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Questell, Americo and Connie

Questell, Americo and Connie. Interview: Bronx African American History Project
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Transcriber: Jacqueline Soboti

Mark Naison (MN): Hello, this is the 141st interview of the Bronx African American History Project. Today is February, no; January 30, 2006 we are at Fordham University with Connie and Americo Questell [also known as Louie] and our lead interviewer is Natasha Lightfoot.

Natasha Lightfoot (NL): Well, first, I just wanted to ask both of you a little bit about your family background when you were born and you know, what your parents did and where they were from. So if you, just want to start first Mrs. Questell?

Connie Questell (CQ): Well, I was born February 9, 1943. I am the only child of my father and mother, my mother was previously married, and she had five other children. She was raised in Reidsville, Georgia in the south and all of the children were born by, what you call that, a mid-wife. I was the only child born in the hospital because she came to New York to work. She was a maid, she met my father who was a butler and he was also the chauffeur, they got together and fell in love, they then got married, and they named me Constance after their madam.

MN: Now when you, where were they living when you were born?

CQ: My-- when I was born we were living at 726 Jackson Avenue, right around the corner from Boston Road, just about mid way between Boston Road, and where the new historical houses are on Jackson Avenue, right in that area, and we lived there for a number of years until we moved to-- no, that wasn't at 726 Jackson Avenue that had another address, we moved to 726 Jackson Avenue, okay. We lived off Boston Road, but

I can't remember the address, it was 165th and Boston Road then we moved to 726 Jackson Avenue.

NL: And you mentioned your father was West Indian, what island was he from?

CQ: From the Bahamas, he came from Nassau, but I found out by tracking back that he really is from Cat Island and that coming from Cat Island there was no work there, everybody came to the Bahamas to get work, and when I was in the Bahamas on vacation I saw lots of people with the last name Strachan, S-T-R-A-C-H-A-N. They owned cab services, they owned grocery stores, they were vendors in the markets, but at the time I didn't know which outer island I came from so when I saw the Strachans and I approached them, they said, well what was your other island because no one was born here. No Strachan was born here in Nassau, I didn't know it at the time, so I went home and asked my dad, he told me Cat Island so if I ever go back, maybe I can trace it. My mom is from Georgia, as I said Reidsville, Georgia and she was married previously as a young girl and her husband died, she had five kids there and when she decided to come to New York for a better way of life, she met my father, and once she met my father and married, then she sent for my brothers and sisters.

MN: Now did they meet in the Bronx or in Manhattan?

CQ: They met in New Rochelle.

MN: Were they living in New Rochelle?

CW: My mother was a live-in maid.

MN: A live-in maid, right.

CQ: And my father, I don't know if he lived there or not, I don't think he did, he was the chauffeur so he would come in every morning and drive the car for the madam and her husband.

NL: I see, so same question to you Mr. Questell?

Americo Questell (AQ): My name is Americo Questell, I was born on July 5, 1940 in Santurce, Puerto Rico, and I-- my parents are-- my father is Puerto Rican, my mother is Dominican, and they-- my father is a carpenter, and he used to go from place to place, you know, building military houses or developments, that's when he was-- when he went to the Dominican Republic, that's where he met my mother, and I have three older siblings that were born in the Dominican Republic, but I was born in Puerto Rico, and I came here in 1949 to New York to the Bronx, and I have been here almost - - practically ever since then. The reason why I came I was told, cause I used to love cowboys - - Cowboy movies and the only way they got me to come to New York to the Bronx where my sisters living, was to tell me that my sisters were going to buy me a pair of cowboy boots, and that I was only going to come for a short time, and that was in 1949, and I am still here. [laughter]

MN: Where was your family living when you moved to the Bronx?

AQ: We were living in 112th Street off Madison Avenue; I was living with my older sister there.

MN: So that was in East Harlem.

AQ: East Harlem.

MN: Right.

AQ: And then I was going to this elementary school there-- had a lot of bad little boys there, and the boys there wanted to make all the other boys in the school join their little gang, and I didn't want to be a part of that, and I got into a fight with one of the kids in the gang, and one of my friend's parents, I mean, mother was at the school that day, and she saw what happened, and she came and told my sisters, so my sisters shipped me to the Bronx. And this is where I have been. I have been in the Bronx almost forever.

MN: And when she shipped you to the Bronx, what neighborhood did you move into?

AQ; We moved to Castle Hill, Castle Hill Avenue, right off, I was living off of Lacombe and Castle Hill in the Bronx and we lived there for three years, then from there we moved to Melrose Projects, and on 153rd and Morris Avenue, and not too long after that, that's where I met my better half, my wife.

NL: Ok, I just wanted to kind of get a sense of what your education looked like, you know for those first couple of years, what you know, what grade school did you go to, what kind of experiences-- teachers you know, the subjects you like, what sticks out to you from those first years that you might have spent in school?

CQ: Well, when I started school, I was living at 726 East 166th Street, Jackson Avenue, and it was right across the street from Morris High School. I went to Forest House, I was younger, like 4-5 and that was like pre-school, but it wasn't called pre-school, it was just a place like day care.

MN: That was the Forest Neighborhood House when it was on Forest Avenue before they built the house.

CQ: Exactly, it was like a community center but it had a lot of activities, and it wasn't in the Forest Projects; it was a separate building for the Forest House. Then after that I went to P.S. 23 which was the school I went to for my first, second, and third grade, after that they came and gave my mom notice that they were going to tear down our building and all the surrounding buildings to build a Forest Housing Project. They told us that if we want to come back once the project was built, we would have access. So while I was living there, my mom was working two jobs, and she would work day and night, and my brother went to Morris High School, well all of my sisters and brothers went to Morris High School. My brother went to Morris High School and he would go to school and he would look out the window, the window faced my building, and he would stand in the window and waive to me to let me know that he was there, and that I was safe because I was alone and I was only 6-7 years old waiting for mom to come home from work. He would stand there, the teacher allowed him to stand there and wave to me for maybe 20 minutes, half an hour, then finally my mom and her nursing uniform, because my mom was a nurse would-- would be coming up, and she would say, "Connie, I am here!" And I say, "Ok, mom!" And she would come upstairs and she'd get me ready for school. So it was a learning experience because I learned to be independent, not afraid, and I felt safe, even though I was alone, I knew that my brother, but he couldn't jump out the window if anything happened, but I just felt that sense of security knowing he was there. And after about like I said 7-8 years old, we moved to the Melrose Projects, and it was a godsend because it was clean, there was no mice, there were no cockroaches, the wall was painted white, I thought I was in heaven. The project was a blessing.

MN: What happened like on Jackson Avenue, was it fairly deteriorated or did you happen--

CQ: It was-- you know that type of houses were every room is straight through like a railroad flat? It was two apartments and we have about seven rooms. I had 7 rooms and we had an extended roof so I could climb out my mother's back window and be on the roof, and I used that roof for play, and sometimes I would go on the roof to the end and jump down to the roof of the other building because then my girlfriend would come out her building and come on the roof and we play jump rope on the roof or sometimes I will just sit on the roof and sing, and the guys across the street, there was a barber shop guy, and I will be singing a song called "Hey-bop-a-re-bop" and he used to see me coming out the building, and he would say, "Hey-bop-a-re-bop!" And that became my nickname to a lot of storeowners because I would be sitting on that roof singing songs by Ruth Brown; songs by old people, that my mom had records by.

MN: This was the rhythm and blues of that period.

CQ: Exactly, exactly.

NL: I was going to ask that question next. What kind of music was played in your home?

CQ: mostly rhythm and blues, a lot of gospel, but down home blues, a lot of down home blues.

MN: Could you name some of the down home artists?

CQ: Lets see, there was-- we listened-- well let me see-- we listened to, God, John Hooker.

MN: John Lee Hooker.

CQ: We listened to John Lee Hooker, we listened to Ruth Brown, and we listened--

MN: Any Louie Jordan?

CQ: Louie Jordan, we listened to, oh God, so many people, but I can't remember their names, but yeah, old time artists, I just can't think of any names.

MN: Any Memphis Minnie?

CQ: No, but there was a couple of female artists that we listened to, I just can't-- maybe I will come back to it, I can't think of their names, but I know that when I began to sing LaVern Baker, of course Dinah Washington, let's see there was a woman that came before Billie Holiday, and I used to sing a lot of her stuff, but it was back in the days.

MN: Right, now was this a two-story building?

CQ: Yes.

MN: And was it wood?

CQ: It was wood.

MN: It was a wood frame house?

CQ: It was a wood frame house and, like I said, it had two entrances, one you came in through the back bedroom, and one you came in through the living room.

MN: Now was the street multi-ethnic or it was mostly black at that time?

CQ: No, it was multi-ethnic. The storeowners across the street were all white, I mean the barbershop was owned by whites, the candy store was owned by whites, the grocery store was owned by whites. The store under us was owned by us except later on it became West Indian, and what's funny about that a guy named Jimmy owned the store, but he used to have a part time job, he would work in Coney Island as a fire eater, and he

pretended that he just came over from Jamaica, and was this fire eater, and my mother and I used-- we loved to go out, we went to the freak shows, you know, to see the fat man, to see the bearded lady, to see the skinny person, to see the midgets, to see all those people, and Jimmy came on stage.

NL: Were they in-- those were in the Bronx?

CQ and MN: No that was Coney Island.

NL: Coney Island, sorry.

CQ: We were standing there waiting for this next act who's the fire eater from Jamaica, and when Jimmy comes out, my mother said, "That's no fire eater from Jamaica, that's Jimmy from my grocery store down at 166th Street in Jackson Avenue!" And everybody looked at her, I was embarrassed, but she was like, "I paid my money here to see a fake?" So the next day when we saw Jimmy at the store, he said, "Your mother almost made me loose my job, I need that second job!" So I went upstairs and told my mom, "Mom, he needs that second job, he does that as part-time, but that was funny. So we lived on a multi-cultural street.

NL: So you have friends with different backgrounds.

CQ: And back in those days, at P.S. 23, the schools were very integrated.

MN: Now, what about your background, the schools that you went to in the Bronx?

AQ: Well, I went to-- let me see-- what you talking about, elementary and junior high?

MN: Elementary and junior high.

AQ: Elementary, I know it was on Castle Hill, P.S. 51, I think it was something like that, 51 or 56. I was there a short time, I was living with my sisters and her husband and one

of my nieces and we lived on Castle Hill, like I said, for 3 years. And at that time I was speaking English, but my English wasn't that great yet. So I was like, maybe a year behind everybody else until I caught up.

MN: They didn't have bilingual class; it was like sink or swim?

AQ: Sink or swim, exactly there's no such thing - - you usually had to catch up with everybody or do the best you can, and then after we moved from Castle Hill, that's when - like I said, I moved to Melrose and we went to-- I went to P.S. 3 where Connie was also at P.S. 3--

MN: And what street was that on?

AQ: 156th and-- off Courtlandt Avenue and you know, from there, of course, I went on to high school after that, but which was right across the street from, I lived on--

MN: Was P.S. 3 and up till 8th grade?

CQ: Yes.

MN: Or so you didn't have to go-- you go directly to high school from there?

CQ: Right. Once I moved into Melrose, I went right directly to P.S. 3 and from the 8th grade, I went into high school.

MN: Now what kind of music was in your house?

AQ: It was-- I guess we listened to, I guess everything but I think it was mostly Latin music, but I used to listen to some of the radio stations - - in trying to improve my English, and one day I am listening to the radio and heard Johnny Mathis for the first time, he happens to be my favorite singer of all time, and I realize how clear, and how-- you know his songs were. And listening to him and singing along with him, my English

improved quite a bit, and of course he is still my number one singer, next to my wife, she really is number one; he's 1A, she is number 1. [laughter]

MN: Did you sing along in the house to him when you heard him in the radio?

AQ: Yes, I did, I didn't know I was, you know, I can't tell you how I sounded, but I sang along with him and again like I said, that helped me, you know, in school, and mostly-- a lot of my, most of my friends, I mean had a lot of-- I had black friends you know, Hispanics, and Japanese almost everybody in this was a project.

CQ: And Italians.

AQ: And Italians.

MN: Now there was an Italian neighborhood right nearby. How did people get along?

CQ: In those days, it didn't seem like that was a problem. I mean we used to-- we were so glad to be in the project, I think it was-- there was a sense of pride, and so if you went down to Morris Avenue in the Italian neighborhood, you carried yourself in a certain way because you were just glad to be where you were. And I think it was like scattered site housing, they would put projects in neighborhoods that were already a well-developed neighborhood to see if maybe some of the neighborhood could carry over into the project's sense of well being and so that project, put right there in the neighborhood and we were surrounded - - a lot of buildings were still being-- people were still coming in, so a lot of Italians were still moving in from the outer area, from the buildings that had been town down previously I guess and we got along fine, we'd go to the feasts-- they would have a feast, once or twice a year and we just, we ate more sausages and peppers and

zeppolis and calzones and everything that they ate, we just fell in love with the whole Italian theme, you know.

MN: The people from Patterson talk about this Italian sandwich shop.

CQ: Oh my God, yes! Because everything was fresh, they would hang the cheese in their window and they would make the bread sometimes on the premises so you would go and get your Italian bread and you would get your cheeses and they even made spaghetti. I mean you even saw them making the spaghetti and the pasta, it was just wonderful, and then we had a chicken market that was there too. So you could go and get your fresh chickens and it was just a wonderful experience and they would have music that kind of introduced us to the Italian singers, the Italian flavor, I mean it was a wonderful experience for us, and especially for, I think, blacks and Hispanics and that had moved into the neighborhood, it was something new for us.

NL: So did you ever-- either of you, did you ever notice any point were that kind of, you know, harmony started to subside, and there might have ever been tensions between different ethnicities in the neighborhoods at any point in your childhood?

AQ: Well, every now and then there would be some-- because we had the P.A.L. right there in the middle of, you know, 151st Street and we also had the community center in the projects, so every now and then with some of the kids in the projects, and some of the kids from the neighborhood that came, that went into the P.A.L. - - some of the Italian kids from time to time there would be some, I guess you could call them fights, I mean you know. I had-- since I had so many Italian friends that whenever things like that happened, I was never involved in any of that, I could go to any, almost any one of the

neighborhoods or any of the projects in the neighborhood; I played basketball with just about everybody so I could whenever-- back in those days, you didn't go to another project especially wearing a jacket of some type, then that would, you know.

MN: She didn't walk into-- Melrose jacket into the Paterson Houses.

CQ: No, there were rivals, Patterson and Melrose were rivals. The girls could go down to their community center, but the guys had a hard time, Louie and I would run many a night from different places that we'd go, so to see if they recognized him. But one this I thought was interesting was the Louie went to Bronx Vocational High School which is now Alfred E. Smith. Bronx Vocational, is the school they used for Black Boy Jungle.

The movie was based on Louie's school and how bad the kids were.

NL: Wow. Was that-- did you feel that was indicative of your experience at all or was it--

AQ: Well, by the time I went there, it wasn't, you know, quite that bad. Although I remember being-- sitting in the auditorium when we were having assembly one day, and two of my friends got into a slight argument and they went outside and only one of them came back and one stabbed the other one just little pen knife, I mean, they went arguing, but some of the other guys said that they was-- you know, after they got outside, they said just forget about this for-- playing around one stuck the other one in the chest and they were both coming back inside but the other one fell in the lobby and just from a simple argument one of them, you know, ended up dying. And from time to time, you know, we would have little things like that, even I myself, my last year at Bronx Vocational, I had a fight with one of my best friends and I was on the basketball team and I was leaving that day, my friend used to be-- to us he was like the Richard Pryor of our school, this guy

was very funny because he always made jokes about everybody, but there is one thing you didn't do back in those days, probably is still especially you mention somebody's mother, and when he did that, you know I told them-- like I said, we were going to play, I forgot which high school we were going to play that day, but I said I will see you on Monday when I come in, and Monday morning when I came in, and Monday morning when I came in, I went to look-- see what classroom he was in, and we met in the bathroom, and we had a fight and then there was guys standing outside watching everything, I think that's probably the only fight I ever, you know. That was the only fight I ever had in high school, but it was that kind of thing, any little thing could set off, anybody and anyone.

NL: At what time are we talking that you guys were in high school at that point?

CQ: 50's.

MN: Late 50's?

CQ: I graduated 1960, so it was 56 to 60.

MN: Right.

AQ: And I graduated in 1959.

MN: So it was the late 50's.

CQ: Late 50's.

MN: Were there any gangs, you know organized gangs at that time?

CQ: Oh yes. Lots of organized gangs, I mean we had the Seven Crown and then there was - - there must have been 7 parts of them because it was the Royal Crown, then a

different crown, the this crown - - the so and so crown, and then of course the Fordham Baldies.

AQ: Yeah, there was quite a few gangs.

CQ: The Sportsmen - - were they a gang?

AQ: Sportsmen, well they were supposed-- just like, only into sports, but they functioned as a gang, but you know, whenever you play in some place, most of the time it ended up in some kind of fight because we were always playing some of the other projects in the area or some of the other P.A.L.'s in the area and before you know it, there would be a fight. So there was quite a few gangs.

CQ: But one thing about the gangs back in the day, they weren't out to kill you - - that weren't their rationale, they were out to hurt you, but they weren't out to kill you. They would beat you up and having brass knuckles like, "Oh my God, they've got a weapon!" It wasn't like they had a knife or a gun - - and it didn't start like that until much later.

During those days, it was fisticuffs - - they had their belt buckles, they had brass knuckles, they might carry a stick, am I right Lou?

AQ: Yeah.

NL: So now beside you know kind of, I know you talk about like the local basketball games. I am wondering what other kind of amusements were there for teenagers growing up at the time. Did you guys go to parties or concerts or whatever-- and I don't know if - - everybody has different parents, so you know - -

CQ: For me, my mom was pretty lenient; I went to the community center P.A.L. The P.A.L. used to have dances, the community centers had dances and then there was also house parties.

MN: Right.

CQ: And so as long as I told my mom what time I was going to be home, and I was there on time, she didn't have a problem letting me go. She wasn't really strict, and Louie's parents weren't strict either.

AQ: No.

MN: When did you start playing basketball like seriously enough to be on organized teams?

AQ: Well, let me see, I moved into Melrose in 1952 and I guess about maybe 1954, I got more into basketball because that I was mostly into baseball or you know things like that because all my friends were playing basketball and then you just go up to the P.A.L. and watch them play and one day I decided that, what the heck, I might just as well go and see what I can understand. You know, I learned it pretty well and we used to, you know, after that we go from project to project or P.A.L. to P.A.L. playing against each other and then I was also playing on the high school at Bronx Vocational. I went and tried out for the JV, you know, this is the younger players, but the people who were, the coaches who were watching us, ended up putting me on the Varsity team.

MN: And this was like when you were a sophomore?

AQ: Yeah.

MN: Yeah, now were you a guard?

AQ: I was a guard.

MN: Was your forte more point guard or shooting guard?

AQ: I was-- back then there was no point in shooting, there was just a point guard, everybody was a shot nut, as we used to call them. You got the ball in your hand, you shot it, and you see Michael Jordan's fade away jump shot today, well I think I was one of the originators of that.

CQ: He was really good. I mean that's all we did, all us girls would go to the park to watch the boys play basketball and Louie had a wonderful coach at the P.A.L., a guy named John Curry. He was very strict and every hard and I thought he was mean, but Louie said, he was just a disciplinarian but he worked with these guys and really shaped them into a good team.

AQ: Yeah, you know and then we also played basketball right there in the playground projects, a lot of time Connie and her friends would come and sit and watch us play. I never cursed around the ladies or older people, so they would come to--

CQ: Listen to him curse because he was cursing the basketball team.

NL: I see. So is that how you guys met?

CQ: We met, just him sitting on the bench with his friends, and I was sitting with my girlfriend, and then you know you start introducing yourself around, and I introduced myself to - - everybody there introduced themselves to me, and I was Louie's little sister when we met. I was a little girl, and he had a girlfriend, but his girlfriend's parents were very, very strict so he used to ask me to go to his girlfriend's house to ask her to come out to play. So I would go and ask Theodosia to come out and play but she was coming out

to be with him and we did that a number of years until I realized, 'Hey! I like this guy and he likes me too!' [laughter]

NL: So you stopped asking her to come out to play and you went out to play yourself!

CQ: So one day, it was like a rumor, 'Louie is going to ask Connie to be his girlfriend today,' and they told me, when you go to the P.A.L. he is going to call you down, and ask you to be his girlfriend, so I was very excited and I was only like 13, right, honey?

AQ: Yes.

CQ: And then he was downstairs playing basketball in the main room, I was upstairs because upstairs they had like a room where you could play cards, you could listen to music, you play bingo or chess or checkers and I was up on the balcony and Louie did like this, and said "come down;" I knew that was it, so I went down and went to the stage and then he asked me to be his girlfriend.

MN: Did he give you a jacket or anything like that?

CQ: No, but I had a little friendship ring, a little friendship ring.

AQ: Now a \$2 friendship ring.

MN: Alright, now Connie when did you start singing?

CQ: Oh gosh, my mom put me in dancing school at 5 years old, so one day in dancing school, I was about 8, 9 years old, a singer that was supposed to do a specialty number could not do it, and they asked could anybody sing, and I said I can sing, so they gave me the song, and I learned it and I sang for that concert so that was about eight years old. So I started singing at eight. By the time I was, I guess twelve or thirteen, I was really, really serious about the music and I started organizing groups, you know, anytime anybody

wanted a singer, we would get together and do doo-wop because that was the music of the day. I mean you listen to Rock n' Roll back in the 50's, Alan Reeve Show, that's what you heard, you heard doo-wop, pure harmony.

MN: Were there any groups that particularly grabbed your attention with the harmonies the ones that made--

CQ: We loved the Heartbeats, we loved the Clef Tones, we loved the Valentines, we loved the Solitaires, loved the Cadillacs but once I started becoming a girl singer I wanted to go with the groups that had high voices, I wanted to do the Frankie Lymon and The Teenagers, I wanted to do the Chantels I wanted to do the Louis Lymon, I wanted to do Kodaks, I wanted to do songs where the girls are high lead, it could be a boy, or it could be a girl, but the voice was high so those were groups I began to mimic. And I was singing with a girl group called the Velveteens and we would do all original stuff, and we were trying to see if we could you know, but our moms didn't want us to.

NL: So you wrote songs as well?

CQ: Oh yeah.

MN: Now do you have any pictures of your singing group from back in the day?

CQ: I had pictures of-- but not my girl group, but I have pictures of the Decoys which was the group I joined back in the late 50's. Oh by the way, this is Louie on the basketball court. And this him and I--

MN: Where is-- where are you?

CQ: You see that little white thing pointing?

MN: That's you?

CQ: Yeah.

NL: This is the bench.

CQ: The bench.

NL: That's so great.

MN: That's the two of you?

CQ: Yeah.

MN: That's perfect-- that is something.

CQ: Now this is time in P.S. 23 in my kindergarten class.

NL: So which one are you?

CQ: I am that pale face right there, this is 1949.

NL: That is so great.

MN: Wow, you are cute.

NL: You were cute.

AQ: That's her painting.

CQ: Yeah, that is painting.

NL: Let me see, which one, this one?

AQ: That one.

CQ: This is Connie and the Decoys back in 1965.

AQ: My God.

MN: And where was this taken?

CQ: Franz Sigel Park, you know Franz Sigel Park on--

MN: It is right across from 160--

CQ: From the courthouse.

MN: From the courthouse, we got to make copies of--

NL: If you wouldn't mind, we would love to make copies of these.

CQ: Not at all.

MN: The Decoy's do you have any CD's or any of the--

CQ: You know what, I have an a cappella, but we do have some-- I have an album, and I have an a cappella tape, I could bring the album in if you want it. This is another club in the Bronx called the Oxford, no this is the wrong one, this is the park on Terrace. This is the one on Broadway, I meant to bring in the Oxford Pub, and I could have brought that.

MN: The Oxford Pub was in the Bronx?

CQ: Yeah. I didn't bring it, this was back in 1972. We had a magazine devoted to rhythm and blues; it was called the Bim-Bam magazine.

MN: And where did you put this out?

NL: Wow. You started this magazine?

CQ: No, no. A friend of mine started it.

MN: And where was it located?

CQ: Right there, the address is there, you see it, it says at the top, or right here it says--

NL: I see. Box 301. Bronx, New York.

CQ: He lived on Tinton Avenue. He started that magazine.

NL: Keith Lamb.

MN: My God.

CQ: And this is a copy of all the Bronx Groups, I yellowed them for you.

MN: Right, right, yeah, no I have those.

CQ: You have that? Good, ok.

NL: Do you know how many issues that this magazine might have put out?

CQ: It was out for at least a year.

MN: Yeah, we will make some copies afterwards.

CQ: You can keep that copy.

MN: So the Decoys was your main - - group?

CQ: Yeah. I sang with a group called the Tiffanys for a little while back in the late 70's.

MN: And who were these?

CQ: These were Tiffanys. This is a girl group.

AQ: That's Connie.

NL: That's wonderful. Look at that.

CQ: And this is us after we got grown. So we were together over thirty years.

MN: Do you still perform?

CQ: We did up until a couple of years ago, one of the guys died.

MN: Do you ever do solo performances?

CQ: Oh yeah.

NL: We have gotten really far ahead. We got to get back to the moment where you first started singing and I am also wondering, you know, your musical history, how you ended up singing as well?

MN: You ended up singing also?

AQ: Yeah, well I had, you know, everybody in the projects wanted to after they heard, we heard a few of the people singing in the neighborhood so everybody had their own little groups, and I had mine, we were called the Newports. We started up as the first group-- the name of our group was the Bobolinks, you know the bird? [laughter]

MN: The Bobolinks.

AQ: And after a while, Connie joined us for a little while, but when we started at one-- the first job that we did was the 845.

MN: Really?

AQ: And she was with us, after that we had to kick out of the group because she was too young, they wouldn't allow her.

CQ: To get into a place where they sold liquor.

MN: So I didn't realize that 845 had doo-wop groups in it.

AQ: They had a little bit--

CQ: A little bit of everything, yeah.

MN: Now this was in the late 50's?

AQ: Yes, this was in the late 50's.

MN: And this was the group you called-- under the names Bobolinks and Newports?

AQ: This was under the New ports.

MN: And you sang at 845?

AQ & CQ: yeah.

AQ: We sang there like and Connie sang with use like I said once, and they asked us to come back. We had to get rid of her because she was too young.

MN: How many people were in your group.

AQ: Five of us.

MN: And what portion were you, a bass, a tenor?

AQ: Well I was a lead, I sang lead, and depending on the song, sometimes I sang second tenor, sometimes baritone, sometimes even bass.

MN: Can the two of you give us a brief demonstration, can you do-- a little harmony for us?

CQ: What you want to do?

AQ: Let's see, how about-- "Girlfriend" maybe?

CQ: Ok. [Sings] "Please be my" you start it.

AQ: [Sings] "I am asking you--"

AQ & CQ: "Please be my girlfriend, I have been waiting for a long, long, long time for the moment I can call you mine, oh little girl say yes."

AQ: "I tell you."

AQ & CQ: "Yes, yes"

AQ: "Why don't you be my--"

AQ & CQ: Girlfriend, please give me my heart one more chance, and we can spend a sweet romance, I really love you soooooo. I will be back--"

NL: That was great.

AQ: Sounded a little high, so I am sorry.

NL: Well, trust me, for an improv, off the cuff thing, you guys sounded better than I can ever sound.

MN: Now, one of the things that has sort of come out of this is how much kids had in the time you were growing up in terms of adult supervised activity. Where were the different places you could go, lets say to sing or to perform, or you know the play or to dance like within, lets say, ten blocks of Melrose where were the different spots where there was adult supervised recreation and culture for kids?

CQ: Well basically, it was the centers, the project centers, back in the day, you had groups that were always giving a dance, so we would just go from center to center if you heard that the Tinton Houses were giving a dance, you'd go there, if you heard that the Forest Houses were giving a dance, you'd go there, if you heard Melrose or Patterson was giving a dance, you'd go there. Now as long as the guys didn't wear their Comets Junior jackets or their Lords jacket, that was another group - - the Lords, as long as you didn't wear your colors unless somebody wanted to start something, and then you know you back out, you leave, you know but the centers in P.A.L. was basically the places that you can go. We were still kind of young to be going into like the Embassy Ballroom, or to the Savoy Manor or Hunts Point Palace, but when we got to be about 16, 17 and we're still on Melrose, we could go to those places, they didn't card us, they didn't-- even though they sold liquor on the premises they didn't ask us, you know, for cards or anything, and we were under 18.

MN: Now, did you get formal music instruction in the schools at all, you know, for the singing-- did you ever perform in school?

CQ: When I was in school I was in the chorus and we did have a girl's group, you know girls that were in the chorus would all get together because all of you knew you could sing, and we would perform for the talent shows. Louie did you do the same thing?

NL: That was in high school?

CQ: That was in high school. In junior high and elementary school, I don't remember too much musical education.

NL: Did your high school have--

AQ: Yeah, I was in the Glee Club and that's where I was introduced to classical music of my-- the teacher that I had, Mr. Sachs, one day he was playing something when I was passing by and one of the albums that he was playing, anyhow when it sounded good to me and I came and sat in there with him after that he didn't allow anyone to touch because we had a whole wall of classical music, but he would let me come and listen to the music. You know it was very interesting, but we had the Glee Club. We did things like Oklahoma and some of the plays or we just did the music, Oklahoma and other things.

MN: What was your experience academically in Bronx schools? Were the teachers encouraging or was it not a positive experience?

CQ: They weren't encouraging and even the black teachers weren't encouraging. My mother was a nurse, she was a practical nurse, I wanted to be a registered nurse. My black registered nurse professor told me not to strive for being a registered nurse, that I should start out being a practical nurse, and I couldn't understand why, and I told my mom and my mom said, "Well, is Ms. Megan white?" And I said, "No, she is black Ma." And she

said, "Well I don't understand why she is not encouraging you to be best you can be." So I took the practical nurse course and thought I was going to be a practical nurse, but then I realized I couldn't stand blood or dead people [laughs] so nursing was out anyway, but I thought I wanted to be a registered nurse.

MN: Now this was a high school teacher?

CQ: This was my-- this Grace Dodge, this was my nursing program, this was my head of the nursing program, she was a black teacher, and she did not encourage me to go anything more than be a practical nurse.

NL: Now just a little, just to go back a little, I remember on the phone when we talked before - - the first time, you told me that you chose to go to the Dodge for specific reasons. Now I just wanted you to elaborate on that.

CQ: Well, when we were in junior high school, Morris High School was the school, the party school, if you went to Morris, you were going to meet all the fine boys, you were going to be with all the hip kids, it was the party school of the Bronx. It was the oldest school in the Bronx, and it had a fabulous music program and that's really why I wanted to go but it was also the kind of a school that you could get lost in the social aspect of it. So I picked a corny school to go to, which was Grace Dodge. [laughter]

MN: Now were you ever encouraged to go to college by any of your teachers?

CQ: No, I chose to go to college because I was working- - I had graduated already, and I was working in a nursery school and I was working as an assistant teacher, and my director came across some information that said I could get a degree in early childhood if I went to a certain school for only three years as opposed to a four-year course, so I

decided to take advantage of that, and I was going to go in for early course, so I decided to take advantage of that, and I was going to go in for early childhood, but I realized it was an extension of motherhood. I had already had a baby, I was teaching children 3 to 5 and now I would be getting my degree in this area as well, I felt like I was going to be constantly with children, and I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life. So what I did was took my Associate's in Public Administration because I thought I wanted to be a politician till I found out that I would have to do things I didn't want to do, according to my professor and I was very, very honest, very, very opinionated, and I felt if I had a law that I wanted passed, I wasn't going to water it down just because I have to play footsie with the other politicians, so I decided not to become a politician and to go into communications and that's where I got my degree. I ended up at Lehman College.

NL: Sorry I actually wanted to hear whether the same experience was true for you in terms of how you ended in kind of choosing your career path because I'm wondering if the teachers at Bronx Vocational were similarly not so encouraging? Did you have to find your own way?

AQ: Well, I had two teachers that I remember, I actually feel that they were-- of all my teachers Mr. Sachs, my music-- he was very encouraging, he tried to get us to go beyond high school. My English teacher was the same way, and my math teacher was very popular in school because he didn't dress like the regular teacher, he was sort of hip so to speak, and he was very encouraging. A lot of the other teachers used to get very angry with him all because all the kids love him mainly because of the way he dressed; he used to act like he was one of us. But he also tried to encourage us to go to college. But most

of the other teachers-- they were-- I don't remember being encouraged by them in any shape or form.

MN: Now, what sort of training in the trade that you had in Bronx Vocational?

AQ: I had carpentry.

MN: And did you go into that after you graduated?

AQ: I wanted to, but back then if you didn't someone-- you had to be in the union in the first place.

MN: Right.

AQ: And if you didn't someone, you didn't into carpentry. If you weren't white or knew someone, you were not going to get into carpentry. And I tried, and so I-- well I was only out of high school about, I got out in June '59 and in November I went into the service. I didn't want to hang around doing nearly nothing like a lot of the guys I saw after they got out high school, so I went into the service.

MN: And how long did you stay in the service?

AQ: 2 years, 3 months, 14 days, and 8 hours. [laughter]

NL: It was that good?

AQ: No, I will tell you exactly why, I was only supposed to be in for 2 years, I wanted to -- I pushed up draft, I told them wanted to be drafted, and I wanted to be drafted hopefully during the time when there was no one fighting anybody any where because I didn't want to shoot anybody, I didn't want to kill anyone, I didn't want anybody shooting at me. So when they called me, there was nothing going on, and after at the end of my two years the first time I ever sat down to--

[END OF SIDE A, BEGINNING SIDE B]

AQ: In February of 1962. And that was the reason why they put us on alert - - that was the beginning of the Vietnam situation, but luckily I - - after being on alert for 2 weeks, almost 3 weeks, they decided they weren't going to send us, so I got out.

MN: And what did you do, what career path did you take after you got out?

AQ: Well, when I got out - -

CQ: Is that when you worked at the factory?

AQ: Yeah, I worked at different things, and then one day, my oldest daughter's godfather was working at a hospital out in Staten Island - - Willowbrook and he called me because I needed work because my wife was expecting so after that, after working for Mental Hygiene for 2 years I decided I wanted to know about why I was taking care of the patient and the things I was doing. So I went onto nursing school and I then became an RN and I did that for almost 35 years.

MN: Right so you were an RN and what was your - -

CQ: Basically out of school I went to work for Teacher's Insurance Company, I was with CREF.

MN: Right.

CQ: And I was there for about three years, then after I got pregnant then I stayed home, became a mother, and pursued my music so I sang with bands on the weekends. And I made as much money singing weekends as I would if I held a job during the week, and I did that for about 30 years. And off and on I also worked, I mean I would pick a job

when I felt like I wanted to - - when I thought like the music business was slow, but basically I did the music for 30 years.

MN: Wow. Now what about - - was your family religious and did you end, were you involved with particular churches when you were growing up?

CQ: My mother wasn't religious per se, but we did go to church every Sunday and I did go to Sunday school.

NL: What church did you attend?

CQ: Solomon and Temple Baptist Church over neat the Melrose Projects and that's also where Louie and I got married. And then when we moved to the Lafayette-Morrison Houses, we started going to St. Andrew's.

MN: Now how old were you two when you got married?

CQ: 19, I was 19. Louie how old were you, 21?

AQ: 21.

MN: This was after you were in the service or when you came back from--

AQ: It was a - - when we got married, New Year's Eve 1961, that was four or five months - - we got married when I was - -

CQ: You were still in the service

MN: Were you in uniform when you got married?

AQ: I was still in uniform, but I didn't, I don't think I wore it.

CQ: Exactly.

NL: And so at that point, after you got married, did you stay in the Melrose area or were you--

CQ: We moved to Brook Avenue and we were living on Brook Avenue for about a year, year and a half and then we got accepted for the projects but it was a project in Manhattan and we lived in the Johnson Houses for about 5 years.

MN: And where was that located?

CQ: That was on 106th - -

AQ: 115th and Park Avenue.

MN: And then you moved into Lafayette-Morrison, which was a Mitchell-Lama?

CQ: Exactly, it was a Mitchell-Lama. I had heard, like I told Natasha, I heard about because one of my girlfriend's mother was a court stenographer and the people who had built the development - - they were coming in to try to get the Mitchell-Lama status because of the fact that it was built for rich white people, but they didn't like the neighborhood, so they weren't buying.

MN: Right.

CQ: So they had to now make some money and what they did was they took a certain portion of it for low income people and right after she heard that, she got in touch with her daughter, her daughter got in touch with me and we filled out the application and we got in. So that's how we got in.

MN: Now how did you get into music as a business, as well as an avocation?

CQ: Well, I was in my teens, my high teens, I guess 17, 18 years old, I met a couple of producers, one of them was guy name Al Brown who was also the one who discovered Johnny Maestro and he met Johnny Maestro on a train - - his wife did, his wife said Johnny Maestro was sitting on the train with three other people harmonizing and she gave

Johnny her card and Johnny got in touch with her and Al became the manager. Well, Al also advertised in the papers looking for musicians and that's when I connected with him.

MN: Which newspaper did he advertise in?

CQ: *Amsterdam*, the *Amsterdam News*. We had-- I had already cut a record, but it was dub, it was one of those records that you were going to take some place and then you show it off.

MN: Now where did you go to cut a dub in those days?

CQ: Mr. Johnson, who lived on 161st Street and Morris Avenue, took us to a studio and don't remember where the studios was, but it was just one of those really kind of a raggedy studio where they had padding all around so that it could give you some sort of sound effect and we sang, me and the four guys I was singing with from the Melrose Projects, we sang.

MN: And what was the name of the group at that time?

CQ: The Decoys.

MN: These were the Decoys, so all these guys worked from the Melrose Houses?

CQ: Yes, also of them are from the Melrose houses.

MN: Now were any of them also basketball players or did they--

AQ: Well, everybody played, Marion played, Marion was the tallest in the group like he-- everybody played a little bit.

MN: So this was-- how did you find them, how did you start singing with four guys?

CQ: You go to the community center and like I said, I would start off singing with the girls, they were probably singing by themselves and then when my group broke up, you

kind of like intertwine and just like with Louie when he didn't have a lead singer, and I was not doing anything and I sang with his group we kind of meshed, then you knew you, hey we could do something here, so it is the same thing with them. And we recorded this song and after-- we didn't do anything with it - - our manager died and we didn't do anything with it. One day I was on the bus or something or maybe I was at a center. And I heard our song playing on the radio, they didn't know who the group was all they knew it was song, and they had given it another name and by that time I had got in touch with Al Brown, we were going to be managed by him. We then told Al that our music was being played on the radio, Al went to Times Square Records, who was the guy who distributed; a guy named Slim told him that that was our record and that was our group was that was being played and so we got a little recognition from that. We started making some appearances because of it and that's how we got started.

NL: And where did you make appearances?

CQ: We were-- we did the Oxford Club.

MN: Now, where was the Oxford Club located?

CQ: I mean the Oxford Pub, on White Plains Road, I have a flyer and I will try to get it to you.

NL: At White Plains Road up the - -

CQ: In the 233rd Street area, the Oxford Pub, we also did the Stardust, back in the early, very early 60's or late 50's.

MN: Now that was-- that the Stardust when it was at West Farms and Tremont?

CQ: Was it Tremont or was it Eastchester Road?

MN: Or was it that there was-- the Stardust then moved up to the north Bronx. They--

CQ: I think it was when they moved up to the north Bronx that we did it, it was at the Eastchester Road.

MN: At the Eastchester Road Stardust Ballroom, and right.

CQ: We also did the Boston Road Ballroom, which is right there on Boston Road. We did the Savoy Manor; we did a couple of other little bar places that were in the Bronx.

NL: And when you played did you play with normally mixed crowds or mostly African Americans and Latinos?

CQ: Mostly, African Americans.

MN: And so they would pay you on the spot or?

CQ: Usually they would pay us on the spot.

MN: Depending on the gate or?

CQ: yes.

MN: So it was not a set contract.

CQ: And then there was time when there was not a lot of people there and of course you didn't get paid at all.

MN: Right, what about-- was that same thing with your group the Neptunes-- the Newporters?

AQ: Basically, the same we just sang wherever-- we had a guy who was trying to manage us, was one of the guys that worked at the P.A.L. He was also a policeman so he knew some people here and there, and we did different places in the Bronx that I cant even

remember the name except for the 845 Club and some of the other places that I don't remember the names.

MN: Now did any of you remember going to the Blue Morocco?

CQ: Sylvia's Blue Morocco? Sylvia didn't have doo-wop, she did-- I don't remember her- -.

MN: It is more jazz.

CQ: More Jazz, yeah, because I am sure they tried to get us into the Blue Morocco, but they didn't open the door for us.

MN: Did you have other friends who were singers from the neighborhood; you know where there other people from Melrose who pursued this kind of career?

CQ: Definitely, there was Bobby Rivera and the Hemlocks.

MN: Oh, I read about them, they were from Melrose?

CQ: Not Bobby, but the group that backed him up, the Hemlocks were from Melrose.

And then there was Carl Petris and The Unique Teens. Carl was from-- the songs they made was called "Genie" and Carl was from Melrose and the Unique Teens were from another area. And then of course there was us-- and Brooke Benton lived in our development, he lived in 681 and we used to watch him go on gigs, you know sometimes we will be on the corner doo-wopping and he would come out in his tuxedo pulling in his pink--

AQ: In his pink Cadillac.

CQ: Yeah.

MN: How did he get into the Melrose Houses if there income requirements?

CQ: I don't know. Maybe his career hadn't taken off yet when he came in, and eventually it did take off and so eventually he moved, but he was there for a while.

MN: That's something.

AQ: Well, his mother and his family still lived in 681 and when he-- when they first moved in there, he was not at least as far as we know, he wasn't that well known then, and then of course then after he, you know--

MN: Yeah, he took off in the early 60's as I recall.

CQ: Exactly, and Melrose was around since 1949 so he could have came in early.

MN: Right, right. What was your-- how many children did you have?

CQ: We had three, two girls and a boy, and we all sing.

MN: They all sing too?

CQ: They used to call us the King family because we do shows together, you know.

MN: Now when-- most-- from what I can gather, it is very hard to make a living from music, so you know, when did this really click for you, you know the weekend opportunities?

CQ: It didn't really click for me while I was singing doo-wop, I never made any money, I really never made any money. I didn't start making any money until I went solo and sang with my own band and that was called the Sound Pipers. And so I was able to make money then, not great money but it was enough money for me to help send my two girls to college without going into our own finances, so I did pretty well.

NL: And what kind of music would you describe the Sound Pipers as having?

CQ: We were a wedding band.

MN: Right.

CQ: So your typical wedding band, your Bar Mitzvah, your wedding, your graduation, whatever-- your dance band, that's what we did.

MN: Now, by the way, I have heard some dynamite bands like that at people's wedding and Bar Mitzvahs, I mean stuff that's so good.

CQ: And you say why haven't they recorded, right?

MN: Yeah.

NL: And I thought that was it for the majority of - -?

CQ: Exactly, for the majority of my music. Al Brown has his own band by the way, and Al was not only - - I mean he managed below us for a while, he managed quite a few groups, Johnny Maestro as I said before, he managed just a couple of groups. I mean you see Al Brown's name on quite a few things and he had his own band too, so I sang with his band for a while and then from his band once you sing with one band then other musicians who have their own band would say listen I am looking for a girl singer and your name kind of spreads around.

NL: So what was it like to be in that scene, I mean I know, you know, it seems like almost everyone you knew had some kind of you know association, or aspiration to be in the music business, so what was it like to feel like you were a "mover and shaker" so to speak?

CQ: It was fun. Louie sang at the Apollo. I never got a chance to sing at--

MN: You sang at the Apollo!?

AW: yeah, with the group we had, we sang at the Apollo.

MN: With the Newports?

AQ: Yeah and we did an original song that was written by my daughter's godfather, who was, he was the - - also, one of our leads and first our tenor.

NL: So who were the people in the Newports? Give their names, we loved to keep just for the historical record.

AQ: Well, there was Gene Hicks, Raymond Fogerty, John Moore, Larry Hall, and myself. Larry Hall was my daughter's godfather and he-- the song we sang was called [Inaudible] this girlfriend that he had, it was-- when we got up on that stage, as far as we knew and everybody was telling us after we sang that we were going to be-- [Inaudible] because it was amateur night.

MN: It was amateur night, now where did you meet Paul Himmelstein?

CQ: At Morris High School, I went to a concert there at Morris High School and Paul was there and we told him when we met him that we sang one of his songs because we used to sing "One, Two, I Love You" and we told him that we loved that song and that we, whenever we did a set, we would always have that song as a part of it. And he was very, you know, very nice and very kind. He had already stopped singing by that time and he had went back to Morris for some dedication or some show that they were having because he did attend for a couple years, I don't think he graduated but--

MN: No.

NL: So after-- I am interested to know, you said after your Apollo performance people told you, you were going to be the winner?

AQ: That's why they us that night, including the guy who was the M.C. that which I cant remember but then after we sang this group called the 'School Boys,' I don't know if you heard of them.

MN: I have heard of them.

CQ & MN: [Sing] "Please say you want me to, to be your love".

CQ: That's the group that beat them out.

MN: That's a great song, that's one of my favorites.

CQ: They were little boys.

AQ: They were all small, they had-- I will never forget, they had these little green suits on with these big hats and orange shirts and they look so cute - - they sounded good.

MN: Was that the song they sang?

AQ: That was their song.

MN: That is one of the great songs that is on every collection, I have to say.

CQ: So you lost to the best.

AQ: So we came in second after that and after that we kept singing at different places.

NL: It was mostly a side thing for you as opposed to you know trying to making it your--

AQ: Like I said we wanted to-- I mean our manager wanted to get us further in the music business but our manager had a tragic event in the project, his brother was across the street from the project shooting dice with some guys and one of the police officers in the project went over there to stop them and a fight broke out and the police officer shot our manager's brother, so after that he didn't want to-- especially since the cop who shot him was a black cop, and our manager is Italian, Joe Viella, you remember that.

CQ: And I remember the cop that shot him, he was really a nice policeman.

AQ: Mr.-- Officer Hill, he was one of the nicest guys but there was a bunch of guys and what was-- they pulled out something, so he ended up shooting. Anyway after that Joe didn't want to manage. I don't know if because his brother was shot by a black cop if that anything to do with that, then after that, he didn't have anything to do with this kind of music anymore. So you know, we just went on and we met another gentleman later, what was his name, Mr. Moore?

CQ: I don't remember.

AQ: We've seen him in a lot of things as--

CQ: Oh, the boxer?

AQ: The boxer, yea. From Patterson.

CQ: From Patterson, yeah.

MN: Now one of the more troubling things that always comes up when we are interviewing people in your cohort is drugs. When did you start noticing drugs being a major issue with either in the Melrose houses or among people you knew?

CQ: It's funny, when I first started noticing drugs-- it was a young guy in our project who used to run around like crazy, we didn't know what was wrong with him, but they told us he was a drug addict, and he would be running around because I guess you know he had taken too much and he was trying to run it off or something. But the main drug of choice during my coming up was marijuana, reefer, that is what everybody was smoking and we called them drug addicts because that was what we thought they were so when we saw everybody like that other guy, whatever his name was, who was running around,

they said that's a drug addict and we used to see him nodding, he was one person and I had never been exposed as a young teen to a drug addict.

MN: Right, and what about like the Vocational High School, was there anything, any signs there of people talking about using or heroin?

AQ: I don't remember any of that, much of that happening at least during the years that was in high school. I would say that once in a while something would break out, but I never heard much of that.

MN: Right, so this was not a major factor that entered your even awareness?

CQ: No, not in the 50's. It might have been out there, but we weren't exposed.

MN: Now you mentioned that Brooke Benton-- well now did anybody go to school with him?

CQ: No, he was older than us.

MN: he was older, he was older, so-- but he was living with his parents or family?

CQ: His family was there, were not sure if it was a wife or if it was mother and father, but he was an adult, I mean we were teenagers watching him go to work. Because we knew he was going to work because he had on a tuxedo, he'd be carrying his music bag or you know carrying something that looked like an instrument - - we don't know, a mic stand or whatever it was, but we knew he was going to work.

MN: And you would hear him on the radio.

CQ: His records.

MN: Right, right, right. Now you also said J.J. Walker grew up in the--

CQ: He grew up at 700 East 153rd Street and he used to bug us because he had the nerve after he got popular to say he grew up in a ghetto. It was not a ghetto. But J.J., I remember him, he was a young skinny kid, who I think the kids told me that he used to make them laugh because he was always doing funny things.

MN: Now, he was younger than you or older than you?

CQ & AQ: Younger.

CQ: So, if his remembrance of the project was something other than we remember, cause when we left the projects it still was in good shape.

NL: And what year did you leave the Melrose projects?

AQ: Let me I see-- I guess-- because we stayed for- - after Cheryl was born we stayed there for short time--

CQ: Right, so we say we left about 63, 1963.

NL: So there was really-- there was no problems as much as what you saw even a couple years later, so you didn't see any drugs or crime, things like that?

CQ: Right.

MN: And it was still kept clean and well-kept?

NL: Right.

AQ: It was very clean, when I do just duty, usually I go to 161st Street and whenever I get a long lunch I walk over to Melrose and I sit in the Projects there. In the middle of the projects we have what you call, we had an oval - - grass, nice green grass. I mean it had chains around it, if you were caught on it, you would get a \$5 fine, but when I started going back there a few years ago, like I said when I was jury duty. They had already - -

they had benches there now, they had walking paths through there. There was one of our friends that we knew years ago; I don't know if I should say this but--

NL: You don't have to say names.

AQ: My understanding now is that he is one of the biggest pushers, drug pushers in the project and I see him every now and then when I go - -

MN: And this somebody in your generation?

AQ: Right. This is one of the guys I used to play basketball with all the time and he was like my little brother and to see it now in comparison to the way it was in the past.

MN: So if you did a then and now what were biggest differences just in the visual aspect?

AQ: Now, I would be scared to walk through the projects or even sit there for too long.

Then you could sit anywhere, except like I said, you couldn't walk on the-- the grass used to be kept very immaculate.

CQ: And we had police security, these were real policemen that carried a gun and they were your friends and you felt very secure living there. I don't even see any security now and I don't know where they are - - maybe they are just as afraid as the tenants, but if when you go into the hallway it smells bad. It is unkempt, the elevators - - they aren't fixed in a timely fashion, so sometimes you are walking up and down those steps. The lights are out, I mean I go into the projects every now and then; I am scared of the projects now.

NL: And even-- up to the time you left, were the projects still kind of a multi-ethnic space?

AQ: Yeah.

NL: It was, yeah.

CQ: I mean it was being predominantly black and Hispanic by the time we left.

NL: So you were noticing the transition.

CQ: Definitely, notice the transition. When I was living there as a child, I lived next door to an Italian family called the Fasiglias. My mom used to go to work and Adel's mom, that was my girlfriend, Adele Fasiglia, would invited me over for dinner three times, and I became, like a pasta freak, I had calamari, I had squingilli, all kinds; I always did love Italian foods, but I loved even more.

MN: So people were in and out of each other's houses and eating each other's food and listening to music and during childcare the mothers helped each other out. Were most of these intact families when you were growing up with two parent families, or did - -

CQ: No, a lot of them were one parent family. Adele's mother was by herself, she was a one parent family. There was another couple across the hall that there was a mother and father. I mean it was a mixture, a mixture.

NL: So then I wanted to know, kind of what it was like moving to - - from that area to, you know, Lafayette Morrison, how was-- how do you feel like the two neighborhoods compared?

CQ: Well, you felt like you were stepping up, every time you moved at least for me, every time you moved, you felt like you were making a step forward and I, when I moved to Lafayette Morrison with the balcony, high-rise building, fast elevator, modern appliances, you felt like you were moving up.

MN: And id you feel it was a healthy environment to bring up kids in?

CQ: Very much so, definitely, yeah.

NL: Yeah, what schools did you sent them to?

CQ: they went to P.S. 93, and then they went to 232, and then 152 from there they graduated and went on to high school.

NL: Right.

MN: Do you feel your kids got better education that you got in the schools?

CQ: They got a better education primarily because they had parents that were educated.

MN: Did you have to stay on top of teachers?

CQ: Yes and I did. I was involved in the P.A. I was involved in going to the classroom if I still had something that I wasn't satisfied with, and let the teachers know. My mom. Louie's sisters, they all worked very hard, if they came to P.A. meeting it was rare because they didn't always get a change to get off or they, were working two jobs. So there was not a lot of follow up.

MN: Did either of you have mentors outside your family that played in an important role in your life growing up or was the whole neighborhood like a mentor? Any individuals that stood out you know in terms of a community center or--

CQ: I think the community centers played a real valid part of my life.

AQ: Yeah that would be the community center and the P.A.L. Mr. Bob in the P.A.L. who was--

CQ: He was always taking us on trips, exposing us.

MN: Mr. Bob.

CQ & AQ: Yeah.

CQ: He was a director.

MN: What was his - - was his last name Bob?

CQ: Bob was his first name I think.

AQ: It was his first name; he didn't want us to call him by his last name.

CQ: Yeah, we called him Mr. Bob.

AQ: But he had to call Mr.

CQ: And he had a boat, and he exposed us to the first time to a boat - - taking us out like a yacht or a boat going fishing, I mean--.

NL: And where did you go fishing?

CQ: Just up - - City Island or some place, you know and we had never been--he picked certain children who I think exemplified the good kids at the center, and he used it as a reward so that we would go on trips, and things of that nature you know.

NL: So when you were-- you know, in the Lafayette-Morrison houses, and you started to notice- - because I am thinking you were in Lafayette Morrison Houses through the 60's and 70's up till now, so what were your thoughts about what was going in the rest of the south Bronx over the course of that period when your kids were coming up? Because that was when the fires were happening, and a lot of the-- you know, drugs tried to take over more areas--

CQ: We kind of kept our children close by. We didn't want them to go out of the neighborhoods very often. They didn't have the P.A.L and the community center which was a shame because the kids a spent lot of time on the bench. They spend a lot of time in the hallways, I mean. Then there were some people that tried to organize the

community center.

NL: In your development.

CQ: In our development but they didn't really take off, so the kids - - we kept them in programs, we put them in martial arts, we put them in theatrical groups, singing lessons, dance lessons, we tried to keep them as active, and we took a lot of vacations, we were always going away some place. We tried to keep them as active as we could because they didn't have what Louie and I had in our community when we were growing up, they didn't have a center that they could go to every night and have arts and crafts; and music and games.

NL: What were your reactions to the kind of music, you know, your kids started to get into as they were growing up?

CQ: When I heard rap--the kids love our music, I mean they could listen to Johnny Matthis, they could listen to the Cadillacs and Doo-wop as a matter of fact the kids sing Doo-wop with us, they could back me and Louie up; Harptones, Heartbeats, they know all of that. The Valentines, Cleftones songs they know all of that, because they grew up in all that kind of music. Some body asked me would I like to do a Decoys job, I said I don't really have any Decoys. They said well your kids sing right, I said yeah, they could really back me up on anything that the decoys did because they have a good ear, they all--two of them went to LaGuardia School of Music, all of my children sing.

NL: Right.

CQ: But-- they listened to our music, and then when rap came out, rap was fun, it was like poetry, singsong poetry, and I used to go out sometimes because my daughter Cheryl wrote rap, and she had a rap group.

MN: She did. Okay one of my students is doing her research paper, senior thesis on women in hip-hop, so I need to get your, she'd definitely want to interview your daughter.

CQ: That would be great. But Cheryl used to, she used to--

NL: What group was she in?

CQ: She didn't have a group. She would write for herself and for different guys in the street who wanted to rap.

NL: So she was like a ghost writer?

CQ: Exactly.

MN: So she did lyrics?

CQ: And then she also worked as a producer for a show on TV called Classic Concept and they had-- it was the first video, before MTV, it was the video show that was on WNYC and Cheryl used to work for that station so she came in contact with MC Lyte, Salt N' Pepa, all the girl rappers who were just coming out, and Heavy D before he got started, you know Nice and Smooth, I mean all of them.

NL: I remember Tuffy singing for Nice and Smooth, I remember seeing his face and being like, "I know him!"

MN: Really?

NL: Yeah.

CQ: Alright, I got out sometimes and I listened to other rappers and if I heard a line that was really cool, I write it down, I will kind of steal it and I come back to Cheryl, and Cheryl, "I heard a great line Cheryl!" And I give her the line and she say, "Nice line." And she kind of move it around somewhere, but use it somewhere in was something that she was doing. So I liked rap, I liked it, I liked the early sounds of rap, I didn't like when it became underground and when it became dirty, I didn't enjoy it anymore.

MN: Right.

CQ: But I didn't mind the music, and even now I've got all of their albums all of the first rap albums at the house.

NL: Really?

CQ: They haven't taken them out yet, so that they stay too much longer they are going to be mine.

NL: So now, I guess - - what are your thoughts, your experiences in the Bronx, would you, you know, do you feel as though because there are a lot of people who went to the Bronx, you know, came up in the Bronx, but kind of went through there and went somewhere else. What made you guys stay?

AQ: I guess part of it is our children living in the Bronx. When they moved out on their own, they also lived in the Bronx, so that is part of our life that been with us forever - - well one of our children just recently moved out of our state. But we loved the Bronx, we enjoy the Bronx, I mean we-- our children was born in the Bronx, we met in the Bronx, we went to school together in the Bronx, the elementary school and you know, the Bronx has been you know, our life, although I, every couple of years, I go visit my family in

Puerto Rico and my brother-- I have a brother and a sister, bunch of nephews and nieces in Puerto Rico and we spend some time there, but three of us come whenever we go. we always come back you know, but since we live here. I always think that I we moved some place else, if our family weren't here, we'd find some reason to come back to the Bronx.

MN: what do you think is that-- you have been all over the country and you know, you have traveled around, what makes the Bronx so distinctive, if you are thinking about the things that make it special to you?

CQ: I think it's the melting pot that makes it distinctive, I mean at one time, it wasn't predominantly Hispanic, which I believe it is now, at one time there were so many nationalities in the Bronx, I mean you had the Arthur Avenue area, you had the Morris Park Avenue, the Morris Avenue where there Italians were, you had certain areas of the Bronx where - - the Morrisania area where a lot of blacks live, I mean and then there was areas where just different nationalities lived, I don't know where they, I couldn't pinpoint all of them, but I know that you could just see so many different people in the Bronx. I love the Bronx Zoo, I love the Van Cortlandt Park, I love the Botanical Garden, I love Yankee Stadium. I just like the feel of the Bronx. We didn't like Brooklyn when we were coming up, we thought the Queens girls were snooty, [laughter] we thought the Brooklyn girls were rough and tough. We saw the Bronx girls and boys were just right.

MN: And so between the Brooklyn thugs and the--

NL: Queens snottiness--

CQ: And the snooty Queens people, that's exactly it.

MN: Well, anyway--

AQ: Although we had some nice tough groups in the Bronx. But a lot of-- a lot of the people in the entertainment world, there so many that have come from the Bronx, and that is-- actors, singers, or whatever, even classical musicians have come from the Bronx.

CQ: That's right. I mean the comedians; look at the comedians like what is his name Klein?

MN: Robert Klein.

CQ: Robert Klein, yeah, and then even some of the designers, I can't remember his name, -- Ralph Lauren I think.

AQ: Yeah.

CQ: From the Bronx, I mean a lot of wonderful people, a lot of creative people came from the Bronx. There were was a gentleman that wrote a play called "We Live in the Bronx" and I can't remember his name, but we did it back in a couple years ago and I wrote a song called, "We live in the Bronx." [Sings] "We live in the Bronx, we live in the Bronx, and we are first world people and we live in the Bronx. We work very hard on our low paying jobs, but we are first world people, we are happy people, we are loving people, and we live in the Bronx!" You know it was a really good play and it was all about the Bronx.

NL: And where did you guys stage this?

CQ: It was at a church on 161st street, and I have the program at home and maybe I will get the program to you because the guy who produced it his wife is a writer, and he is a professor at one of the colleges.

MN: Right.

CQ: And it was a good play and I submitted two songs for the play and everybody else submitted two songs - - it was all about how people from Scarsdale and Riverdale ride through the Bronx on their way to Manhattan and they never stop. And all they do is they look out the window on the train and they conspire and make up ideas about what the Bronx is about, but they really never know.

NL: Right.

CQ: And it was a really good play.

NL: And what year was that did you do it?

CQ: It must have been late 70's.

NL: So I mean is that something that's to think about the fact that was a musical culture, an artistic culture that endured you know--

MN: And it is still here, and you know even though the Bronx is majority Latino, there's still immigrants, there is 100,000 people from west Africa living in the Bronx, you know there are still people from the Caribbean coming there are people from Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe, it is still happening, the melting pot is still going on and the music is still being generated so you know your story, I mean, is very inspiring.

CQ: I wouldn't trade places, I wouldn't have given up this life for any other place. I love the Bronx. I am a Bronxite. I am a Bronx girl and anytime there is a movie about the Bronx, when "Marty"-- I went to see that movie when "Queen of the Stardust Ballroom" came out, I went to see that movie. De Niro, you know, he must love the Bronx, everything he does has some kind of Bronx influence. Chazz Palminteri--

MN: Right, "The Bronx Tale".

CQ: "The Bronx Tale" and the music in it is just wonderful, it is just wonderful, so I just wish you know people would, I think this project will just enlighten people, and they'll get a chance to see that the Bronx-- is not all South Bronx, it is all whatever they think the South Bronx is.

MN: The South Bronx isn't what people think the South Bronx is.

CQ: Exactly.

MN: I mean that's part of the message, the South Bronx has been many things, and one of them was this hopeful family neighborhood where people could, you know, move up and raise families.

NL: And be creative.

MN: And be creative, and that period needs to be claimed.

CQ: It needs to be looked upon as it did back in the olden days when people were living on the West Side downtown, and they wanted to go to their summer home in the Bronx. They wanted to live well so they would come up to the Bronx, Hunts Point was the focal point - - all the different places in the Bronx - - this was their summer palace, this is where they lived, this is where they shined.

NL: And is that-- I am wondering to, did you all do that kind of stuff growing up, going up to other places in the Bronx?

CQ: The only time we went to any other place is if we went to Fordham Road which was the Mecca of the Bronx at one point. All the stores on Fordham Road were magnificent, all the buildings on Fordham Road, you couldn't afford to live on Fordham Road, you

just couldn't afford it and mostly only the white folk owned those big apartments on Fordham Road; you didn't go to Fordham Road and see shades half drawn, torn, you didn't see curtains flying out the window - - it was not. It was a well dressed area. Fordham Road was well dressed. Fordham Road was like Riverdale. At one time in our life, and then all of a sudden it changed. It changed, people just didn't take pride in their environment. But I would like people to look on the Bronx as they did once before as a wonderful place to live, as a wonderful place to go. We don't have enough restaurants we don't have anymore clubs anymore, any really nice clubs. We don't have any family places that you could go to eat and you know, really just have a really nice night out. People need to not be afraid to build here.

MN: I have to tell you one of my tennis partners bought the Sears building here and is going to put a really nice restaurant in there. And you what, you talking about is the word and there are some very hip clubs down in the area, down in the 130's

NL: They're trying to make it into a riverfront district now.

MN: there is a very nice Jazz club called the G-bar on a 150th Street and Grand Concourse where you know really classy place, it is starting to happen again.

CQ; Wonderful, wonderful I know that they have the antique stores on 138th street or somewhere in that area, and I really think they are trying to build up that area.

MN: But there are some bars and restaurants opening now.

CQ: Opening there too, wonderful. That sounds wonderful.

MN: Well, okay this is absolutely wonderful and we will round up.

[ENF OF INTERVIEW]