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## Robinson, Robert

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Transcriber: Dominique Jean-Louis

Mark Naison (MN): Today is November 6, 2007. We are here at Fordham University, and this is a Bronx African American History Project interview with Dr. Robert Robinson, who recently retired from the Center for Disease Control as a public health specialist. With us today are Dr. Mark Naison, Elizabeth Carmona, and Princess Okieme. Dr. Robinson, can you please tell us your date of birth?

Robert Robinson (RR): August 11, 1943.

MN: Okay. What we always do in these interviews is start with family. Could you tell us a little bit about your family and how they ended up coming to the Bronx.

RR: Well, my father was raised in Clarksburg, West Virginia. And he came during the Depression, and he came because he had a relative here, an uncle who worked in the Bossy. So when he came to New York, he began working as a bartender. In fact, that defined found his employment, I believe up until the age of when he was forty-five.

MN: Now, what level of education did he have in West Virginia?

RR: He graduated from high school. He was very bright man, he finished second in his class, and it's always been a real question of mine is if he'd had the opportunity to go on for higher education, what would he have become, what would have happened to him. But he always talked very highly of his education and the teachers that he had.

MN: Now did he go to an integrated school?

RR: No, that's what I was just getting ready to say, he went to Kelly Miller, which was a segregated school, and consequently, his teachers were African-American. And you

often hear stories about the education that came out of that segregated experience, and the kind of passion and commitment that the teachers brought to that environment. And the stories he tells, particularly, Dr. Naison, you would resonate with this, because his favorite teachers were assistant teachers. And he just, and his name was Saunders. I remember his name, I don't remember very much these days, at my elderly status. But I do remember Saunders because he would tell this story again and again and again. And always fascinating, in terms of the response my father-the memory, you could tell the impact that this particular teacher had on him. But in any case, you know, he had lots of stories about his education, coming up in Clarksburg. You know, we know that West Virginia is one of the poorest states in the nation, and consequently being black in West Virginia is one of the poorest experiences. And he tells of being farmed out to his aunt, when he was young, and having to walk to school, particularly in primary ages. You know, there were very few people, and what he describes as a fairly battered-down small kind of little box somewhere that he got his early education. So, it was difficult for him, but-and Kelly Miller closed in 1954, because of, you know, the decree that these segregated schools was no longer allowed. And Clarksburg has a very interesting-they have a Kelly Miller Foundation, and every two or three years, they have a gathering of everyone who went to Kelly Miller. And it's sort of like a village homecoming, because my brother and I still go. We find it kind of incredible that these people who are their eighties and nineties-

MN: That's amazing.

RR: You know, and they all show up. And it's basically every black person who lived in the Clarksburg area who went to Kelly Miller High School and here they come back with their families and kids and grandchildren, and it's-and every year there's smaller and smaller numbers because people are transitioning.

MN: Do you still have family in Clarksburg?

RR: We still have family, but it's actually sort of- you rediscover them every time you go back, 'Oh, you're my cousin?' It's that kind of experience. It's not a close family in the sense that- you know, my father- we never went back. Well, we went back to West Virginia, I understand, when was a baby, but I had no recollection of going back to West Virginia. So there's not a-

MN: Right.

RR: -there's not a very close family.

MN: How old was your father when he moved to New York City?

RR: I would imagine that he was around eighteen or nineteen years old.

MN: So it's right after high school.

RR: Exactly.

MN: And where'd they move? Did he move to Harlem or the Bronx?

RR: Oh, no, they- I believe the experience was primarily Manhattan. The reason why we came to the Bronx was because I was born, and the apartment that they had on- I think it was Convent Avenue, if memory serves. But in any case, the apartment they were living in was too small, I

have an older brother, so apparently everyone picked up and moved to the Bronx because they could get an apartment that was bigger.

MN: Right. Now, what about your mother's family?

RR: Well my mother was raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Well, she- in the old days, they would say that she was illegitimate. Her mother was not married. My mother is- her experience was difficult. The Cambridge family- I mean, we looked at pictures, photographs which we do have, and it's a matriarchal experience. It's always pictures of these very strong black women. And there's not a man in sight. And I don't think there was a man in sight. My mother left Cambridge, I believe- she didn't finish high school, we don't know very much about it, but it seems as if she had some kind of- I hesitate to say it, but the only way to say it, is she had some kind of breakdown. And I really don't know very much about that. What I do know is that her mother abandoned her, came to New York and was living in Manhattan. And my mother came to New York to find her mother. And she found her, and they met in Harlem. She was living with another woman. They were- they were lovers, apparently. And my mother lived with them, I believe, that history is vague.

MN: Now that's- in terms of, was that a time when people thought of women being lovers if they lived together or is that something that people concluded thirty years later after the gay liberation movement gave a different consciousness.

RR: Well, I don't know, you know, my sense of the black experience is that there's always been an unstated tolerance for alternative lifestyles. It was something that was known and accepted. Perhaps not talked about, but- it's sort of like a space thing. You live in a big house, you have closets. You live in a small house, you have no closets, there's no place to go. So there's a

visibility that, you know, perhaps becomes forced, and accepted. I never got a sense of intolerance from them.

MN: I mean, to me that's absolutely remarkable. And how old were you when you became aware of- ?

RR: Well, (laughs), I think probably seventeen, eighteen, nineteen. You know, there was- you know, this really is getting extremely personal, I- you know, I'm reminded of- I wrote a piece once. My grandmother, we used to call her Mum, and my mother and- they didn't get along, and in fact, they fought a lot. And they had some fairly atrocious physical fights. My grandmother used to live with us in the Bronx. And at some point, it got too much, and she was kicked out. And she went back to Harlem to live. And my brother and I, we would get on a train, and we would go to Harlem, and we would visit my grandmother secretly. Because she was persona non grata at that point. And every time we left, we would call her Mum, and she would say, 'Now remember, mum's the word!' And we didn't- and in fact, Mum was the word. We- those were visits that my brother and I made in secret. But my grandmother, Mum, she was a character, as they say. And she had- she lived in an apartment that was a couple of blocks down, Seventh Avenue, 127<sup>th</sup>, a couple of blocks down from the Hotel Theresa. Now what Mum would do, is on Saturdays, she would go out and she would buy a case of wine. [Laughter] And then on Sundays, when the liquor stores was closed, all the winos in the neighborhood knew that they could go to Mum's and they could buy a bottle of wine. And that was the relationship. Now, when, what was his name, Rat Brown. When Rat Brown got arrested for breaking into a grocery store, I wrote a small piece that appeared in a Youloohoo, it was a newsletter that came out of Chicago that was produced by a brother from, I think he was from Zimbabwe. And actually, his body was found in pieces on the railroad track, right outside of 125<sup>th</sup> Street. And of course they said it was

suicide, these were the days when a lot of radical, progressive black men were being killed left and right. And for those of us who knew him, we always felt that he was assassinated. But anyway, I wrote this piece, "Rat Brown and my Grandmother." And the thesis of the piece was, if Rat Brown is a general in the revolution, and certainly, for all intents and purposes, if you understand who he was and where he came from and the role he played in, you know, what many of us felt was a liberation struggle, Rat Brown was a general. And the thesis of the piece was, why would a general be robbing a grocery store, and what that meant to me was, if we were going to look critically at the black community, and the relationship of the community to that struggle, there was definitely an absence of support for people who were leading that struggle. And the analogy I made was that my grandmother could sell wine on Sundays and be undiscovered. And my grandmother, when I foolishly, for some strange crazy reason, pushed a young boy down the stairs when I was a kid, and then ran home, and the police came, and I hid under the bed, and my grandmother said that I wasn't home- my grandmother protected me. She did not turn me over to the cops. So if I had that kind of support from my grandmother, why could we not produce a community that provided that kind of support to Rat Brown. Well, I showed that article to my grandmother, thinking, well, 'Mum, look, you're published! I published you.' And she looked at me, and tears were coming out of her eyes. And she was appalled that I would talk about her personally. And the idea that I had actually published the fact that she sold wine on Sundays was something that was- you know, and that was sort of a lesson to me, at the time, in terms of, well, one, you don't necessarily publish without people's permission. [Laughter] That was a very crude and basic way to learn that lesson. And that gets us back to the original point, in terms of my mother. My mother, you know, led a bisexual life, and we became aware of that, somewhere

around where we were eighteen or nineteen. And you know, it was just- it was not an open part of our life, because we did not know. But it's- life, very strange circles. My mother died young, forty-five, she had breast cancer, it was a very rare kind of breast cancer. She had cancer of the blood vessels. And at the time, they didn't know what to do- it was inoperable. She ended up at James Ewing Hospital. She died at James Ewing. And the nurse's aide that took care of her was the woman, Lucille, who was living with my grandmother, when my mother came and found her, many years earlier.

MN: Wow.

RR: And that was- that was a wonderful circle, for that to happen. I hated the fact, in retrospect, 1961, we knew nothing about the art of dying, and how you die. The medical establishment was useless in terms of educating families about members of their family who were dying. So the idea about bringing my mother home wasn't even an idea. Didn't-it wasn't part of, you know, you didn't have- you weren't, that was not part of your consciousness of- you didn't even understand that that was an option. And so we got a phone call that she was dead. And you know, the idea that she was alone. I never- I hate that idea. It's just always been something that I wish would not have been. But anyway, to talk about my mother is to talk about a very complicated, very central person in my life and in my family's life. And she was the foundation in our upbringing. My father was a bartender, he worked at night. He was home, he was present, but he slept during the day, he worked at night. We always did dinners. In my earlier life I remember that he was in the Merchant Marines, so I can remember that he was away for months. And, you know, how we were as kids and how we were raised, all of that, really, the spirit of that-

MN: Where had your mother and father met?



RR: Well, they met- my father was a bartender at the Small's Paradise, and my mother was a, what are they, you know, a barmaid. And they met at Small's Paradise-

MN: Wow!

RR: - and apparently he proposed to her in a little eatery that was right around the corner on Seventh Avenue. And- that's right, it was Saint Nicholas Avenue that they lived on, not-

MN: And what year did they get married?

RR: I don't know.

MN: In the thirties?

RR: I'd have to do the math. I'm not sure-

MN: How many years older than you is your brother?

RR: Well, let's see, I was born in '43, my brother was born in 1940, so yes, they got married in the thirties.

MN: Now, when did they move to the Bronx, what year?

RR: 1943.

MN: Wow.

RR: The year when I was born.

MN: Right. And where did they move to?

RR: They moved to Stebbins Avenue, 865 Stebbins Avenue. And they lived there all their lives.

MN: 865. Is it still there?

RR: No, now it's- that building went down with the rest of the buildings. There's one building across the street that stayed, and it was a girl's high school.

MN: Right. What was the name of the high school?

RR: I don't remember.

MN: Could you describe the building.

RR: It was six stories.

MN: Did it have fire escapes?

RR: Yes.

MN: Was it a walk-up?

RR: Yes, it was a walk-up. We lived on the ground floor. Yeah, we looked up out on the street. It was a front, it was not a back apartment, so we were spared the view of the cellar.

MN: Right. How many bedrooms?

RR: Three? Three bedrooms. Living room, long hall, kitchen, bathroom. And a little foyer when you came in.

MN: Now, what were your first recollections of the block you lived on? How old were you when those memories start coming?

RR: Well, we, you know, street life was alive and well. And we played in the street. Checkers, stickball, the school across the street had a big schoolyard, so-

MN: This was the high school?

RR: No, it was junior high school.

MN: What was the name of it?

RR: I don't remember.

MN: It was a girls' junior high.

RR: It was a girls' junior high. And so there was basketball courts, and sometimes you'd have stickball games down there. So we- it was a very rich, a very rich life. We were in the street most of the time. And we ran in the streets, we had bicycles. I had three close buddies that I grew up with, Paul, Maurice and Henry-

MN: Paul, Maurice and Henry.

RR: -and the four of us, we were the- we hung out together. Stebbins Avenue was- you graded streets by their toughness, and Dawson Street was a tough block, and that was perpendicular to Stebbins. And Kelly was tough. Stebbins was not tough, so we suffered. Halloween would come, and there was annual- the kids from Dawson Street would load up their little socks with stones and they would make little- I don't know how they did it, because we never did it, but as a matter of fact, it's very interesting. We didn't do that. But they knew how to create these little hard bags that they would beat you over the head with, and sure enough, and everyone knew, everyone knew, like clockwork, that kids from Dawson would come to Stebbins, and if you got caught, you would get beat. And I got a crack on the head, and had to go home, and get bandaged.

MN: So you bleed a little.

RR: Oh yeah, absolutely. [Laughter] Absolutely. So it was the luck of the draw.

MN: Now what was the ethnic and racial composition of these blocks at the time you were growing up?

RR: Primarily African-American. And then, Puerto Rican. But the Puerto Ricans began, they began migrating, I would say, after the early fifties.

MN: So African-Americans were there a little earlier.

RR: Absolutely, Absolutely.

MN: Were there any whites left in the Bronx?

RR: There were a few, but not many.

MN: Were they older, or there were kids, too?

RR: Well, that's a good question. My- Linda and Jerry, they were, father was Puerto Rican and mother was white. And there was a white boy who lived across the street, Sonny. I cannot say that there were a lot of white kids in the neighborhood. You met them when you went to school, they were in the minority in school, but-

MN: What elementary school did you go to?

RR: P.S. 39.

MN: And what street was that on?

RR: Longwood Avenue.

MN: Now, were there gangs in your neighborhood, and was that something you were aware of, or was more like there were some blocks tougher than others?

RR: Oh, no there were definitely gangs. And there was a black gang, let's see, Seven Jewels, something like that, I'm not quite sure what their names was. There was a Puerto Rican gang, and then if you ventured forth into another neighborhood, there was another black gang, sporting- I remember their colors more than I nearly know them. Their colors was green and red and the colors of the gang in my neighborhood was black and red. Puerto Rican gang was gold and black.

MN: Did you feel safe on your black most of the time?

RR: Yeah, I felt safe, because you learn survival skills, for one thing. I certainly remember walking down the street, and I would cross the street if there was someone coming that you kind of knew was a loose cannon. And you crossed the street, and you avoided that person.

MN: Right. So you had a sense that you were living in an environment which could be dangerous, if you weren't careful?

RR: Absolutely, absolutely. You know, I had my close calls.

MN: Now when you say close calls does this mean like bullets flying that you had to duck, or a knife fight.

RR: No, no, my close call came when I was foolish enough to take a pretty girl to the movies who actually was the girlfriend of some strange thug who I did not know. And when I was in the movie, somebody came up behind me and whispered in my ear that they would be waiting for me when I got outside. The girl disappeared, and I hung out around the movie, and may have seen the same movie twice, I'm not sure. But somebody who had sort of peeped the situation came over to me, and offered me- he actually offered to give me a knife, which I refused, and I finally went out, and sure enough, there were three guys who were waiting for me, and they came up to me, and just at that moment, a good buddy that I knew, Kenny, who lived on one of the tough streets. He was coming out the street with about three or four of his friends, and he saw the situation that I was in, and went over, they had a conversation, and I was spared whatever beating that was in store for me that particular afternoon. Now you, the violence at that point, there were gang fights, but it was organized, it was not a random violence. And you knew who were the gang members. And sometimes you knew them, and that provided a certain degree of protection.

MN: Right.

RR: You also kind of heard when there was going to be a gang fight, and you had enough sense to avoid-

MN: So there's a certain predictability.

RR: There's a certain predictability. There was randomness, like I said, somebody was coming down the street, and I knew that person had a reputation that, you know, if you stepped on his shoes, or he accused you of stepping on his shoes, you were, you know, you were in danger. And I would cross the street.

MN: Right.

RR: So, no, there was, there was violence but it was organized in a way that you could avoid.

MN: What about schooling? Were someone who did well in school from an early age, and won classes, and-?

RR: You know, when I graduated from elementary school, I can tell you what I didn't know. I didn't past tense, present tense, future tense. I had no idea what that was. And I couldn't, I didn't know my numbers tables in terms of nine times seven. I still can't tell you what nine times seven is without doing it on my fingers, or slowly in my head. It was not something that I learned. Whether it was taught or not, I can't tell you because I don't have recollection of that. But I know that there was one afternoon, apparently, that

I went down to the auditorium of the gym, I think it was actually, and we took tests. I'm not really I have a recollection of what those tests were, but we were taking tests. And when I got to junior high school, it turned out that the tests I was taking was for the music course, and apparently, I passed, and when I got to junior high school, I was put in class Seven Three, which was the music class. Well there were two good classes in junior high school, Seven One, which is, was predominantly white, and Seven Three, which was all of the musicians, some of whom were white. Well Seven One and Seven Three had the same teachers. In fact they had the best teachers.

MN: And which junior high was this?

RR: Nolton.

MN: Fifty-two. The famous junior high school Fifty-two.

RR: Is it famous?

MN: Yeah because so many great musicians came out of that school.

RR: Well, let me tell you. [Laughter] This is a musician who turned out not to be so great. [Laughter] But in any case, the music class, and the other class, they got the best teachers, and to this day, I think that I began getting a decent education because I went to the gym one morning, and passed a test that I didn't even know why I was taking, or what I was taking.

MN: Right.

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RR: And it turned out that I was in the music class. Because if you were not in Seven One or Seven Three you were in Seven Five, Seven Six, Seven Seven. And the further back you got, the wilder it got, and the least amount of education you received.

MN: Now, what instrument did you play?

RR: The tuba.

MN: The tuba!

RR: E flat.

MN: And did you ever play the tuba before?

RR: No, no.

MN: So they gave you a tuba?

RR: They gave me a tuba.

MN: Did you take home?

RR: Yeah, I used to drag it home for Christmas, and-

MN: What do you do with a tuba? You go-

RR: That's exactly right, that's exactly right, that's exactly right [Laughter]. No, as a matter of fact, wasn't until I took the tuba home one Christmas, and realized that I hadn't been paying attention, and was playing all the notes the same and it wasn't until I took the tuba home that I realized there were flats and sharps. [Laughter] And that maybe you needed to do something differently.

MN: I just have to go to the bathroom for a second, so-

RR: Please

-----Tape Break-----

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MN: Was there much political discussion in your home, when you were growing up, or much reading of newspapers and discussion of political issues.

RR: No, there wasn't. I'm not sure why I got my social consciousness from. My father worked nights.

MN: Right.

RR: My mother had an assortment of blue-collar jobs: nurse's aide, she was a waitress. She was even a cross-guard for the school. At one point she even worked in the kitchen in the schools we were going to. So she kind of, you know, took an assortment of jobs. They were, you know, they were working people. Now books- can't say that there were books in the house. My mother read to us, when we were kids. That's a very strong memory, but-

MN: Was there a teacher who had a particular influence on you, in elementary or junior high school that encouraged with reading or-?

RR: Well, I had some negative experiences with teachers in junior high school. I remember I had a, you know, possibly even some hero worship going on, Mr. Sanders. White guy. And I don't know what the occasion was, but people were sort of giving out the occupation or job that they thought they could be, or wanted. I can remember Mr. Sanders walking up the aisle, and I said, 'Mr. Sanders, could I be an engineer?' And he looked at me, and he says, 'No, Bobby, you can't.' And my heart- you could have picked it up off of the ground. I did not have- when I was leaving the, on my way to leave the building in junior high school, I was on my way- you know, you had to get into the special high schools, Stuyvesant or science, you had to take a test. I was on my way out the building, and the assistant principle came up to me, and told me that I could not take the test. I was not allowed to take the test. Now I, I don't know why.

MN: Did you ask?

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RR: No, I didn't ask.

MN: He just came out and arbitrarily said you couldn't-

RR: He told me that I could not take the test. Now, maybe I had been bad-

MN: This sounds like something out of the Autobiography of Malcolm X.

RR: Well, I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. Maybe it came right after the time- we had a teacher who used to teach Spanish, and she had a, she had this bad habit of taking those little, you know, those little twelve inch wooden rulers that they used to have. She had a habit of taking this ruler, and when she got annoyed, she would come over and she would give you a good rap with it. And I was sitting in the front seat, second row.

MN: And this is when corporeal punishment was allowed in the schools.

RR: I have no idea, I have no idea. But I failed Spanish in the ninth grade, possibly because of this incident, and went to summer school for it. But at this point, I knew that she was- I could see her holding that ruler. I knew that she was on her way and it was like all in slow motion, and she just kept coming closer, and closer to me, and I just sit there, and I just knew. And she raised her hand, she came down with that ruler, and before she knew it, I just reached up and I grabbed it out of her hand. I don't think she had ever had that happen to her in her life. And I don't know if it was shortly after that I was on my way out the school to take a test for science at Stuyvesant, and that may have been- I don't know, I have no idea. Because I don't remember the events. I do remember that I failed Spanish, and I do remember that I was not able to take the test. I went to Morris High School. My brother had also gone to Morris High School. He had gotten left back in high school. And I went in to who was my advisor, he also turned out to be my track coach, Ed Morris. But at this point, he didn't know I was going to run track, and he was just my advisor. And I walked into his office, and he said, 'You're Bob Robinson.' I said, 'Yeah,' and he said,

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‘you’re Carl’s brother,’ and I said, ‘that’s right.’ And we sat down, and I wanted to take an academic program. And he allowed me to take academic English, and academic social studies. He did not allow me to take geometry, he did not allow me to take biology. And I think there was another class he did not allow me to take. Oh, and he did not allow me to take a language, Spanish. And I fought to get into those classes. I got into geometry, somewhere mid-semester. I got into Spanish, somewhere mid-semester, I never got into biology, and so to this day, I took biology and I took physics. I never took chemistry in high school because I never had the time, I never was able to make up that year where I was not allowed to take science. So I had to fight to get into an academic program, and I would say that the-maybe the most outstanding teacher in my life was an English teacher by the name of Avis Hanson. She encouraged us to read, and I loved to read. I had always been a reader. As a reader, I wish someone had told me to read something about black history.

-----Tape break-----

RR: I read all the books about the Black Stallion, I guess that’s as close to black history as I got. [Laughter] And I read all about King Arthur, and Merlin. So I loved to read, and I read comic books. So I was a reader, but I wasn’t necessary a writer. As I said, I came out of elementary school not knowing what past tense- in fact, I didn’t even learn tenses until I took Spanish in summer school. And I didn’t realize until then that I had never been taught Spanish. Which is the reason why, when I got into the Spanish class- I got into the Spanish class mid-semester the same day that they were giving a test, and the teacher said, you know, ‘You don’t have to take that test.’ And I said, ‘Give me the test.’ And I passed the test very well, but I passed the test because I learned Spanish in summer school. And I knew it. And I think the kids around me had

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had the same teacher I had in the ninth grade, and they didn't know it, so I probably knew Spanish better than they did. But in any case, Avis Hanson had a system of grading you, and she would give you two grades. She would give you one grade for your grammar, and another grade for your ideas.

MN: Wow.

RR: And she always told me, 'Bob,' or, 'Bobby, the most important grade is the one for ideas, because you will get the grammar. And so I was never afraid of writing, because she rewarded me in such a way that English and writing became a joy.

MN: Wow.

RR: And that- she was my favorite teacher, and she was the most special teacher. But I would have to say that, I mean, I had some good social studies teachers in high school, but from elementary school to junior high school to high school, I can't remember more than three teachers that I would say were outstanding.

MN: Right, until you got to high school.

RR: And that includes high school.

MN: And that includes high school. Now, did you have experiences with racism that made you think of what was going on as racism? In other words, things-when they were happening, you said, 'This is because I'm black, this is racism.'

RR: Well, I don't know. You know, that's-I mean we- for example, in elementary school I remember my mother had to come to school one day because we were writing-it was some kind of essay that we had to write for a class, and I ended it, I don't remember what the essay was about, I don't remember what the subject was about. I'm assuming I didn't pull this out of thin air. But I ended it with- and I don't even remember where I learned the staying, but it was, "if

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you're black, stay back, if you're brown, stick around, if you're light, you're all right. And I ended the essay. And she sent me home with a note that she wanted to see my mother, because she was very disturbed about this whole essay I wrote. And my mother, bless her heart, came to school, and I don't think she quite cursed the teacher out, but she certainly defended my right to have that idea. And this was- what was I? I was in the fourth grade, fifth grade, sixth grade, I don't know. But that was an elementary school experience. Racism? You know you-know, by the time I went to college at eighteen, it was very clear that the world was divided in black and white. It was very clear that there was a stigma associated with being black, and that there was an inferiority complex associated with being black. And that that was something that had to be internalized, had to be integrated, and had to be negated in some way. It's also true that at eighteen the civil rights movement was re-emerging and getting stronger. But I guess my point is is that when, I think his name was Cashman-I'm not sure- when he told me that I could not take an academic class, I mean, that was clearly racist. But I didn't see- I didn't experience as a racist act- I don't-

MN: That's why I was asking about it-

RR: Yeah, yeah, I know-

MN: -the consciousness of the time rather than-

RR: -yeah, exactly, you're right, you're

MN: -what you would say now.

RR: I did not run home and say my guidance counselor is racist. The language, the construct, the construct was not there. I knew there was- I felt that there was an injustice. And an unfairness that occurred.

MN: Right.

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RR: But seeing it as a racist act- at the same time, the consciousness of being black, relative to Puerto Rican, relative to white was- we knew who we are, who we were.

MN: Now, tell me a little bit about blacks and Puerto Ricans in your neighborhood. Were they very separate, or was a lot of blending of culture, and music, and sociability.

RR: I don't think there was a lot of integration. I think that blacks and Puerto Ricans, similar to the gangs that were going on, led somewhat separate lives. They were separate communities. I think there were personal friendships that were created. But that happened on a very individual and personal level.

MN: What about the music? Were you very aware of Latin music and very involved in it?

RR: Very aware of Latin and when we- when there would be community events, for example, at that junior high school across the street. It was quite wonderful, because they were a contest, and there was rock and roll. There were always neighborhood singing groups, quartets. They would compete.

MN: This is at the junior high across the street. Outdoors or indoors?

RR: Indoors.

MN: So like talent shows.

RR: Oh, yeah, talent shows. And there was always the mambo contest. And the dancers in the neighborhood would show their stuff.

MN: Were you one of the dancers?

RR: Absolutely not.

MN: Were you one of the singers?

RR: Absolutely not. [Laughter] I played the tuba, and no one ever asked me to accompany them at anything that they did [Laughter]

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MN: So you didn't sing or dance?

RR: Absolutely not. Absolutely not. I think actually we pulled a quartet together. But, I tell you what I did do, that was crazy, I had a good buddy, he lived on Dawson Street, Paul Mann. And Paul turned out to be one of the toughest guys in the neighborhood. But Paul Mann and I used to do a comedy skit.

MN: Oh!

RR: We did it in elementary school. It was the-I'm trying to think of it- but he was the straight man, and I was the fool. And I don't know what we did on that stage. I cannot, because it was not- it was not anything that we practiced, and it was not anything that we wrote down. It was just something that we did when we got up on that stage, and it would bring the house down, and then they would take us to other auditoriums.

MN: Really!

RR: Oh, yeah. We were good. [Laughter] Whatever we were doing. Whatever we were doing, we were good.

MN: Have you kept up with your comedy?

RR: Can't you tell? [Laughter]

MN: Now, one of the things- did anybody- you have this student, this teacher knock you down when you said you wanted to be an engineer. Did anybody pump you back up when you were in high school and say you have the potential to really be a leader, to be a thinker, to be somebody who's going to make a difference in the world.

RR: Well, you know, I certainly had experiences in social studies and English, with Ms. Hanton. They were positive, they were warm, they were good quality relationships between a student and a teacher. But I can't remember any teacher saying to me that-

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MN: Nobody said you were destined to greatness?

RR: Absolutely not. Absolutely not. When I applied for college, I had no one. No one was telling me. I went to the library and I got out the college book and I went through the pages. If I liked the picture of the school, I took down the address.

MN: Where'd you end up going?

RR: Michigan State.

MN: What! From Morris High School to Michigan State University.

RR: That's exactly right. [Laughter] That's right. And, right, and one of the first classes I took was pre-med chemistry. Now, if you remember the story, I took biology and physics in high school.

MN: But not chemistry.

RR: But not chemistry.

MN: And you took pre-med chemistry.

RR: And I took pre-med chemistry because I wanted to be a doctor. If I couldn't be an engineer, I was going to be a doctor. And that was my first college F.

MN: How did you afford to go to Michigan State?

RR: I don't know. [Laughter] No, I really don't know. I didn't get a scholarship.

MN: How did you get there?

RR: By plane. By plane, with new Samsonite luggage that was given to me by a friend of the family, I would say. And- I don't know. I don't know, I have no idea. I have no idea.

MN: It's such a crazy story for me, because having grown up in Brooklyn at that time- Michigan State?

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RR: Michigan State. All I know is that I went, and you know Morris didn't have a football game, a football team. And I was not a football person. But Michigan State, 1961 was number one in the country. And I looked out of my dormitory window, and I saw literally two or three thousand people shouting in the- whatever was constituted the lawn of this dormitory I was in. And I thought it was a riot, and my roommate told me that no, that it was actually a football rally. That was the roommate who stayed. The other roommate didn't stay because he moved out. He moved back in eventually, but he moved out initially because he wouldn't- he couldn't see himself living with a black- with a black student.

MN: Jesus.

RR: But I stayed at Michigan State for about a year and a half, and then, family issues, my mother's illness. Some personal issues, and so I left Michigan State and ended up getting my bachelor's from City College at night.

MN: Now, were you living in the Bronx at that time?

RR: I lived in the Bronx up until around 19- Boy I lived in the Bronx, I graduated, I was living on Stebbins Avenue. Graduated from City College in 1967. I went to Adelphi University for a master's in social work. I lived home for one more year and then I got a job as a counselor in the Seek program.

MN: In what school?

RR: Well, I was- I think this was coming out of City College. The program was centered on Hotel Almack, on 71<sup>st</sup> Street and Broadway.

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MN: Now, is there a point in all of this that you're becoming very politicized by the Civil Rights Movement, or that comes later?

RR: Oh, I think they were- some of that was filtering in. I like to think that probably my first political act occurred- I ran for senior class president, and was elected.

MN: In Morris?

RR: At Morris High School.

MN: So I was senior class president. And the tradition was that there was a senior class play, and everyone would go to the play. Well, you know, the majority of students at Morris High School were black and Puerto Rican. Whites were in the minority. The senior class play, traditionally, the only people who went, were white, for the most part. Because going to plays was not exactly an experience that blacks and Puerto Rican students knew. So I became senior class president. And I told the senior class advisor that we were not going to go to a play this year, we were going to go to the movies. And she let that be, and thought it was crazy, and she said, 'Well, you're going to have to sell the tickets on your own, and as you sell them, you will get-' So we sold a lot of tickets. And the irony is that the movie that we went to see, particularly given my current politics, was the Exorcist. Now, I would never pay, as an active liberation and political consciousness, choose to go see the Exorcist. And-

MN: The Exorcist or Exodus?

RR: Exodus. With-

MN: Charlton Heston.

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RR: No, it wasn't Charlton Heston, no, no, no, it was- what was it? I can't remember. But it was the Israeli conquest of Palestine is what it was.

MN: Right.

RR: And that's not a movie that I would choose as an act of liberation. But at the time, in 1961, there was not a lot of consciousness about this issue, and this issue was highly romanticized in that movie, and there we went to see that movie. But no, you know, when I got to City College-to Michigan State, there was a letter in the newspaper from this white student who was castigating- he was very racist. And I wrote a letter that got published. I saved it, and it was very polemical, and hardly the best piece that I've ever written in my life, but I was only eighteen, at the time. And- so I don't know, I don't know where my consciousness- I did not participate in the freedom lines.

MN: Right.

RR: I did not come out of a Southern experience. I cannot say that the South Bronx produced a consciously political experience in that era. I knew that I had a consciousness of black and white, I had a consciousness of injustice, I had a consciousness of racism, I had a consciousness that black people were not to blame. And how I got that and where that came from, I-

MN: When did those things become very explicit and a source of real passion? In that in the- did that happen by the late sixties for you, or it took further into the seventies.

RR: Well, I went to the school, I graduated in '61. And so yes, you know, throughout the sixties, through my- you know, the undergraduate experience, you found yourself, more

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often than not, in various kinds of debates about current social issues that were occurring during the day. You were certainly following-

MN: Did you go to any demonstrations or marches?

RR: I did not. What I did was go to school full-time at night, work full-time during the day.

MN: What did you do for work?

RR: And- I was a mail boy at Sophie Felt's, downtown. I was a assistant teacher for a nursery at the West side Y on 63<sup>rd</sup> off of Central Park West. Then I became an interviewer for a research project. They were evaluating the job corps program. And I was hired as an interviewer for that project, which was located in the Brooklyn, in Brooklyn. Joseph Benjamin, who was a well-know sociologist, was principle investigator and I had him, he was my teacher at night. And I can remember he offered me the job, and I refused because I loved being a nursery school teacher. I would get off the train at 145<sup>th</sup> Street, and walk up St. Nicholas and I would be singing nursery rhymes to myself, which were the same rhymes I would be singing all day to these kids. And my father picked me up, it was about nine o'clock at night, nine thirty, and for some strange reason, my father picked me up from City College, and I said, 'You know, Dad, I just got this job offer,' and I think the pay must have been, I don't know, six dollars and change an hour at the time, back then. But I did the numbers, you know, and as I indicated, whenever I do the numbers, I do them very slowly. And I realized that the money I would be making at this job was two times what I was making as a nursery school

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teacher. And as they say, I realized that I had an offer I couldn't refuse. So the next time the class was held, I ran up to Dr. Benjamin in panic, afraid that the job was no longer there, and he said, 'No, no no, you've got the job.' But I also worked in a construction company, not as a laborer. I tried being a laborer for a couple of weeks, and they put me in a ditch with an Italian crew and all they did was speak Italian, and they wouldn't speak a word of English. So that didn't last too long, and next thing I knew I was migrated to the office, and became a timekeeper.

MN: So, this was-

RR: But I did not have time for demonstrations, I had to work, I had to study, I had to catch up, I'd been out of school. I nursed my mother her illness, so I had lost time. I had matriculated City College, I could not- you know, and I matriculated within the least amount of credits, which I think was, you had to get a certain average with thirteen or fourteen credits. Whatever it is, I got. I matriculated. I went to summer school every summer. And every New Year's Eve, I was in the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street library doing term papers.

MN: Now, what did you think of groups like the Black Panthers, or the Young Lords or the protestors against the Vietnam War when all these things are going on and you're filling up every minute of your time with work and school?

RR: Well, you know, I did, one of the jobs I did, one of my last jobs was working for How You Act And the Community Action Institute. And I worked at Howe You Act around 1965 to 1967. And that was part of the anti-party program, which is a consequence of the social peoples that were occurring during that time. I was very

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supportive of protestors, and I was very supportive of the black liberation struggle and the Black Panthers. I certainly, you know, and I'm blocking on his name, the psychologist-

MN: Franz Fanon?

RR: Franz Fanon. I certainly was reading *Wretched of the Earth* along with everyone else. And I taught Franz Fanon, I taught a seminar on Franz Fanon when I became chair of African-American Studies, and when I graduated from Adelphi University with my degree in social work.

MN: Now, what strikes me is that, you know, having known a lot of people who were heads of African-American Studies, your path seems more gradual. You know, in other words, there isn't this- a lot of people sort of have these moments of political awakening where they're fired up.

RR: No, I didn't- you could have- I don't think I had a catharsis. But I always feel that there was a certain line of continuity. For whatever reason. You know, I'll go back to when I was a senior class president. The idea that there was something wrong about a tradition that excluded the majority of the students, and only served a minority- that to me, was an injustice, and I think, probably my intuitive strength is that I hate injustice. And my passion, and the work that I have done around race and community has been a passionate distaste for injustice. And so yes, I responded very positively to the Black Panther Party, and to other liberation movements. I also, as chair of African-American Studies, was very critical of what I felt was polemics, rather than substance. I worked

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with John Henry Clark, at How You Act. He was head of the community education component of what was the Community Action Institute at How You Act. You know, and John, as substantive as he is, can also be very polemical in his analysis. And the extremes, the extremes of nationalism, the extremes of whatever constituted Marxist analysis of the situation. I mean all of those ideas were alive and well and flyer. They often had crossed purposes. I was never one- I was never one way or the other. And often was critical, of what I felt were the inconsistencies of the analysis. I don't think I was critical in the sense that my behavior or my actions were moderate. I never considered myself a moderate in the movement. But I did continue to see myself as a person that insists on a critical analysis of the ideas that are being put forth.

MN: When did you go to social work graduate school in Adelphi.

RR: I was at Adelphi from 1967 to 1969.

MN: And then you became head of black studies?

RR: Exactly.

MN: When did they create a black studies-?

RR: In 1969.

MN: Was it as the result of a protest?

RR: It was a result of undergraduate student demanding- and that was happening all over the country.

MN: Right, yes. At Fordham, we actually had a sit-in, here. Was there a sit-in, or marches.

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RR: Oh, I'm sure- there were several sit-ins. There were several sit-ins. And I was there for seven years, I left in '76, and you know, when I left, I guess from a statistical perspective, the retention rates of black students at Adelphi University was slightly higher than the retention students of white students, retention rate for white students. And I like to think that that had something to do with the program that we helped develop. We also were very strong in terms of linkages with the black community and the Latino community at Adelphi.

MN: You mean outside the university, or in-?

RR: You know, inside the university, students. We supported efforts to create academic courses for Latino students. We had Latino faculty in our department. We worked very hard to create the Latino student union, and the black student union.

MN: Now, is this something that you think your Bronx experience helped prepare you for, or was something that was pretty much just obvious from the situation you were in?

RR: No, I think the experience of growing up in the Bronx and having Puerto Rican friends was very influential in that regard.

MN: Now, do you think that has also been true with your work in public health, that- How has the Bronx shaped your career once you went into public health?

RR: Well, that's very interesting, because- and I don't think I have ever really thought about it in that regard- but a principle of my work, and how I have tried to apply- is inclusivity. That is a vitally important principle for me. And the notion of inclusivity is- my experience coming up in the South Bronx had- with respect to people of color, i.e. Latinos and African-Americans, has been a very integrated one. So it makes sense that



the importance of that idea to me as a value could very possibly have evolved out of that Bronx experience.

MN: As you moved around the country, you know, after you left Adelphi, went to Berkeley, actually moved to Atlanta, did you find many people in other parts of the country who had similar experiences to you growing up in the South Bronx in terms of a variety of people, and cultures?

RR: No, because America is not an integrated society. I think there were pieces of California where you get a cross-section of communities coming together.

MN: Did you meet anyone who went to a high school like Morris, in the course of your travels, and academic experiences?

RR: Well, who is the guy, Powell, what is his name? The Secretary of Defense?

MN: Colin.

RR: Colin Powell? No, I've never met anyone who had a high school that produced both a Secretary of Defense and a Secretary of State. A man capable of going into the U.N. and leading us into one of the most foolish wars that we've ever experienced. [Laughter] Morris is a very unique school in that regard. No, I can't that, no. But in fact is, the question, it never really came up. You know, I can't say that I've had a lot of conversations with people where we've actually talked about-

MN: What your high school was like.

RR: -our high school experiences. I'm a scientist, so when you ask me something, if I don't have data, I get a little nervous about the answer I'm giving you. So I can't say I have a lot of data.

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MN: Right. At Michigan State, the people you meet, did any of them go to integrated high schools?

RR: Oh, no, no. When I went to Michigan State, I think there were twenty-three thousand students, in the whole school you could count the number of black students on one hand. I don't think they knew how to spell Latino. [Laughter] And I don't even think Asians had arrived yet, in 1961, so I'm not even sure there were a lot of Asians in that school. Certainly that would not be the case today, but this is 1961 that we're talking about. No, there was an agriculture school, a lot of the students were farmers. I had one young man, Mickey, who I became very good friends with, and when I befriended him, I was in his room, and he was standing there, and- Mickey had a, when he got nervous, he sweated, and I literally was standing there talking with him, and literally watching his armpits get darker, and darker, and darker, and he was simply wetting his shirt. But we talked about that, and we became very good friends and I actually visited Mickey several times in his hometown in Michigan.

MN: Now talk about- you know, I can't keep you here forever, although, we often do- tell me something about your work in public health, and over the last fifteen, twenty years.

RR: Well, my specialty, is tobacco prevention and control. Well, when I got my degree from UC Berkeley in '83, I would have loved to stay in California. But in my opinion, the bay area is not a place that is very supportive of professional black males. And suffice to say, as I sat and waited for the job offer, it never came. And survival dictated

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that I leave. And I got two years of a post-doc, and I went to the National Cancer Institute, in a training program. I suppose that there is an anger associated with this, because at that point, I was forty-five years old, forty-three, I don't know, I have to do the numbers, but I was in my forties, and basically I had been out decent- I had not had decent money since 1976.

MN: When you left your-

RR: When I left Adelphi. And here I was, with a doctorate from UC Berkeley, no job, a training program, making training kind of money, which is to say no money. And for me it was just more dues-paying, although, I mean, it was a good training and being at the National Cancer Institute gave me a foundation in public health, and that was very important. And after I left the National Cancer Institute, I went to Foxchase Cancer Center which is and was one of the preeminent cancer control centers in the country. And I got involved in tobacco control because two things- are you okay?

-----Tape Break-----

RR: -tobacco control for several reasons. One, African-Americans were, at the time, second to only Native Americans in the country in tobacco use. Two, they led the country in tobacco-related mortality- they led it then, and they continue to lead it now. And three, when you looked at the number of African-Americans who were involved in doing tobacco control research, you could count them on one hand. In fact, I would say at that point, there really were no researchers. Dr. Freeman, who was head of surgery at Harlem Hospital, right here in New York City, and was very much involved with the

American Cancer Society. He was perhaps the best known, and perhaps the only person who was advocating nationally around issues dealing with the use of tobacco by African-Americans. So I got to Foxchase Cancer Center in Philadelphia, I looked at it as an opportunity to one, begin doing community-based research, and two, getting involved in an issue, tobacco, that I felt was a critical public health issue. And I did that. While I was at Foxchase Cancer Center, I developed a cessation guide for the African-American community, Pathways to Freedom, which is still the state-of-the-art-

MN: It's called Pathways for Freedom.

RR: Pathways to Freedom. And it is even today the state-of-the-art cessation material for the African-American community.

MN: How long is this?

RR: It's thirty-six pages.

MN: Can you order it on the internet?

RR: You can get it from the Center for Disease Control. And I also, in 1990 R.J. Reynolds, developed a cigarette called Uptown. And it was the first cigarette that was explicitly defined for a specific community. And this was a cigarette that was for the African-American community. And it was a cigarette that came in a black and gold package. The cigarettes would turn upside-down, so that the filter was down, because they- tobacco industry, which is the most competent, along with alcohol, the most competent industry in the world in terms of targeting any particular population. In public health, we are still arguing as to whether targeting whether targeting is an effective

strategy for doing good public health. Meanwhile, the alcohol and tobacco industry has been doing it for decades at great success, but that's another story.

MN: Colt 45. Billy Dee Williams.

RR: Exactly, exactly, exactly, exactly. But at any rate.

MN: It works every time.

RR: They chose Philadelphia as a test market, and the signal was turned over so that they had done the work, blue collar, they did not like to pull the cigarette out from the filter because their hands were dirty, so they had turned the cigarette around, it was a menthol cigarette, which means-

MN: Well, we know from Dave Chappelle, oh, you haven't seen the Dave Chappelle Show, where he talked about, you know, blacks and menthol cigarettes?

RR: Well, yes, I have not seen it, but we began highlighting the use of menthol cigarettes by blacks, three out of four African-Americans smokers use menthol. You know, menthol cigarettes tend to be higher in tar and nicotine, the whole nine yards. So here's Uptown Cigarette, it's menthol, the only cigarette brand that was higher in tar and nicotine content, you have to understand nicotine is what makes you addicted, and tar is what gives you cancer. The only cigarette-

-----End of Tape One, Side Two-----

RR: Uptown Cigarettes was second only to unfiltered Camels by R.J. Reynolds in tar and nicotine content. And they chose Philadelphia because, again, they had done their research, and for whatever reason, Philadelphia had a reputation of being a passive city

around issues of public health relative to the African-American community. So they figured they could go into Philadelphia, do this test market, get in and get out, and then sell their cigarette. Well, unfortunately there was this researcher at Foxchase Cancer Center named Bob Robinson, who knew a minister that he had involved in a community-based project around cancer control in the black community called Jesse Brown, and we both knew a woman who was an expert in communications called Sharon Sutton, and we were very close with Carl Mansfield who was head of radiation oncology at Thomas Jefferson and worked closely with the American Cancer Society, and the four of us began organizing the community, and within thirteen days, R.J. Reynolds pulled Uptown off the shelves. It was a story that was told not in the health section of the newspapers, but in the economic section, because it was an economic issue, because we chose not to talk about the health consequences of this cigarette, we chose to talk about the notion of empowerment, and the fact that the tobacco industry was targeting the black community and that the black community had a right to choose what products come into the community, and what products don't. So we completely did a paradigm shift, we changed the language of the issue. It went from health to economics, and R.J. Reynolds was out of town, instead of in town. It was unprecedented. It was a story that made international press. And it put the black community on the map, in terms of tobacco control, which is where they had not been. So, I guess I became famous, in public health. I had led the Uptown coalition.

MN: Are there any pictures of you holding Uptown cigarettes?

RR: Well, I'm sure they have pictures of me somewhere. [Laughter] I had developed Pathways to Freedom, and so I got recruited by the Centers for Disease Control, to go work for their Office on Smoking and Health. And when I got there, what I began to do was develop again, community-based programs. We funded national organizations in the Latino community, the Asian community, the Native American community, the African-American community. But we also did other things. If you look at the tobacco control movement, in 1990, for example, you went to a national conference of the tobacco control movement in 1990, you would look at the audience and it would be 99.9 percent white. And in five, six years, that was totally turned around. We began talking about diversity, advocating for diversity, and advocating for inclusivity. I was not well-liked by the tobacco industry by the time I finished, I was also not well-liked by mainstream organizations in tobacco control. Because I criticized them as heavily as I-

MN: Now, it's interesting. Do you know about the campaign against the Kool Mixx?

RR: Yes. As a matter of fact, the campaign against Kool Mixx was spearheaded by Jesse Brown, and Sharon Sutton, the same people who did the Uptown.

MN: Because I got involved in that as a hip-hop expert for the New York State District Attorney's Office for a former student of mine at Fordham.

RR: They helped spur another organization that actually took the lead in that. Sherri Watson, the National African American Tobacco Prevention Network. And those national advocacy organizations came out of the work that we did at the Centers for Disease Control.

MN: They produce some of the greatest posters I've ever seen.

RR: That's exactly right. That's exactly right. They had communication and advocacy down. But a lot of it- when we did Uptown, if you remember, California was the first state they had the legislation where they got twenty-five cents excise tax on tobacco, and they pumped it into statewide tobacco control programs. They were the first state to come out with cutting-edge communication advocacy initiatives. I went to California, I went to a meeting of their communications committee. And they, at that time, were debating the issue of- was it efficacious to really develop a campaign that singled out the tobacco industry as the enemy. And they wanted to go in that direction. But the Uptown experience was actually the first experience that demonstrated that by targeting the tobacco industry as the enemy to the community, that that was a message and a theme, and a framework or a paradigm, that actually worked. And they just simply surrounded me because they wanted all the information they could get from me, to help them help support their efforts to sell that idea in California, and they did sell that idea in California. And California became the lead state in producing some of the most profound, effective communication messages around tobacco prevention and control in this country. So, you know, your question was how have my ideas impacted my work, my work has always been about community. And my work has always been about inclusivity. And my work has always been about developing initiatives that served people of color, and we also develop programs that served the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender community. That was novel, that was new. But that was also based on the idea of inclusivity. And



bringing as many communities into the pod, and serving as many communities that needed to be served as possible. And that's what I try to be.

MN: Wow. That's extraordinary. Well, we have to end this, unfortunately. But, just as I always bring it back to the Bronx, if you were going to summarize how growing up in the Bronx influenced your life, what would you say, in a relatively short-

RR: Well, the Bronx, I don't know what growing up in the Bronx today would be like. But for me, growing up in the Bronx, despite the fact that heroin was alive and well, that there were risks, very visible risks. Many young women who got abortions and died because they were dirty abortions. There were people becoming addicts all over the place.

MN: And you saw that on your block?

RR: I saw that on my block. I saw that on my street corners. I experienced it in the apartment I grew up in. I experienced it with friends. But in spite of all of that, I think what the Bronx gave me was community, and a sense of friendships that began in the Bronx, and continued to this day. I think they were rules, values, loyalty, and trust, that came in those relationships. And somewhere in that experience came the lesson that you're not going to make it without struggling, that nothing was ever handed to you in the Bronx. Nothing was ever given. You weren't given anything in the Bronx. But you could gain, but it required work, and it required struggle. And I think it's the community that's perhaps one of the strongest themes of my work. And struggle is perhaps one of

the strongest ingredients in my work and in some way, both of those things came from the Bronx.

MN: Okay, thank you very much for an extraordinary experience here and for being part of our research project.

RR: All right. Thank you.

MN: Thank you

-----End of Tape 2-----