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Rhoden, Everard

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Transcriber: Will Beller

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): This is the 153rd interview of the Bronx African American History Project, and we are here with Everard – is that the right –

Everard Rhoden (ER): – Everard.

Dr. Mark Naison: Everard Rhoden. An educator and soon to be entrepreneur who grew up in the Longwood section of the Bronx. Mr. Rhoden, tell us a little bit about your family background.

ER: Well, my – I was born in Santa Cruz in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica, which was ironically the same town that Colin Powell's parents were born in, and when I came here – about two months after I came here I moved to Longwood Avenue and Kelly.

MN: Right, now did your family first move to Harlem –

ER: No.

MN: – or did they move directly to the Bronx?

ER: No, my mother is the one who came up, and she moved directly to the Bronx.

MN: Yes, did she have relatives – how did she find the Bronx? Did she have relatives or friends living there?

ER: She had friends. She was – she actually – she was actually sponsored and she came as a domestic helper. So she came to a family and was domestic there – sleep-in, and then I came two years after she came.

MN: Right, now where was – where was the family that she worked as a sleep-in – what –?

ER: Basically they were in – they were in Queens.

MN: Okay.

ER: In Long Island – actually they lived in like Great Neck [Crosstalk].

MN: Now, now did she have an alternative apartment in the Bronx?

ER: She lived with friends in the Bronx.

MN: Okay, so in other –

ER: She had a room.

MN: She had a room in the Bronx – in what neighborhood?

ER: On Kelly Street.

MN: On Kelly Street?

ER: 830 Kelly.

MN: Okay, so this – were all the other people who were in that apartment also live-ins?

ER: No, they had a variety – they were labor class, and they had a variety. They had more options than my mother did, and so – because they were here longer.

MN: Right.

ER: But they were Jamaican background people.

MN: Right, and what year did your mother migrate here?

ER: She came here in 1952.

MN: In 1952, and how old were you when you joined her?

ER: I was 11.

MN: Wow.

ER: I came in 1954.

MN: You came in 1954, and did you join her in a one room?

ER: Yes. It's very, it's very interesting because [Clears Throat] she only had one room, and so, since she was a sleep-in, I could sleep in that room while she was at work, and when she came for a day – she would come on the weekends – I would sleep in the living room of this family that we knew.

MN: Of another family?

ER: Exactly.

MN: Okay, so on the weekdays you slept in the room in 837?

ER: 830.

MN: 830 Kelly Street, and then where did this family live where you slept in the living room?

ER: Well they had – there were three bedrooms, so they had two for themselves.

MN: Oh, okay, so she rented a room with a family?

ER: Exactly.

MN: And so you slept in the living room?

ER: That's right.

MN: Right, and what was the – was the family also Jamaican?

ER: Yes, they were.

MN: And what occupation did they have?

ER: They were – one worked an elevator operator if I recall at this point. The lady – probably a domestic if I – you know, not too clear, but probably a domestic related job she had.

MN: Now, when you were moved to the Bronx from Jamaica at age 11, what were some of the things that leaped out at you or stood out for you?

ER: Oh, right away the climate. I came in December [Tape Error] cold. I had never seen anything like this or felt anything like this in my life, and the other thing that was so striking was the heights of the buildings, you know? And the relative – the absolute organization of the city – it was such an organized looking place. I think those were the most striking things.

MN: Now, what grade were – did you enter?

ER: Sixth, sixth grade.

MN: And that was – was that in, in junior high school or that was – ?

ER: Elementary.

MN: Okay, what was the difference between the schools in Jamaica you had attended and the school in the Bronx [Tape Error but picks up where it left off]?

ER: The schools in Jamaica were far more demanding at that age [Clears Throat]. The curriculum was tougher, the discipline was [Tape Error]. The student body in Jamaica was more uniform. The student body here was diverse – ethnic and so on and so forth. I recall that when I came – if I may use a couple of seconds to say this, I went to junior high school – elementary school when I first entered. The school was a mixed school. They gave me a reading test to place me in the sixth grade. They placed me in the top class. The class had one other black student there. The majority of the students were Jewish, but you did have some Europeans who were coming in at the time from the Ukraine and other places.

MN: Right.

ER: And, I recall the teacher saying – asking me when I first came in if I knew my alphabets. I felt insulted because I told them, “But I just passed the reading test.” [Laughs] I had a very strong Jamaican accent and he said that, “Do you know your alphabets?” And I said, “Well, not

only do I know, but I could sing it for you backwards.” [Laughter] And he said to me, “Okay, smarty go ahead.” And I said [Singing], “zyxwvutsrqponmlkjihgfedcba.” You know, so, [Laughter] so I was a little started, but shortly on in the class I realized that we had caught most of the stuff that he was doing two years back.

MN: Right.

ER: I had about two years in advance, so it was a fairly easy year in terms of work. A lot of times in Jamaica I had taken Latin. I had taken French. I was doing simple and compound interest, all the fractions and stuff. Kids had never heard of that before.

MN: Right.

ER: [Laughs]

MN: Now, what was the atmosphere like on your block?

ER: Active. The kids were aggressive. I was not used to gangs. There were gangs there. Mostly block gangs.

MN: Block gangs?

ER: Yes, gangs on the block. Every two blocks they’d have a gang.

MN: Now, what were their names?

ER: Yes.

MN: Do you remember?

ER: Let’s see if I can remember. You had – you had the Bisquana Tims. You had the – there was a branch of the Sportsmen not far off from there. There was a Puerto Rican gang known as the Sinners at the time, and also they had – in the area they had the Seven Crowns.

MN: Right, now did you feel like when you – you know, moved here, that you had to figure out the lay of the land [Tape Error] in order to be safe?

ER: Oh [Tape Error] without a doubt. I mean if you were going to [Tape Error] at all, you had to find out how to assimilate and get along, and so, I had a little problem because of my accent at the time. And I recall youngsters in New York City calling me, saying to me – they say, “Jamaican Monkey Chaser.” [Laughs] You know, so at that time you have realize you have to have a comeback for that. So I used to say, “Well we don’t have any monkeys in Jamaica, so you must be the only monkey we chase – I’m chasing.” [Laughter] So, once you – you had to learn how to get back, and once you got back you got their respect.

MN: Verbally or physically?

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ER: Well, mostly verbally – sometimes – well you had to learn how to fight, and you got along with the guys on the block because you kind of related to them. You stuck together, and this is how you – you know, that was a natural defense.

MN: Was there a lot of fighting, just – ?

ER: Yes, but not on a very serious level – not where you had weapons and stuff. It was mostly fistfights, stuff like that, and I was a little active at the age so I didn't mind it.

MN: Was there – were there a lot of street games being played also?

ER: Oh, yes we had, like for example, right at P.S. 39 at the corner of Longwood we had this game called Three Steps to Germany.

MN: Three Steps to Germany?

ER: Right, and you had to – what happened is you were allowed to take three steps, and then you had to get to the other side of the – it's like a team – one side –

MN: Yes.

ER: – and you had a team on the other side. You were allowed three first steps, then you had to earn your other steps to get to the other side in order to win, but if they caught you in between a step, you would get punched – you would get beat up. So that was, you know [Laughter]. Then you had – we used to play pitch – Stickball, you know – we used to have Hot Peas and Butter.

MN: What is Hot Peas and Butter?

ER: You would hide a belt – they would hide belt, and you had to find it. Everybody would turn around, a person would hide a belt, and you would – everybody would come out to try to find the belt. One person would hide the belt. Everybody would come out and try to find the belt. The person who found the belt would be able to hit everybody with the belt until they got back to a certain line, you know, starting point.

MN: [Tape Error] had a certain element of physicality to it?

ER: Yes, always did. That was the stimulus in the game.

MN: Yes, now did you also do Johnny and a Pony?

ER: Yes, we also played Johnny and a Pony.

MN: And Ring-a-levio?

ER: Without a doubt, but Ring-a-levio was, was not as aggressive a game.

MN: Right.

ER: Johnny and a Pony was –

MN: Yes, I remember.

ER: – kind of aggressive, and so we used to play that. The more aggressive the game was, the more we would, you know?

MN: Right, and your block was multiethnic and multiracial?

ER: Yes it was, it was – up in our side of the block at that point it was mostly black and Puerto Rican.

MN: Okay, now if you drew up the block, this is Kelly Street, what's – one side is Longwood?

ER: Yes, you had Kelly, and then Kelly intersected with Longwood.

MN: And then what's the other side?

ER: The other side we had – well Kelly would continue and I think it went down to Avenue of St. Johns.

MN: Right, okay.

ER: And then you had, yes, in that area, and eventually it merged with Southern Boulevard.

MN: Right, now were your blocks – was your block mostly five story walkups?

ER: Yes they were.

MN: Were there any – were there any brownstones or private houses?

ER: Not on that particular block. You had to go down to Banana Kelly to come to [Crosstalk] one, but if you got across Longwood – that's the Saint to – Saint, Saint Margaret's, then you had brownstones in there.

MN: Okay, so you were north of Longwood, or –?

ER: I was north of Longwood.

MN: Of Longwood, okay, so you were in the tough side.

ER: Yes.

MN: And Colin Powell was one block over, he was –

ER: He was –

MN: – the 900 block.

ER: Yes, he was further down. I was 830. He was down near the corner where a term – we called in the Banana where it had a little curve. So his, his – where he lived, if I recall, those homes were a little lower. They were like three or four stories.

MN: Now, did you family belong to St. Margaret's?

ER: Yes, we did.

MN: And did you go their regularly?

ER: Yes, we went to St. Margaret's fairly regularly. It was nice because we were Anglicans in Jamaica, and St. Margaret's was an Episcopal church.

MN: Did you get involved in any of the theatrical activities that were there?

ER: I was – at St. Margaret's – we didn't stay that long on Longwood – Kelly. We were at Kelly for about – I would say about a year. As you know, it's an inconvenient situation. We had just one room.

MN: Right.

ER: And, so we went there. I began to – I was an altar boy, if I remember, for a short period of time at St. Margaret's.

MN: Right, now where did you move to from Kelly Street?

ER: Washington Avenue.

MN: Washington between where and where?

ER: Near 171st and St. Paul's Place.

MN: Right, now how did that neighborhood differ from Kelly Street?

ER: There were fewer Hispanics. You had some Hispanics, but you had fewer, and it was – how would I, geographically it wasn't that much different. Outside you still had your gangs, but it was my first – our first apartment.

MN: Okay, now was your mother still working in the same sort of position?

ER: Shortly after I came she was able to – she got a, she met someone on the train. She was coming on the train – she was a very attractive lady, and this gentleman began talking to her on the train. He was in the jewelry business, and he invited her to perhaps come down. He had a store downtown in Manhattan where he sold custom jewelry, and she joined him – she worked

for him after that, and he happened to be Jewish by the way. [Incomprehensible] but they're jewelers, and she got involved in that business and stayed in for a while.

MN: Right, and so she was able to, you know –

ER: Yes.

MN: – afford an apartment as a result?

ER: Afford an apartment, and I had greater freedom of course – my own room, which I was happy for [Laughs].

MN: Now was this in – also in a, in a tenement building?

ER: Yes a five story building.

MN: Now were you near St. Paul's Episcopal?

ER: I became a member of St. Paul's. I'm glad you know that place. I became a member of St. Paul's, established a good relationship there, and we stayed there for – we were on Washington Avenue maybe for about four or five years. And St. Paul's was a very exciting parish. We had Father Pearson there. Have you ever heard that name?

MN: No.

ER: But he – Father Pearson got married to Nelson Rockefeller's daughter, and she came and lived there, and it was a big thing.

MN: Wow.

ER: And then we had Father Collins. I remember these people well because they became a part of my experience.

MN: Right, now was this a multiethnic church, St. Paul's?

ER: Yes it was, but it was – strangely enough, most of the parishioners at St. Paul's were Jamaican. You did have an African American segment there, but it was mostly Jamaican.

MN: Yes, what was the general surrounding community like at 171st – Washington Avenue? Was it a – would you say it was a noisier than Kelly Street? Was it more industrial?

ER: No, it wasn't as – describing – comparing Washington Avenue I'd say they were very similar. The only distinction between them was that on my side of Washington Avenue it was mostly people of African descent, whereas, when I think back to Kelly Street you had a greater variety of people of a European, Hispanic –

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Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

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MN: Right, now where did you end up going to junior high school?

ER: 52.

MN: And you stayed in 52 even when you moved to Washington Avenue?

ER: Exactly, exactly because I had started at 52 before I left Kelly, and we just decided to stay at 52, and that was Thomas Nulton 52. That was quite an experience at 52, you know, I had there. I was happy to be there.

MN: Now, were you in the, you know, in the – stayed in the upper track classes?

ER: Yes, I was always in the – we had three classes in each grade that were considered, you know, academically excellent, and I was always a member.

MN: Right, how were the teachers at Thomas Nulton? Did you feel –?

ER: Excellent. At that time, the commitment of teachers was superb, and so our experiences – my experiences were exhilarating.

MN: Exhilarating, now that's [Laughter] I mean, and this was –

ER: It turned you on to education.

MN: Oh wow. Are there particular teachers who, you know, who made a –?

ER: Yes, I can remember, there was – let's see, let me think – we had Mr. Frazier. He was a science teacher; a fantastic person, a strange man. He was in the war by the way, World War II, you know?

MN: Yes.

ER: We had Mrs. Berman – fantastic science – another science, biology, teacher. Ms. Keating I remember as being very outstanding. There were others, but – Agnelli, Ms. Agnelli. She was an art teacher there. Those are the most pronounced at this point.

MN: Now, were there any particular subjects which excited you more than others when you were in junior high school?

ER: Always history.

MN: History?

ER: [Laughs] History instead of science, and of course, thanks to Ms. Agnelli, there was art – very exciting.

MN: Did you get involved in extracurricular activities?

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ER: Always, I was a member of the school basketball team. We competed.

MN: How did you learn to play basketball?

ER: Very fast [Laughter]. I was – well basketball is a staple of the inner city community, and I was always a fairly, if I might say so, very coordinated person as a youth, and a fast learner in sports and stuff. So I spent a great deal of time in the street at the school, and then of course I had to go upstairs and work until 11 o'clock at night – school work, but I was able to mix it well.

MN: Did you get involved in anything like Yearbook or, you know, were there, were there art clubs or anything?

ER: Well I was in the glee club in junior high school. I was part of the art – an art club, and as I remember correctly, you know, and basically –

MN: Right, now, you know, Washington Avenue isn't that close to junior high school 52.

ER: No I had to take – I think it was two buses to get there.

MN: Was there – was it, you know in an era of gangs and territoriality, was it an issue crossing boundaries, you know, going to junior high?

ER: Not so much because I had known quite a bit of people in the Kelly Street area, so it's not like I was coming as a stranger. I knew most of the guys at 52.

MN: Okay, so if you from – just somebody from Washington Avenue who didn't know anybody [Crosstalk]?

ER: You might have problems, but since I was known in both communities I didn't have any trouble.

MN: Now, one, one question – a lot of the people we've interviewed for this project are fairly successful people who were in the upper track classes. Did you have any idea what school was like for people at Nulton who were in the lower track?

ER: Yes, we were all friends, so we, we, you know, had a sense of what was happening. That wasn't a time when people had to make hard and fast decisions about occupation, jobs, and trades and so on. It was a matter of getting through school without any real perception of what you were going to do with your life. So we socialized as equals, and there was no, you know, a little elitism and all this kind of babble, and if there was you'd get beat up, so [Laughs].

MN: Now, were there gang fights outside of Nulton, or –?

ER: Yes, you did have some fights, and especially with the, not the Seven Crowns – there was another Crown gang that was Hispanic because the Crowns had divisions, and there was a

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Hispanic division of Crowns there that was called the – it wasn't the Seven Crowns. The Seven Crowns was mostly a black Crowns thing. There was another Crowns – there was the Egyptian Crowns, and then the Hispanics had that neighborhood – another division of Crowns.

MN: Was there much racial tension or division in the school?

ER: Yes and no. Back in that time, it was a time when you had a sizable amount of immigration from Puerto Rico to New York, so a lot of the Puerto Ricans could not speak English. A lot of the young Puerto Ricans are just coming over from Puerto Rico, and they stuck together because of the language thing – the culture thing, and once you stick together the us and them thing came up, and very often you would have fights between gangs of Hispanics and blacks.

MN: Now what about the white kids – there weren't enough to be a force?

ER: They, they – the white kids in the neighborhood were generally more academically inclined – not involved in those kind of activities – tried to get along – knew everybody, but didn't really join the gangs.

MN: Right, so you had black kids who were in gangs – black gangs and Puerto Rican gangs?

ER: Yes, you had mixed gangs of black and Puerto Ricans, then you had Puerto Rican gangs, and you had black gangs basically [Laughter].

MN: Okay, but you, you found that you could maneuver this without getting in any particular danger, or were there ever hairy moments where you almost got sucked into something?

ER: Well, you know, I would be involved to the extent where – fistfights type things.

MN: Give me an example of a fistfight [Crosstalk].

ER: You know, people would wear their colors, you know, and someone would come on your block, and they're sporting another color and stuff, and they would – one of the teasers – well we had, Tims, you know so you had girls who were in your gang also that we usually called Tims.

MN: What did you call them?

ER: Tims.

MN: T-I –?

ER: T-I-M-S.

MN: Tims. The girls in the gang were called Tims?

ER: Right.

MN: Okay.

ER: And so, guys from another area would come around, they would sport their colors, and they tried to rap to you – you know, you wouldn't have it, so that caused a lot of problems, so we'd organize – you know, try to chase the guys off the block, and, you know, get into fights. But usually fist fights – not, not–

MN: Now, were you still hanging out on Kelly Street when you were living in Washington Avenue.

ER: Yes, before going home I would go, you know, guys going to hang out.

MN: Did you make friends at Washington Avenue to the same degree?

ER: Oh, yes, without a doubt. My most permanent friends were from Washington Avenue because I was there longer, and so on, so we established interesting friendships.

MN: When did you see – did you think of yourself as being like an intellectual or, you know, when you were in junior high?

ER: No, I – there were times when I thought that education was an imposition. It was a necessary imposition; that was reinforced by my mother. My mother was a very tough person – uncompromising, and I remember on Washington Avenue we'd be hanging out down – these are the doo-wop days now, and we'd be downstairs hanging out with guys, and we'd be harmonizing in the hallway, and after a certain hour – because I had to get upstairs by about 7, and she would come downstairs if I happened to be down there after 7 o'clock – this time I'm like 13, 12, 14 – she would come downstairs with her belt wrapped around her fist. You couldn't tell if she had it, so it was wrapped, and she would come downstairs, and, you know, holding her hands behind her back, and asked me if I knew what time it was. And all of a sudden, you know, she would start beating me [Laughs].

MN: In front of your friends?

ER: Oh yes. Yes, [Laughter] I just had to get upstairs and try to be cool and all this kind of stuff. Of course, I was embarrassed and hurt and all that, but I wanted – I had to get upstairs.

MN: Now, were you her only child?

ER: Up here. She had a second child who came up later.

MN: But this was – did she have very high standards for you academically?

ER: Oh, extremely.

MN: Now did she – how, how far did her education extend [Cell Phone Rings]?

ER: Second grade.

MN: Wow.

ER: Second grade.

MN: So she had a 2nd grade education but she drove you to – now was she somebody who read herself?

ER: No, she – she operated on instinct and raw common sense, and she's a very practical, common sense person- very survivalist oriented [Cell Phone Rings], strong morally.

MN: Now, but your success academically – was this something that, you know, started early with you in Jamaica? Like were you doing, you know, well in school from the time you were like in Kindergarten or first grade?

ER: Yes, it's, it's a – it's, it's an expectation. I mean, you'll always remember we didn't come up here for nothing.

MN: [Laughs]

ER: You know, if we would of come up here for nothing, we would have stayed down there, so you had to succeed. There was no, there was no discussion.

MN: [Laughs] Right, now when did you first become aware of doo-wop? [Cell Phone Rings] Was it on Kelly Street or Washington Avenue?

ER: Excuse me for a second.

MN: Yes [Telephone interruption].

ER: Doo-wop really started mostly on Washington Avenue.

MN: Right, and were there particular songs, which like made an impression on you?

ER: Oh, Frankie Lymon.

MN: Okay, so but this is – right.

ER: [Laughs]

MN: So that was the song that sort of got everybody going [Cell Phone Rings].

ER: Yes, that was, that was the – the centerpiece.

MN: And did – so harmonizing on the street corners and the hallways was – followed from that.

ER: Oh, without a doubt.

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MN: Did you ever try to get a – you know, perform in public? Did any –

ER: Well we always performed in public, but it's our own public [Laughter].

MN: But you never – did you ever sing in school talent shows or in church?

ER: I only sang in the glee club, and we didn't really do too much doo-wop in the glee club. It was more formal.

MN: Yes, did any people you knew form a group which made a recording.

ER: Yes, the Students.

MN: And where were they from?

ER: They were from mostly that area, Washington Avenue. I can't think of the name of the song now, but it was one of the top ranking songs.

MN: Right, they were called the Students, were they the Five Students or something like that?

ER: No, they just called themselves the Students.

MN: Just called the Students.

ER: Just called the Students. I wish I could recall a song [Crosstalk] – 1956, about 1956. You could probably look it up.

MN: Yes, I can look it up. And did people sing at Junior High School 52? Was there any doo-wopping in the hallways there?

ER: Oh, yes, there was doo-wop in everywhere. I mean that's the thing that –

MN: Did the Puerto Rican kids try to doo-wop also?

ER: Oh, sure. You know, I mean, it was what's happening, and if that's what's happening everybody's going to try to , you know.

MN: Right, now did you have any exposure to Latin music?

ER: Oh, yes.

MN: At both places or more on Kelly Street?

ER: More on Kelly – over at Washington Avenue, although the area that I lived in there near [Incomprehensible] and St. Paul's – P.S. Junior High School 55, it was mostly black. When you got up to Claremont Parkway, you found a larger Hispanic community – up Claremont and above Claremont, and I was a part of that experience also, but on a different level.

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MN: So which Latin musicians do you remember listening to, you know, back in that time?

ER: Oh, the normal ones. Ray Barretto, Joe Quijano, Mongo Santamaria – those were the people that we, you know, were related to the most [Cell Phone Rings].

MN: Did you dance Latin?

ER: Yes, I danced Latin – Pachanga, everything, you know [Laughs].

MN: Now did you ever go to any of the live music clubs in the Bronx.

ER: Palladium – well Palladium's downtown. There weren't really that many clubs in the Bronx.

MN: Did you go to the Hunt's Point Palace at all?

ER: I went to the Hunt's Point Palace a couple of times.

MN: Now, what high school did you go to?

ER: Morris.

MN: And was – was that the zone school or is that where you wanted to go.

ER: Morris was – at the time had a fairly good reputation, and it was a convenient place to go for me. I just had to take the bus down to 166th and cross over, go up the steps.

MN: And what was that experience like?

ER: Phenomenal. Morris was one of those schools at the time where the Board of Education [Cell Phone Rings] set it up as an experiment of multiethnic groups in high school, and so you had – they kept the one third, one third, one third, ethnic high school.

MN: And this was in – you were there in the late 50's?

ER: That's correct. I got in there in '58.

MN: And you graduated in 19 –

ER: 1961.

MN: – 1961. Are there any teachers who made a big impression on you in Morris?

ER: Oh, a lot of them. The one that stands out the most is Mr. Gilman. He was a math teacher. He got me to fall in love with math. He was, he was a favorite in the school. I would say he was the most popular teacher in the entire school.

MN: Mr. – Mr. Gilman?

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ER: Gilman. He was a Barbadian teacher. He was from Barbados. Very stiff, you know that British [Laughs], but he, he – I mean math was second nature to him, and you could see he was so in love with it, and he got you to fall in love with it. And we have people like, let's see [Cell Phone Rings] – oh, boy – we had, let's see –

MN: Do you recall an English teacher named Ms. Hanson? Did you ever – Avis Hanson?

ER: No, I don't recall.

MN: Who was the principal when you were there?

ER: Let me see if I can think – Dr. Schweitzer.

MN: And did you have any contact with him?

ER: Yes.

MN: What was your impression of him?

ER: Very progressive, very warm – outstanding. I was on the soccer team there. We had Mr. – Dr. Drima was the coach of the soccer team – very, very interesting guy, and also we had Von Kemp. Von Kemp was the track coach, you know – very popular. The athletic people were very popular in high school because the school was known for its athletics, and we had – the names will come back to me.

MN: Yes, now, so you played on the soccer team?

ER: Yes, the soccer team and the handball team.

MN: And the handball team?

ER: And the track team.

MN: And the track team?

ER: I was very athletic.

MN: Yes, what distance did you run in track?

ER: The cross country, cross country [Incomprehensible].

MN: Right, now when you entered Morris, were you thinking of going directly to college after you graduated or –?

ER: Oh, yes the college [Cell Phone Rings] was always in the forefront – always on the forefront of, you know, my mind, and [Cell Phone Noise] at that time they had, they had – Morris was

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divided into three programs. You had a general program, commercial, and you had the academic. And so the academic people were students who were going to prepare –

MN: Right, and they had good counseling for college?

ER: Oh, excellent, excellent. The school again was an exciting place because of the diversity you had there – it was so tremendously diverse.

MN: In your academic track it was fairly multiracial?

ER: Yes, it was – not only multiracial – it was – it followed a traditional path. The academic students there were basically white students, and you had a sprinkling of others – of blacks, you know, Hispanics and so on, but by and large the academic program was largely white.

MN: Now, did you have mixed social contact with the white students in your –?

ER: Oh absolutely. Morris was a very close school – the students – there wasn't – there was never to my knowledge while I was there an incident – a racial incident. The different races got along extremely well. They were very close to each other. There was a whole Morris concept, you know, and we're all Morrisites. That's basically how –

MN: And there was a culture of – there was pride in being part of this community?

ER: Oh, Morris had, Morris had a reputation, a disposition that was almost unique, and it was promoted by the staff. It was promoted by the principal.

MN: So people were proud of going to this integrated school?

ER: Without a doubt.

MN: Wow.

ER: Without a doubt – just a phenomenal school, phenomenal school. I remember we, we, we had a tradition of winning the Bronx Championship in basketball. Once in a while Clinton gave us a little time, but as a result we were invited to Madison Square Garden all the time for the city finals, and we had the Third Avenue L if you remember. And what would happen is that on the days – every year traditionally they would, they would send a special train to 166th Street to pick up the Morris students. All of Morris high school went to the game at Madison Square Garden, and nobody else rode that train [Laughter]. It was a train that came – it came empty and stopped on 166th, and only Morrisites were allowed on, and it went directly down to 149th, and then we – 149th we – they brought another train coming from I think it was Seventh Avenue just for Morris students.

MN: And it would take you down to Madison Square Garden [Laughter]. You'd have your own – that's amazing.

ER: Absolutely.

MN: Do you have any pictures from that time, or –?

ER: Yes I do, and I will –

MN: With letter sweaters and all that stuff.

ER: I'm going bring them – I'm going to bring them next time we see – I'm going to show you that stuff, you know.

MN: Wow, now where did you end up going to college?

ER: City College?

MN: Yes, and so – were a whole group of people from Morris – went to city or this was –?

ER: Yes, we had a representative number of students at City College, but as you probably know, City College – most of the students of the city came from Bronx Science, Stuyvesant, Brooklyn too. And you had a good amount of people from our –

MN: Now was this based on your high school average, or you had to take a test?

ER: Yes, average – high school average, and if I remember correctly SAT scores.

MN: So you took the SAT's?

ER: Yes.

MN: In those days.

ER: Yes.

MN: Now, in your community was there an intellectual or political life a St. Paul's Church. Was – when – were there thing, you know – were there lectures there or discussions, or was this mostly religious experience?

ER: It was basically religious. However, it was a progressive Episcopalian community in the sense that they became – they became integrally – they integrated their activities with the well-being of the person outside of their church.

MN: Now, did you have any awareness of or interest in the Civil Rights Movement when you were at Morris? Was this something that you were aware of?

ER: Yes, I was always a political and historical, social minded person, so I was always conscious and sensitive to issues relating to civil rights.

MN: Was this something that some of your teachers emphasized in their classes or it was more something that you picked up later on?

ER: Yes, now the Civil Rights – the Civil Rights Movement as you know technically started in '57, but it didn't really pick up steam until the '60's, and so by that time I was at Morris, and then it really crystallized when I was at City College. And I was very much involved at City College.

MN: Right, what organization did you join at City College?

ER: [Laughs] I helped to form the Onyx Society at City College. Onyx – at City College there was not really – City was the greatest experience of my life. It was a school that was predominantly Jewish. It was about – when I went there it was 87% Jewish, and it was approximately 2-3% black, and another 8% other – white. The Jewish community at City College was extremely progressively. Some people call it the Pink School or whatever, you know, social science school. But it was a very progressive school, and so it was a very accommodating thing for other ethnics because the people there were very broad-minded. They were more universal in scope, and so it was a great place for somebody to mature without feeling alien or separate or different or all this other kind of stuff. And they had the Hillel Club which was the Jewish club. You had the Hellenic Club there. They had other kind of clubs, and as I looked around with some of the other black students, we realized there was no African American or black organization except with the Dubois Club. When we went to the Dubois Club, which was mostly, you know, like an evening club, you know – evening students. It was run by Jewish students [Laughter] – right. And so we said, “Look we really need an –” and then there was the Western Indian Students Association.

MN: Oh, there was a West Indian Students –?

ER: Yes, almost in every school you have that. And, and it was a very – it appeared to be a very elitist organization and somewhat detached because most of the students there – they were high academically motivated, but they had intentions of going back to Jamaica –

MN: Oh, okay.

ER: – and other islands and making money. And so they didn't really get involved so much in social activities – civil rights stuff. So myself and a gentleman, a young man from Barbadian background, Stan Conomo, we ultimately formed the Onyx society at City College, and we tried to get other African identified students to join, and, you know, create something. And so we did, and it was very interesting.

MN: Is it still there?

ER: The Onyx Society is still there.

MN: So this is – that – you – this is –?

ER: We started that in 1966.

MN: And it's still –?

ER: It's still there. In fact, there is such a history with the Onyx Society. Onyx – the Onyx Society ultimately led to the struggle for open enrollment, which was won.

MN: Right.

ER: And by the time – open enrollment started in 19 – I had already graduated, but open enrollment began in 1970.

MN: You arrived at City in '62?

ER: No I had – I worked before I went to school because we were very poor, you know, it was very bad. So I worked in a bank for a while before, and then I left the bank and went to City College.

MN: How many years did you work at the bank?

ER: I worked in the bank from when I graduated until about 1965.

MN: Okay, so you – that was like four years. Now what sort of position was this?

ER: I started up as a check clearing clerk, and then I – savings –

MN: Right, was this in the Bronx?

ER: No, yes it was – over at Soundview – the factories [Incomprehensible] no longer exist [Laughs].

MN: How did you, how did you get the job?

ER: You had to go down and take a test, and you know it was a math test and I [Laughs] –

MN: Right. Now where were you living at the time you graduated from Morris?

ER: When I graduated from – when I graduated from Morris – Morris or –?

MN: Yes, from Morris.

ER: Okay, I graduated from Morris – I was living in the Bronx River Projects.

MN: Okay, so you, you moved –

ER: I moved from Washington Avenue to the Bronx River Projects.

MN: Right, and what were the Bronx River Projects like?

ER: Very crowded, very active.

MN: What year did you move to there?

ER: 19 –I think I moved to Bronx River about 1960.

MN: Right, so would you say it was a step up from Washington Avenue?

ER: It was essentially. It was a bigger place.

MN: Bigger apartment?

ER: Yes, and the rent was subsidized I guess.

MN: Right.

ER: So it was cheaper. It was a money move plus it was more space.

MN: Now were the Bronx River Projects multiracial at that time?

ER: Yes it was. It was multiracial. You had a sizable Italian community around. You had a sprinkling of, you know, Jewish people, but it was mostly black and Hispanics.

MN: It was – and how – in terms of the atmosphere, you know, in the building or the, you know, the exterior – how did that differ from Washington Avenue or Kelly Street? Or was it pretty much the same?

ER: No, the surroundings were more private homes. You know, and once you left Bronx River Projects, right across the street you had two family homes, and so it was interesting. It was near Monroe High School. Ed Kranepool was in the same town, and so – and there was a sizable Jamaican middle class home owners around there.

MN: Now when you were growing up was your identification as Afro-Caribbean a very powerful part of your identity?

ER: Not necessarily, I mean I – I had my formative education here by this point. From when I was 11 until now I'm, what 16, 17 I guess?

MN: Right.

ER: I had a broad based experienced. I never secluded or –

MN: Did your social – you socialized with people of –

ER: Always.

MN: – different backgrounds?

ER: Absolutely.

MN: And what about your mother – did she belong to, you know, Jamaican associations?

ER: No we were not Jamaican centered that much. I mean her friends by, by – historically would have to be – were Jamaicans.

MN: Now what about the food in the house? Did she cook—?

ER: Yes, it was mostly Jamaican centered food.

MN: What about – did she listen to Jamaican music?

ER: All music.

MN: All music, but not just Jamaican.

ER: We weren't so – yes, ethnocentric [Laughs].

MN: Now were there gangs in the Bronx River houses or—?

ER: Yes, you still had gangs going on in the area. It was less – it was less intensified than it was at Washington Avenue. By that time – what began to happen at that time was drugs began to appear. And a lot of people wonder why drugs were introduced. The arrival of drugs in the community, especially with heroin, had an impact on gangs – on the street gangs at that time, which was the reverse of what it is probably today in the sense that it cooled people out. They weren't as aggressive. There, you know, there was the gang fighting thing kind of slowed down, and, you know.

MN: Right, now – I take it there wasn't much heroin on Kelly Street. Or was there?

ER: There was – there was heroin – heroin was I think – it appeared was a drug of choice at that time.

MN: Now did you see junkies on Kelly Street?

ER: Yes, you saw them. They were always nodding you know. They had a hard time holding their balance and stuff.

MN: Were these mostly young people?

ER: No, there were – but at that time we think of them as being in their 20's.

MN: Okay, now your – what about Washington Avenue? Was—?

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ER: Same thing – you had, you had it there. That was a time of [Incomprehensible].

MN: Okay, and some of the people who were junkies were, you know, had those hairstyles and— ?

ER: Yes, a lot of them because it's part of a hip, you know, the hip thing.

MN: Was there much in the way of alcoholism that was –?

ER: Yes, alcohol was very strong at the time.

MN: Now, you're describing a neighborhood where these are poor, working class communities, and there's fighting, there's some drugs, there's alcohol. Did most of your peers make it out of there or were you unusual?

ER: I would guess – because by moving, you know, you break relationships – I would suspect that these – most of the youngsters that I grew up with at that time probably ended up becoming mostly laborers. By and large some of them probably sent a good amount of time in prison – probably drug related later on or theft and stuff like that, but probably came out and got involved in this, you know, working class.

MN: Now of the kids on your block, what percentage were in upper track classes?

ER: Very small – I would say maybe, maybe 2%.

MN: That, that – so you were fairly unusual from both your block in Kelly Street and your block in Washington Avenue?

ER: I would say to an extent, and what you notice about – let's say people with whom I was familiar at the time – the same phenomenon exists today. Immigrants no matter where you come from tend to be more successful when they come into a low class area – I don't want to use – lower economic area – they're more driven to success. So that's usually what it is whether it's from the island [END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE; BEGIN TAPE ONE SIDE TWO] –

MN: [Some of the interview is lost when the tape flips sides] were of the upwardly mobile families you think?

ER: Yes, those churches, the traditional – those kind of churches are basically Anglican churches, and your West Indians are by and large Anglicans, so those churches had a large percentage – very often the largest – the larger membership numbers were West Indian backgrounds, and they were doing well. You know, they would come here, they would probably work, start very low, and then they'd progressed up. And so, they played big roles in those churches.

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MN: Yes. When was the first time you became aware of racial discrimination in let's say New York City?

ER: Probably – probably immediately. I can't think of any, you know, really dramatic experience when I was young, but the subtleties were all around you.

MN: What were some of the subtleties that ultimately made an impression?

ER: Well, even when, for example, when I went to the class – the sixth grade class – that class was 90 whatever % white, and many of them interestingly enough were European born, and when the teacher asked me that question I thought it was racial. The moment I heard that I thought it was racial.

MN: Were there any neighborhoods in the Bronx that you sort of knew you should keep out of? Were there, you know, any of these ideas were there are certain boundaries –

ER: Well in–

MN: – which you have to become aware of?

ER: In the, in the – on Washington Avenue you had to be careful in going up to Fordham Road or Tremont. In the Tremont area you had the Italians and the Little Italy area and you just didn't feel comfortable walking on Arthur Avenue, you know at the time [Laughter].

MN: Oh, yes.

ER: Or Fordham Road at the time was heavily Irish, and the Fordham Baldies, you know, were existing at the time, and you just didn't – you just didn't go there. I mean you just didn't walk in there unless you, you know, you were in a group of people or whatever, and then, you still didn't feel comfortable. You did have that.

MN: Did you – when you were at – went to City College, were you, you know this is 1965, so –

ER: Yes.

MN: – you know, you've already had the March on Washington and all of, you know –

ER: '63.

MN: – yes, and the Civil Rights Bill – was this something you had by this point, were passionately aware of?

ER: Oh, yes. I was very much conscious, aware of, and highly opinionated.

MN: Now was this something you talked about with friends, or –?

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ER: Oh, sure – always, and I must say this – I’ve always found, because I’ve been communicating with different ethnic groups all along. Morris High School was a total experience of that, and the Kelly Street area when I lived there. 52, the school, was ethnically very mixed, and you, you develop concepts of different groups and stuff. City College was the first experience where race didn’t seem – even though it was an overwhelmingly white school – race did not seem to be a factor in behavior and communications or anything else. It was a very progressive – a very intelligent, progressive – where almost the entire student body saw the issues through the same prism.

MN: Wow. Now, when you went to City College, did you go with the goal of being an educator?

ER: No.

MN: What was your goal at that time?

ER: Law – political science. I majored in political science. They had one of the better political science schools in the country. I was very fortunate to have people like Dr. – Professor Feingold – I don’t know if you ever heard of him.

MN: No.

ER: Phenomenal person [Tape Error]. Ducachek was a member of the Duma. Arthur Schlesinger – you name it. Morgenthau was there at a certain point. John Davis was a part of Kennedy’s administration. It was a phenomenal political science department.

MN: Wow.

ER: Just unmatched, but the same values that I had relative to the struggle were the same values shared by people who happened not to be black in the school.

MN: Right, now did you go to any demonstrations when you were at City College?

ER: Oh yes, we were involved in all kinds of stuff at City College.

MN: Any, any particularly memorable demonstrations or sit-ins or marches or –?

ER: Yes, one of the more interesting things that took place at City was when we invited H. Rap Brown to speak at Shepard Hall [Laughter]. It was, you know, a lot of people were saying it was a dangerous thing to do because H. Rap Brown –

MN: What was this like ’67?

ER: Yes, Rap was – we invited Rap – I think was ’67-’68 [Crosstalk]. But, and he was, you know, a brimstone – a fire, fiery type person, you know. But one of the more interesting things that occurred that we were in the center of was when there was a Professor Zimbardo – have you

heard of Professor Zimbardo? He was an anthropologist, and he was over at NYU, Professor Zimbardo, and he had done a study he said at the time of the City University system where he wanted to find out why black student in the City University system sat together in the cafeteria and ate as a group [Laughter]. He apparently went around he said, and he was asking students from different – he visited City College, Queens, Brooklyn College and asked these black students who were sitting together in the cafeteria why they didn't – why were they in an integrated environment. And according to him, at the time, he said that the overwhelming response was that they didn't feel academically comfortable [Laughs]. We found that a hilarious finding, and we invited him to – this by the way, this finding was published in the New York Times and everything else. So we had just formed the Onyx Society that I told you about, and we invited him to address us because we were confused by that finding. And so it was a big thing. It was a big story – thousands of students over at City. He did accept. We thought he'd be scared and not show up, but he did show up, and so on, and that was one of the more exciting things to take place. He, he said that he was misquoted – all sorts of stuff – he needed the New York Times reporter to be there and he retracted from it.

MN: So, when you graduate, what – it was '69? 1969?

ER: '68.

MN: And what was your first job out of college?

ER: Board of Ed. I was – as you know I was very active at City, and, especially with the Onyx Society and other things that were related, and I got a draft notice before I graduated.

MN: Okay.

ER: I got a draft notice before I graduated that as soon as I graduated I had to show up at 12 White Hall Street.

MN: I remember that.

ER: You remember that? And what I did was I changed my major [Laughter]. I changed my major to education, and the Draft and Selective System told me I was already in the system, it was too late, and so I threatened a lawsuit at the time, if I remember correctly, and this guy – I think the selective service commissioner was Aptica, and I was able to get an interview with him. It was in the Chrysler building, and I went down there to work on the documentation, you know, all of that kind of stuff. And to, you know, then he delayed the draft thing. He put it aside and set up another hearing to be held with my draft board, and after that I got my deferment back.

MN: And so you –

ER: Went into education.

MN: And what –?

ER: And then you couldn't be drafted [Laughs].

MN: Right, now what grade were you teaching?

ER: Well, I, I taught in elementary school. I went right back to the South Bronx.

MN: To what school?

ER: 124.

MN: What was – on what street?

ER: 160th right near Longwood.

MN: So you went back into your old neighborhood?

ER: That's correct.

MN: Wow.

ER: District seven.

MN: I thought I was going to stay there and then go to law school in the evening and stuff like that and then end up going back into law, but what happened was I really fell in love with education.

MN: Really, wow, and so you loved the teaching?

ER: I, unbelievable.

MN: And was this – what was – what were the students like? What grade did you have?

ER: I had – I had a sixth grade class, and they were – they were well chosen students. They were problem kids.

MN: What – I'll bet they were.

ER: Yes, what happened was, to be frank, it was a school that was 100% minority. By this time the migration –

MN: Right, by the late '60's there were no more whites –

ER: Yes, that's correct.

MN: – left in the Longwood community.

ER: There was – to show you how interesting this is – that school had approximately, I'd say about 65-70% Hispanics and 30% black, and there wasn't one Hispanic teacher in the school. There were two black teachers in the school, and –

MN: Now did you go the year of the teachers' strike?

ER: They very year. I went there in February, and the strike was [Tape Error] –

MN: Wow, so were – what did you do during the strike?

ER: I taught [Laughs].

MN: You taught. How many of you broke – went in and broke the strike?

ER: The young, progressive white teachers broke the strike, and we – I broke the strike, and that's because we didn't – it was a fight against decentralization, and we were for decentralization.

MN: Right, now when you started teaching, was there any black history in the curriculum?

ER: No.

MN: Was that an issue that you –?

ER: It became an issue, especially with – it ran with the decentralization.

MN: Now, was there a lot of tension in the school?

ER: Yes, enormous tension.

MN: Was there any violence towards the teachers who broke the picket line?

ER: Well, I tell you what, I thought that my name reached a few people, and I couldn't progress in that district.

MN: So you thought that you were marked off?

ER: Oh, without a doubt.

MN: And that –

ER: Troublemaker.

MN: [Laughs].

ER: And so I stayed in the district for a while. I fell in love with dealing with at risk kids. I –

MN: Now, how did – what made you able to deal with the –

ER: My background I think.

MN: That you were from the neighborhood?

ER: Yes, you, you grow up as part – as an at risk kid – I mean I was an at risk kid even though I, I so-called succeeded, I was at risk considerably, and –

MN: Now that's an interesting –

ER: – most of my friends were.

MN: Okay, did, did your teachers see you as an at risk kid when you were in junior high school?

ER: No, but just being there by definition – you were in a very risky neighborhood, very risky activities, so many people got caught up in drugs at the time after drugs – when drugs really began to break out.

MN: So you saw people around you falling by the wayside?

ER: Oh, sure.

MN: You know, and it's there but for the grace of God –?

ER: And a mother that didn't accept it.

MN: Now your mother – so other people didn't have mothers who came down with a belt to hit them and get them out?

ER: No, no I don't recall seeing that.

MN: So this – you had a fairly unique [Tape Error] situation in terms of –

ER: Your mother was a terrorist [Laughs].

MN: Oh, okay because I, I had a similar type of parents. I wrote a book about my growing up called *White Boy a Memoir*, and there's this one incident where I was adopted by the Italian kids and their football team, but I was forbidden from playing tackle football, and my father who was a teacher ran out onto the field with his bowtie and suit and dragged me off –

ER: [Laughs].

MN: – by my helmet.

ER: No kidding?

MN: You know, publicly embarrassing me.

ER: How old were you at the time?

MN: I was eight years old.

ER: Isn't that something? Must have been traumatic then.

MN: Yes, I was the best player.

ER: You're kidding?

MN: Yes, so – but it was that, you know –

ER: It's a book thing, you know [Laughs].

MN: But in any case, you know, that kind of parent insulated you.

ER: Oh, well she was a force [Laughter]. She was a force. Still is by the way.

MN: Oh, and nobody messed with her in the neighborhood.

ER: She was, she was respected, I mean, you know, for her toughness and all that kind of stuff.

MN: And, you know, what she accomplished.

ER: Oh, yes well even the kids, you know, the youngsters will respect her for doing that. I mean, they were glad it wasn't her – that they didn't have her as a mother [Laughter].

MN: Right.

ER: But, but they realized that she was just no nonsense. You know, she doesn't mess around.

MN: No, she don't play.

ER: That kind of stuff.

MN: Now, so you can speak in a lot of different voices now. Did – could you do that then>
Could you speak in the different accents or languages to, you know—?

ER: Yes.

MN: So you could do a little –?

ER: Since I grew up here, the way I'm talking is how I talk naturally, but I can always change and talk like a real Jamaican when I'm ready, you know [Laughter and Crosstalk]?

MN: And you can talk like a, a, New Yorican.

ER: Right.

MN: You know, so you could – now did that – so you did little theater with the kids?

ER: Oh, yes you always do that. This is why – I think this is one of the things that always excites youngsters in my education experiences where I would speak the way I'm speaking, and then I would switch for whatever reason. It would be natural, you know, it's not like pretend, or I would speak Spanish. I have this little joke, you know, two years ago when I went up to 144th to set up a little at risk program for them –

MN: 144th is where?

ER: Canal Road.

MN: Right.

ER: Michelangelo. And there was a Hispanic assistant principal, you know, and were talking. I'm talking to her in Spanish. We're talking about Puerto Rico and this and that. We were in different places, and she was all excited and this and that, and I would talk to her at the beginning in Spanish, and then I came – I said to her, "You know I'm not really Puerto Rican?" You know, because I tell her I'm Jamaican. She said to me, "What's the matter you're not proud of being Puerto Rican?" in a very serious way [Laughter]. Then I had to prove it to her, so I had to switch to my Jamaican accent to convince her, you know. But she said for a whole year she was – she said she can't believe it. She said the whole year she was convinced I was Puerto Rican.

MN: That you're faking it?

ER: No that I was Puerto Rican [Laughter].

MN: Wow.

ER: But my students – one of my students – I had a student in Harlem. Her cousin was that heavyweight champion. I forgot his name now – Riddick Bowe. Riddick Bowe's niece was in my class. Tough girl – she was just like Riddick, and I would do that and stuff, and she said to me one day, she says, "Mr. Rhoden, you know you're not really Jamaican. You're a Jafakin'." So from that she kept – all the students all call me Jafakin' [Laughs].

MN: Jafakin'. So you really enjoyed the challenge, and –

ER: Loved, loved, loved it.

MN: – did you get to know the families of the kids?

ER: Oh, yes. Love education – there is nothing like it. I mean I can't imagine anything is – I'm sure you go into law and stuff, and people enjoy that. There's money, power, but influencing kids' lives – changing, being an agent of change for youngsters who are down and out, boy I can't think of anything that –

MN: Now what age – what’s your favorite age group of kids to work with?

ER: Well, junior high school.

MN: And that’s the toughest.

ER: That’s correct.

MN: So you like the toughest kids in the toughest age group.

ER: That’s where change makes – has meaning, and that’s where change is so necessary.

MN: Now you started teaching at a time when pretty terrible things were starting to happen.

ER: Oh, yes.

MN: How did that neighborhood differ in the late 60’s, early 70’s from when you were growing up there?

ER: Well okay, when I went to the south Bronx to teach, those were the burning days. They saw the burning and the sufferings. And, you know, you see, you know – actually people came in and said, “Look were going to burn your building down tomorrow night, so everybody get out?” They need notes, you know.

MN: Yes, the building’s going so –

ER: Yes, it’s going to burn up, or next week or whatever. You know, people would try to get out. Now what is most interesting about this change is that – okay so I remember when it wasn’t burning down when I first went down there and so on, and then the burning down period when I started teaching, and then the rehab period. I think the Bronx has gone through –

MN: Yes, well those neighborhoods have been totally rebuilt.

ER: Oh, it’s unbelievable. It’s such a credit to the politicians, the people, the community activists who have –

MN: Now all this time you were teaching where were you living? Were you still living in Bronx River or did you –?

ER: No. Now by 1963 moved out of Bronx River. I moved there in 1960, moved out in ’63. My mother bought a home on Throop Avenue.

MN: Now where is that? North Bronx?

ER: Throop is near Allerton, yes – off Allerton, and we were the – I know it wouldn't be fashionable to say we were the first blacks on the block, but we were the second [Laughter]. It was a mostly Italian neighborhood. You had a large Jewish factor there. So it was basically –

MN: Was this a two family home?

ER: Yes, it was a two family.

MN: And so you rented out?

ER: A duplex.

MN: A duplex?

ER: Yes. We rented out downstairs.

MN: So your mother had done fairly well?

ER: So she went from a domestic, which I find – and I got it right about that. We went from living in one room – so in 195 – up until 1956 we're living in a one room. In '57 we had our first apartment. Stayed there for three years, moved in '60 to two bedrooms, and then in 1963 she bought her house.

MN: Wow. That's an amazing story for someone with a second grade education.

ER: Without a doubt. She, she –

MN: Did she ever go back to school?

ER: Well I'll tell you – no what she did though was – she's still alive by the way. She's in Florida. She got into the costume jewelry business after a while because that gentleman did the [Incomprehensible]. She was able to make a certain amount. She still has the first dollar she ever earned, you know, that's the kind of person she is, and then she bought the home in Throop and married a builder – a Jamaican gentleman. They went down to Florida, she went into real estate, and she had to take the real estate exam to get her license. She took the test five times before she got it, and she made it.

MN: Wow, so this is where your entrepreneurial –

ER: I don't know –

MN: – aspirations –

ER: I don't know [Laughter].

MN: You'll find out.

ER: I'll let the geneticist answer that.

MN: Right, well okay I think we can wind this up now. Are there – in looking back at your background, you know, it sounds like you've had remarkable success with students that many people have given up on.

ER: I don't want to wag my own tail, but that's what's been said.

MN: Now what do you – what if – I mean I've – I haven't done it as a teacher. I've done a lot of this as a coach, you know, and I've spent – what do you think is the secret of communicating with the young people you've worked with. If you were going to say there's a young teacher who wants to work with this population, what would be some of the things you would tell them.

ER: He has to identify with their difficulty. He or she would have to have a natural identification with – not a cultural thing. It's something that comes innate.

MN: it's a –

ER: And you know you have that sensitivity. You have that feeling. You put yourself in the place of that student and appreciate the hardships that student is going through, and understand that the negativity that he or she gives off to you is not innate. It's something that has been induced in the youngster, and so you find mechanisms for reducing that.

MN: Do you think that somebody has to have come from a somewhat similar background to do this?

ER: Not necessarily.

MN: Have you seen teachers –

ER: Not a similar ethnic background.

MN: Not ethnic, but have gone through some of what they've gone through.

ER: It helps enormously but not necessarily – not necessarily at least by my experience. Yes, I've seen a lot of white teachers who are very instrumental in impacting youngsters because they are sensitive, and they identify.

MN: When you're doing this, do you spend time with these students after school? Is that part of that experience – a mentoring relationship that extends beyond?

ER: Oh yes, you don't want to put time limits on those types of experiences. You're involved with the parents, and you take them to different places, and you know.

MN: So, you know, you would take them to museums and, you know –?

Interviewee: Everard Rhoden

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: 04/03/06

ER: All sorts of stuff- yes like last year, you know, I'll show you this eventually – I got restaurants in the community to give us food free for the students' dinner – three course dinners, and the students now have to earn the dinners. So I always set up a competitive situation, and the students have to get a certain number of points within a certain time frame. And the points – you can imagine it's all about coming to school – you get certain points for that – performance in exams.

MN: This is in what community?

ER: That's in the north Bronx.

MN: Okay so you've gotten the restaurants –

ER: Free, yes.

MN: Wow.

ER: And it was a big thing, you know, and then the food was so good some of the teachers came in, you know, the winning – in other words –

MN: Are these mostly Caribbean restaurants?

ER: Well, yes it's Caribbean. The one that I'm dealing with right now is a Caribbean restaurant.

MN: And which one is this?

ER: Jamaican – it's Total Blend.

MN: I've heard of that. What street is that on?

ER: It's between 219th and 220th. You'd love to meet those people.

MN: Is that the health food sort of place?

ER: They have health food there – well the food they have is healthy.

MN: It's called Total Blend?

ER: Total Blend.

MN: Okay, wow.

ER: You got to go there.

MN: Now what school is – were you doing this with?

ER: I was at 144 when I did that.

MN: So you came in specifically to do a program for at risk kids?

ER: I came in there, and I chose to do that. They had a – I was going to go there and be involved in a math program that they had, and then what I noticed was that they were using the MIC Program. I don't know if you ever heard of it.

MN: No, I don't know too much about pedagogy.

ER: Oh, okay they're using MIC, math-in-context, and it's very convoluted and, and, and a failed program, and so I told them I wouldn't be a part of that. Now by the way, it's out. It's out. The whole city has dropped it, but I told them I would rather work with problem youngsters, so we set up this program.

MN: Now was this – what grades was it? Six, seven, eight?

ER: No this is junior high – mostly eighth grade.

MN: And in the north Bronx, or – what background were these kids mostly?

ER: A large Jamaican community. You know, I would say half the students are Jamaicans, and then the other half would be a mixture of African American. You have some white students – mostly Italian – Albanians, and –

MN: And what street was this on?

ER: It's on Gun Hill where Gun Hill and Allerton merge.

MN: Oh okay.

ER: Like you're going on 95.

MN: Oh, right near 95, okay – right near Duke's.

ER: Yes, exactly. That's where I met him. I think it's dealing with special education or something like that.

MN: Right, right – oh, so that's where you met Nathan. Okay, so –

ER: Interesting individual.

MN: Yes he is. Now so this – has this program with the restaurants been written up at all?

ER: It's been written about. I think that it's something – I could have brought – I should have brought something – it's something that works so well. The food was so good that a couple of teachers ate it, and they all ran to the principal. I said, "We got to bring this food –" so the whole school – they had a the whole school –

MN: Okay, so Total Blend is the place?

ER: Total Blend is the restaurant – best food you’ll ever want –

MN: Right, and what’s the street again?

ER: 219th and 220th on White Plains Road.

MN: Okay, excellent.

ER: Don’t forget to write that down.

MN: Oh, no I’m a food person. I’m going to remember that [Laughter and Cross Talk followed by Tape Error].

MN: Okay well thank you very much –

ER: Sure.

MN: – for this wonderful experience and inspiring one.

ER: Absolutely.

[END OF INTERVIEW]