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## Roberts, Beverly

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Transcriber: Mary Maxwell

Date: April 23, 2008

Brian Purnell (BP): Brian Purnell is here at the office of the Parkchester NAACP. Which is located in Saint--.

Beverly Roberts(BR): Paul's Lutheran Church.

BP: Saint Paul's Lutheran Church on--?

BR: 1891 McGraw Avenue.

BP: Between White Plains Road and Virginia Avenue.

BR: That is correct.

BP: This is an interview for the Bronx African American History Project, with Ms. Beverly Roberts, currently the president of the Parkchester NAACP. Thank you again Ms. Roberts for agreeing to participate.

BR: You're welcome.

BP: And if we could start by, if you could say and spell your first and last name and your date of birth.

BR: My date of birth is 06/09/1951, Beverly, B-E-V-E-R-L-Y, Roberts, R-O-B-E-R-T-S.

BP: Excellent. Ms. Roberts, where were you born?

BR: I was born in Manhattan.

BP: But you said earlier that you moved to the Bronx when you were about 5 or 6 years old?

BR: That is correct.

BP: Do you have any memories of living in Manhattan or what neighborhood?

BR: You know, I know lived on 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue. I don't have a lot of memories, prior to moving to the Bronx. As I said I was 4 or 5 years old. I remember the building and what it looked like because we always jumped, going up and down the steps. But other than that, I don't really remember a lot about that community.

BP: Were you living with your parents at the time, when you moved to the Bronx?

BR: Yes. I was living with my mother.

BP: What was her name? Or what is her name?

BR: Well, my mother's deceased. Her name was Hortense Caines.

BP: And why did your mother move to the Bronx? I guess, so you said, this is about 1956, '55, '56?

BR: That's correct.

BP: Why did she move to the Bronx at that time?

BR: I think in the--. From what I was told, the area was changing, in Manhattan and I think that they were directing a lot of, at that time, colored people, to the Bronx. And someone told my mother about the area that we moved to being a family area. And that was West Farms Road.

BP: West Farms Road.

BR: Right.

BP: Do you remember the address?

BR: I do. 1318 West Farms Road and I lived in apartment 2A, as in apple.

BP: Your mother was--. When you lived in Manhattan, did you live in uptown in Harlem or was it--?

BR: No, I lived on 50-I think it was 53<sup>rd</sup> or 54<sup>th</sup> Street.

BP: All the way on the west side.

BR: On the west side, exactly. And that was at that time, and African American area because I

know that there was primarily a lot of, in those days, colored people. Because when I came here, when I came in 1956, that's what you called yourself, a colored person.

BP: Right, right. I think that west side neighborhood in Manhattan, I've heard it sometimes referred to as San Juan Hill or--. It's where currently Lincoln Center is, right around that area.

BR: Around that area.

BP: You're the second person I've interviewed who has said that they moved to the Bronx from that area around this time, or in this 20-year period. So West Farms Road, what section of the Bronx is that?

BR: You know, that's a very good question. You know I think it's called the West Farms area, I don't know section wise, I don't know.

BP: And how long did you live there?

BR: I lived there for 20 years. I spent most of, until, I even lived there--. I got married when I was 18, so I lived there for a year. I lived there for almost 2 years after I was married and then I moved. And I moved to Rosedale Avenue and then from Rosedale Avenue, I lived there 1 year and then I moved to Parkchester. And I've been in Parkchester for--. I came here in 1974 and I've been here ever since.

BP: Alright. So let's talk a little bit about where you spent 20 years of your life. So the West Farms Road area. So as a child, do you remember having any playmates that lived in your building or lived in the area?

BR: I remember it very well because when we moved there this was a Jewish community. And again there was really very few black people living there. And one of the memories that stays with me is that the people, the grownups in that neighborhood used to make really mean faces at my brother and my sister and myself. And my mother would tell us, they were tenements, it was considered a courtyard, and in the center of it you had a big garden with trees, and then there were 4 buildings surrounding this garden. I lived in 1 of the buildings, so the kids, and then there was a concrete area around the garden, where the kids would play. And we would come downstairs and we would just stand there and as people would come out of the buildings, it was a form of intimidation, but even as children these white people were willing to make us feel unwelcomed. And my mother would always tell us, never take anything, don't take any candy, because my mother really had such a great fear that one of these people would try to poison her children. I mean and I remember that. But as time went on, my brother and sisters, we were so well behaved, because you know, black peoples' children, you went down, your mother said something and you did it, they started to talk to my mother and ask her, but how do you get your children to behave the way they do? Because they have these little white kids that would run up and down and talk back to their parents, and then as time went on and I went to school we made friends. The white community started to move out, but I did spend a number of years being in a racially mixed environment and eventually people got used to us and we then developed friends. And then other black people started to move into the neighborhood. One of the kids I grew up with, we are still very good friends, even today. Yes, we were 8 and 9 years old, and now we're 57 and 58, she's moved to Virginia but we still have a very close personal friendship.

BP: Wow, I want to ask you a few questions about, again, kind of everyday life in the neighborhood, but before I get to that, your mother, Hortense Caines, was she born and raised in New York City?

BR: She was born and raised in New York. Again, that whole Manhattan, 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue area. Now my mother lived a number of places, my mother lived in Harlem, I'm trying to think of--. I know she lived in that area, that 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue area for many years, then she moved to Harlem and she

lived in different, she lived in different places in Harlem and then I think she went back to that 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue area. And that's how we wound up living there with her children.

BP: What type of work did your mother do?

BR: My mother was a medical person, she was like a nurse's aid. And then when she had her children, she became a childcare provider. Her job, she worked in the home, my mother, we always had 10 kids in our house. Because my mother took care of everybody else's kids. That went to work, so that she could be home with her kids, and I guess in a fancy today term, it was daycare.

BP: Now, you had older siblings or younger?

BR: 2 older siblings.

BP: So you were the youngest of 3?

BR: No. I have 2 older siblings and a younger sister.

BP: Your mother, would she only take care of African American children or was it a mixed group of children too that she took care of?

BR: We only had African-American children that she took care of. Some of them lived with us, you know, some of them, their parents picked them up at the end of the day, and some of them she boarded and they would come on weekends and pick their kids up. And they became part of our family.

BP: It's almost like you grew up with much larger extended kinship network than just your, your siblings.

BR: Yes, and there are people from that group that I still have contact with today. I mean we're still friends. At my mother's funeral, at least 5 or 6 of those kids came to my mom's funeral, yes.

BP: Your father, were your mother and father separated or had he passed away?

BR: They were separated. I had limited contact with my father and my father's family. So although I know who they are, I don't really know them because that contact just wasn't there.

BP: So a mother, a woman working full-time raising her own children and in some ways other family's children, what type of values or what type of lessons did your mother instill in you and the rest of the, the group?

BR: My mother was very strict. It was you do what you're told. The value system was strive to do your best, have integrity in what you do. We were not allowed to lie, we were made to do homework, read books, go to church on Sunday. We were taught very strong family values, and I know that it's had a profound effect on the kind of person that I grew up to be. Because my mother instilled those values in us and the kids that she took care of. I mean they loved my mother, my mother treated all of them as though they were her own children. Which when I look at, looking back and seeing these kids in our house all the time, I don't know how she did it. But she did and we had order, I mean with all that was going on. And then my mother got a belt out and beat your butt.

BP: If you crossed the line?

BR: If you crossed the line you could rest assure you were gonna get a belt and you know what it wasn't child abuse. It was you know what spare the rod and spoil the child. And you went and got strap and you got your butt beat.

BP: Do you know, how did families that hired your mother as a childcare provider, how did they hear about her services, or how did they--?

BR: Word of mouth. That was, you know what, I'm looking--. My mother, there would be a knock on the door. A lot of these people never met my mother until they knocked on the door, hi, I understand that you're the lady who takes care of children, and I have to work, I need someone

to take care of my little girl, or my little boy and I hear that you're the person I should be talking to. And my mother just never turned anybody, you know, she just never turned anybody away. We had infants, we had toddlers, we had kids that went to school, I mean, when you're living it, you don't even understand it, but when you look back on it, it was an amazing way to just grow up. And like I said, it was strictly, my mother never advertised, she wouldn't have even known about advertising, word of mouth, knock, knock, knock.

BP: Your apartment, apartment 2A, was it, how many bedrooms, or how many rooms?

BR: 2 bedrooms, it was a 2 bedroom apartment. My mother had her room, my 3 sisters, my 2 sisters we had a room and my brother slept in the living room.

BP: So I wanted to speak a little bit more about interactions with your neighbors. I guess from the mid to '50's into the early 1960s, you mentioned that as a child you remember there being mean looks from even some of the adults. Were there any other types of negative interactions that you remember with white neighbors? As a child, was it just looks or did it ever—was it ever verbal? Ever have any physical altercations or--?

BR: You know, it was never physical, I could never say that there was any kind of, that there was any kind of physical abuse, but I do know, even as a small child there was just this feeling that these people didn't like me. You knew that there was, and I could see with my mother, the way, when we walked, how, I knew that she was trying to protect us, you could, if I were to, you could almost feel her putting her arms around us. As we walked by, but she was proud, you know when she saw this place, it's a better life for my children. And I'm gonna be here, because I have a right to be here, and I'm gonna be here, and she would grab us by the hand and she'd pull us close to her and we would just walk by. And people really saw my mother and they started to have a lot of respect, you know it was this black woman, no husband, 4 children, but these children were perfectly mannered, clean as a whistle because my mother was, and no one is gonna think my children are heathens. We were scrubbed, ironed, and this is what was presented in that neighborhood. Then you go to school, and the school was reflective of the community, I mean I think I have some pictures, there were not a lot of black kids in the school. So you go into a school, and you know, you're the black children in the class, and the same prejudice that people had, I mean teachers had the same kind of prejudice, and you were aware that there was something about maybe them treating a white child differently than they treated you. Whether it was, who raised their hand first, there were little subtle things, but you knew. But I had my hand up first. And you didn't call me, but you said the first person that raises their hand, but that was my hand. And then if you said anything, no you didn't have your hand-- . And these were just these little nuances that went on that started to help you see, well you know what, there's gonna be different treatment of me, then there are these other kids.

BP: Where did you go to school as a child?

BR: The first school I went to was on Jennings Street and it was P.S., give me a minute, P.S. 66. And I went to that school from kindergarten to 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

BP: And when you started school, you noticed that you might've been one of a few or if not the only African American child in the class?

BR: One of a few. One of a few black kids.

BP: And how was it when you finished at that school?

BR: It had changed. I mean the neighborhood, the community had changed and you know there were certainly many black people in the school by then. Some Hispanics, but still you had a racially mixed environment, but as you get older you learn the system, so you really, you learn how to deal with it better and you learn, you just learn how to work through the system. You

start to develop that, you know, you start to learn the game. And by 6<sup>th</sup> grade, you know, you knew who to talk to, you knew how to get the things that you needed. You started developing those skills.

BP: So about 6<sup>th</sup> grade you're maybe 12 or 13 years old, I guess at that time. Now who were members of your playgroup or your peer group? Was it a mixed group or was it, I mean you said earlier that, as the neighborhood changed you--, and people became more, more accepting, open to socializing with your family because of the example that your mother provided, you had a mixed group of play friends. Is that the same in and out of school?

BR: Yes, because in school, because you're with these kids all day, you become friends with them. I mean I had white friends, they would walk home, we would walk home from school together, we would go to each other's houses to do homework and we had this cool, you know, growing up in that area, it was just this cool group of kids and we just had the coolest time. Just exploring the neighborhood. Where the Sheridan Expressway is, is across the street, right now, from the buildings that I lived in. It runs through, I watched them build the Sheridan Expressway, so that was our playground. When they, we could go in there and we would find, we would build stuff. They had knocked down buildings, so there was all this cool stuff, bricks, and pieces and we would play for hours, we'd build, rebuild little houses and cook hotdogs, I mean we just made this area like our domain and in those days, you could be out all day. You got up in the morning, you did what you had to do and then you went outside. And this one came out, and there would be a group of 10 of us and we would just roam the area, you had a little bit of money, not a lot, maybe a quarter, but it went a long way and you shared it with everyone. I mean there was a lot--. One of the things I remember is that there was just a great community, there was a lot of sharing going on in all aspects. And I realized that we got that, because we saw adults do it. They borrowed money from each other, you know when someone didn't have money, you would say can I borrow 2 dollars? And they had this little network where no one went without. My mother would say and it's—you know, why don't you bring Junior, tell Junior to come and eat with us. Now looking back what I realized is that the word would go out that that family was having hard times and they didn't have food. So if there were 3 kids, someone would invite, say bring 1 of those kids to your house. So you could feed them. So there was no homeless people, you know, because if someone didn't have money, all of a sudden there would be a rent party. Now I know what it was, these fish dinners would be fried and all of sudden a bag of groceries that maybe other people put together was going to that person's house. So that was, even in a poor community, that was the sense of community that I remember. Everyone, the children belonged to the neighborhood. Anyone could smack you, you know, you could not do anything that someone wouldn't come back and tell your mother. Say how they hell did they find out? Someone saw you. And went back, and that was it. There was no back talk. If someone walked up to you and said, now you know you shouldn't be doing that, you said, yes Ms. So and So, and that was it. But it really taught a lot of values. We had a church, my church was on Home Street and it was called Home Street Woodstock Presbyterian Church and every Sunday we had to go to Sunday school and that was the way most of the families lived in that community. And everything was in walking distance, you know, you walked. I mean very few people had cars, so you just kind of walked the neighborhood. To your church, to the stores that you shopped in. And that's, that was the life, but the kids, we could just explore the railroad tracks, I mean, we found ways, we found berries, we picked berries, we went fishing.

BP: Where would you go fishing?

BR: In the Bronx River.

BP: Wow.

BR: In the Bronx River, I mean we just would find all this cool stuff that kept us busy.

BP: Since you're talking about this, what other types of games, were there any specific games that you played as children?

BR: We played stickball, hopscotch, we called it Potsie, were you took a--. You wrote the numbers out on this square, we played those games, we played for hours.

BP: And was it a all girl group that you socialized with or was it boys and girls?

BR: It was boys and girls, it was this cool co-ed group of kids and we were really good friends. We spent every day together from morning, and we knew, when it started to get dark you had to get home. But people weren't afraid then to let their children out, because no one bothered kids. I mean, no one snatched kids in those days, you could just say I'm going out and you knew where you could go and then we would sneak. We would go further, we knew where a bakery was that baked bread and you'd go there and stand outside, you know they'd give you piece of bread and we'd all share this. It was just this cool thing.

BP: And music, we always, we speak to people about the musical interests. Even in this peer group, what was the musical taste of the day? Was it doo-wop or was it moving more in a rock 'n roll actually with your--?

BR: It was more rock 'n roll, The Temptations, The Four Tops, The Miracles. You know that whole Motown, The Supremes, I mean that--. Those were, those were the groups, we listened to that music on 45s, you know, you had the little record player and you know you put your little 45 on, and you know, we would sometimes chip in to buy a record. Because not everybody, and in those days, not everybody had a record player. So if you had the record player, that was great, we would just go to someone's house that had what it was what we wanted to do and that's how we would sit around and that's how we spent our days.

BP: And where did you go to junior high school, after P.S. 66 what was your next school?

BR: Herman Ridder Junior School, junior high school 98.

BP: So that's on Crotona Park East.

BR: Boston Road, 1690 Boston Road, but it's Boston Road and it's right near Crotona Park.

BP: So that's called junior high school--?

BR: It was in those days junior high school 98, it was Herman Ridder Junior High School.

BP: What was your experience like there?

BR: That was you know, I liked school a lot, so it was a very, I had a very good experience, I was a good student. I like school. I was very personable, very well mannered, outgoing, so it was a good, school in general for me, was a very good experience.

BP: High school, where did you go to high school?

BR: James Monroe.

BP: Now, in your junior high school and in your high school years, did teachers--? So I guess now we're talking about, this is a mid, a mid to late 1960s. Do you graduate from high school in 1970?

BR: In '69.

BP: So did your teachers, well one question, were the grades in the classes that you were in, in both junior high school and high school, were they still mixed or were they becoming predominately more black and Hispanic?

BR: They were still mixed. Herman Ridder was still a mixed school and James Monroe was still a mixed school. I would say maybe, in the beginning maybe more, maybe there was more whites than African-Americans at Herman Ridder, but maybe by 9<sup>th</sup> grade it changed a little more. And

the same thing with James Monroe when we started maybe in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, it might've been less than half but by the time you graduated, it was 50/50 or more.

BP: Where was Monroe High School located when you attended?

BR: Boynton Avenue.

BP: Boynton?

BR: Yes, it's B-O-Y-N-T-O-N.

BP: Did teachers encourage you to go to college after high school?

BR: Somewhat, but not to the degree that I think they should've. I had some teachers who always said to me, you know, you're so brilliant, you're so bright, you can be anything, you can be anything that you want. And then there were other teachers that if there was an opportunity because they knew you wanted to get the best grade, if there was an opportunity for them to give you less, they always did to like kind of discourage you and keep you in your place. So I experienced both but I think what outweighed it was the teachers that actually believed in me, and there were many so it outweighed it because they would--. I remember in, because they did a lot of tracking of black students in those days, and even, I remember, when I went to junior high school, they had taken, now in elementary school, and in those days you had lower exponent classes, like 6:1, 6:2, those were the smarter classes--. Now I came out of a class, I came out of 6:2, in junior high school--, in elementary school, but when I got to junior high school they put me in 7:8, which was a very high exponent class and not an academically challenging environment for me. But what happened was, and that's how they would've tracked me, when I went to 8<sup>th</sup> grade, they put me in 8:8, but they had asked students to stay after school who wanted to learn algebra, and I was always the kids, you know, I'll do it, I'll do it, so I stayed after school and I went into this algebra class, and the teacher, the math teacher who taught that class, saw my ability to learn algebra and he said, I don't recognize you from any of my SP classes, what class are you in? And I said, well I'm in 8:8, and he said, you're in 8:8? Why? Bring your mother to school tomorrow and you're not gonna be in that class anymore. I came home, I told my mother, I said they told me to bring you to school and within a week, I was in class 8:2 and from there I went to 9:2, and it was a very different education than what I would've gotten had it not been for this one teacher, who refused to see a student like me being trapped in those classes. And I remember the principal saying to him, why don't you mind your business, right in front of my mother and I. And see my mother, she didn't understand the system, she wasn't gonna go and fight, it's like well this is the class they put my daughter in. She didn't know enough to say, but my daughter doesn't belong in that class. So that's how I moved from a class that would've been a very mediocre education into classes that were really about educating the students that they taught. And it was very interesting to see how students were being tracked.

BP: Do you remember that teacher's name?

BR: Mr. Weinberger.

BP: Mr. Weinberger?

BR: Yes, of course I remember him. He was an eccentric mathematician, that's what he was and he did--. Everything about what he did was math. And he wanted to make sure that students learned algebra in that school and he stayed after school and as I said I volunteered to be in that program and it changed the course of how I was educated.

BP: For someone who spent, I guess almost 2 years in the higher tracked classes, what do you remember, what some of the differences were between being in a 6:1 class, to being in a 7:8, and a 8:8 class to being in a 9, 8:1 or 8:2 or in a 9:2 class?

BR: Absolutely. You had discipline problems in the higher exponent classes, and the teachers



were less interested in teaching students and mind you 7:8 and 8:8 were kind of mid range because they went up to 7:15 and so you know, that was mid, that was not the real high exponent classes. If you were, I would say in those schools, if you were beyond a 5, then I think you were almost like written off as vocationalish. If I would look back, and if you were up to maybe about a 4 or a 5, then you were interested in looking at you as possibly kids that would go to college. And I think that was, and I think that was the difference. Fortunately, in 8:8 I didn't spend that much time there because this program came about at the beginning of 8<sup>th</sup> grade. So I was immediately moved in a short period of time from an 8:8 class to an 8:2 class. And then you took languages, you know which, that wasn't available, I mean these things were not available. You were in a music class, you played an instrument, you know that's not available in a 7:8 exponent. But the minute you moved down, to either an SP class, and he tried, this teacher, actually tried to have them put me in an SP class, but the principal wouldn't do it because he said I didn't come out of 7<sup>th</sup> grade in an SP class and I would be too far behind, or at least that's what he was saying, so they compromised and I went into the 2 exponent.

BP: Did, well since you mentioned it, what language were you able to study?

BR: Spanish, and I learned a little bit to play the flute. You know, and you have a greater exposure to a well-rounded education. These are the classes, you get taken to museums, and you know it's what education should be. It's not learning from a book. Education is allowing a young person's mind to expand to all possibilities. The first time I went to Lincoln Center, I went because they took us in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The first time I saw an opera, it was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. It opened up a world for me, where in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I had a teacher and this is a model story, you walked into, it was 9<sup>th</sup> grade, you walked into this room and there was this spinster and I remember this teacher's name, Mrs. O'Connor, she played classical music for 15 minutes every day. And you know when you're 15 or 14 years old you're like this, and we read the New York Times. This teacher, and I read the New York Times this very day because of that class.

BP: Mrs. O'Connor?

BR: Mrs. O'Connor, we listened to classical music, it was an advanced English class and we listened to classical music. And we had to read the New York Times, every day. And that was the first time, and she had us address each other by our surnames. I would have called you Mr. Purnell, Ms. Roberts and that went on and that's the way we had to interact with each other, which changed us. I mean we walked out of that class, we were different, we were bigger. We were bigger, there was no question about it. And by the end of that class she could say, and what were we listening to today Ms. Roberts? Tchaikovsky Ms. O'Connor. And there was not a kid in that class that could not chose Wagner or Tchaikovsky or and where would kids like us ever have that? You know what I mean? That's what education is. It truly is.

BP: Are you and educator or a teacher now? Just curious.

BR: No, I'm a recruiter.

BP: Okay, hopefully we can get up to that. You said until 12:30 or--?

BR: Yes, 12:30 is good for me.

BP: So you went to school, sounds like you were a serious student, you did well. Did you do anything else in your spare time, did you ever have any part-time jobs or--?

BR: All the time. You know my family didn't have money, I worked, I got a job in high school, in supermarkets. I was the cashier and that was a great job for someone my age. And to be able to, you know be a supermarket cashier, I was 15, my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday I was getting working papers so that I could have a job and my own money. And I would just walk in places and try to get a job. And I walked into the supermarket, I'm trying to think, it was like the Simpson Street area. I

walked into the supermarket, and you gotta figure, I'm a 15 year old, and I'm asking for a job, and they're laughing like, you're just a kid. And I'm like, yes but I really wanna work and I could really--. He says you know how to work a cash register? I said no, but I could learn. And he picked up a circular and in those days you didn't have a machine that added for you, if something was 5 for a dollar, the cashier had to know one was 20 cents. That was the way. So he picked up the circular, he asked me all the things in the circular, and how much would this be? I gave him all the right answers, and he walked me over to the cash register and he just said okay, he showed me how to do it and he said okay do it, and make the change. And I made the change. And he said okay kid come in on Saturday. And I had that job for most of my time in high school. And it was, you know, it was a good job for me and it gave me cashier skills.

BP: That's impressive. This is kind of a contemporary question, somebody who was very interested in learning and did well in school, were you in a peer group of other young people who also felt the same way about their academics?

BR: Some yes, and some no. Like the person that I--. We remained friends, we were very much alike. In a community like that, you get both. You have some kids that were very serious students and other kids that weren't. In my family, I mean I was the most serious. Of my siblings, about, about school.

BP: What was it like for your brother in school? Well now this is your older brother?

BR: Yes.

BP: How many years between you?

BR: 2.

BP: 2. Did he also excel academically?

BR: Not at all. He did not. I think, very much like now, with black males in the public school system, there were always issues and challenges in how they would fit in. And I, it's just not a system that works well for who they are and what they need. And it still doesn't. I mean we know this because you can look at drop out rate, currently, it didn't work well for my brother. He was not a bad kid, but it just was not a good fit for him. So he was failing a lot of things, got into mischievous things and then he was moved in to a 600 school and you know--. Now you can look back and see that these were the tracking that they do with young males, and they still do it today. Now they call them alternative sites, and you go and there are these young black males, some of them are violent and belong there and a lot of them don't. But once they don't know what to do with you, I mean, that's what they do.

BP: So after graduating from James Monroe did you go to college?

BR: I got married.

BP: Oh, that's right you said you got married at 18?

BR: Exactly. I married, I actually got married to a guy that I knew from junior high school. And he was actually Polish. And that's why I always had white friends. And he was one of, he was one of my friends in the group of kids in junior high school that we hung out together. And it was a racially mixed group of kids. And we got married, he's deceased now, but I have a son. My son is 39.

BP: What was your husband's name?

BR: Robert Piechowiak.

BP: Robert Piechowiak. Okay so you got married in 1969?

BR: Yes.

BP: What was it like being in a--? I guess was it common for a African-American and a Polish man to be married?

BR: Not at all. No in 1969, not at all.

BP: In the Bronx?

BR: In the Bronx, not at all. Not at all. But you know I was always kind of my own person, I was probably if I look back I was always pushing the envelope slightly, you know. And I was just gonna be my own person and I was gonna like who I liked and be with who I wanted to be with and I just didn't care, you know what people thought. But no, you didn't see, I mean you did not see racially mixed couples in those days. Not at all. We would walk, people would stare at us, and make all kinds of you know, make comments, you know white boy, and you know it was challenging. I mean even finding an apartment--.

[END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B]

BR: --we would go for, would go to look at apartments, he would go, we were denied apartments on Grand Concourse. I'm trying to think of--? Fordham Road area. All these white areas like he would go and they would say there was an apartment and then they'd say bring your wife and when I came, there was no apartment anymore.

BP: Really?

BR: Absolutely. And you know we reported it, but the human rights, they said look we could get you these apartments but I don't think--. They would tell us, I don't think you're gonna be safe over there. Because you had the Fordham Baldies that was a gang around Fordham Road. And then like Arthur Avenue was still, was always the mob type Italians, so they were like I don't think that's a good place for you to live. So we lived in West Farms Road. Then we moved to Rosedale. And even moving to Parkchester. They thought they were renting to someone white, I mean they asked--. Because he came, we knew the game, he came by himself, and 4 couples came together. Now the other 2 people were told that they didn't have any apartments, we got an apartment in 2 weeks.

BP: They other couples, the other 3 couples were--?

BR: Were black.

BP: African-American men and women?

BR: Yes. And they were told that there were no apartments, and they were put on a waiting list. And he came, by himself, said he was married, had a son, and in 2 weeks they called us and said we have a wonderful 2 bedroom apartment for you. Because they thought they were renting it to this nice little white boy. And then my son and I showed up with him, but in a place like this they knew they could not back out of giving us the apartment and that's how we got to live here.

BP: What was your husband's last name? How'd you spell that?

BR: P-I-E-C-H-O-W-I-A-K

BP: And what kind of work did he do?

BR: He worked as first, he worked as a in the hospital, as a maintenance person. Then he had a contracting business with his brothers, then they bought a medallion for a yellow cab, and then he went to work, no before the medallion he worked with a telephone company as an installer and then as a supervisor. And they got a medallion for a yellow cab and they did that together for you know, a long, long time.

BP: And did your families get along well with each other or was there tension even within the families about this uncommon marriage?

BR: Yes. I think in the beginning, I think black people are far more accepting, than white people. He lived out in Green Point, he moved out to Green Point where the Polish—that's a whole Polish community out there. His father, he was being raised by his father and his stepmother and they separated and then he lived, just to give a little brief--. Then he lived with

his father, they moved out to that Green Point area, I mean I went out there a couple of times, there was absolutely no black people, I mean that wasn't even a partially mixed community. There was just no black people out there. So that, I didn't do that often, he would more come to West Farms where I lived. But within our families yes, and then eventually, you know people kind of get used to it. His brothers, and he had 2 brothers, stepbrothers, and 2 half-sisters, we all got along. I mean, you know, we were moving into the '70s so it was really this kind of climate for people to want to know more about each others culture. So that was, it was a time where you had a lot of, curiosity in cultures. And we started to really be a part of circles that were very racially mixed. I mean if you came to our house on any given Saturday it would look like a League of Nations from black, white, Chinese, Greek, I mean we had a really racially mixed group of friends, which was very interesting and very nice. And we all agreed that we would not, that we would live to see no prejudice, and we honestly believed that based on the group of people that we associated with.

BP: Aside from occasional comments or stares, was there ever any, was there ever any violence directed toward you in the streets of the Bronx for being in a interracial relationship?

BR: My husband got into--. I was always pulling him, like c'mon, you know because men would say something to me. And he would say, you're disrespecting me, and you're disrespecting my wife and then, you know, he would want to get into an altercation with the person and I was always dragging him away saying, it's not worth it. It's not worth it, I don't care. Don't listen to what they say, they're just ignorant and don't listen. And but as far as almost altercations yes, but actual physical, the closest thing we came is that someone, I mean, he actually grabbed someone one time in a restaurant, the guy tried to give me his phone number, and that just like sent him right over the top and he just kind of leaped for the person and I had to pull him away, like pull him off the person.

BP: So your husband was a, he was a bit of, I don't wanna say hot head but, he wasn't somebody that was--.

BR: Oh, he wasn't afraid. I can tell you that much, he wasn't afraid.

BP: And he grew up in the Bronx with you?

BR: Exactly.

BP: And then his family moved to Green Point?

BR: Yes, he wasn't afraid I mean, you know, as they used to describe him, he was a chilly white boy.

[Laughter]

BP: What did that mean?

BR: Cool, you know, chilly white boy.

[Laughter]

BP: Was he a physically imposing individual or--?

BR: No, not really, but you know, he was, he very much identified with black people. He was very, he dressed like the black guys. I mean he used to try to put grease on his hair. I was like stop, you don't need--. Don't put grease on your hair, and a stocking cap, I'm like no. Trying to get waves, you know like the black guys with the waves? He used to put, what was that grease? New something, it came in a can, and all the black guys used it and then you put a stocking cap on and you got waves. There he is with his straight, white boy hair--.

BP: He sounds like an interesting, interesting person. Did you and he stay married until he passed away?

BR: No, we were married for about 8 years and then we got, um we got divorced. And you

know, we kind of went our separate ways. We always stayed in touch and you know we remained in contact with each other until he passed away, I guess about 6 or 7 years ago. Unfortunately, he was killed in a motorcycle accident, because he was just, you know, he liked the edge, I mean that was just his personality. Right down to riding a motorcycle with a German helmet unfastened so you know, that was just, that was just his personality.

BP: I'm curious to hear if have memories--. How did, so this is also right when you're graduating, and you're married, a new mother and--. The Vietnam War is at its height. Did you notice any ways that the Vietnam War was effecting the neighborhood where you lived in the Bronx, or even your peer group in high school or I guess shortly after you were married, you moved to Parkchester. What was, what was the Bronx and Vietnam like in the late '60s?

BR: We were protesting, I remember in high school, I mean we knew then that the war was wrong. We had protests, we made signs, we protested. Now my husband's brother was actually in the Vietnam War. His brother Tony, that was his older brother, he actually went to Vietnam and he fought in the war. A number of the men, a number of our young guys that were part of our group, they were--. Then you were drafted. You were drafted, they were drafted in the military for the Vietnam War and I remember, I remember them coming back and they just weren't the same anymore. It did a lot, it did a lot of damage to who they were. My sister's boyfriend, he was drafted, a lot of them came back, they got into drugs and there was just this destruction of their soul that kind of--. I felt, that kind of happened and if you ever tried to talk to them about it, I remember one time I was very casually talking to my husband's brother about the war and he just started sobbing hysterically. And I still remember that because, it was like oh, I'm so sorry, you know we don't have to talk about that. But I knew that something bad had happened to these men. And a lot of them never were able to get, were able to get it together. But we as a high school, we were protesters.

BP: So when is your son born?

BR: My son is born in 1969.

BP: So right you--?

BR: Right when I'm graduating yes.

BP: And what is his name?

BR: His name is Robert.

BP: And you moved to Parkchester in 19--?

BR: '74.

BP: '74?

BR: Yes.

BP: Well does anything stand out when you lived on Rosedale Avenue, or what was that community like? Was it similar to West Farms or--?

BR: More, there were more Hispanics in that area, and there still are. I was only there for a year. That was a very brief stay. We lived in a private house, we weren't really happy there. And I always wanted to live in Parkchester. I always wanted, because I used to, I was a dancer also in junior high school and high school and I used to come to Parkchester to teach an exercise class. And I would come to this beautiful--. Parkchester in those days, it was the most beautiful place I had ever seen. It was absolutely, everyone was well dressed and the stores were beautiful and the place was just immaculate. You didn't see--. I had never seen city streets that didn't have anything, any paper, not as much as a cigarette butt. And I said, I'm gonna live here. I wanna live here. And the oval, I would have to go across the oval to go to Metropolitan Avenue to where it was one of these health places, Elaine Powers, and as part of a dance program we used to go and

kind of teach like jazzercises, something in there, it was cute. I mean at that age you're just amazed that you know you get to this opportunity to go and do something like that, but it was my first exposure to this, to the Parkchester community. And when we were on Rosedale, I told, I told my husband, I said listen, I wanna go live in Parkchester, go there and see if we can get an apartment, and that's how we got there.

BP: So perhaps we can speak about your impressions upon living here when you first arrived in 1974. Earlier before we started the interview, you said that, you said that you could've walked for weeks and not seen another person of color in Parkchester. So what was it, what was it like now when you first moved here after, I guess after visiting and being enamored with the, the beauty and the cohesion of the community, what was it like now to, to live here?

BR: I though I'd died and went to heaven. I'm not kidding, I really did. I was, I thought that this was the most beautiful place. It just felt right. I loved my apartment, the apartments are big, they are still, they're very beautiful apartments. There were perfectly manicured lawns. The stores, everything, and everything you needed was right here. You had D'Agastinos and Grastiddis, all of these stores. All of these, we would use the term now, upscale. Which wasn't a term, you know, it wasn't a word back then. But you had all these upscale stores, high quality food, butchers, you know you could call up and place an order and someone would deliver your groceries. I mean, I'm like yes! Yes!

BP: What type of work did you do in the early years of your marriage? Well did you work as a young woman?

BR: I didn't work until my son was 4 years old. Then I went into retailing. I worked for Bloomingdales and Lord and Taylor. And then I branched out with a small independent storeowner and I did buying for 3 stores that he owned.

BP: Was this in Manhattan?

BR: Yes, yes. And I did that for like about 10 years. So when I first came to Parkchester, that's what I did, I was in retailing.

BP: So in 1974 there were not many other African Americans living in Parkchester?

BR: Not, I would say there was about maybe 4 or 5%. But because, this is, there are 12,000 apartments in Parkchester. Now, I did have, there was a neighbor, there were some black people in my building, very few, but there were, 2 other black families in my building. 34 Metropolitan Oval because I've not moved, I've lived in the same apartment for the 34 years that I've been here. But if you were walking outside, you could be in any store, not see another black person. I mean Macy's at that time, took up the entire block. There weren't a lot of black people. I'm trying to think--.

BP: Macy's in Manhattan?

BR: No, there still is. There's a Macy's Parkchester. And now it's much smaller but, when I moved here Macy's Parkchester took up an entire square block and they sold everything. From tires to clothes and you know carpet. I mean appliances, you name it, you walked in Macy's and you bought it. But there weren't, there weren't a lot of black people working in Macy's. Because the stores the hired the people from the community. There was a huge Woolworth's, that you know, that were, a double floor Woolworth's that took up another part of the block. But again, you were very aware that these people were saying, uh-oh, they're coming, they're coming.

BP: Was there ever any--?

BR: And then I was, we were a racially mixed couple so that was like, they would just stop and literally turn around. And they'd look at Robert, they're both Roberts, and they'd look at me and look at my son and my son would believe--. My son would say, Mommy why is everybody

always staring at us? So rather than tell him, I said because they've never seen 3 people as beautiful as we are. And my son was 12 years old, and I believed you. I said they have never seen 3 people as beautiful as we are, and when they see us they just can't take their eyes off of us. That was it.

BP: What was Robert Sr.'s response? Did he have a response to that question or--?

BR: By then we were, we were really used to it. Because you know we had been married for a few years and you know we came here for peace. It was a good life, and you were less, it wasn't a threatening--. I never felt threatened here, I just felt looked at.

BP: Before, when you started the interview, you mentioned about the stigma of the Bronx today. I'm wondering if we can go back to the 1970s, mid '70s when you were living here in Parkchester and large portions of the Bronx, even I guess areas where you had previously lived and gone to school, are embroiled in these catastrophic fires and arson--. And the city's in a fiscal crisis and so--. What were some of the—what do you remember about that history of the Bronx, kind of being a bit removed from it? Was there conversation at those times about what was happening in the Bronx?

BR: Absolutely. You couldn't turn on a television. People thought the Bronx was this awful place that was so unsafe, that there were only burned out buildings, that the people that lived in the Bronx were just really poor people. And see being in Parkchester, again, I have to say, I was very removed, because Parkchester is a, at that time, Parkchester was truly a world unto itself. Even as far as the subway system is concerned. You went from, when I took the subway from downtown, there's an express train. It makes a stop in the South Bronx, which is Hunt's Point and in those days, with the exception of very few people, all people of color got off the train at that stop. So, so that was the cutoff point. Very few people of color continued, and it's an express train that only stops there and it still does that today. And then it comes to Parkchester. Now all of the stops in between, Whitlock and Elder and Soundview, it doesn't stop there. So all those people got off, and being a snob, you would say okay all the riff raffs off the train. It's true, you say the riff raffs got off the train now, and I got to go to my nice little area and everyone was very well dressed and you know it was, you were very removed from what was going on in the Bronx, because Parkchester remained this very well-maintained, very nice way of life and that's where you lived and you know I went from Manhattan, Lexington Avenue, right opposite Bloomindales. Which was prime area in those days. I got on the train and I came home and that was kind my life, we had a car, so if we were leaving Parkchester, you know, we left in a car. And I kind of didn't experience other than, knowing it, and then my mom lived on Ryer Avenue. So I would go and--.

BP: That's R-Y-E-R right?

BR: Yes, Ryer Avenue. So I would go and visit my mom. And I had relatives that would live in some of the areas, but they more came to visit me, than I came to visit them.

BP: Where did she live, Ryer and what was the cross street, do you remember?

BR: I'm gonna say 170, maybe 173<sup>rd</sup> Street. Yes. Somewhere around there. I would have to think more about the exact, about the exact location, but it might've been 173<sup>rd</sup>, 175<sup>th</sup> Street.

BP: All right, so she's kind of still in that zone of the South Bronx, which was--.

BR: Yes, tenement, you know, style living, yes, definitely.

BP: I'm wondering in the last few minutes that we have remaining if we can speak a bit about, well there's 3 other things that I wanted you to comment on but one is the Parkchester NAACP. How did you come to get involved in this organization?

BR: I do a lot of community work in Parkchester. Voter registration. I started off doing voter

registration and you know tenant's association. There were different organizations that I joined. The Parkchester First Coalition, I mean that was an organization that opposed Parkchester going condominium. It's a whole, it's a whole story. I mean that opposed Parkchester going condominium and the--. There was a group of people that wanted it to go condominium and a group of people that opposed it. So I worked with these organizations and people got to know me. I was the building captain in my building.

BP: If I may interrupt.

BR: Sure any time.

BP: 2 other, 2 questions building off what you just said. One is a general one. Why did you get involved in community work? I mean, what inspired you, or what motivated you, or what prompted you to, to do that extracurricular work? And the second is, I'm curious, why would you oppose--? Why did people oppose Parkchester going condo?

BR: Okay, the 1<sup>st</sup> question. I got involved because I believe in giving back, and I believe in service. I think that as a human being, to whom much is given, much is required. And I feel that, you have to give back to the community that you live in by identifying things that you want to see change, and be a change agent. Not sitting on the sidelines talking about it, but actually participating in the development and the change that you think is necessary to occur. I got involved in political because I thought a black candidate should run around here. I saw a black candidate running, I walked up to him on the street and I said, I wanna have lunch with you, I want you to tell me what you plan to do for this community and if I like it, I'm gonna campaign for you.

BP: Who was that candidate?

BR: That candidate was, Tyrone Woods, he was running for the assembly. Peter Rivera is the assemblyman for the 76<sup>th</sup> District around here. But I campaigned for Tyrone and he actually won the election, but it was contested by the incumbent. And they have more money, and when they contest an election, they go in and they do a lot of stuff, and I know that Tyrone won because they said initially, ultimately the result was that Peter Rivera won by 250 votes. But the media announced that Tyrone had won so--. You know that was just a lesson in politics and how it really works.

BP: When was this? What year was this?

BR: 19, maybe 1990?

BP: Okay.

BR: Yes.

BP: So having that sense of community involvement, was that something that you think you picked up from your mother and her--? The kind of position she had in her--? Where do you think that came from?

BR: It came from my life's experience. Because my mother was not a person who was community involved. You know, taking care of the kids was actually, that took up a lot of her time. But I always knew in my community, even as a child, even as a young person, I stood for what I believed in. I just did. I mean I would stick my little heels in and make signs and raise pennies and you know that, that was just--. And anyone who knows me, they just said, you were just a little, you're just a bigger version of the little person that you were. That is my belief, it has always been my belief in school, if I thought things were wrong I was always in student government, you know I ran for offices and all things, all throughout school. In high school when we wanted to wear pants to school, we had to have a sit in. I organized a sit in for girls to be able to wear pants to high school. And we won. And we were able to wear pants. It's just, I



think there's just an innate belief that if you think something's wrong, then enact something that will bring about positive change. And I still believe that. And that's why I love the NAACP. It is, it has been a remarkable experience for me to be a part of this great organization. I've been involved with the NAACP now for I guess about 12 to 15 years on a real involvement level. And it's been one of the best experiences of my life.

BP: So you came into it in the early '90s.

BR: Yes, exactly.

BP: I don't want to take up anymore of your time so perhaps we'll stop there and I'm gonna turn this off.

BR: Sure.

BP: So thank you for participating.

BR: Oh, you're quite welcome Mr. Purnell, it's been a pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]