

MN: Were there any organizations in the community? You had mentioned later the Boys and Girls Club in Kips Bay. Was there anything like that that you went to for cultural activities in your community?

VW: No, I think where I was was kind of in a - - I don't want to say no man's land, but I think it was kind of a gap between 99 and the community activities there and where I was. There really wasn't that sense of community and people doing things together.

MN: Over time was there a white flight phenomenon in your block or did that population remain pretty much the same when you were a teenager as when you first moved there.

VW: I think it was gradual until the drugs hit and then it became - -

MN: When is your recollection? When you talk about drugs you mean heroin?

VW: Yes.

MN: When did heroin hit your block? Can you pinpoint it?

VW: Yes, I would say '52, '53.

MN: That early?

VW: Yes. I remember boys when I was in junior high school who were beginning to get into that.

MN: These were specific people?

VW: Yes.

MN: What was the sign of heroin addiction that you would perceive, you know, in somebody?

VW: You'd see people sitting falling asleep, you know, just sitting on the stoop. A lot of stoop activities and somebody would just be nodding out or somebody would say, "Oh, so-and-so is involved in drugs. Stay away from them."

MN: Did this produce robberies or any deterioration in the general level of safety or was it more of something that just affected the people who were strung out?

VW: I didn't perceive it until much, much later.

MN: Hi Harriet. Okay, let me just - -

VW: Do you want me to move over?

NL: No, you can stay there. [Tape skips]

VW: ...of the noticibility of drugs. I don't think it was until later that the thievery and the people feeling that it was impacting on the neighborhood - - it took a few years to reach that point. I would say early 60s.

MN: Was there a gender element in the drugs?

VW: Yes.

MN: This was only guys?

VW: It was only guys and there was a very strong sense of protection over women that this is not something that you give your girlfriend or you offer your sister.

NL: How do you think that those drugs ended up in the community in the first place?

Were there any kind of circulating theories?

VW: At the time I didn't have a clue. I know that there some associations with music, you know, jazz musicians.

MN: Because there were jazz clubs in the neighborhood.

VW: Or the Latin bands also. There was the smoking of pot and those people who were foolish enough to get involved with heroin and spoiled their whole music by doing that.

MN: You talk about the Latin Music. Were there certain clubs that you were aware of growing up where Latin music was being played?

VW: Well, the *Hunts Point Palace* was always a place where there were dances.

MN: Did you go those dances?

VW: Yes.

MN: How old were you when you first started going to dances at the *Hunts Point Palace*?

VW: Thirteen, fourteen.

MN: Really?

VW: Yes. I went with my friends' parents so it was okay. I was in a protected environment.

MN: Who were some of the artists you saw there?

VW: Tito Puente, Orlando Marin, oh gosh. Those are the two that stand out.

MN: Orlando Marin?

VW: Right.

MN: M-A-R-I-N?

VW: Right. Joaquin [inaudible] and his brother.

MN: Did you learn how to dance Latin?

VW: Absolutely. [Laughter] Still dance Latin and love to dance Latin.

MN: Did you ever go to any other clubs other than *Hunts Point Palace*?

VW: *The Audubon Ballroom*.

MN: *The Audubon Ballroom* in Manhattan.

VW: There was a club on Westchester Avenue. I think the *Tropicana* club- -

MN: The *Tropicana*, yes.

VW: - - but I never did go there. It was kind of I think for real adults or I don't know but somehow it wasn't in the - -

MN: Were you aware of *Club 845* when you were in the - -

VW: No, I was not.

MN: You were more aware of Latin music than jazz?

VW: Yes, the neighborhood was more Latin than it was African-American.

MN: What year did you go to high school?

VW: 1953.

MN: Which high school did you attend?

VW: Washington Irving. That's the one time they let me out of the Bronx.

BP: Was that your parents?

VW: No, I was just kidding because at one point somebody had mentioned in an interview - because I had spent so much time in the Bronx – that I did leave the Bronx once - that I went to Washington Irving. [Laughter]

MN: How did you find that school?

VW: It was a specialized school. You had to specialize in one of their areas and I chose home economics because it was a way of getting there from the Bronx. Otherwise, you could not go. It was not a district high school.

MN: The alternatives were - -

VW: Morris.

MN: - - Morris or Walton.

VW: Right.

MN: Or Evander?

VW: I don't think so. I don't think Evander was a choice.

MN: It was really just Morris or Walton or else some vocational high school. Central Commerical or something like that.

VW: Right, but that's also specialization. Interestingly, I don't ever remember anyone ever allowing us or introducing us to the exams to go to those schools at the time.

NL: And you're saying that's generally for your school or for specific students.



VW: Well Science in Stuyvesant, you needed to take an exam to get there. It always seemed odd to me that coming from an S.P. class, which was an academically gifted advance class, why there was never an indication, “Well you can take a test for Stuyvesant or Science.” Somehow that just passed me by.

Harriet McFeeters (HM): What middle school did you go to?

VW: Ninety-eight, Herman Ritter.

BP: Herman Ritter.

NL: When you started high school, I was wondering if the kind of ongoing civil rights struggles and kind of national racial tensions - - did that affect you or kind of contribute to any sort of tension in the high school environment.

VW: There was not that tension. Washington Irving is a huge high school if you are familiar with it at all and students came from all over the city there whether it was for their straight academic or commercial or some specialization and probably the one point of tension was in my junior year. We wanted to join the Arista, which is the honor society, and although we were home economics and academic majors, the school authorities tried to say that we could not be in Arista because we were not straight academic and when I say quite a few of us were people of color so it seemed as though that was the backlash at the time and we did win the battle and say, “Well, although we are home economics, we are academic and our grades meet the standards and so we should be accepted.” That was the only point at which there was any tension around it.

MN: Were there gangs in your neighborhoods that you were aware of or was this again something that guys were in much more than women.

VW: I think the guys were in the gangs and there were gang fights that you knew about and there were some girls in social clubs that were kind of connected to the gangs but didn't involve in the fighting.

MN: Did you ever feel physically threatened walking home from the subway at night in the 50s?

VW: No.

MN: Any hour of day or night - -

VW: Well, you couldn't stay out 'til any hour. That was, you know - -

BP: I'm curious - - if you could maybe explain some of the values or boundaries that your parents might have set around you and your siblings.

VW: Sure. We usually had to be in by twelve or one o'clock. Even my brothers had to be home by that time. Very seldom was it three or four o'clock in the morning. That would be New Year's. [Laughs] That would be very, very special but there were really curfews where you didn't just stay out. There was no sleeping over anybody's house. You came home and slept in your own house in your own bed regardless of what the situation was.

MN: Were you allowed to date?

VW: Yes, that was not a problem.

MN: If you were dating someone, did the boy have to come into the house and sit down and talk to your parents?

VW: Yes, he had to come and pick me up and meet - - by this time my father had passed but he had to come and pick me up at the house and meet my mother. There was no meeting down the street.

NL: How did you meet Mr. Washington?

VW: I guess that kind of jumps a whole period in my life because I was married previously. That's why I hesitated there.

NL: Okay, well if you feel like commenting on your first marriage - -

VW: Sure, that's not a problem. I met my first husband at Lehman College, which was then Hunter College in the Bronx.

MN: Okay, so you went from Washington Irving to - -

VW: Hunter College in the Bronx - -

MN: - - in the Bronx.

VW: - - which then became Lehman College. Then, I met my second husband - - we were divorced after seven years and my second husband happens to be my high school friend's brother. We met after many years and we started dating.

MN: You had mentioned that Simpson Street started to really change in the early 60s and that's when it became a more tense, dangerous environment. How did you notice that and what was the form did that deterioration take? Let me ask one other question. When did you start noticing landlords neglecting their buildings - not painting or not fixing things?

VW: I think I probably moved before I really recognized that. I think we have to go back in time also. When you think of Simpson Street as a time when you say about

curfews - - nobody had keys and so the door was left open until the last person came in and that last person locked the door.

MN: So there was a presumption there - -

VW: Of safety.

MN: - - that you didn't have a front door lock.

VW: Right, and nobody was going to intrude on your home and so the door was left open.

MN: And this is in the late 40s and the 50s.

VW: No, I'm talking about the 50s.

MN: In the 50s - -

VW: In the 50s.

MN: - - people kept their doors open.

VW: Yes. I don't think I had a key the whole time I was home.

MN: Was there informal block watching?

VW: No. Well, informal in the sense that - -

MN: Like people looking out the window.

VW: - - if you wanted to do something that you shouldn't be doing, you better go where nobody knows you. Go five blocks away where somebody isn't going to knock on your mother's door and say I saw your daughter doing this.

NL: That was something that was practiced regularly?

VW: Absolutely.

NL: Your neighbors definitely reported on your behavior on the street.

VW: Yes, and so you better not have someone - -

NL: Acting out of line.

VW: Yes.

HM: When you went to junior high school, were you living on Simpson Street?

VW: I was still on Simpson Street. I went there because I was - -

HM: Did you walk over?

VW: No, we took the bus. I took the bus.

MN: Was Washington Irving a good educational experience for you?

VW: Excellent.

MN: You had academic courses and then the home economics?

VW: Right.

MN: In those days, what did home economics mean? This was, again - - this generation has never experienced home economics.

VW: It was anything from nursing care – home nursing care – to preparing simple meals, setting the table - -

HM: [inaudible]

VW: Yes, that kind of economics. Knowing where the dishes go, where the silverware goes.

HM: Was there sewing? Did you have sewing?

VW: We didn't have so much sewing as the more of that part.

MN: Did they teach you how you should act with men?

VW: No, they did not, no.

MN: How to take care of a husband?

VW: No, it was more home care. There was like a little apartment set up within the school so you could learn how to dust and vacuum and set the table and wash the dishes. To this day I remember the order in which you're supposed to wash things – glasses, silverware, china, and then pots.

MN: Really? Glasses, silver, china - -

VW: And then pots.

HM: Because of the grease.

VW: The grease.

NL: That's how I wash things but I didn't know.

VW: You didn't know. [Laughter]

MN: So you didn't take that course at Yale?

NL: No.

MN: Home economics?

NL: My mom taught me that so maybe she took a course while she was in Antigua.

VW: There's a science to it. It just doesn't happen.

HM: You asked a question about did they teach you how to relate - -

VW: To men.

HM: - - in school. That's sort of a sexist question but anyway - -

MN: No, there's a reason. I'll explain.

HM: - - I wonder what did your mother - - did she give you guidance in that area and how did that evolve or you just sort of found out?

VW: Yes, it was more just learning as you went along. She really didn't give any guidance at all - just a frown. If somebody came in that she didn't approve of, you knew by the time you got home that night that that was not somebody who should come back again.

MN: Was it presumed in your household that all the children would go to college?

VW: No, I don't think so. I don't think it was presumed that everyone would because the older children did not and I don't think there was much of an awareness of the availability. Up until recently, my older brother did not realize how inexpensive it was to go to college. He went to the School of Aviation Trades and worked as an airline mechanic for thirty years but he did not know that there was that kind of access and for these two young ladies - - I got a letter from Hunter. It's going to be my fiftieth anniversary and they said in the letter, "Please recall that you got four years education for under a hundred dollars with three books," and I get goose pimples thinking of it now. Tuition was twenty-two dollars or some crazy thing and they loaned us our books.

MN: How did you find out about Hunter? Was it a teacher at the school who pointed you in this direction?

VW: Yes. By that time - - and at Washington Irving they had better guidance.

MN: This was the guidance counselor who did this or teachers?

VW: It was a guidance counselor and I think informally among ourselves we learned that we could go to one of the city colleges.

MN: Did you have any friends who went to college out of the city who went away to school? Or pretty much everybody who went to college went to one of the CUNY schools?

VW: I had a cousin who went to MIT and that was because he had been in the Air Force and he was able to use the GI Bill.

MN: Did a lot of the men in your family go into the military?

VW: That was a right of passage.

MN: By being drafted or they volunteered?

VW: My brother volunteered who was in the Air Force. My other brother was not military minded.

MN: What year did you arrive at Hunter College in the Bronx?

VW: 1956.

MN: How long had that school been in existence at the time?

VW: I'm not sure exactly how long but it had been formally used as a U.N. meeting place when the U.N. started and also prior to that the Waves or the Wax something - - the women in the Air Force or the women in the Army used that as their base.

NL: Were there many black women considering going to college in the community or were more people opting to work?

VW: I think more people opted to work. I think maybe it depended on the campus also. At Lehman in the Bronx there were very, very few people of color – African-American or Latino.



HM: You said the university had very strict standards in those days about who they allowed to take these screening tests and you had to be in a certain ranking in your class -

VW: Yes.

HM: - - and have a certain average. Some people - - some of my friends from Vanderbilt who got in spent their first year of college in no-credit class in sort of like remedial classes at Hunter. I remember English and some other classes and then they took the regular course.

VW: Yes.

HM: I don't know if that was integration purposes but the city university really used to be a tough place to enter academically for anybody.

MN: When you went to Hunter, did you have in your mind that you were going to become a teacher?

VW: No.

MN: So you were going to go to college and then see what happened?

VW: I was a science major. I wanted to do something in the sciences but I had no idea what I could do and I wound up becoming a teacher because that's what women did and I didn't have anybody in my major who could say to me, "As a biology major, you can do this and this and this."

MN: If Valerie Moss were somehow transmitted thirty-five years ahead and was going to college, would you have been a scientist?

VW: Yes.

MN: So you would have been a research scientist and that's what - -

VW: Or I would have gone to medical school.

MN: You would have gone to medical school. So no one - - women in the city university who were good in science were not encouraged?

VW: No.

MN: Did you ever say to somebody, "I want to go to medical school. I want to be a doctor."?

VW: No, although, there were men around me and black men who were doing it. It just never even occurred to me that that's something that I should pursue.

NL: What were most of the young black women doing? Most of the black women who were in college were going into teaching>

VW: Yes.

NL: And most of the young black women who weren't in college, what were they doing?

VW: Secretaries. Not even secretaries, really. Some kind of commercial endeavor but you couldn't even get a job as a secretary because that was a front desk, really high profile.

HM: When you were at Hunter were you aware of the fact that they were recruiting people to major in science because I know I went around the same time that you did and I was encouraged to major - - and I was a biology major also.

VW: I had no idea.

HM: At that time the government was looking for people to go into the sciences. I think it was before [inaudible] but there was a trend toward the development of sciences and actually there was some guidance, for me, to go into that field.

MN: Were African-American students at Lehman - - was there a social life of fraternities or sororities or clubs or did people socialize in a multi-ethnic context?

VW: Most of the socialization was off of the campus and if there was fraternity or sorority involvement it was off campus and not on campus. When you speak of African-Americans at Hunter at that time, picture four tables this size and the number of people that they can seat. That's how many there were.

HM: Were you in the Tuscon Overture Society?

VW: That was downtown.

MN: What about Puerto Rican or Latino students. Were they even less numerous?

VW: Less, maybe a half a dozen.

BP: Did the African-Americans who were people of Caribbean descent and Puerto Ricans form friendships?

VW: There were friendships but there were no official kinds of clubs or activities that happened.

MN: So how did you meet your first husband? Was it in a class or was it at a party or a casual social encounter?

VW: Casual social encounter on campus.

MN: Was he also from the Bronx.

VW: He was from the Bronx.

MN: From you neighborhood?

VW: No, he was from the North Bronx. He was wealthy. [Laughter]

NL: So there was an understanding that if you were from a certain part of the Bronx - -

VW: Well, he lived in his own home.

MN: He wasn't from Fish Avenue by any chance?

VW: Very close.

MN: He was very close?

VW: 223<sup>rd</sup> Street. By our standards he was - -

NL: Were there people of color already living there?

VW: Yes. That area for some reason, I don't know - when he mentioned Fish area - that area became the next area where many, many people of African-American descent lived.

MN: When you were at Hunter, at what point did you plan to become a teacher. Was this by your sophomore year or junior year?

VW: About my sophomore year because then you had to commit yourself to the whole sequence of courses and student teaching and all of those things.

MN: Did you have in the back of your mind first becoming a teacher, then becoming a principal, you know, having a career ladder within education?

VW: I wish that I could say I was that smart but I was not. [Laughs] It was enough money to get out of school, have a job, contribute to the house. That was the major - -

MN: Were most young women expecting to get married?

VW: That was why you went to college.

MN: To get a better class of husbands?

VW: I don't know necessarily a better class of husbands but I know among especially the white students, the goal was to find someone to marry even if you were in an all girls school, which seems absurd but at the time that I went to Hunter, it had just started

admitting men maybe three years before so you're talking about five thousand women

and one hundred men. That was a huge disparity.

HM: Did you join an African-American sorority.

VW: I started pledging but I never completed the pledge stage.

MN: Were you doing any student teaching while you were at Hunter?

VW: I student taught at 99.

MN: Wow!

NL: What grade?

VW: I taught in - - it was a lower grade. I think it was second grade. It was a great experience.

MN: And this was in your junior year?

VW: My senior year.

MN: Your senior year.

NL: What year was that?

VW: 1956. No, 1960, I'm sorry.

MN: If you graduated as an education major from Hunter, could you go directly into a position as a classroom teacher or did you have to go to graduate school also?

VW: No, I was completely certified and I was able to start teaching.

MN: You had to pass a state exam or a city exam?

VW: A city exam.

HM: At that time the state requirements were not that important.

MN: And the city - -

HM: It had a very difficult [inaudible] to become a teacher. The city did

MN: And you did that your senior year?

VW: Right. There was a written and then you had an oral exam also where a panel of people sat and asked you questions about teaching.

MN: When you were thinking about taking the oral, was there a sort of folk wisdom about how you had to speak and conduct yourself to make sure you passed the test.

VW: Well, you had to take a speech course at Hunter in order to do the student teaching and there your speech was kind of molded into being one that was an acceptable standard – English – and the wisdom at the time was to wear white gloves and a hat because that's what was acceptable.

HM: Because of the culture.

MN: White gloves and a hat?

VW: Yes, that's what a lady looked like.

MN: Do you have any pictures of yourself in white gloves and a hat?

VW: Sure. [Laughter] I went to church with white gloves and a hat so it was wearing your church best for an interview.

BP: I have a question. It seems like your entering the public school system at the same time and finishing college around the same time civil rights issues around education are going on in the country - - Brown vs. Board of Ed and Little Rock. How did that or did that affect you in any way or your thoughts on teaching? Was there any conversation around education in New York on those issues?

VW: I don't think I was as aware of it as I should have been. There were issues in the school later on closer to '67, '68 as my consciousness rose it created problems with my peers because there was a lack of ability to accept that I was just not another teacher because although I was a teacher of color, people did not see me as a teacher of color.

BP: Can you explain that a little bit?

VW: Sure.

BP: This is in the late 60s?

VW: This is in the late 60s.

MN: The time of the teachers' strike and - -

VW: Yes.

BP: As far as the early 50's go – mid to late 50s New York City – there wasn't that sort of reaction - -

VW: There wasn't that sense of urgency or reaction about it. I remember a couple of young people in college going south to participate in the marches and I didn't have a clue.

MN: I remember because we are in some of the same cohort that people almost tried not to talk about race. Was that true with your white friends that people sort of tried not to call attention to things racial or was that - - was there much race consciousness in the 50s?

VW: In the 50s I would say there was very little – very, very little – and it was not talked about. If you were part of a group, you were just part of a group and it wasn't expected that you would necessarily be treated any differently.

HM: Did you know anybody who had difficulty with the Board of Ed or [inaudible] and attributed to their color or their vernacular?

VW: I did not, no.

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

VW: I didn't know anybody personally but I had heard stories about that.

BP: What would be a typical story?

VW: This is the absurd. It's not even so much black vernacular but a person with a French accent taking the exam to teach French would not be given a license because they had a French accent, you know, where there was total misunderstanding about the importance of language.

MN: What was your first teaching assignment? What school was it?

VW: It was at P.S. 93.

MN: Which was located where?

VW: Off Bruckner Boulevard on Elder Avenue.

MN: Is that more Hunts Point or it's further east?

VW: It's moving towards Hunts - - it's just north of Hunts Point but east. It's south of Soundview. It's further south of Soundview.

MN: Is it south of the Bruckner or North of it?

VW: It's on the east side of the Bruckner because that's where the Bruckner runs north and south.

MN: What was the composition of the school ethnically when you were there? Was it mostly Puerto Rican?



VW: The school was mostly white, Jewish, with children bussed in from the Bronx River Projects and so it was considered a school in transition.

BP: So this is 1960.

VW: This is 1960 and that was a pejorative.

BP: What were some of the conversations going on?

VW: The fact that these bussed children now were changing the tone of the school and the bus children were more needy than the other children.

MN: And this was among the other teachers?

VW: Yes.

NL: And they were assumed to be - -

VW: Less smart because they were from the projects.

NL: And those children were generally children on color?

VW: They were generally black and Latino kids.

HM: Was that a K through 3 school?

VW: No, it was a K through 6 school.

MN: Were the teachers predominantly white in that school?

VW: I was the only black teacher.

MN: You were the only black teacher.

BP: What was that experience like?

VW: It was fine up until 1968. [Laughs]

NL: What was the turning point there? Was it the strike or were there other issues leading up to the strike?

VW: I think it was mostly the strike then because I was a strike breaker.

NL: That's what I wanted to know. You participated?

VW: I went into the school.

MN: This is one of the things and at some point we'll probably have a conference where the whole issue of the teachers' strike and its impact in the Bronx schools is raised. What are your recollections of the whole set of events leading up to the strike and the strike itself? Did this blindsided you or did you sort of see it coming?

VW: No, I sort of saw it coming because I had a very good friend who was working at - - I'm forgetting the name of the school where this controversy - -

BP: 271 in Brooklyn?

HM: 201 in Manhattan.

VW: 201.

MN: 201, I.S. 201.

VW: My very best friend was teaching at I.S. 201 and so there was lots of conversation about it and so I knew that it was coming. I was very much in favor of the idea of community control. I felt that parents needed a greater say in the schools and I thought that a lot of fear was involved on the part of the teachers and the administrators.

MN: What were they afraid of on the - - oops.

HM: Did you live in that neighborhood near 93 at the time?

VW: No, I lived on 221<sup>st</sup> Street.

MN: 221<sup>st</sup> between where and where?

VW: Barnes and Bronxwood.

MN: When teachers expressed fears, what were they saying they were afraid of?

VW: It wasn't fear of being hurt but rather that parents were going to hire and fire teachers. That became the cry. "We can't let the parents make decisions about who the teachers are going to be. Parents are not qualified to make those kinds of decisions." So it wasn't fear for their safety but how can we let *those* people come into the school and tell us how to run the school.

BP: That was the phrase that they used - -

MN: *Those* people.

VW: *Those* people.

BP: Earlier you said that you were not seen as a person of color until this moment.

Could you explain that a little bit more?

VW: I think one of the - - I'll relate to you a story that may help you to understand this a little bit. I had a very good friend who was Jewish and living in Parkchester and our husbands and the two of us - we all got together. We did lots of things together. We vacationed together, you know, the closest of however friends are described. Her brother-in-law said to me one day, "How come you sound like a Jewish girl from the Bronx?" okay so seeing me in the context of their lives and not seeing me separate from their lives and then when you begin speaking out about issues and taking a stand that's uncomfortable, then people have to take a step back and realize that no, you're not just another Jewish girl from the Bronx regardless of what you wear and regardless of how you sound, that there's another dimension to you and so that was - - it became a separation.

NL: And you never really found yourself back in that same sort of place?

VW: No, in fact our friendship ended.

MN: Wow.

HM: After the strike?

VW: Yes.

NL: Wow. Did you have your own sort of epiphany as an African-American in terms of sort of an awakening of racial consciousness? Is this something you can identify as happening?

VW: I think it was gradual but one of the things that happened to me at the time was that I had the opportunity to go to Cornell one summer and study at a Black Studies institute and all of a sudden I was reading black literature and talking to people about issues that I had never talked to anybody about.

NL: What summer was that?

VW: It was either '68 or '69.

NL: Were the student demonstrations going on around that time at Cornell?

VW: That was when Cornell was at its peak. [Laughter]

NL: Because I know that students took over the administration buildings there and were pressing for - -

MN: That raises a question. When you were growing up, did you read any books about African-American history? Did you read novelists like Richard Wright or Ralph Ellison.

VW: Never knew they existed.

MN: You never - -

HM: That wasn't part of your curriculum.

MN: Is that true of you also, Harriet?

HM: I'm amazed at the similarities in - -

MN: You had grown up and going on to Hunter College in the 50s without having heard of Richard Wright or Ralph Ellison?

VW: Yes.

HM: I had heard of him but I hadn't read anything.

VW: When I pledged the sorority as a junior I began to learn a little bit about black people. [Laughs]

MN: You hadn't heard of W.E.B. DuBois or Paul Robeson?

VW: No.

HM: I had heard of him but it wasn't part of the school curriculum. It was more a thing my family talked about it

VW: And my family, being from the Caribbean, had very little knowledge so it was not something that was part of our conversation.

MN: Now this is an interesting question because you're picking up in the - even when you start coming to the school - there's resentment by the teachers of having to teach working class black children. Do you think that was there in the 50s when you were going to school or is this something that came later or was it always there? Or was it not there if you were in the top track?

VW: I think that's the key. I think if you're in the top track you're considered special and you're continually told that you're special and you're continually isolated as you're not like the others, you are special, which if you're special you keep on being special.

MN: It's almost like being honorary white or if you're in Morrisania, being honorary Jewish.

HM: And more than that, don't you think that you kind of never felt the difference between you and the other kids in the class? Did you feel like a black person as a teenager in school or did you feel as if you were just another student in the class who was competitive?

VW: By the time I was a teenager it was different because I kind of isolated myself from there and selected my own group of friends that were not part of school so I was not really - - there wasn't a social life at Washington Irving High School. My friends were outside of school.

HM: As a teacher in 93, some of the teachers probably lived in Parkchester - -

VW: Yes.

HM: - - in the projects I want to say, in the developments, and did you ever go and visit them or were you in social interaction with the teachers?

VW: Yes. There was a good social relationship - -

HM: Until the strike?

VW: - - until the strike.

HM: And you were on the wrong side?

VW: Right, yes.

HM: I remember 93 was an area where there was a middle class black community that lived in the Lafayette-Morrison apartments at that time and were you a part of the group - - there was a group of parents who were very well educated.

VW: They were my friends.

HM: I was going to ask you - - were you part of that group? Even though you didn't live there you were a teacher in the school so you - -

VW: I didn't live there but there was one other teacher who you probably know - Isabel Oliver. You know the Olivers. She was very instrumental with opening the school and I joined her.

MN: When did you become aware of the need for having African-American History in the school curriculum? Did that happen before the strike or after the strike?

VW: It was before the strike. It was gradual. I had begun doing some of that on my own and Harriet I don't know if you were in the district when they did Operation Upgrade?

HM: At the time after the strike the Board of Ed started to identify materials that reflected the African-Americans [inaudible]

VW: This was even before then. There was - -

HM: There were books and text books that came into the school to be available.

VW: There was a project I participated in, which was probably '64 or '65 called Operation Upgrade that did a lot of that.

HM: P.S. 232. Was that - -

VW: No, it was - - I can't remember his name. The superintendent who did the crossword puzzles. What was his name?

HM: Gene Malesca.

VW: Gene Malesca was the one.

MN: Did some of these white teachers who later became very bitter - - were any of them enthusiastic initially about African-American history?

VW: Yes! Yes.

HM: They were intimidated by the change in the - -

VW: The administration.

HM: - - because they didn't regard the parents as being their equals but that particular community had parents that were - -

VW: They were teachers, doctors.

HM: - - as well educated and sophisticated as the teachers in the schools so it was a very unique situation.

MN: This sounds like a pretty traumatic experience to be part of. People who you thought were friends you could trust just became unbelievably bitter.

HM: They were scared.

MN: What do you think made them that bitter?

VW: I think they felt that they were betrayed. I think now I was - - how dare I think that way? How dare I not think like they thought?

MN: How much of this – did any of it – was connected to the feeling that some of the parents were anti-semitic? Was that something that fed into that? Or that wasn't something you had in the Bronx?

VW: I never heard that, no.



HM: I don't think [inaudible]. At the same time that they had the strike and they were talking about community control, there was a lot of friction in Manhattan and in Brooklyn but the new thing that was going on that was very intimidating for the teachers, I think, was the introduction of paraprofessionals and the paraprofessionals were going to work with the teachers and they regarded the paraprofessionals as spies - -

VW: That's true.

HM: - - and so they didn't want to accept these spies coming into the classroom to see how effective or ineffective they were and that was threatening.

NL: I had a question. Did you interact - - when you were being a strike breaker and continuing to teach I was wondering how much did you interact with parents and did they have - -

VW: The parents were in the school.

NL: - - and they had a lot of input and opinions. What were they saying in response?

HM: [inaudible]

VW: I wasn't a parent yet so it was a different - -

MN: What was the picket line like? Describe the scene outside 93 and what it was like to cross that picket line, what people were saying, what was the atmosphere?

NL: What were the parents saying in response?

MN: Paint us a picture.

HM: [inaudible] break down the gate. They have to break down the gate.

VW: One of the things that had to happen was to break the chains because the doors of the school had been chained.

MN: Was this by the custodians or the teachers?

VW: Yes.

MN: The custodians were supporting the strike?

VW: Right, and so the chains had to be broken in order to get into the school. I don't remember really being abused crossing the picket line but I know that there was a great deal of anger. I wish that I could paint a wonderful picture for you of all this terrible stuff that went on. [Laughs]

MN: But nobody yelled at you or threw anything at you?

VW: No.

MN: Or you didn't get hate calls at home.

VW: I think more of that happened after.

MN: You got hate calls later?

VW: Not hate calls later but there was a lot of anger when I returned to the school.

HM: After the strike?

VW: Yes, after the strike. People did not speak.

MN: They walked by you without- -

VW: Oh, they walked by - -

BP: More passive-aggressive?

VW: Yes, very passive aggressive.

BP: And these were some of the people who you were good friends with?

VW: For eight years.

HM: That was the same experience I had.

VW: One of the things that very specifically that happened was at that time there was a big protest about the flag and pledging the flag and so people would watch me to see if I was pledging the flag.

MN: This was the protest just generally?

VW: Just generally in the United States about flag burning and protesting against the flag and so in order to get at me people reported to the Principal that I was not pledging the flag with my kids and in the auditorium I would not pledge the flag, I wouldn't mouth the words or say the words.

MN: Were there any white teachers who crossed the picket line with you in the school?

VW: No.

HM: There were some white parents though because my friend Jane was one of them.

VW: There were, yes. There were some white parents.

NL: So you were the only teacher at 93 that crossed the picket line.

VW: No, no. This other woman. There were other teachers. I think there were three of us.

HM: There were some white teachers in the community also.

VW: By that time I was no longer the only black teacher. There were maybe five of us.

NL: Okay, and you all crossed the picket line and then other than that it was parents?

VW: Yes, so it was clearly down racial lines in terms of the - -

BP: What was the school day like during the strike?

HM: Some kids came and most didn't.

VW: Most children didn't come but it was very flexible, very fluid because you'd have mixed groups of kids, different ages, and trying to do alternative curriculum and teach them about things that were going on so that they would have some understanding of what was going on.

MN: Did any of the teachers on strike try to do education outside of school to show that they were on the side of the kids?

HM: 93 had a unique situation. At the time I was working for the Board of Ed but since I lived in the Bronx, they asked me to work in the Bronx so I had the chance to see the situation in many of the schools and 93's community – the black community, black and some Puerto Ricans who lived in the neighborhood – were very much in favor of community control and they had very good questions about the quality of education.

They were supportive of the idea of integrated curriculum and upgrading the number of minority supervisors. They were really - - this was a very intellectually mature group of people but in other schools there was - - and so I think the teachers were intimidated by the fact that that community was strong and they were educated people. Many of them were civil servants and college people so the picket line there was not a strong picket line like there was at Morris High School.

VW: That's true.

MN: Let me ask a question because - - do you think that some of the white teachers in the Bronx around the city shut down after the strike and weren't as effective or as caring as they were before or do you think they were professional enough that no matter what - -

in other words, do you think that there was a morale issue in the schools with a lot of the white teachers who were angry that made them less effective as teachers?

VW: The white teachers?

MN: Yes, who opposed the strike.

HM: I think what happened was that people were galvanized - -

VW: Yes, or polarized.

HM: - - according to beliefs and their philosophies and it made it very racially tense.

VW: Very racially polarized.

MN: And it stayed that way for a long time?

HM: And UFT was a very strong provocateur.

VW: I left in 1970 so I don't know what happened after that.

NL: So you weren't a member - - were you a member of the UFT?

VW: Sure.

NL: And what was your feeling with other members in relationship to the strike? What were your interactions?

VW: Do you mean before the strike?

NL: Yes. Were there - - I guess I'm just wondering what was the dynamic within? Was there kind of a racial dynamic within UFT?

VW: There was no racial dynamic before that. I don't think there were people in positions of power within the UFT at that time but before the strike there was not a feeling of - -

MN: I guess the question I'm asking - - do you think that the strike hurt the quality of education in the schools or was it - -

HM: Do you mean immediately or long range?

MN: Both.

VW: I would say immediately no but I think long range it did. I think the polarization that started continued and there were many schools in which to this day there's a polarization and there're a lot of anti feeling against the bilingual teachers and the feeling that teachers of color are not as qualified as white teachers and so I think that it has persisted and as the numbers have grown – as it has in New York City – there was a time when the percentage was so low and not that its huge now but I think there persists this idea that black teachers are not as qualified, Latino teachers are not as qualified and forget about supervisors. A supervisor of color will be challenged immediately.

HM: But they also had a philosophy that changed in terms of standards. Like when you went to high school and I went to high school and college there were very high standards. You had to make high marks on the regents and you had to be able to pass every screening test and you had to be pecking order. Where you were in school was very important and then when I became a teacher and probably same as you, the standards sort of slipped a little bit to the point where they changed the kind of examination that they gave to become a teacher. They eliminated the Board of [inaudible]. Remember? And that's when the state became involved and to this day there's a whole different aura about it.

VW: I guess except that I would feel that in a sense it's not that the standards very often slip but that they were changed because very often the standard of measuring someone was very linear. If you didn't have a certain percentage, you were on the wrong side and you were out and it didn't allow people who had skills and who could do the job very well - - it did not allow them entry and so it wasn't just a number. Now there were other criteria that were looked at and I think that that's important. There are many people who feel that unless you had the number, there's no way that you can meet the standard and I don't personally believe that.

HM: But now they are changing it. It's very interesting what's happening. They're modifying the number that you need in order to pass, you know, because they haven't been successful in having the kids pass the test. They're lowering the standards so that they can pass.

NL: So you left teaching at 93 in 1970. Where did you go after that?

VW: I went to Lehman.

MN: Did the strike have any impact on your decision to become a college teacher rather than stay in the school system?

VW: Absolutely! Let me out of here as fast as I can. [Laughs]

MN: Really, because the normal path would be to do what Harriet did, you know, become an A.P., a Principal, Superintendent, but your reaction to this was, "I can't stand this anymore."

VW: Unfortunately, it was a very bad period of my life between '68 and '70 because I had a stillborn, I had a divorce, the strike. It was like everything was just smacking me in

the head. It was a very, very bad period of time and so when I was asked to go to

Lehman to supervise student teachers and it was for one semester.

MN: And who was the person who asked you?

VW: Who was the person? I don't remember his name. Someone connected at Lehman who was working there. Isabel Oliver was working there and then someone else and I don't remember his name.

NL: So someone mentioned your name and - -

VW: It also was a time when they looked at the faculty of Lehman College and they said, "Oh my goodness, there's nobody here of color, do you know anybody?" and somebody said, "I know Valerie," and so I was invited to come for one semester to supervise student teachers.

MN: And you clearly liked it?

VW: It was a lot of fun. It was great.

HM: And then you had a special program?

VW: Not then. I was just supervising student teachers.

MN: How were you able to stay? What was the next step from supervising student teachers?

VW: They kept inviting me back and I kept going to the district and asking for a leave of absence and so one year, two years, three years.

MN: At what point did - - these were one year appointments?

VW: Yes.

MN: At what point did they say, "We're going to create you a tenure track line if...?"



VW: At the point where I said, “Woah! If I want to stay here I need to do something different.”

MN: Like get the PhD?

VW: Get the PhD.

MN: And then they said to you, “If you’ll get a PhD...”

VW: No, it was understood. You learned the rules as you go along. This is what it takes to stay here. You get a PhD, you get tenure, you do the writing - -

MN: I mean but was there a specific point that you went from renewable one year contracts to what we call tenure track?

VW: I think at the point that I went to the district and they said, “We’re not going to give you another leave of absence,” [Laughs] and so I said, “Okay, now I need to do something different. I can’t be...”

HM: [inaudible]

VW: Yes.

HM: And was that the weekend program?

VW: I just kind of did my own program.

MN: At what point during all this at Lehman did you meet your current husband?

VW: It was early on. It was in 1972.

MN: So you had been there for a couple of years?

VW: Yes.

MN: Was this something that you were introduced by somebody who knew both of you?

VW: I knew his sister very well. We were high school friends so we just happened to be at a family - -

HM: Was that the time when Tom Minter?

VW: That was later on.

HM: He was something at Lehman.

VW: Tom Minter was Dean, Dean of Education.

HM: And he had been the chancellor at the Board of Ed.

MN: So you met our husband and how long were you dating before you decided to get married?

VW: Well, to quote my daughter, we lived in sin for two years - - [Laughter]

MN: I know about that. [Laughter]

VW: - - and we got married in 1972.

MN: And where did you end up moving to? Was it still in the North Bronx?

VW: Well, I was living in Jamie Towers at the time - -

MN: And that's where - -

NL: I grew up.

VW: - - and we just planted our roots and have stayed there.

NL: You went into - - I wanted to ask you about what prompted your decision to move into Jamie Towers. What were the demographics of Castle Hill at the time and was it easy to get into that development?

VW: It was pretty easy to get into. You made an application.

MN: Was this Mitchell-Lama?

VW: It was Mitchell-Lama.

MN: So it was a coop.

VW: It's a coop and at the time it was racially and ethnically controlled.

MN: So this was like [inaudible] city.

VW: A third, a third, and a third.

HM: [inaudible] like the Castle Hill Projects.

VW: And Castle Hill at the time was more white than black.

HM: But that was a city housing development.

NL: Castle Hill Housing, yes.

VW: But it was a middle class housing development as opposed to a lower income.

MN: When you moved to that neighborhood, is that when you became associated with St. Andrews?

VW: Yes.

MN: So you joined the church fairly quickly after moving there?

VW: Probably not so quickly. I don't do religion well. [Laughter]

HM: [inaudible]

VW: Yes.

NL: You were in Castle Hill at the time of kind of all the community board issues – the school board controversy. First of all, I wanted to know - - what were your opinions of the educational kind of outlook available for your own daughter at the time?

MN: What year was Kerry born?

VW: Kerry was born in '77.

MN: In '77, okay.

VW: I was not terribly pleased. I worked very hard to find her a school in Manhattan until it killed me because I was driving her to Manhattan, picking her up from Manhattan, and district four in Manhattan had all of the different new things and innovations and all of those things going on.

MN: What were you looking for particularly that wasn't there in any of those - -

VW: I was looking for an innovative program that incorporated some of the new ideas in education.

NL: What were those new ideas?

VW: Some of the sort of open classroom, the newer reading - -

MN: The whole language?

VW: - - the whole language, some of the ungraded classroom ideas.

HM: The integrated. Was she in a school that was integrated?

VW: The integrated, yes.

MN: So this was very strict like phonics, like six in rows?

VW: I wouldn't call it that way necessarily but my impression was the District Four schools were moving ahead faster and having a wider range of choices than the schools in the Bronx.

NL: Where is District Four located?

VW: East Harlem.

HM: But they also crossed Harlem to some of the Columbia University buildings and it was a more integrated district than District Five.

MN: Was there ever a laboratory school of any kind at Lehman where some of these new ideas would be tried out? Did they ever try to create an experimental school?

VW: No, they didn't. They haven't.

NL: So Kerry never went to school in Castle Hill?

VW: Actually, she did. It was very interesting. We were in District Four while she was in kindergarten. It killed me to drive up and down the East River Drive and get to my classes and so forth and I found out that in District Eight they had a wonderful gifted program.

HM: At 182?

VW: At 182.

MN: District Eight. Now where is 182, what street?

VW: It's on White Plains Road and what is that? White Plains - -

HM: Right near the shopping mall.

VW: Yes, it's White Plains near Bruckner. I can't think of the exact address.

HM: Lafayette.

VW: Yes, Lafayette. They had a wonderful gifted program. She was accepted to the program. It was an ungraded gifted program in which there were kids from kindergarten through fourth grade.

HM: But then there was a fight about that. Do you want to tell him about that? I feel that - - that's where you started - - I began to identify you as a community- -

MN: So what happened with this gifted program?

VW: Okay, the district - - 182 is in the center of the district. District Eight is a long district that goes from below Hunts Point to Throgs Neck. The northern part of the district - white, Italian, Polish ethnic; the lower end - Latino, African-American; the middle - all the new high rise apartments with a mix of all kinds of people and so the gifted program was at 182, right smack in the middle of the district. The white parents at the northern end of the district began to advocate to have the program moved to a school in their district.

HM: They had one also.

MN: So they already had one but they wanted two?

VW: Yes, they wanted that program totally.

NL: They just wanted all gifted stuff to happen - -

HM: Well, the Civil Rights Bureau came into it because there was this black or mixed brown group of children at 182 and all these white children at 71 and I think the district became under a civil rights mandate because of - - they didn't have an integrated staff, they didn't have an integrated school.

NL: At 71?

HM: At 71 and anywhere in the Bronx in the 70s.

MN: At this time were you a superintendent?

HM: No, I was working with - - I was one of the assistants to the superintendent and the reason I know about it was because one of my responsibilities was going there and they had a lottery so that children who wanted to - - we had to integrate those schools up there

so they made a lottery system that parents could apply to send their children to those schools and then they would select - -

VW: Who they wanted.

HM: It was supposed to be a lottery but.

VW: But that's also why they wanted the gifted class to move because they would supposedly get the safe children of color there because these were the smart, nice, good children who would now be with their children.

MN: How did you enter this argument?

VW: Well, I entered because I did not want it to be moved. I felt that it was blatantly unfair to take it from the middle and put it at the far end. This way all children had to travel to it and not just the black and Latino children had to travel to the white area.

MN: Was Dennis Coleman supporting you?

VW: Very, very much.

HM: But the state representative, the assemblymen, and the councilmen from the north end [inaudible] - -

VW: Calandra.

HM: - - they had a lot to do with the organization in support of that separation and they even gave money to 71 so they could [inaudible] that school.

VW: Thousands.

NL: What was your community campaign like to keep 182 in the neighborhood? What exactly was - -

VW: Well, we went to the Human Rights Commission. We wrote to the Board of Education. At that time Al Oliver was the special assistant to [inaudible] the chancellor and he was a neighborhood person and he was very supportive of it.

MN: He was from the Bronx?

VW: He was from - -

HM: Lafayette-Morrison.

VW: Right by P.S. 93.

MN: Did the Human Rights Commission have a Bronx office or did you have to go to Manhattan?

VW: No, you had to go to Manhattan. They did not help greatly and unfortunately Al Oliver died and he was our major advocate.

NL: So how did you end up?

VW: It wound up - - the parents would go to every single board meeting and sit there as a conscience so that they wouldn't take a vote to move it.

NL: Were the board meetings very hostile?

VW: Very hostile.

MN: Didn't you describe that in one of the interviews with Dennis as like just this atmosphere of menace sometimes in Throgs Neck?

HM: That probably was another issue. That's like at P.S. 60 down at Hunts Points Road.

VW: When we walked into the meeting they would roll their eyes and make comments and who was the other superintendent?

HM: Max?



VW: No, not Max - the other deputy. There was another deputy who used to refer to me as, you know, "Here comes the trouble maker."

HM: Kadish?

VW: Kadish, right. It was that kind of - - and then one day when Dennis was there when there were no parents there, a vote was taken to move the whole [Tape skips]

MN: What grade was this?

VW: This was third and fourth grade.

HM: It was a class of six children?

VW: They had a freeze on admitting anybody into the program and they phased it out. Six children.

MN: Where did your daughter go after that?

VW: After that she went to Throgs Neck to P.S. 71.

MN: Did she go to public junior high as well?

VW: No, then she went to the Spence School in Manhattan.

NL: I was going to ask - - what prompted your decision?

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

VW: So you were both with Larry?

NL: Yes, we were both with Larry.

MN: So this was a very important part of your daughter's childhood - the Kips Bay Boys and Girls Club.

VW: Yes, that was after school.

NL: It was after school. It was on Saturday mornings. It was pretty much - -

MN: How far from your house was it?

VW: Out the block and down the street. [Laughs] Out the front door and walk down the street.

NL: From Mrs. Washington's building you can see - -

MN: Its south of the Bruckner?

NL: No.

VW: No.

MN: Is it the St. Andrew's side?

VW: Yes, further east than St. Andrew's.

NL: I can draw you a street map.

MN: I need one of Natasha's maps.

NL: So here's White Plains Road and this is Randall Avenue and this is where Kips Bay is. Now, Randall Avenue continues up going north. This is Pugsley Avenue. That's where Mrs. Washington lives and over here is Seward. This is where I live.

MN: Where's the Bruckner?

NL: The Bruckner is probably a couple of streets over this way - -

MN: Ah!

NL: - - and 182 is somewhere over here.

VW: In the middle there.

MN: I got it. So all this is - -

VW: Right in walking distance.

MN: So you could walk to this and it was a wonderful place?

HM: It is wonderful. It's still there. That's where J. Lo took her dancing lessons.

VW: Yes, well they had the same teacher.

NL: We all had the same dance teacher – Kerry, myself, J. Lo and her sister.

HM: Oh, were you in her class?

NL: Well, J. Lo and her sisters were older than me so the classes were kind of organized by age so, you know, kind of seven, eight, nine-year-olds would be in one section. My sister was in another section that was for twelve, thirteen, fourteen-year-olds and then there were kind of the advanced students.

HM: That's a wonderful community resource and it's been very - -

MN: And it's still there.

VW: Oh, absolutely!

HM: - - and it's expanded. They now have wonderful tennis courts

NL: They do a little league, they do tennis, they do basketball.

VW: Do you know they have their own ice skating rink?

HM: Olympic size pool.

VW: An ice skating rink is the latest addition.

HM: Oh really? Where is that? Inside?

VW: No, it's an outdoor ice skating rink.

MN: Did they have theater there or did your daughter get exposed to theater in other places?

VW: Well, the dance and theater kind of went together but she always did theater in school. She was always in a play or summer camp was some kind of aspect or drama.

MN: What summer camp did she go to?

VW: Castle Hill!

NL: There's Castle Hill Day Camp.

VW: Castle Hill Y, Montefiore - -

MN: So this was not sleep away. This was some regular.

NL: Yes, you go home. [Laughter]

HM: Did you belong to - - wasn't there the pool? What was the name of that pool that they had at the end of Castle Hill Avenue?

VW: No, that was gone by then.

NL: Jamie Towers had its own pool.

VW: We had our own pool.

NL: Yes, so we went to the pool there and that became like the pool that everybody ended up descending upon from all around Castle Hill. That was the thing. You were so excited when the pool would open up and I remember it being a thing where at one point it used to open up after Memorial Day and everyone was so happy because it would extend for the whole summer. Then, at one point they waited until July 4<sup>th</sup> and the kids were like - - we were up in arms because we needed the pool open.

VW: They were at the pool gate - - if the pool opened at eleven o'clock they were at the gate at five minutes to eleven. They came home from day camp and went straight to the pool. [Laughter]

MN: When you're talking about this experience, I mean, you're at Lehman so you know what's happening in some of the other neighborhoods where the drugs and the

abandonment - - it seems like almost this is a different world than back where you grew up. What happened to your block and the neighborhood where you grew up in during the 70s and did you ever go back there?

VW: I go back often because I'm in and out of the schools very often in the area so that gives me an opportunity to go back.

HM: You didn't tell him about the programs you had for student teachers [inaudible].

VW: Oh, okay. I don't know when you want to get to that. Let's talk about the 70s.

MN: Let's talk about the 70s and what happened to Simpson Street and that whole thing, which is - -

VW: A lot of the buildings did not get burned down as opposed to other places further south or I guess in Morrisania and so the block remained in tact and partly because the police station was on the block. I'm sure you've seen Fort Apache and those references. The Forty-first precinct so that I think helped to stabilize the block in some sense but it was like a war zone. That's why it was called Fort Apache with the police and the police cars and the fear and people not coming out of their doors and it was about that time that we moved my mother out in the mid 70s.

MN: And you moved her - -

VW: To the north Bronx [Laughs] and then from the north Bronx to Parkchester.

HM: But it's interesting that around that same time there were gangs that were very much into the schools like at 123 and 125, which is not that far away from Jamie Towers and I remember there was a wonderful young man who was involved in working with boys and you know, the men that run the Bloods and the [inaudible].

Even though it was a small area, there were different ethnic - - different economic groups I would say. There was an upward mobile group of people who lived in the coops and right next to the coops were the housing projects like the Monroe housing and Bronx River and we saw the differences in the school. I used to know the addresses of who lived where, you know, what they were and the family backgrounds, of course, were very different. In Lafayette-Morrison - -

VW: Yes, that would happen.

HM: - - there were people who had good jobs with the government and then right next door were people who were struggling.

MN: Did you ever really despair at any point about what was going on in the Bronx and in the schools?

VW: The schools especially.

MN: What things really upset you the most as you were student teacher training? What were the things you saw that upset you the most in the 70s and the 80s?

VW: I think the disorganization very often in the schools - the lack of learning that was going on. I mean, that more than anything. Not understanding how you reach a point where children are not achieving and where children are just falling consistently through the cracks. A lot of my work during that time was in District Nine, which takes in a good part of Morrisania and working with teachers and working with student teachers and seeing what they're doing and not understanding why there's this gap. What's happening?

MN: How much do you think is the problem a problem of principals and leaders or how much of it is larger forces that are not easily under anybody's control?

VW: I understand. I think there was a large amount of time in which principals were not effective where they had kind of a dictatorial kind of relationship with teachers and they were not allowing things to happen that could have improved the situation. I think we've gone past there and we're to a point where it's almost like come full circle again where the same kinds of administration is going on. I think there's also been a period of time in which the teachers believed a lot of the literature about the disadvantaged child and stopped having expectations and stopped doing the kinds of things that are necessary for children to learn. I think there's not a vested interest if you don't live here, if they're not your kids. When you go back to Lisa Delpit - - I don't know if you're familiar with her. She writes about other people's children and what do you do when you're teaching other people's children and I think there's not that - -

MN: How do you spell her last name?

VW: D-E-L-P-I-T. She's in Georgia I think at Georgia State or something like that. People not really having a sense that children of color are capable of doing the kinds of things that we know they can and I don't know that it's done out of ill will but I think it's a sense of - -

NL: Detachment?

VW: I don't even think its detachment but they're not able to do it so don't put the pressure on to force them to do it. You know, they're hungry, their parents are drug addicts. All of these things that intervene, which says they can't learn so just give them

so much, don't frustrate them too much and then I think that has become to the point now where it's fear of children. I can't tell them to sit down. I can't be a disciplinarian because they might hurt me.

NL: The bar remains low.

VW: The bar remains very low except for the gifted few, which goes back to the days when we were in school.

MN: So there's a triage going on and do you think things are better now than they were fifteen years ago?

VW: In the schools?

MN: Yes.

VW: No.

MN: So you think that the problems you just identified have not been - -

VW: I don't think they've been dealt with and I don't think this administration is dealing with it. They think that you deal with these problems by giving children more phonics and more drill and kill and they're not dealing with the kinds of affective ideas that people who teach children need to understand about people of color and about the abilities and about the history and about all these things that are part of one's life and that's how you help children to learn.

HM: Do you think that there is such a thing as a curriculum that could be successful that just isn't understood or being implemented or is it that we haven't really found that curriculum?

VW: I think there are many things out there that have been implemented.



HM: But not successfully.

VW: There was one. I worked with a principal in Mount Vernon many years ago who had a very interesting curriculum based on the Kwanzaa principles and she had three different schools within her school and one school was totally based on the principles of Kwanzaa and they were posted in all the children's classrooms and the teachers knew them and they knew what they meant and their entire lives were around these principles, which when you think about it, they're not that different than ethics so why not teach children based on this and they did very, very well.

HM: On the state test?

VW: Yes.

HM: Because that has not been really proven in general. I go to a lot of the conferences and you look to the charter schools that have more flexibility to do what they want and nationally they haven't really proven anything. I mean, there's a different attitude there – a more liberal and a more caring attitude I think and the community is involved but as for the specifics of how do you teach a child to read - -

VW: But I think that goes back again to the test and I'm not so sure that testing is measuring what the kids are doing because I see children in the classroom doing one thing and then they get a measure on the test that does not equate to what I've seen them do in the classroom so there's a gap somewhere.

NL: And you feel like it's something to do with what is being done on the state and city levels and not - -

HM: Well, the teachers haven't been taught how to teach the child and to have them be successful on the test. There's a gap.

MN: Let me flip back to something - - Natasha said that you had some pictures from your early years and actually some film of you and your sister at Freedom Land?

VW: No, this is video of my sister and her family with her children at Freedom Land.

MN: It would have had to have been not video or its video? In those days they had - -

VW: I think it was an eight track that she had transferred to a video.

BP: Can you explain what Freedom Land is?

VW: Freedom Land was an amusement park that was built on the current site of Coop City and it was based on the historical development of the United States and the geography of the United States so when you went to Freedom Land you started on the East Coast and I don't remember exactly but it took you through to areas of the West Coast or the middle of the country with rides that were simulated - a covered wagon - and those kinds of things, which was to give children a sense of the geography and the history of the development of the United States.

BP: What year did your sister's family go to this?

VW: This had to be early 60s.

MN: Early 60s because Coop City was built in the late 60s - middle and late 60s.

VW: I don't think it lasted more than a couple of years. People were not interested in the history of the United States. [Laughter]

MN: Well, okay, well, we're winding down and is there anything you would like to say as kind of an overview of the things we talked about to sum up - - sorry.

NL: Technology.

MN: I remember one of the Black Panther slogans was, "The spirit of the people is stronger than the man's technology." [Laughter] Okay, so, any things that you haven't had a chance to say in kind of looking back at this whole experience?

VW: I don't know if it's necessarily looking back at the whole experience but it's my feeling about what you're doing in this project. I've had the opportunity to look very much at the literature written about the Bronx especially with the Bronx Project at Lehman College and over the years I've wondered why there was such an absence of history about African-Americans in the Bronx and it's wonderful to me that you are doing this and documenting what has happened because it is significant and it was a big hole and looking at pictures and looking at documents and not realizing that there has been this presence for so many years.

MN: Is there any chance that you could make copies of some of your childhood pictures that give a sense of what that environment looked like because I think that's very important that we have pictures of people playing in front of the house, going to church, you know, posing in family pictures so we don't lose those - - the images connect to these words.

VW: I will definitely do that. I just have not had the time in this time period to go through them.

MN: We're not going anywhere. This is the third year of ten years minimum so we're not going anywhere and it seems like you always stay in the Bronx so you're not going anywhere [Laughter] and I don't go anywhere either. I live in Brooklyn.

NL: That was my last question actually. I wanted to know what prompted your decision *not* to leave because there were so many people who you know that have left and so many people who often retire out of the city and even move within the city to other areas outside of the Bronx. What made you stay?

VW: One is the diversity. I really did not want to move somewhere where I was going to be the only one and I've had that experience so many times in my life. It's work. It's work being the only one in the community all the time with people also expecting you to explain - -

NL: Your whole entire race. [Laughter]

VW: Yes, or to be the model citizen for the whole entire race. I love the diversity. We live in a development where people are friendly, warm. My niece refers to my building as the building where people speak to each other.

NL: That's true. Everybody says hi.

VW: Everybody says, "Good morning." Everybody passes the [inaudible].

NL: There are lots of families who have been there for the last twenty-five, thirty-five, forty years.

VW: Right and so it's a safe place, it's a warm place, it's a place where I know lots of people and they know me and it's been very comfortable. I think about it but then I say, "Where?"

NL: And why?

VW: And "Why?" Exactly.

MN: Brian, do you have any questions?

BP: I was just curious - - the parent movement that you were involved in with the special program with your daughter - - were there records? Were there any types of fliers or any types of written materials, meeting minutes, things of that nature that might have - -

VW: No. Unfortunately, no. There might be stuff at the District Office - documentation.

NL: Because that's the one thing that we're really pushing for is to make sure there are documents so that they can be archived that can go along with these testimonies.

HM: It would be interesting to get the school board minutes - -

VW: Minutes, right.

HM: - - where those issues were discussed.

VW: Sure. There had to be an election.

HM: They are legal documents, actually.

MN: I wonder if those are down in the Municipal Archives.

HM: You need to ask Mr. Coleman because he has been associated with it very closely up until [inaudible].

MN: Which brings to mind another question. Were you ever involved with the NAACP in the Bronx?

VW: Very short period of time.

MN: In what years?

VW: I have no recollection at all.

MN: Okay, thank you so much for a great interview and a wonderful experience and yeah. This is great. I hope you'll stay part of the - -

[END OF INTERVIEW]