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## Ramsey, Andrea

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Dr. Mark Naison: Hello this is the hundred and twenty fifth interview with of the Bronx African American History Project. We are here with Andrea Ramsey who grew up in the Morrisania section of the Bronx is a life long Bronx resident and is now an art therapist. Today is Tuesday August 9<sup>th</sup> and we are at Fordham University. So to start with, when did your family move to the Bronx?

Andrea Ramsey: Well my grandparents moved to the Bronx probably in the late 1950's. They were living on the west side near 98<sup>th</sup> ,99<sup>th</sup> street. And they moved and they moved to 974 Union Avenue.

Mark Naison: This is your grandparents?

Andrea Ramsey: My grandparents. They were from Barbados. Edith Nurse Plow and Regal Blackwood Plow and he was a mailman and she was a house wife and they had two daughters; Margery and Gloria my mother and they moved to like I said Union Avenue.

Mark Naison: Right. Now how did they find the Bronx? Did they have other friends who made the same move from Manhattan to the Bronx?

AR: It seemed like a lot of their friends from the Caribbean were moving to the Bronx. I guess you know the rents were a little cheaper the apt were nice and the change in the dynamics of who was moving in and who was moving out.

MN: Right right, oh, where in Union Avenue was this located?

AR: It's between 163rd and 165<sup>th</sup> Street.

MN: Yeah right and what was the structure of the building? Was it - -

AR: It was a small apartment building-- it was a walk up I think it had a five or six floors maybe five.

MN: So it was a classic Bronx five story walk up. And was this the building you were born in?

AR: No I was born in Harlem hospital because um my Antiguan grandparents lived in Harlem and I guess when my parents first were married they lived with his parents so I was born in Harlem.

MN: Right.

AR: But I moved to the Bronx well they moved to the Bronx um well they were already in the Bronx my mother but my father and mother moved to 1105 Tinton Ave .

MN: Right so that's where you grew up?

AR: That's where I grew up.

MN: Your grandparents moved to Union Avenue?

AR: Right.

MN: And you grew up in 1105 Tinton Avenue which is between - -

AR: Between 166th Street and Home Street.

MN: Okay Um now your father's family was from Antigua?

AR: Right Antigua.

MN: And your mother's family was from Barbados. Was this considered a mixed marriage?

AR: Well friends always tell me that I am a half and half. So um no they were still Caribbean.

MN: Was there a Pan-Caribbean social life or did people associate mainly with people from their own islands?

AR: There were Benevolent Associations in a lot of groups that people you know joined together to help financially but I think most people from the Caribbean kind of stayed together.

MN: Right.

AR: I mean it didn't matter what island you were from.

MN: Right. Was it your sense that most of like your grandparents friends were also of Caribbean ancestry?

AR: Well my grandfather was pretty unusual--he had friends from every ethnic group I think imaginable.

MN: Hue.

AR: He had Irish friends, he had Jewish friends, he belonged to the Civil Defense Leagues so you know there was Mr. Fryeburg or Mr. Sullivan so there they really he didn't really stick to Caribbean he was involved in cricket so there was a lot of - -

MN: Oh really!

AR: Yeah, yeah.

MN: Now where did he go to play cricket?

AR: He played both at Randall's Island and Van Cortlandt Park.

MN: At Van Cortlandt Park. Did you recall going to - - ?

AR: Yeah I went all the time but I never learned the game of Cricket. I like the coconut drops.

MN: Describe the coconut drops.

AR: They are pure sugar and coconut. And they just kind of mix it all together and then it gets hard.

MN: How many people would be at these cricket matches?

AR: Oh my goodness! I would say hundreds. Hundreds of people.

MN: And were the men dress in white uniforms?

AR: Yes all in white and they still play on Sundays up in Van Cortlandt park I still see them all in their white uniforms and you know with there.

MN: And this was in the '40s and '50s?

AR: '40s.

MN: '40s Okay. Where there any other events that you recall going to associated with sort of with the Caribbean cultural or fraternal life?

AR: Um I guess there were dances. You know I remember going everybody went the children went the older people went I don't remember exactly where they were. There were always places in Harlem.

MN: Okay but so the fraternal associations were centered in Harlem?

AR: Right, right.

MN: Now what about church? What church did your grandparents belong to?

AR: Okay my grandfather was baptized in a Moravian church and my grandmother was Anglican or Episcopalian but for some reason when we moved to the Bronx we went to St. Augustine which was Presbyterian.

MN: Right.

AR: So we were very involved with Reverend Hawkins and the whole St. Augustine community and they were really I remember church when you didn't get there early you couldn't get a seat. It was just packed.

MN: Uh yeah for Stanley this was probably the most important African American church in the Morris neighborhood. So how many people would be going you talking about here 700 or 800?

AR: I don't know what the capacity of the church was but they had all types of activities. They had girls scouts troops they had boy scout troops they had anything imaginable you know roller skating church plays it was just like the center of the community social life in that area.

MN: Right. Now did you go to a summer camp?

AR: I went to Camp Ohado which was the St. Augustine's camp up in the Catskills some place I think.

MN: Right. Now were you part how were the earlier groups of campers?

AR: I think so because when I went it was pretty rugged I mean it was an old farm house. I think they used a chicken poops for um bunks I think the girls dorm was maybe like a barn and it was pretty rusty.

MN: How old were you when you went for the first time?

AR: Um I might have been nine or ten you know there were loads of mosquitoes there was a swamp like lake that they had to swim in. We did arts and crafts it was fun. When you think back it wasn't what camp is now. I don't think kids today would really want to go to this camp.

MN: Right, right um what elementary school did you attend?

AR: Um I started out in PS 23 on East 165 and 166 between Union and Tinton and I went to Kindergarten through sixth grade there.

MN: Now when you were attending PS23 was it a multiracial school?

AR: Um no I don't think so it was predominately black and a few Latinos and maybe a few white and most of the teachers were white Irish and Jewish but they were a few black teachers you know that I know Mrs. Donastin and I'm trying to remember the others. My sister.

MN: Do you have positive memories of elementary school? Or were they- -

AR: Um well you know just like any school experience I think some things were positive and some things were negative I think culturally we got a very rich African American historical sense of who we were. We always sang the Negro National Anthem.

MN: And this was at PS 23?

AR: At PS 23.

MN: And this was in even in classes with white teachers?

AR: Yes! So we got a good sense of black history despite the fact.

MN: That's really--

AR: Yeah, but we got a good sense of all things like I remember listening to classical music we had music appreciation you know and till this day I know the tunes of Bacorw by Offenbach because you know that's how you remember the song. You would kind of hum it along. So we learned a lot. I remember once Tonto, I don't remember his name Jay Silverheels he came to the school and we were in the auditorium and we learned about Native American Folktale. So I think it was a pretty well rounded education.

MN: Were the classes tracked by ability level?

AR: Oh yes they had SP classes special classes for kids that were more advanced they would do two grades in one 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade so they would graduate a little earlier. My sister was in the SP class and Augusta was also in the SP class.

MN: Now what was the sort of street and community like in your child hood? Do you remember this as being a very vibrant?

AR: I think it was I think they were a lot of people immigrants from the Caribbean, migrants from the south and I think it was a very vibrant community. I mean people knew each other and it was funny because we really didn't visit each others houses but we knew each other just from being on the street In those days there were no play dates or anything like that you just went out and played and you know you knew all the kids in the neighborhood and all the kids and the families knew you.

MN: And was there a lot of adult like supervision?

AR: Not really-- I mean it was mostly from the window like my grandmother would look out you know. I would always say when the sun went down we came up and she didn't care what you were doing you had to come up and we could sit on the fire escape and watch other kids outside.

MN: So you used the fire escape. So the fire escape was something that people used?

AR: Yeah to get fresh air just to watch what was going on. Yeah.

MN: What was the sort of the cultural and intellectual atmosphere in your house hold were there formal dinners or everybody sat down?

AR: Well most of my earlier years were spent on Union Avenue because my parents worked so during the week I stayed with my grandparents-- my maternal grandparents

MN: Okay, what sort of work did your father and mother do?



AR: Um my mother was an office assistant. First she worked for the Tax Department and then she worked at Hunter College and my father worked, first he worked as a manager at a grocery store a vegetables store in Harlem and then he ended up owning a beer and soda or working as a part owner of a beer and soda distributor on Intervale Avenue --Saxon Beer and Soda Distributor.

MN: What was the name of it?

AR: Saxon Beer and Soda Distributor.

MN: And he was one of several partners?

AR: Yes.

MN: Were these other people from the Caribbean or were they - -?

AR: No, I think they were from the South.

MN: Do you have any pictures of this Distributor place?

AR: I don't think I do. I have a picture of him when he worked in Harlem.

MN: Right.

AR: But I don't think I have one when he worked.

MN: And this was called Saxon Beer and Soda Distributor?

AR: Saxon Beer and Soda Distributor.

MN: Right.

AR: One of the partners is still alive I could maybe contact him.

MN: Does the company still exist?

AR: No. When we went on the walking tour I looked. There was still a beer and soda distributor in that same spot but it is owned by different people now.

MN: Right. Where did you meet Augusta?

AR: Well she lived across the street. She lived towards Victory Baptist Church and she was in classes with my sister.

MN: Now somebody had mentioned that for a time that Harry Belafonte lived on Union Avenue.

AR: Yeah a cousin of mine, Carla Williams, told me that when he first came to the United States, he was some how affiliated with Augusta's family and he stayed there a while. But I never found any proof of that.

MN: Your maternal grandfather sounds like he's a very organizational and politically sophisticated. Did he talk politics at the dinner table?

AR: Yeah they talked about politics and he belonged to the Civil Defense Fund and he just belonged to a lot of organizations you know cricket clubs so there was a lot of talk. My grandmother too. She read three papers everyday. You know she never really got a high school diploma because when she came here she was about 14 and she had to work.

MN: Um was there a lot of encouragement of academic achievement?

AR: That was critical.

MM: And how many siblings do you have?

AR: I have one sister.

MN: So the two of you were expected to do well in school?

AR: Yes.

MN: Did you take music lessons? Was that part of - -

AR: We took dancing lessons. Well I did start music lessons but unfortunately the cousin that was giving me the lessons her house caught on fire and she moved uptown

Bronx. And so, there was the end of. I learned where middle C was that was about s  
good as it got

MN: So where did you go for dance classes?

AR: We went to a place called McLeay dancing school it was near um Bronx Zoo. And  
before that when I was about three or four I went to Harlem and I went to Katherine  
Dunham School of dance.

MN: Oh okay did you do dance performances?

AR: Oh yes it was traumatic. [laughter] I dreaded them-- I wasn't meant to be a dancer.  
Dancing school only had performances. I was forced to put on a costume and jump on  
the stage.

MN: Did you ever go to Forest Neighborhood House that was around the corner?

AR: I knew where it was but I really never went.

MN: It was St. Augustine that was more the center of - -

AR: And yeah when I was a teenager I went to 99.

MN: What was some of the cultural activities that you were involved in St. Augustine?

AR: Um I was the Junior Usher Board and I worked in the day camp in Bible school.  
And my sister was a Girl Scout. I never joined and just a lot of socialization at the house  
that was next door.

MN: Was reading an important part of your childhood?

AR: Oh yeah. As a matter a fact when I went to school I was only four I was in  
kindergarten. My grandmother was a reader and so I could read so they thought there  
was a mistake so they put me in the first grade but I was only four years old.

MN: You were four years old in the first grade?

AR: And my grandmother had my sister and my younger cousin at home now so first grade went all day so that was a leave for her so they left me in the first grade but I think developmentally I was just a baby. I always felt a little backwards because I was much younger than all of the other kids in class.

MN: Right. Now did you go to the Morrisania Library?

AR: Well when I was older. When we were younger we went to Woodstock Public Library.

MN: Where was that public library located?

AR: Its located towards more towards lets see 150<sup>th</sup> or 60<sup>th</sup>. We walked over to the Woodstock Library. I think I joined at four years old.

MN: So you remember your first library card and taking out books?

AR: When I was older I went back and they still had the card in their fill that I filled out and they gave it to me but unfortunately I had lost and of course with years but yup. Reading was very important and I still read a lot, everyone in my family read.

MN: What were librarians like in those days encouraging or did you figure it out your self?

AR: Um we figured it out ourselves you know they might give you a little overview of the card catalogue but they weren't going to go through the stacks and try to help you find things like Librarians today.

MN: In those, when you were growing up um was there any negative peer pressure towards kids who were studious or did well in school or read a lot?

AR: I don't remember that I really don't um there was like two separate things when you were in school you were in school and when you were outside of school you were outside

of school so I mean you played outside and maybe you went home and there wasn't that much television. Very few families had television so you know you read or you played games or you made up things or you drew or you did things. I don't remember kids really teasing other kids that were smart.

MN: And it didn't happen in school either? Did you ever sense that the kids in the one and two class were be harassed by the kids in the seven or eight class?

AR: Um Sometimes, but I think it was the kids, not necessarily because them being smart I thinks it was just the nature of growing up you know kids got harassed and some didn't. I don't really remember because I was more average so - -

MN: Did you to the movies a great deal?

AR: Yeah, it was usually a family thing. Like my mother and aunt my grandmother we would all go around the corner to the movies.

MN: These were on Prospect Avenue?

AR: Yeah and when I got a little older you they had kids and I had a separate section and you had to sit in the kids section. They would bring out the flash light to make sure that you were behaving.

MN: Were there family trips to Crotona Park or was that important enough.

AR: We went to Rockaway Beach.

MN: Really!

AR: We would take that long, long ride to Rockaway Beach.

MN: This is your family?

AR: Yeah and usually my grandmother stayed. We stayed for the summer with my grandmother in the summer. And there were a lot other grandmothers. Most of them were of Caribbean decent.

MN: So they had bungalows?

AR: Yeah it was the Weeks family. Mr. and Mrs. Weeks they had two houses and they rented rooms.

MN: Do you remember what street these was on?

AR: Beach 77.

MN: Wow. So there was a whole Caribbean community in Rockaway because I grew up with you know Jewish Garment workers who had bungalows in Arverne in the '30s.

AR: We didn't own them we just rented them.

MN: No they rented also. Nobody owned anything.

AR: And it was like a house so then you would have to make up a schedule like when you cooked when you used the bathroom you know. And then she had a house on the other side for the more affluent people and the she would cook for you. So if I went with my mother we would stay on that side because my mother wasn't able to cook. And when I went with my grandmother she cooked so we stayed across the street.

MN: How large would you say was this Caribbean--you know-- this contingent in Rockaway?

AR: It was pretty large. I mean Beach 77 on a weekend was all everybody I knew. I mean I knew every single person.

MN: So this was a Morrissania to Beach set. And everybody was from a Caribbean ancestry?

AR: Yes the majority.

MN: Was Joyce's family there?

AR: No I don't remember her family going but there were a lot of other families that I remember went.

MN: And for how many? Did you stay for a week, two weeks?

AR: Well with my grandmother we stayed for like almost the whole summer

MN: And what would be some of the things you would do in Rockaway?

AR: Oh my goodness! Every Wednesday it was fire works and then there was a Jewish couple who owned a candy store and ice cream store so on the way back we'd get ice cream, um we collected shells, we painted shells and we sold them, we made lemonade--

MN: Did you go in the water?

AR: Oh everyday all day. Sometimes I go in the beaches now here and the water's so cold I can't image how I stood in them. As a kid those waves would knock you down.

MN: Was there any of these little amusement places with ski ball and - -

AR: Yeah Beach 99 I think if you walk up to beach 99 it was Rockaway Playland and the Grass Ring. Usually once or twice during the visit in the summer, we would go because it was expensive. We would go up to play land. The best thing about Rockaway that I remember is that they had this Jewish bakery and they made cherry cheese knishes. I have been looking for cherry cheese knishes ever since there no place.

MN: That's what I use to have in Rockaway. They are spectacular--

AR: I know you get them hot and they were delicious. But there's no cherry cheese knishes. If you find them you let me know because--

MN: Its funny I have such a vivid memory of these from back then. And were there any like Jewish hotdog stands that you can get kosher hotdogs near where you were?

AR: The problem is that my grandmother wasn't big on buying hotdogs. She made lunch usually two or three sandwiches.

MN: Now um what sort of cooking did you grow up with?

AR: Well not a lot of Caribbean cooking. I mean we had peas and rice, we had steamed fish. Fish. My grandfather was a fisherman. He loved to fish.

MN: Did you ever go with him?

AR: Occasionally. But I didn't have the patience.

MN: Where did he go fishing?

AR: Um, Cross Bay Bridge. He did a lot of fishing on Cross Bay Bridge.

MN: Did he ever fish in the Bronx?

AR: Um No. Out in Rockaway. He went crabbing so he ate fish almost everyday. A lot of fish.

MN: Do you have any photos of that, from the Rockaway experience, because that's very important you are the first person who mentioned that there were this you know that there was this Morrisania Caribbean colony in Rockaway.

AR: I do. I have quite a few pictures. From generations. From my mother as a young girl at Rockaway Playland. They had friends.

MN: What were their names - - ?

AR: They had friends who had a house there.

MN: And these were people from many different Caribbean nations? Not just Barbadians and Antiguans?



AR: No, there were from all over. Jamaicans, a lot of people from different islands.

MN: Um, to get back to the Bronx. Where did you end up going to Junior High School?

AR: Um I went to Olinville Junior High School which is on 216th or 213th. My mother had a friend Mr. Kelly who she worked with at Hunter College. So I used his address and I went up to Ollinville. And from there I went to Evander Childs.

MN: Right so were there any other people from your neighborhood going to Olinville?

AR: Yup. Mary Hurdle who live across the street. She and I would get on the train on Prospect Avenue and ride the train up to Olinville.

MN: Was this considered a better academic experience?

AR: I think so.

MN: Was it a predominantly Jewish school at that point?

AR: No I remember a lot of Italians a lot of Italians. Evander also.

MN: Right, right. When did you start going to the PS 99 after school center?

AR: Probably my beginning year of High School.

MN: At what point, were you aware of the singing groups in the neighbor hood and kids trying to get musical careers?

AR: Well I think you always heard the guys all of the time. You know every guy had a group you know so did the girls but mostly the guys and the girl groups were girls from St. Anthony.

MN: Did you know the girls?

AR: Yeah, I knew them because a good friend of mine Rona went to St. Anthony and so they would have talent shows. I always went to the talent shows.

MN: So they would have talent shows at St. Anthony.

AR: Right. And I would travel around with them so they also had basket ball teams and I would get on the bus and go to wherever they played basketball.

MN: Did you know Hetty Fox at that time. Because she was on that basketball team?

AR: No I did not know her.

MN: Was the singing group phenomenon starting when you were in elementary school or more when you were a little older.

AR: I think I started noticing it when I was a little older because when I was younger it was about me playing and like Arthur Crier he lived in our building.

MN: And was he singing all the time?

AR: Oh yeah, all the time all the time. I was good friends with his sister Shirley. We had a club. We started out as the Polly Pigtales and it was so funny because I read an article that said this was for young white girls but what did we know. So we named ourselves The Black Polly Pigtales.

MN: So this was a social club. How old were you when you started this?

AR: I must have been eleven or twelve.

MN: Because the person we interviewed yesterday Delores Martin who grew up in Home Street between Union and Forest, she also started a social club. Do you remember what the name was? It was like the Starlites or something

AR: We went to Lace Angelique's because once we went to Junior High School Polly Pigtail was, you know, lame. So then we became Lace Angelique's.

MN: Lace Angelique's. How many of you were in this?

AR: So it was Shirley, myself, my sister, Tony, Marie Mackenzie, Joyce, and her sister, Lee, Linda Hill, and Orlana, It was like ten of us and then later Joyce Hansen joined.

MN: Did you have your own sweaters?

AR: Oh no, and that's the dream. Because Linda had an older sister Sylvia and their club had sweaters. But we never got to the point where we could have afforded sweaters. But I said one day I'm going to get us some sweaters.

MN: That's right start now. Do you have pictures of the group?

AR: Yeah yeah.

MN: So again these are... What did you do as Lace Angelique?

AR: We were very civil minded. We would have raffles we would get the merchants in the neighborhood to donate things or we would go door to door and ask people to donate things and then we would have raffles printed up and then with the money we would take the kids to the zoo. The kids who never been to the zoo. So we were very culturally minded. We did a lot of very nice things.

MN: Did you ever throw parties?

AR: Yes. We had once threw a party on Belmont Avenue. This is when Joyce Hansen's family moved and in those days young girls were not allowed to go out late at night. It wasn't late it was from eight to twelve and no girls came to the party. So we had about fifty boys in Joyce's mother's basement.

MN: And this was in Belmont Avenue between where and where?

AR: Off Tremont.

MN: That was mostly an Italian neighborhood or Jewish neighborhood?

AR: I'm not sure it I think it was an Italian neighborhood because it was Belmont. I remember it had a corner store that made donuts. It was a great fiasco, we didn't mind because we had all the boys. But Joyce's mother was a little appalled at the time.

MN: Did any of the people in your club sing?

AR: Shirley. Shirley was really the only one that I think could sing.

MN: Now when Shirley started singing, did she think I'm going to cut a record or was this something you did for neighborhood recognition.

AR: Her mother was a pianist at St. Augustine at one time.

MN: Oh really?

AR: So I think her family just was musically inclined. And then she had a brother who was always singing. But you know there were always little pockets of groups and

Linda's sister Sylvia she sang. People had singing groups. We weren't a singing group

MN: Right. Did you think of when all of this was going on that were people thinking of like I'm going to have a record I'm going to be or was - -?

AR: I don't know it just seem like people sang because people wanted to sing. I think once Arthur kind of got popular and then there was another guy, the Brankers and he became the manager for the Platters. I think once people saw that there were other people that were kind of making it big. I think there was more of a push to make a record. It wasn't like now where everyone wants to be a rapper.

MN: So it wasn't like that?

AR: No.

MN: Were there like battles in the street like between different music groups in the corners. Like Hip Hop Battles.

AR: I think it was more dancing, more Latin dancing. I think guys were more competitive about dancing. They had really intense Latin dancing. Everybody Latin

danced. Everybody listened to Latin music. So it wasn't like if you were black you didn't listen to Latin music.

MN: How old were you when you first became aware of Latin music and where did this come from?

AR: Well, in my own home my father loved Tito Puente. My parents listen to anything from Iman Sueman to Tito Puente to ethnic music we herd music all day on the weekends. You know while you are cleaning you listen to records. So music was just apart of it and my father had a lot of Latin music.

MN: Did they ever take you to Dances?

AR: No.

MN: So you didn't go to the Hunts Point Palace?

AR: I did go but not with my family but with my friends.

MN: So how old were you when you knew how to Latin dance? Was this Junior High or before - - ?

AR: I don't really think I still know how to Latin dance. I know the principle I'm not as good as some of the others. I mean I can dance but not like the ones who took it seriously. I have friends to this day who go to La Maganette and you know they Latin dance.

MN: Now what about at 99 what were the activities at 99 when you started going?

AR: It was pure dancing. Music and dancing. In the warm whether it was out doors?

MN: They had dancing in the play grounds?

AR: Yeah. They would set up speakers and you would dance outside and in the winter you went to the gym. I guess the gym

MN: When you say they these were the teachers who ran the program?

AR: You know I never knew who ran the program. I don't know if it were the after school people or outside agent.

MN: Well this is fascinating because you are the second person who mentioned dances outdoors. Somebody said there were dances at Morris High School because people talk about the school yard jams in the early days of Hip Hop but in those same school yards people. So in 99 people were dancing outside?

AR: I remember Baby Washington at the time that was a big hit.

MN: And what at the time when you were dancing to Baby Washington would you call this the Lindy Hop?

AR: No. The slop. At the time Baby Washington was a slow record. But I think the slop. I remember Judy Carrington who lived on 166<sup>th</sup>, she was the best slop dancer.

MN: I would imagine that you would give us a demonstration.

AR: Of the slop I need some practice.

MN: Now what about the slow dancing?

AR: You know they had the Grind which was a slow dance. It was just a two step.

MN: Would the teachers let the kids Grind?

AR: Not really. They didn't encourage it. It didn't happen much because you had people walk around.

MN: Did you feel like there was good supervision? Did you feel safe at P.S.99?

AR: I felt safe but I don't think it wasn't about supervision. You didn't even think about it.

MN: You went there for the other kids?

AR: Yeah just to hang out.

MN: Do you remember talent shows at 99 where there was live performances?

AR: Very few. I think I may have gone to a few. I think they were more with the group St. Anthony.

MN: Now did you ever get involved in sports?

AR: Not really. Not until much later on in life. But during that time I mean we played sports in the street. We played hand ball and slug and um you know street games but not formal.

MN: Did boys and girls play different games on Tinton Avenue or pretty much everybody played the same games?

AR: I think pretty much everybody. Usually the boys played stick ball some girls played but mostly boys. And handball anybody could play. Slug is when you hit the ball underneath instead of handling.

MN: Do you have any recollection of racial tension in the neighborhood in Morrisania?

AR: Vague recollection but there were gangs I remembering hearing like the Seven Crowns and but I mean I never saw like any real gang warfare but I remember a young man Carl, and I can't remember his last name he had a brother Jerry and I remember he was killed in front of a Braumawick drug store on 163rd and Union and they said it was gang related but you know I really didn't know who the other gang was and when I went to Evander we were always afraid of the Fordham Baldies. That was a big Italian gang.

MN: You didn't see gang fights in your neighborhood?

AR: No. The people were very territorial I had the benefits of growing up on two blocks because my grandparents lived on one and my parents lived on the other. But you really didn't go out of your neighborhood too much.

MN: Now when you were in junior high and high school were you encouraged to think about college by your teachers?

AR: I don't think so. I really don't remember. I always liked to paint and draw so it was just expected that I would do something in the arts.

MN: Did you have any formal art training in school?

AR: Yeah they had art classes in Evander and in elementary school. I got like an academic art diploma.

MN: Did you do paintings, sculptures?

AR: I did paintings.

MN: Did you do any photography?

AR: When I went to Fordham. I'm a Fordham Alumni. I got my B.A. when I went back to school in the 80's. And Photography was part of my major in arts. But most of the photography courses I had to go down to the Lincoln Center Campus.

MN: Were there any art programs at St. Augustine?

AR: I don't remember. Arts and crafts but I don't remember any formal training

MN: When you went to Evander did you go with a whole group of kids from the neighborhood?

AR: There were a few kids that were out of the district and we would ride the subway you know together but not that many. Most of the kids lived in the area.

MN: Why Evander and not like Walton, Roosevelt or Morris?



AR: I really don't remember. My sister went to Walton--it was an all girls school. I went to Evander. I had a quite of few friends that I knew from my neighborhood that went to Evander.

MN: Right what about Morris? What was Morris' reputation at that time?

AR: I think Morris was on a decline around that time my mother went to Morris you know in the heydays in the forties. A lot of people went to Morris but I don't know why I didn't go to Morris you know cause it was right around the corner.

MN: When did you start going to the Hunts Point palace?

AR: I must have been like 16, 17.

MN: And this was going with friends?

AR: Yeah.

MN: And who were some of the people you got to see there?

AR: I remember seeing Celia Cruz there. I'm trying to remember some of the other bands. Some of the Rock and Roll stars I don't remember exactly it was kind of a long trip to get over there. I didn't go that often.

MN: Were most of your friends black or Caribbean or did you have Puerto Rican friends as well from the neighborhood?

AR: I had like school friends and then I had some block friends and I had family friends. It was like little pockets of groups of friends. I think when I graduated from High School my social group expanded. So I had more friends of different ethnic groups. But in school I had friends that were like Puerto Rican you know?

MN: This was in Evander?

AR: Right.

MN: What about in Olinville?

AR: Olinville I don't remember having that many friends because I was younger and it was harder to travel with social events back up to school.

MN: When you graduated from Evander did you take a job right away?

AR: No I went to FIT and I took Textile designing and I worked in the industry a very short period of time and then I got married. When I graduated from school I was only sixteen.

MN: Wow!

AR: I started school at four.

MN: How old were you when you got married?

AR: 18.

MN: Wow. Where did you meet your husband?

AR: I met him--Richard Powell who was a musician and he had a band and he went to Evander and he invited a group of my friends to hear them practice in his basement on Crotona Avenue. My husband was trumpet or saxophone I forgot what he played. I met him there.

MN: Was this a jazz musician or this was Rock and Roll Rhythm and Blues.

AR: They played a little bit jazzy kind of rhythm and blues you know Rock and roll kind of in between it was pure jazz though.

MN: Was it unusual to get married at 18 in those days or?

AR: I don't know I guess not I don't think my family was too thrilled or his family. But we got married anyway.

MN: And where did you end up settling?

AR: Well we lived on Franklin Avenue and my husband was in the Air Force.

And so my daughter was born about a year after I got married. And we went to Texas.

St. Angelou, Texas and then we went to Anchorage, Alaska, and then we went to Tuscon, Arizona. Four years he was in the service we lived three different places.

MN: Right. And then did you eventually come back to the Bronx.

AR: We came back to the Bronx and we lived on Crotona Avenue and then we lived on Shakespeare Avenue and West Farms and then we moved to Tracey Towers.

MN: What year did you get married?

AR: 1962.

MN: Was the neighborhood you grew up in still safe in '62 or were things starting to change in ways?

AR: I think things had changed. Things had started to change I think before that I think a lot of drugs were introduced into the community.

MN: When did you become first aware of the drugs-- particularly heroin? How did that manifest itself?

AR: I think I was in junior high school.

MN: Really that early!

AR: Yeah I saw a lot of guys that I had gone to elementary school you know they were drug addicts.

MN: These people like 13, 14, 15 was strung out?

AR: Yeah I started to notice them.

MN: And this was on Tinton Avenue and Union Avenue? And what were the signs of that?

AR: You would just see them nodding or you would see them like looking disheveled  
you know. They would stop going to school.

MN: And this was the guys almost all?

AR: Almost all of the guys. I don't remember. Later I remember seeing girls but those  
days it was mostly the guys.

MN: And was this something people were staring to talk about?

AR: Yeah it was a big problem because they would rob to get drugs and you know  
people stopped leaving there doors opened you have to lock your door

MN: And this was in the mid fifties you say?

AR: I would say in the mid fifties.

MN: And the mid fifties is when you started to see the signs of this?

AR: Maybe late fifties. There have always been numbers in the neighborhood but drugs  
was something completely different.

MN: With numbers everybody it was peaceful?

AR: Well I don't know it was peaceful but it kind of was an accepted thing.

MN: Where were some of the known number spots in your - - ?

AR: On Tinton Avenue it was Jazz and George candy store right down stairs from 1105  
in the same building.

MN: It's called Jazz and George?

AR: That was the two guys that owned the Jazz and George.

MN: And were these guys African American?

AR: Yeah they were African American.

MN: And so that was also the local number spot?

AR: Yeah that was one of them. And on Union Avenue I remember more people in the street like the numbers guy. They would come into like the beauty parlor.

MN: Now would they be well dressed and polite?

AR: Yeah they were well dressed. They were the ones with the money usually

MN: We have this little discussion on our list serv. Fathers leaving families. Do you think there were any relations with families breaking up or fathers leaving and the drug problem or not something?

AR: Well if I look at say my friends they were mostly two parent families. Sometimes the fathers and mothers divorced or separated but for the most part most families that live in Tinton Avenue and Union Avenue there were two parent families. I mean you didn't always see the fathers because most of them worked a lot.

MN: How did people explain this heroin plague?

AR: I guess there was no way to really explain it. People just accepted the fact. Hoping they didn't get robbed and hoping that their children didn't become strung out.

MN: Did this affect you coming home late at night or you saying I'm not going to walk home from the subway at eleven or anything like that?

AR: No. I remember going to a dance at FIT. I came home about two o'clock in the morning and I remember getting off the subway and walking down Prospect Avenue going to 1105 and I remember this man he stopped me in the rain and he said are you Butley's daughter? I said yeah and he said my name is Lip, don't ever be afraid to walk down these streets.

[END OF SIDE A]

[BEGINNING OF SIDE B]

MN: Lips said just mention Lips if anybody bothered you.

AR: Butler was my father, and he was friends with Butler, so he obviously knew me, so I guess I wasn't afraid.

MN: So the drugs was much more dramatic than the gangs?

AR: I think the gangs were scary but I didn't see it, the drugs I saw.

MN: Were there any kids in your building that became strung out?

AR: Kids on my block a lot of kids, their lives just went down the tubes.

MN: Were these kids who were concentrated in the lower academic tracks?

AR: No, one of the Stover boys I remember, I think he was the first person on Tinton Avenue to go away to college and to find out he was doing drugs was mind-boggling because it seemed to transcend educational ability, he came from a two parent home, and it just didn't seem to be, I don't know whether, I guess at that age people think it's cool, it's hip, not realizing the extent to which they would get hooked on heroin. And I think that's really what happened, they were experimenting like kids do sometimes and the next thing you knew they had a habit.

MN: When you were in high school, did you think of yourself as a jazz fan?

AR: Yeah, I has an older cousin who lived upstairs in 1105 and she was maybe 7 or 8 years older than I was and she loved jazz so I would go up to her room and we would sit and listen to all kinds of jazz artists.

MN: Did you go to any large jazz in Manhattan?

AR: Yeah.

MN: Where are some of the places?

AR: There were a lot of places in the village, I don't remember all of the names, but then you could go and listen to jazz and you didn't have to be a millionaire. I was telling a friend this Sunday, you know now to go to Blue Note or any of those places, it costs a fortune. If you're not a drinker you've got to buy drinks and you've got to pay a music charge, and in those days you could go down to the Village and hear jazz, good jazz. And then they had Randall's Island, the Jazz Festival, I volunteered to be an usher, and I got to hear the rehearsal, and the show, you know, you heard everybody.

MN: Did you go to any of the clubs in the Bronx? Did you ever go to Club 845?

AR: No, I think I was too young when it was around and when I was older it was gone.

MN: What about the places on Boston Road, the Blue Morocco, or Freddy's or,

AR: No, those were all of a different era, the era before my generation.

MN: Right, so when you and your husband returned to The Bronx and moved to Shakespeare Avenue, did you still come back to visit the people, your whole family, most people move and grow up - -

AR: Most people had moved by then, that was in the '80s and most people had already left that area. Occasionally, I would go back when they had the Old Timer's Reunion. Then they used to have it at 23 Park, now they moved it to Crotona Avenue, so it was a little different. It was sad because so few people from my generation seemed to have made it through. A lot of them were gone, every time I'd come through, they'd say oh he died and he died, it was kind of depressing.

MN: Really? How do you explain the casualties? Is this something that happened with most cohorts, or do you think that it's something about people who grew up in that community and that social - -

AR: I really think drugs took its toll. I really think drugs played a big part in accounting for people not living out their lives.

MN: Was this woman as well as men or more the men?

AR: More the men, but some of the women too, you heard about the women, but mostly the men.

MN: What about the Vietnam War? Did that have much of an affect on your cohorts?

AR: I really didn't know too many people that were involved in the Vietnam War. I think that was a little bit, well let's see, my husband was in the service, I think that was a little bit after Vietnam, so I didn't know too many, I knew people that went, but not no one I knew personally. So the drugs seemed to be independent, this was before the Vietnam War, the drugs really gut at the community.

AR: Much more so than gangs, that's for sure.

MN: What does it feel like to go back there today? Does it make you feel nostalgic? Optimistic?

AR: It's very sad because it doesn't look like the same place. If you were to put me on Prospect Avenue and just turn me around, I probably wouldn't know where the heck I was. I feel bad, it's nice to see St. Anthony and St. Augustine's and a few of the buildings, my building, 1105, my grandmother's building on Union Avenue - -

MN: There gone?

AR: They're gone. That whole side of Union Avenue, I guess it's the East side of the street, nothing is there. They have a senior citizen's housing and then they have a parking lot.

MN: So that whole area was abandoned and burned basically?



AR: I don't know if [inaudible] and they tore it down and just changed the whole structure of the neighborhood, they put those little town houses, it just looks fictitious to me. It's not my neighborhood.

MN: It's not your neighborhood.

AR: Yeah, but I go drive through once in a while, like the other day when they had the jazz fair, I got some chicken from the barbeque place.

MN: Now what about the density? Were there more people when you were growing up, more people in the street?

AR: I guess there were. I think people stayed out a lot, especially kids. Kids didn't go inside and play with computers. Everybody's outside. Any time you had the opportunity to be outside, you were outside. You either went up to Crotona Pool, you know they had night pool so you could go in the evening - -

MN: You could go swimming at night?

AR: Yeah, they had night pool.

MN: I hope they had good life guards.

AR: People I guess didn't worry as much about drowning and stuff. They had lifeguards but it wasn't preoccupation that you were going to drown. I noticed most pools closed their diving plank. They don't even have it in public parks now the diving planks. Crotona had the regular pool then they had the pool where you could go dive in the water, but not anymore.

MN: Did you ever go boating - -

AR: Indian Lake? yeah, when I was little because by the time I grew up, Indian Lake was no longer, they didn't have the boats there.

MN: So your whole group of [inaudible] they're still around and still in touch with each other?

AR: Yeah, we're still in touch with each other you know, we try to get together every once in a while because like Joyce lives in Columbia, South Carolina, and Shirley moved up to the boondocks - -

MN: Robert Dubois.

AR: Yeah, so it's hard for us to get together, but we email and keep contact and let each other know what's going on. Marie McKenzie lives in New Jersey, but she came down, we went to see Dustin Rhodes. I think that's what's different, my daughter doesn't have that, she doesn't have that core of friends that she grew up with.

MN: That level of camaraderie and - -

AR: Yeah, and I feel bad because kids today, they don't have that.

MN: What do you think built this?

AR: I always did wonder, when I lived in 1105, it was a double courtyard building and I knew every single person and every single person knew me, and that doesn't happen anymore. If you know the people that live on your floor you're lucky. We knew everybody, everybody knew you, and it's just, - My aunt who went out to interview, she still has her same friends that she had when she was growing up, you know, the ones that are left. She's 85 years old, but they call and keep in contact. People just socialize differently. When you had a friend, it was for life.

MN: In looking back on Morrisania, how long do you think that the really positive period was in that community, before the drugs hit?

AR: I guess when you're living in it at the time, you don't think of it as so positive because when I was growing up, it wasn't anything special, it was just growing up. But when you look back and you see what life is about now, then you say hey that wasn't so bad. I see all those people that email about all this positive and some people seem to resent it. Well what about this and what about that? But it was part of life, and when you're going through it, you don't say this is going to be the best part of my life so I better enjoy it.

MN: Again in this whole discussion, were there things going on-- that this guy was drunk all the time, this guy's a wino?

AR: Yeah, but it was just the way life, yeah, there was a wino, there was a lady who had the candy store around the corner, people were alcoholics, people were gay. Our neighbors below us, two women, they were gay, and nobody ever, they were just downstairs and that was just the way it was. There wasn't much focus on trying to label people and identify people and scoring people.

MN: What about the schools? Some people make the argument that the teachers outside of the gifted and talented classes neglected or underestimated a lot of the kids.

AR: Well, I guess that probably did happen, they had what they called CRMD, for the kids that were kind of slow, and I guess it was easier when you come in to teach if you have smart kids, it was more fun. So the kids that were achievers did get more attention and they were [inaudible]. But I mean you had the opportunity, if you didn't take advantage of it there was no one to hit you over the head and say you better learn.

MN: It's very interesting to me, you're talking about PS 23, there was Black history in the school.

AR: Yeah, and it was every kind of history, there was Black history, there was regular history, it had music, it was well rounded. It wasn't just go to school and reading writing arithmetic, you got kind of a cultural experience and I think that was a good experience. I didn't get that as much when I went to Olinville, I mean Olinville was good because I learned a good craft, and I learned real points, so you got a different well rounded experience. I think culturally, they didn't give a darn about black history and all that.

MN: And what about St. Augustine's? Was there - -

AR: It was very political, Reverend Hawkins was always having fund raisers for different causes, so he was a political master, he was very outspoken in the community and it was a time when people needed that kind of leadership.

MN: Were you very aware of the Civil Rights movement going on in the South when you were growing up?

AR: Not as much I think because I got married very young and I wasn't in New York, but I know when I went to Texas, it was really a rude awakening, because it was a small water town in Texas and there was only one block really where affluent Blacks lived, and so you couldn't just go and try to look for an apartment. When my husband went, he found this lady whose husband had been a doctor and they owned the Shirley Hotel and they closed the Motel because her husband had died and she became like a wreck--loose, so my husband and I ended up living in the Shirley Hotel, [laughter]

MN: The only people [laughter]

AR: The only people. Her sister and her mother had moved into the Shirley Hotel, but it was just no place to live. And I remember when I traveled with my daughter from Texas

back to New York on the train, going through several Southern places when we stopped, you saw the signs, colored only, so I had never experienced that.

MN: What does your daughter think about this whole Bronx experience, growing up in that neighborhood?

AR: I don't think she has really any connection, not at all like when I grew up. She goes to Virginia Beach, she has kind of a middle class environment, so she doesn't really have friends that she grew up with here that she would ever come back to, I feel bad for her, I really do. She makes new friends, but it's not the same thing.

MN: Stanley, are there any questions you would like to ask?

Stanley: I was going to ask, it seemed like when you were growing up, it seemed like there was more civic communal life, now you don't see that too much. Is it because of the drug epidemics, or - -

AR: It seems like people don't care, everybody's interested in their own little enclave and what they do and so there's no need for them to join together. I'm going to do my thing and you can do your thing. You didn't have much money and so you had to kind of stick together and it was very different.

Stanley: I was also thinking like, for example, it seems like your generation was more bent on elevating themselves throughout the society. Do you think that that same drive and desire has [inaudible] the people?

AR: I don't know, I think in some of the aspects its more prevalent, but it's more about the Benjamins, you know, getting the money and not so much about helping the community, It's more about me, me, me, I,I,I, and - -

MN: The idea that you have eleven and twelve and thirteen year olds who had a club that raised money to take little kids in the neighborhood to the zoo, - -

AR: Yes - -

Stanley: That seems like crazy talk right now. [laughter] I couldn't imagine kids now a days kids are more worried about the Jordans or anything else [inaudible].

AR: To go to the zoo. I mean we cleaned people's houses to earn money, we would go around and baby-sit, we would have Halloween parties and get money from people to buy stuff for kids in the back yard. It was just the way you lived.

MN: Is this something you saw your parents and grandparents generation doing?

AR: I think so - -

MN: the Benevolent societies, the Burial societies, you grow up in immigrant families where everybody helped each other.

AR: Yeah, people really had to help each other to survive. Everybody was kind of new to the neighborhood so you had to kind of stick together. I remember people calling my grandmother monkey chaser because she was from the Caribbean and you know - -

MN: Did she speak with an accent?

AR: Oh yeah, Monda, Tuesda, I would say mom it's Monday. Monda, Tuesda, Wedensda, - -

MN: Could you speak in like - -

AR: Like [inaudible] [laughter]

MN: Say coming from - -

AR: Let me think, I don't know what you're talking about. But now Mark, I don't understand what you're saying, what you talking about?

MN: Okay, well [inaudible] [laughter].

Stanley: We spoke earlier about how there was a lack of male figures and that you saw like you said, [inaudible] Black girls and [inaudible]

AR: Oh, I definitely feel that. That's a big part, in ISS, we get a lot of we get a lot of [inaudible] on the psychiatric unit, and some of the young men don't even know who their fathers are and have never asked. Not to know is one thing, but not to ask, do you ever ask your mother, no, never asked even who their father was. Have no idea.

MN: So that whole group of young men being taken out of commission has had a very powerful effect on everything that followed.

AR: I think so, I think so, because when I was growing up, even if the father was kind of a silent figure, he was there doing the financial thing, supporting the family, working two jobs or whatever. You knew he existed, even though he might not have been there emotionally for kids, but I think without male leadership, especially for young Black males, it's like horrible for the boy.

MN: Anything else you want to ask, Stanley?

Stanley: All set.

MN: [laughter] Anything that you haven't said, looking back things that you'd want to put on record?

AR: It's just that you don't want to idealize the time you grew up in, it wasn't perfect, there were things that happened, when I got older I found out some of my friends had been abused - -

MN: Yeah, the violence in the families and that sort of thing.

AR: Yeah, people were on home relief, families, very affluent friends that I have now, their families grew up very poor. It wasn't a perfect world, far from it, but it just left me with a feeling that was good and I think that's what a lot of the people remember. You can talk about all the bad things, you can talk about all of the horror stories, but I think when you go back in your memory, you try and remember good things. I think, you get enough people talking about the good things to know that it's not just one person's fantasy and I think that's the important thing to remember. I'm sorry that more people didn't have that experience.

MN: Right, okay?

AR: Okay.

MN: Terrific, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]