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Roberts, Talibah

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Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Talibah Roberts

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Mark Naison (MN): This is the 107th interview of the Bronx African American History Project at Fordham University on March 15th, 2005. We're with Talibah Roberts who is a staff developer with the Board of Education in the Bronx and who grew up in the Morrisania Section in the 1970's. Your father sounds like he was an amazing figure in that community, in the area around Boston Rd. Could you tell us a little bit about your father's background and how he came to the Bronx?

Talibah Roberts (TR): Well, my father - - originally he's from St. Louis, Missouri and when he came to New York, he first lived in Harlem around the Morris and Washington Heights area, right where the park is on 145th St and then he later on moved to the Bronx and he purchased a building on E. 169th St back in 1975. The building was 773 through 781 E. 169th St and he owned the - - there were thirteen units, so six were stores and the rest were residential units all on the walk up. And the grocery store was known back then as a *bodega*, was where my father worked. He did his work around the building and taking care of his own personal business, but normally every Sunday you could find him in the grocery store. What was unique about my father's grocery store was that he had a fish tank in his store and I think that a lot of people may remember that. He sold a lot of candy, he had a candy store, and he sold groceries there as well. Often times in the community when people needed to buy food on credit, he extended that as well.

MN: Now his name was Ceylan?

TR: No, Ceytan: C-E-Y-T-A-N Roberts.

MN: And where was your mother from?

TR: My mother is from San Dulce, Puerto Rico. And growing up my mother and father were not together, but I had both parents very active in my life. So it didn't really make much of a difference.

MN: Now, did you live in that building?

TR: No, I lived in Crotona Park East, right across the street from Crotona Park where now I think it's called Flags. At that time it was then called Herman Ritter Junior High School 98.

MN: OK so you saw your father all the time?

TR: All the time, all the time. I could walk there.

MN: Where did your parents meet?

TR: My parents met in Harlem way before I was born.

MN: What year did you move to the Bronx?

TR: I was born there. I was there already; we lived there for many years on Crotona Park East.

MN: And what was it like growing up there?

TR: Very exciting; there was always something going on everyday. During the summer time was the time I went outside. For the most part, my mother was very strict about school and school was number one. We would go to the library on 163rd St, that's the Morrisania Library, and actually my first library card I received from there when I was second grade, so we went there almost everyday. We would walk to the library after my mother picked me up from the school bus, and then we would go and visit my father in the grocery store, and then I would come home with my mom.

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MN: Now these were years when a lot of things were going on in the Bronx, some good, some bad. Were you aware of some of the troubles going on with buildings being burned and abandoned?

TR: Oh yes, definitely. Many times we would play in those abandoned buildings, on Minford Place. That was on Boston Rd and 174th St and that's where Jimmy Carter went to visit.

MN: Right, near Charlotte St. So you saw that whole - -

TR: Oh yes. Kids used to play on the mattress in the back and that's where we would practice flips and our break dancing, in the abandoned buildings.

MN: Did you actually see buildings burn?

TR: Oh no, it wasn't burned when I came.

MN: So all those buildings were there?

TR: The community started to go down when I was growing up, but it wasn't burnt down already.

MN: When you first moved there, what year did your - -

TR: No, we were there. My parents moved there November 1965, the Blackout. The day of the Blackout was the day that my mother moved into 1700 Crotona Park East.

MN: 1700 Crotona - - is the building still there?

TR: Oh yes. It's still there. And it was an A&P, it's now a McDonald's. Right across from 98, Herman Ritter. When the Blackout came back in 1965, my mother was in the A&P when it happened.

MN: Now what year were you born?

TR: 1966.

MN: You were born 1966; so you were coming of age when all this was starting, the arson, the abandonment - - do you actually remember seeing fires? Is that something - - or was it more the results of them?

TR: Just the results of them. You could hear the fire trucks, it wasn't a constant - - it wasn't every day, but I took the school bus right by 61. I didn't attend school in the neighborhood, I went to another school district and I would take the school bus right by the other elementary school so that it was directly across from Charlotte St.

MN: Did you experience your neighborhood as a safe place to grow up?

TR: Oh yes. Definitely.

MN: So people were still looking out for each other?

TR: Yes. It was safe for us, maybe not for the outsiders.

MN: You had mentioned things like numbers as being part of the neighborhood, was that both where your father was and where you lived?

TR: Oh that whole area. Actually, it's the same - - looking at the map, it's all the same community, that's 10456, and 10460; all connected. Numbers were just - -they were the norm. You have a mixed community, predominately immigrant community, and they would have illegal bets on the horses and they had something called *bolita*, little number slips. And you had places where you could go into a grocery store and play a number and that was quite common.

MN: Were marriages or relationships across the lines of blacks and Puerto Ricans pretty common in this community? Do you think the two groups were pretty closely connected?

TR: Very closely connected. As a matter of fact, my mother who was Puerto Rican, as I stated before, she brought a lot of our culture - - she introduced our culture to a lot of the African American children and adults in the building. She would take a group of us every year to the Puerto Rican Day Parade. She was known for that as well.

MN: Did you grow up thinking of yourself as bi-cultural? As being both African American and Puerto Rican?

TR: No, not at all; only Puerto Rican.

MN: So you grew up as Puerto Rican.

TR: Yes because of my mother's influence and my mother was very much a nationalist, and she came from a family in Puerto Rico that was very politically active and she was very much into her culture and very proud of her culture and her own personal family history. So, in the house and in my life, my dominant culture was Hispanic culture.

MN: Did your mother know people in the Young Lords Party?

TR: My brothers and sisters - - actually I have my brothers and sisters range in age from 10 years older than I am, to 20 years older; so I had three brothers and three sisters and they were all older. And then I came ten years - - there's a gap, a ten year gap. So my oldest sister, had she lived, she would be 58, so they're familiar with those gangs. We also had a dual family history because we come from - - my mother's family, most of them lived in Harlem so I spent time between both places growing up.

MN: What was the dominant musical influence in your household?

TR: Latin Jazz and Salsa.

MN: Who were some of the artists you remember most from your childhood?

TR: My grandfather was a musician, so I grew up with the grand combo - - I grew up

with Celia Cruz, Ablancaiz Velafanye which was like classical singers, Tito Puente, Eddie Palmieri, Willie Colon, Tito Rodriguez; those were some of the mainstays in my house every day.

MN: Did you go with your family to hear live Latin Music?

TR: Well, we had it in the house. My grandfather was a musician so I grew up - - there are at least 35 people in my family that can either play an instrument or sing.

MN: So it was in your house, people were playing all the time?

TR: All the time. Television took a back seat to music in our household.

MN: Did you grow up playing an instrument?

TR: No, but I sing.

MN: And you still do? [Laughter]

TR: I don't want to be held to that but I can if I have to. [Laughs]

MN: OK. Now, in terms of your father's cultural influence, when you were at his house, what kind of music did he listen to?

TR: Al Green, Teddy Pendergrass, Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight - - we listened to those singers as well at home in my mother's house, and in my father's house - - my father liked Tyrone Davis, I remember those singers. He loved Sam Cooke, a lot of Sam Cooke. I did have two dual cultures actually - - now that I'm speaking about it and I can really see that I grew up with both cultures. But just my mother - - because I lived with my mother, her culture being the dominant culture. We listened to with my dad, mostly Sam Cooke and Nat King Cole.

MN: Describe what your mother looked like and then what your father looked like so we can paint maybe a picture for people.

TR: My mother's about medium brown complexion; she had jet-black hair, she wore it in an afro. My mother always kept her hair natural, she didn't perm, she wore her covered - - sometimes she would wear turbans or what was called *geles*. She resembled Celia Cruz in some ways, but just a little thinner - - higher cheek bones, finer features. She was often mistaken for being Cuban because she covered her hair. My father is just a little bit lighter than my mother, had very light brown eyes. He had wavy hair, reddish brown hair. My mother spoke Spanish and English and my father spoke English, French, Hebrew, Yiddish, German - - spoke at least four other languages.

MN: Did your father go to college?

TR: Yes. He went to - - I know for part of his time he went to Lincoln University. I think he went to NYU - - he was going to school to be a dentist but he didn't finish.

MN: When you were living in Harlem, your family, did he own businesses there?

TR: No, my aunts did. My mother's family did, they were all entrepreneurs.

MN: OK so there was an entrepreneurial tradition - -

TR: In both of them, in both families.

MN: Both of them. So your father bought a building - - were the tenants already in it?

TR: Yes. And I guess people move in and move out, but a lot of the tenants that were there remained throughout the time that he owned the building.

MN: And what about the store owners, were the stores vacant?

TR: No, they were full, it was active, doing very well.

MN: What made him decide to buy that building?

TR: I don't know, but I remember - - I was very young of course - - I remember him plotting and planning to buy that building. Our lives began and ended with both parents

working very hard to support us, but they both did their own things. They sold food - - my mother's family - - as well. So it was a good connection between the both of them, the two cultures.

MN: Now when you say your mother's family sold food, they owned restaurants?

TR: They owned restaurants, they owned *botanicas* back in Puerto Rico; they were midwives, that's what they were. My mother's family. It was a good connection between the two cultures because my mother cooked one type of food and my father cooked another type of food and the two of them would sell food whenever people had definite family, they would cook.

MN: Did they have informal catering businesses?

TR: Informal catering businesses.

MN: That's interesting - - was that an important institution in the community?

TR: It was important in our household, it was very big because when the disco era started to come out, my father used to cook food on the weekends for clubs.

MN: Wow - - where were some of the local discos that you remember in the Bronx?

TR: I don't remember any because I was too young.

MN: But the disco era created a market for people who did catering?

TR: Well, my father sold food - - so I know that's what he used to do. Because on Wednesdays - - our weekend started on Wednesday. Wednesday my father and my mother would start to buy the food and prepare whatever they were going to sell on the weekend. So it wasn't as if they cooked it on that same day, they planned it out.

MN: Did they have people working for them?

TR: Oh we were the workers. [Laughter]

MN: And you would deliver it?

TR: No, my father would deliver it. What workers? We were the workers. I was a prep cook; I cut onions and green peppers, that was my job.

MN: What were some of the dishes that you remember cooking?

TR: All rice. Red rice, yellow rice, black rice, white rice, shrimp fried rice, candied yams, baked macaroni and cheese, collard greens, fried chicken, baked chicken, pig feet, chitlins - - my father cooked that, we didn't cook that in our house.

MN: That does smell.

TR: No, I never had chitlins in my house, not in my mother's house. But those were some of the things that I can recall.

MN: Did your father have a van that he delivered it in?

TR: He had a station wagon.

MN: Did it have lettering on the side?

TR: No, no, no.

MN: So this wasn't a formal business.

TR: No, it was never formal. He didn't ride up to Albany and get his license he just - - that's what he did for a living, a lot of people did that.

MN: So that was one of the ways of bringing in income.

TR: Yes, that was The way of bringing in income.

MN: So you think that they made more money from that than from owning buildings or -
-

TR: That's where they got the money from.

MN: Oh so he bought the building in part from the income derived from the catering business?

TR: Of course.

MN: Did he have any other businesses?

TR: Actually, I don't think they called it catering, that's just what they did. We're saying catering now, and I guess you can call it catering now.

MN: Because now in all these upscale neighborhoods there are all these - -

TR: My mother and father sold food for a living.

MN: And that was the major way they made a living.

TR: That's what they did.

MN: Wow. And this was a family business and it was on the weekends.

TR: That's what they did. I didn't see it as a business in a sense. Now, I can see yes, that was our businesses. But that was simply what we did, it was a norm.

MN: Did they have other jobs?

TR: When my mother and father separated, my mother she worked for a group called United Bronx Parents.

MN: Oh I know that very well.

TR: With Ms. Antonetti.

MN: Oh so she was down there in the center - -

TR: On Boston Rd on 174th St. It was a free lunch program.

MN: Oh because I know the headquarters down on Prospect, but this was a lunch program - -

TR: 174th St and Boston Rd.

MN: And she ran the program for the center?

TR: My mother worked there; she was the secretary. There was herself and another lady, two women they ran that particular - - right near 98.

MN: Is your mother still alive?

TR: No, both my parents are deceased.

MN: When your father - - what other businesses when your father bought the building was he involved in? Did he own the bodega?

TR: He owned all the stores downstairs, he had a pool hall - -

MN: So that was his pool hall. What was it called?

TR: There was no name.

MN: Did it have a sign "Pool Hall?"

TR: I don't remember.

MN: Or was this a social club pool hall?

TR: It was a pool hall; very nicely he'd fixed it up. He'd built the pool hall back in 1991 but the stores and everything else were there since 1975.

MN: Did he have - - were any of these places which he owned have live music?

TR: No.

MN: Do you remember any live music clubs in that neighborhood at that time, that they were still playing live music, that you went to?

TR: I know the live music that I listened to.

MN: Which was?

TR: DJ's spinning on the turn table.

MN: OK but those weren't at clubs?

TR: No, we didn't go to clubs, I was too young.

MN: OK when did you start becoming aware of the DJ's? How old were you when you first - - was aware of hip hop DJ's and that phenomenon?

TR: Maybe 10 years old.

MN: And where was the first time you saw a DJ?

TR: In my building.

MN: In a house?

TR: No, it was a norm for people to bring their equipment outside.

MN: This was outside, in front of the house?

TR: People would - - whoever had the best equipment or a good stereo, they would bring their radio right from their living room and bring it outside and play it. Or sometimes people would put their speaker in the window, the DJ and we're standing outside in front of the building, and we would dance.

MN: When you were dancing, did you get involved in formal break dancing?

TR: Oh yes.

MN: Can you still do that?

TR: A little bit. [Laughs]

MN: OK so you sing, you break dance - -

TR: I can rap. I used to rap a little bit.

MN: Do you free style or is it more prepared?

TR: I would free style - -

MN: Can you free style for us now?

TR: I don't know if I can free style but - -

MN: Do you have any rhymes that you remember from back in the day?

TR: Oh I remember - - of course we were all into Sugar Hill Gang.

MN: Did you have any of your own rhymes?

TR: I use to say "The initials of my name is B-E-R/ I got a big fat father with a burgundy car" [Laughs] And I would say "Take it to the limit/take it to the top/Don't mess with me/ or you will get dropped."

MN: That's pretty hot, OK. So this was all over the neighborhood in the 70's?

TR: And in the 80's.

MN: In the 80's too. Do you recall seeing any large jams in the parks or the school yards?

TR: Well, 63 which was right across the street from - - Boston Rd. We used to go to jams but they always had a shootout. So it was one way in the school yard and one way out.

MN: When you say shootout you mean literally - -

TR: A shoot out would mean that someone would maybe take a gun and shoot - - you know, we called it bust a cap in the air - - and then everyone would run and it would be over. Sometimes we'd run out and it'd clear up and then we'd come back and party.

MN: But this wasn't the case of somebody shooting somebody?

TR: No, never.

MN: Never. So it wasn't a violent situation?

TR: No.

MN: You felt safe pretty much all the time?

TR: Yes.

MN: So you didn't experience this period or this neighborhood as dangerous?

TR: Never. No. As a matter of fact, my father was very upset with me because I used to walk through the park all the time - -

MN: Crotona Park.

TR: - - in the dark. I would go from Murphy Projects, visit my friends over there, we would go to one side of the park and the other - - we walked through the park.

MN: That's interesting you mention Murphy Projects because I think Art Crier, the person up here, he did some talent shows there.

TR: Oh really.

MN: Did you ever see the Cold Crush Brothers?

TR: Yes. The Cold Crush Brothers, we saw Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five - - I saw Grand Master Flash plenty of times. He was awesome. He was like our hero in junior high school and wherever he was at, where's the party, we would find out where he was playing - - Bronx River - - we would go to a place called Lambert Houses - -

MN: That's - - Lambert Houses is where Art Crier ran the youth program. Maybe he was running the shows and just didn't - -

TR: We used to - - most of the jams were on that side of the Bronx. But we would go, from all over.

MN: This was at Bronx River or Tremont?

TR: Bronx River, Lambert Houses, and Bronx River Projects; that's where a lot of the jams were. Zulu Nation - - it was always word of mouth; you knew where the party was. All you had to do was ask "Where's the party?" and you would find the party.

MN: Do you have any fliers from back in that time that you saved?

TR: No, I didn't keep any fliers. I have pictures though.

MN: You have pictures? Because we would love it if you could make some copies because this would be real important. What junior high school did you go to?

TR: I went to 167.

MN: Herman Ritter?

TR: No, which was across the street from Lambert Houses.

MN: Was that considered a better school than Herman Ritter?

TR: I wanted to be away from my mother who worked down the street at United Bronx Parents. [Laughs]

MN: OK so you just wanted to be out of - -

TR: Yes.

MN: Was your father involved in Bronx Politics?

TR: My father was friends with Gloria Davis. Gloria Davis lived in our building, 1700 Crotona Park East. I know her son - - she had a son named Michael, I forgot her other sons, but she lived there with all her children, I think that was before she had gotten into politics or maybe at the very beginning of her political career, because she did live in our building.

MN: Now had your father lived in that building until they separated?

TR: Yes.

MN: What year did he moved out?

TR: Maybe '72.

MN: Do you know if he was a member of the political club that was in McKinley Square?

TR: Jackson Democratic Club?

MN: Yes.

TR: I don't think he was a member but everybody knew him because he had a business. And he also cooked food, so whenever they had parties or they had functions - - and a lot of times they would have him come down to the basement of the building, those same people, and my father would fix food for them.

MN: Did he ever have any trouble with people who were trying to rip off the businessmen or gangs or anything like that?

TR: Never. I think maybe the grocery store had gotten robbed, but not when he was there.

MN: You had mentioned that his whole dress was very much like a 70's figure - -

TR: Yes, he was very dapper. Kids today would look at him and say "He's a pimp." I remember crying one day because one of my friends she said, "You, know, you're father's a pimp." I said, "My father's not a pimp." But I guess we had seen these blaxploitation movies and we used to go to the Dover Movie Theater every Sunday.

MN: Where was the Dover Theater located?

TR: 174th St and Boston Rd.

MN: So it's now a church or something?

TR: It's now a church.

MN: So that theater - - how long was that theater open?

TR: Oh I don't know, but I know we would go - - people would come from all over to go to the Dover. And I don't know about capacity, but they broke every capacity law you can ever think of.

MN: Yes, it was just packed.

TR: Because people would come to the movies with milk crates. The movies would get full and we would come and bring our own milk crates and sit down and they would still sell us a ticket.

MN: Was this the only movie theater at that time in the Bronx?

TR: There were several. Prospect had one on Prospect, the number 2 and the 5 train - - there was another one near Tremont, the Dale I think, but I lived around the corner from the Dover, so that's the one that I attended.

MN: Now, where you were growing up, were there gangs that you were aware of, the guys that were in gangs, or were you too young?

TR: My brother - - one of my brothers, was in the Peace Makers. And I know of the Black Spades, so it was quite common to have them in my house.

MN: Did they wear special - -

TR: They had jackets but of course my brother wouldn't dare wear it in the house, but we knew that he was in a gang and the gang was the Peace Makers. And he was stabbed at one time, they stabbed him with an ice pick in his navel.

MN: Wow. Where did the stabbing take place? In Crotona Park or - -

TR: I don't know.

MN: What high school did you go to?

TR: I went to Talent Unlimited High School in Manhattan. In performing arts.

MN: What sort of - - did you have to take an audition to get in?

TR: Oh yes.

MN: What did you audition in?

TR: Drama.

MN: Were there any after-school programs in your neighborhood when you were growing up, or formal, organized youth programs?

TR: They had United Bronx Parents; they had a summer youth program so you could work there during the summer, we went on trips. There was also the Hoe Avenue Boys Club, those two places.

MN: Did you have any formal theatrical training when you were in junior high?

TR: When I was in junior high school, I was in a play called "Charlotte St." I would love to find out who has the footage from that play because it was an excellent play and the teachers that were directing the play, they did it at 167 but they came from Herman Ritter. Mr. Baboff was one of the teachers, so I didn't have any formal training, but I stayed in performing arts all the way through until the completion of high school.

MN: And so you didn't go directly to college or did you go for a little while?

TR: Oh yes, I went straight to college from high school, straight to college.

MN: Was that to Fordham or was that somewhere else?

TR: I went to Lehman for a short time and I absolutely hated it because it was not serious. Despite all the fun that I had, I was always very, very serious about school. School was again was law in my house. I wouldn't have survived in Lehman because it was too much like high school and there was no structure. I was always in honors classes

from elementary school all the way through high school, and once I got to Lehman, I didn't find the structure that I needed, so I came to Fordham.

MN: Right. Now did all your brothers and sisters end up going to college?

TR: No. Me and my older sister.

MN: So a number of your siblings didn't?

TR: No. Myself and my older sister. My older sister went to I think the College of New Rochelle for undergrad and then she went to Fordham at Lincoln Center.

MN: Now what about your other siblings? What sort of things did they end up doing?

TR: My oldest brother, he worked in a day care as maintenance at Tremont Crotona Day Care and my other brothers and sisters, they all moved to Pennsylvania so again, they're 12 years older than me, 20 years, 18 years older - - so I pretty much grew up separate from them. We were in the same house for a short time, but by the time I came of age they were all grown and married and out of the house and out of New York.

MN: So you recall your childhood as being a very happy time?

TR: A lot of fun. A lot of fun. The jams as we would call them, competing with other groups - -

MN: Describe what the competing experience was like.

TR: The competing wasn't fun, we would fight against a group they used to call themselves - - it was Crotona Park East against Crotona Park North so they were the Northsiders. And that was Crotona Park, right across - -

MN: That was the Murphy Houses?

TR: No, no, no. Closer than Murphy Houses. It was right there off the - -

MN: OK I know where that is.

TR: We used to call it "the big hill."

MN: Near the basketball courts there.

TR: Yes, but before Murphy Houses. Actually, Crotona Park North was in the middle of Murphy Houses, so you had Crotona Park East, Crotona Park North, and then you had where the Murphy Houses were.

MN: Right and so you would compete against them - -

TR: No, we would fight against them.

MN: You would fight against them

TR: Physical fights - -we would throw in the summer time - - we had this group that I put together called the Master Brothers and then later on the girls wanted to join so I let the girls join.

MN: So you organized the guys?

TR: I organized the guys, I was the only girl.

MN: OK and it was the Master Brothers.

TR: The Master Brothers and then the girls came in and the Master Brothers and the Master Sisters and I walked to Tremont Avenue and we pooled all our money together and I got red sweatshirts and we got iron on letters and we had our little sweatshirts - -

MN: Do you have any pictures of this?

TR: I have some pictures of our little crew - - we used to show our one dollar bills and - -

MN: Was this black and Hispanic together?

TR: Black and Hispanic together.

MN: And all the groups were that way? In other words, the Northsiders were black and Hispanic - -

TR: No, the Northsiders were all African Americans and us, we were all mixed in.

MN: OK so you had a mixed group against an all African American group.

TR: Yes. They were a bit - - they were rough kids, they were more advanced than we were, maybe they smoked weed before we did, they were more rough around the edges than we were. And they would come - - one night they came, and they attacked us. We were all with our red sweatshirts, our red and white, and our jeans, and we were sitting in front of our building and they came and attacked us with raw eggs, they threw eggs on us.

MN: Yes, I remember those days.

TR: And after that, we went and we fought them every night for at least two weeks. It got out of control.

MN: Now, when you say fought, do you mean fists or - -

TR: No, they would throw things. It would be a time in the night and we would sit in front of the building on Crotona Park and they would come through the bushes very quiet and they would throw things; eggs, rocks.

MN: This is junior high school age or younger?

TR: Junior high school.

MN: So these are like 13, 14.

TR: I think some of them were older than we were. Mostly boys and they would throw raw eggs, rocks, berries - - they had some trees inside of Crotona Park, they looked like olives but they're red and they would gather these berries and throw them at us, and we would do it too, and we would spend a part of our day getting bags and bags and bags of berries and rocks in shopping bags - - back then, they were paper bags and we would save it and store it and put it by our building.

MN: So these are like rock and berry fights.

TR: Yes we would fight and then we also used fire crackers, ash cans.

MN: Did it ever get to the point where people were right next to each other and throwing punches or it was more long distance?

TR: Long distance.

MN: It was long distance throwing fighting.

TR: And firecrackers.

MN: And firecrackers. Did anybody ever really freak anybody out by bringing a real weapon?

TR: No.

MN: OK so this was not anybody going to get killed.

TR: No.

MN: Did it ever turn into breakdance battles or MC battles?

TR: Yes. We used to have a lot of that, MC battles - - that was common. Most of it wasn't - - it was just talk. No one was using their fists, it was I can dance better than you and I have more than you and so on, and so on. We didn't use our fists.

MN: When you're talking about the jackets, did it form into a breakdance crew?

TR: No, our sweatshirts, no. Just so that we can have our own power in our neighborhood.

MN: When you were in high school, did you perform in plays or in music?

TR: Well, I went to a performing arts school, so that was the norm, that was a part of my day. I went to school and did my academics during the day and then in the afternoon we'd switch off and I'm doing musical theater, classical chorus, opera, and drama.

MN: You sang opera, you sang musical comedy?

TR: Opera.

MN: What was your favorite opera role?

TR: I don't know, I love Carmen. I love La Traviata. Anything Italian, I absolutely love. I like Latin like Te Deum - - but that was so long ago.

MN: Did you ever do any form of popular singing, like R&B or Latin?

TR: In the house. In the house, we all sing. I lived in the tenement building so there were a lot of families in there and every Friday and Saturday in someone's house we would sing to the record and we would have our little groups.

MN: Like apartment karaoke.

TR: Exactly. [Laughs]

MN: Was your building a kind of place where people left their doors open and looked out for one another?

TR: Our building was the kind of place where if any child in that building did anything wrong you can believe their wouldn't be time wasted waiting for your parents, you would be dealt with.

MN: Were there any blocks or places where you were afraid to go because those places were no mans land or dangerous?

TR: No and if we were afraid we would take someone with us to be prepared to fight. So I can honestly tell you I don't recall any time where I was afraid in the neighborhood.

MN: Did you ever go to the Claremont Houses to anything or - - that was down by 3rd Webster Avenue, 116th - -

TR: No.

MN: It was more like to Murphy, Bronx River - -

TR: We didn't go, we stayed on that side. All we went was to Bronx River, Lambert - -

MN: So you did the Northeast side, you didn't go to the Southwest side?

TR: No.

MN: Did that have a reputation as being a rougher, more dangerous place? Or it was just different?

TR: Different. We stayed on this side, we stayed on one side of the Bronx.

MN: Anything else about your growing up or your father's work and experience that we didn't cover?

TR: Not that I can think of.

MN: How long was he at that address?

TR: 20 years or more, at least 20. I would say 23 years.

MN: So it was from 1975 to 1998?

TR: '95. He died in '95.

MN: And he died in that building?

TR: Living there, yes. He died in the Veteran's Hospital, he's a veteran, a World War II Vet.

MN: Was he sick for a long time?

TR: No, he just became sick. He probably was but didn't say anything or didn't tell anybody or didn't function as if he was a sick person. He worked and did whatever he had to do everyday.

MN: Did your family attend any church in the area?

TR: St. Thomas Aquinas, Catholic Church.

MN: On what street?

TR: That's on Tremont Avenue. Crotona Park, is that Tremont and Claremont? And I also went with my friends, my African American friends to Tried Stone Baptist Church.

MN: Which was where?

TR: Right next door to 98. It's a church - - it's probably still standing I'm sure.

MN: So you were brought up as Catholic?

TR: Well, my mother was. Catholic and my friends would go to the Baptist church.

They were African American so I would alternate, whoever I was hanging out with I would go - - but I went to somebody's church every Sunday whether it was Jehovah Witness Church - - I was also exposed to the Jewish faith as a young kid because we had - - at that time there was still a lot of Jewish people living in our building and there was one woman, I don't remember her name, I was very small, but we were forbidden to eat at other people's homes but I used to eat with her and I knew that during the summer it was a certain day that she would have these candles out and she would have a table cloth and I knew I could get a special treat. And I would go there and eat and sit with her, myself and another friend. My mother found out because he invited the next kid and you know kids, they spread the word.

MN: So how long were there Jewish families living in the building?

TR: Oh for a long time.

MN: Into the 70's?

TR: Definitely. We also had a Chinese Laundromat, so there was a Chinese family right around the corner and if you go into Crotona Park, you'll see that there's scallions all

over that park and that's because they planted the scallions. And there are also chestnuts in Crotona Park, a lot of people don't know that as well.

MN: Now were there - - today they have great youth programs in Crotona Park; they have a nature center, was there stuff like that then?

TR: [Laughs] No. The only nature center was that Indian lake that was full of slime, so some of the older people they will probably remember when they had boats, we didn't have boats, it was full of slime and you could take a coat hanger and some string and a cup and try to - -

MN: OK so the park had been let go in your time.

TR: Oh the park was out of control. The benches were horrible, they were broken, we would go into the park and sit in the back by what we would call the Indian lake - - or we would go up dead man's hill and sit there and hang out, play cards, drink beer, and go back to the neighborhood when it was time for the jam.

MN: Did the police pretty much leave you alone?

TR: What police.

MN: Oh so this was a neighborhood that was not policed, people policed themselves?

TR: No, what police. I had never seen a police in my neighborhood ever, unless something happened.

MN: That's fascinating. So they were just not there.

TR: Never. Not in Crotona Park either. Crotona Park was dark when I was growing up, there were no lights in Crotona Park; none. So we would sit there and the only lights in the vicinity of the park were near the lake. That's it. So you could walk from one side of the park to the other in the dark; complete darkness.

MN: Wow. So you never saw a police car drive up your block?

TR: No. At Crotona Pool was - - I think it was closed. No one went to Crotona Pool.

The last time we had went there was when we were five years old and every child in the building who went, we all caught a virus, some of us got cut, so we never went there again.

MN: So there was basically, this neighborhood was given up on by a lot of the city in terms of services.

TR: Right. The parks didn't have lights, the Indian lake - - we didn't have grilles; we would bring our own grilles to the picnic table - -

MN: Do you have any pictures of some of these picnics?

TR: I have plenty of stuff.

MN: OK because this is really important to document.

TR: I have a lot of pictures of my father in Crotona Park, sitting on the benches, and the Indian lake, that area there - - one thing that I can say in our community, everyone was like a family. It was a very pleasant experience. We didn't have a lot of problems; if you needed something to eat, I don't ever remember going to bed hungry. If you needed to borrow something, money, a can of tomato sauce or a cup of sugar, you can get it from your next door neighbor and that was common. If someone had to go someplace, they would leave their children - - once we had a neighbor, she left her daughter with my mother for months and she went off, where I don't know - -

MN: And this is people of all different backgrounds and groups?

TR: All different backgrounds - - I grew up around a lot of people from the Caribbean, Spanish people from Honduras, Cubans; so I was exposed to all different types of

cultures and all different types of music growing up. For the most part, there was really no separatism. It wasn't like this group hung with this group. In school, I would hang out with the West Indian children and that was because I was in the middle. Because I'm dark, I wasn't Puerto Rican white, so the Puerto Rican kids would say "Oh, you're not Puerto Rican" because I wasn't white and then the black kids would say "Well, you're not black," because well, I spoke Spanish, came from a Spanish household, so the children in the middle were the Caribbeans or the Jamaicans, or whoever else, so I often hung out with them as well. But in the positive note, we did everything together. There was fighting but it wasn't a dangerous place. If you had a boom box - - there was the time when the boom boxes came out and that's when the neighborhood was - - that's when there was a safety issue. You had a radio and you were not from the neighborhood, you were spotted and by the time - - if you came into the block, by the time you got to the corner, there was someone most likely who robbed you or if you went into the park.

MN: What year did you move from Crotona Park?

TR: 1984.

MN: So you moved out before crack hit or was crack starting to come in when you were there in '84?

TR: I moved out just when crack hit and I moved to this area.

MN: To the Fordham area?

TR: Yes. I was in school here and I lived right on 191st. Crack was out then but it wasn't called crack. People were dipping - - when I was young growing up, it started with them taking cigarettes and dipping it into what I don't know, and then they would smoke that. They were calling it free base. Free basing. But I wasn't surrounded by that at all and

none of my friends did it and their parents didn't do it - - our parents drank social. They were social drinkers, they would drink beer, cigarettes, but no one smoked weed around us. Outside in the jams definitely; people smoked weed, they smoked angel dust, cigarettes, beer.

MN: You mentioned seeing Grand Master Flash at the jams, Cold Crush Brothers, anybody else that really stood out?

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

TR: JDL - - I used to hang around him he was a nut. [Laughs] I shouldn't say he was a nut. He was from the Cold Crush Brothers too. Doctor Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde - - we used to go to Harlem World too. So we didn't just limit our jams to the Bronx, when Harlem World opened up we went to all the parties at Harlem World.

MN: Were there any places in the Bronx that you went to? Was the T Connection still there?

TR: Oh yes, that's right, T Connection.

MN: On Gunhill Rd.

TR: Yes. Definitely.

MN: Any other places in the Bronx you went to when you were old enough?

TR: It didn't matter if I wasn't old enough because my mother was partying doing her own thing and I would go upstairs whenever she went out but I would go right back down. I would sneak out, so I spent my entire summers going to jams and hanging out.

MN: Were there any places in Morrisania where they had jams indoors in clubs?

TR: We couldn't get in.

MN: Right. OK. We covered a lot of ground. Is there anything else that you'd like to say that we haven't had a chance to talk about?

TR: On a positive note, for the most part, a very large number of us though we've come out of that community, drugs were around us, there were numbers, there were a lot of illegal activities going on, but there was still a very strong sense of community, of brotherhood and sisterhood and people really wanting to have a good time. Crime wasn't so much of a problem for us because we were safe in our own communities. And people were - - if they were maybe the ones who were committing crimes, they wouldn't do it in our neighborhoods because we were all there. That's pretty much it. We were not all strung out on drugs. Most of my friends were all very successful, college graduates, some of us we have our own jobs and businesses. I think overall, if more and more research was done, you find that a very large percentage of us went on to become very successful, so we did not fall by the wayside.

MN: What about kids today; do you think they have a tougher time than you did? Or not necessarily?

TR: I think that they have it better than we did which is a disadvantage for them.

MN: Interesting.

TR: I find that it is a disadvantage because they're more privileged and it's more difficult for us in our generation to tell these children well when I was a kid we didn't have this and we didn't have that; it's going in one ear and out the other because they can't relate. We're talking to them about something that they can't conceive at all. But I think that places them at a disadvantage because it doesn't allow them to have something to

struggle for. Maybe they have their own goals but everything is easy for them with technology being what it is.

MN: You were growing up before computers?

TR: Oh yes. We didn't grow up with computers. [Laughs]

MN: No VCR's.

TR: No VCR's - -so we were forced to be more creative and we were forced to rely on each other for entertainment, therefore, we formed a tighter community where by these children, because they have technology, it's very easy for them to go up and watch television, play on the computer, or get a Game Boy. We didn't have that so everything that we had to do as children involved us coming together in the group. We played ringalevio, we played black rope, we called run, catch, and kids, we played kick the can - - so all the games that we played - - double dutch, two step - - all the games that we played and everything that we did involved us being around each other and being a part of the community. So I think that they're more so at a disadvantage because while they have technology, they don't have the sense of community; technology takes that away. It takes the natural community, family, friendship, camaraderie - - it just takes it away.

MN: OK, anything else that you'd like to say that you haven't put on tape?

TR: No.

MN: OK well thank you very much and I'd definitely love to have copies of some of these pictures to document. OK terrific, thank you Talibah.

[END INTERVIEW]