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Pruitt, James Interview 1

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Naison: This is the tenth interview of the Bronx African-American History Project. The person we are interviewing is Mr. James Pruitt, a long time teacher and educational administrator in the Bronx. Who grew up in the Morrisian neighborhood and this is the first of several interviews with Mr. Pruitt and it is going to focus on his experience growing up in the Morisian community. So, my first question is when did your family first move to the Bronx?

Pruitt: My family moved to the Bronx from Harlem, in I think it was 1932. And I base that on the fact that my oldest sister said she attended school in Manhattan, elementary school in Manhattan but moved to the Bronx and changed schools. At which time she entered PS 23, which is on the corner of 166th St between Union and Tinton Ave., the school is no longer there. But the family lived in a 166th St, no the family lived on Prospect Ave. at that time. And later they moved to 166 St next to Saint Anthony's Church, church school. And I was born in the building 818 166th St, in 1938.

Naison: Now was your family initially of southern or Carribean origin?

Pruitt: Southern, my father was from Alabam, my mother was from South Carolina. They both, they met in Harlem in the 1920's, my mother finished college in 1922 where she trained to be a teacher. And my father was a veteran of World War I, and he came to NY after WWI looking for work he had been to Detroit, Sl. Louis, and Chicago. And he came to NY because his brother was already here, and he lived in Harlem. My parents met through my uncle, who was taking a course in prosthetic dentistry at the Harlem YMCA. My dad was in the class, and a future uncle was in the class. And my mother's brother had a larger apartment on 129th St. between 7th and 8th Ave. And his sisters came to NY and they decided that they would live with Bob. Bob decided that he didn't want the responsibility of being, of taking care of his sisters. So he decided he would marry them off. So he met these two gentlemen in the class who seemed like they were responsible, that they had jobs that they were ... So he introduced them to his sisters and that is how my dad and mom got together. And later my aunt and uncle got together. So, the family lived, they were married and lived in Harlem for a short period of time, about five years, about six years and then they moved to the Bronx.

Naison: How did they find the Bronx? Was, did they know people that were already living in the neighborhood they moved in to?

Pruitt: I really don't know. I would imagine that it was probably through association with people who were in the Churches, the church. The Harlem churches were like magnets to people from certain communities. The church that we grew up in, Grace Congregational Church of Harlem, 139th St., had a membership that was largely southern. But within the church there were organizations, auxiliaries. There was the South Carolina Club, and there were other clubs made of people from Georgia and Alabama. You know these were like affinity groups. And there were a few people from the West Indies, not too many, some from Bermuda and Guiana, and they helped each other. My family lived on Bradhurst Ave. and that, Bradhurst Ave. runs along side what was called Colonial Park, which is down the hill from Sugar Hill. And a lot of those people that live in that community moved to the Bronx, family after family I could name moved to the Bronx. Now whether that movement had started before my parents, I don't think they were the first ones to move up to the Bronx.

Naison: Is it your sense that your parents were getting better quality housing in the Bronx, than they would have been able to get in Harlem? In terms of the size of the apartments, and the condition of the buildings? Was that the appeal?

Pruitt: I don't think that was, no I think it was a money problem. Remember this was the depression, and it might have been rent it might have been cheaper to move to the Bronx for the same number of rooms. Remember subways trolleys were five cents, so transportation back to Manhattan was relatively cheap. And there were transfers, so you could really come from the Bronx, take a bus or a trolley, and transfer to another one all for five cents one way.

Naison: Right, now where your parents moved to the Bronx, what sort of work was your father doing?

Pruitt: I think he was sub in the post-office, and he also was a clothes presser at a local cleaning establishment.

Naison: OK so he was working at a small establishment, he was not in ... Was he a member of a union?

Pruitt: No, he worked for a guy named Joe Seciliano, who had a cleaning establishment on the corner of Prospect Ave. and Home

St. OK, and that was a matter of convenience because the family lived across the street. They lived on Prospect Ave. between Home St. and 168th.

Naison: So I take it the neighborhood your parents moved in to was multi-racial and multi -ethnic.

Pruitt: It was a changing neighborhood; it was largely Jewish with a few blacks moving in. And most of the men, most of the black men the heads of households, worked for the post office department. And I could probably name fifteen families where the fathers worked for the post office department. And I was told by a colleague whose father was a rental agent, Mr. Klein. Mr. Klein only rented to black families if the husband, father, if the breadwinner worked for the post office because they could always get his rent if they came up short. They could get the rent from the government. But it was, you know sociologically it was fascinating because at 4 o'clock all these men came up the street from the subways and buses and headed home with a newspaper under their arm. And a grey uniform on, tired, walking, and came up Prospect Ave. on their way to their various homes.

Naison: Did your mother work when the children were young?

Pruitt: No, she was a full-time homemaker.

Naison: And she had a college education?

Pruitt: She had a college education, but in those days the standard was ... you know men were proud to say my wife raises our family and provides for the home, and I provide for the family. So, my father didn't want my mother to work. SO she didn't work until he retired, she said I am not staying home with you. And she got a full-time job.

Naison: Wow, Did your family continue to attend Grace Congregational Church? Or did ...

Pruitt: Yes, they remained. Harlem was the social, was the cultural center for the black community, even though blacks were moving to the Bronx. There were black institutions were there, the YMCA was there, the Churches were there, the entertainment centers all located in Harlem. So, most of the families, while they lived five or six days a week in the Bronx, would return to Harlem churches on Sunday mornings.

Naison: Now did this continue as you got older? Or did the Bronx become more of an autonomous cultural center; by the time let's say you got. ...

Pruitt: I don't think that neighborhood ever became a cultural or autonomous center for black people. I think the ties were always back to Harlem. Politically, people identified with that community, and they supported various candidates. A lot of the candidates for political office rose from that community. Or they threw their support behind some of the candidates, like Harry Bedia, Robert Garcia, and some of the Puerto Rican communities. Some of the judges and some of the others names will come to me right away, Wendel Foster, those people were supported by that community. And many ... so there was an identification for a developing political string, through various organizations, block associations, and civic groups that were started by many of the women that lived in that community. I know that my mother belong to a bridge club, and the little ladies would get together once a month at various homes, and just for their own entertainment. Then they had another organization called the Exclusive 9, The EX9. And they used to raise money for various civic organizations. And then we had a block association, which would give a tea once a year and all the money from the tea would go for camp scholarships, to send kids to camp. And so those are the kinds of ways that people busied themselves, within that community. But I don't know that there were any other cultural institutions other than the church. St. Augustine Presbyterian Church on 16StH St. and Prospect Ave. in the 1930's was largely a white Presbyterian church, not so fast to change. I am told that a woman by the name of Ang

Naison: Angie Dickerson.

Pruitt: Angie Dickerson, right, was a member of the church. And she persuaded the Presbyterian, to bring a black minister in to that community. And they assigned a man by the name of Edla Hawkins. And Reverend Hawkins came to that church, and he was a very low-key, yet dynamic minister. And he attracted a large number of families. So people now had a choice, they could go to church in their own community or they could return to Harlem, or wherever they came from. A lot of people opted to go back to Harlem for their Sunday church, but St. Augustine had a number of activities after church and during the week. My cub-scout group was located there, they had a group of teenagers that met in the church house on Sundays, and there were a number of other organizations that were located there. New York City Mi ...

Society had leadership programs there, there was a cadet program that met at that church. They had a basketball court in the basement, so they had a basketball team called the Knights. So it was you know fast be growing, a significant cultural organization. You know anybody that lived in that area during the periods of the thirties, well forties and fifties would identify strongly with that church.

Naison: Now, in terms of, one other question about churches. The largest church in the Bronx is now the Thesalonia Baptist Church. Which is I believe on 163rd St.

Pruitt: Ya, formerly Stephens Ave.

Naison: Was that church a major presence in Morissania when you were growing up, or did its growth come later.

Pruitt: It came later, but I don't know exactly what point it became prominent. But, you know it was a t a different end of that community. You know, we lived on one end and that was on another end.

Naison: Was there a class or economic difference between people who would attend the Presbyterian Church and people who would attend the Baptist Church, or not necessarily.

Pruitt: Not necessarily. Urn we were home owners, the bank and our family owned a home. Haha. But you know, most of my sisters who were older than me, most of their peers lived in apartments, or even in small houses where there was an apartment available. We were, I think unique, in the sense that we had our own home which we needed. But my parents wouldn't have been able to afford it had it not been for the generosity of a doctor who lived next door to us. When the house became for sale he actually cosigned for the mortgage, because he wanted to choose his neighbors. And he knew our family and he knew that there were five kids.

Naison: Right, now what elementary school did you and your siblings attend.

Pruitt: Well I went to PS. 99, which is Stephens Ave School, which is on Stephens Ave between Homes St. and 167th.

Naison: Now is that the famous 99 school yard where they would have hip-hop jams?

Pruitt: That's 99.

Naison: OK.

Pruitt: Ok, but I was the youngest. My brother attended that school; he is four years older than I am. My sisters attended PS 54, which is on Intervale Ave. just slightly north of that about two blocks.

Naison: Now is that school still there?

Pruitt: No, PS 54 is tom down. PS 99 is now a community, I would call it a social work center it is not a school any longer. It is kind of a school; if they ever need a school for that community the City will reclaim it.

Naison: What are your earliest recollections of the neighborhood when, as you were growing up? You know 3, 4, 5, 6 years old?

Pruitt: Earliest recollections in terms of?

Naison: Just the atmosphere ..

Pruitt: It was a friendly atmosphere. We were fortunate, I lived in I guess looking back, it was a strong middle income area. In my block alone there were two doctors, some of the older children who lived next door to me were social workers or nurses. And some of the dads were in the Post Office. SO families owned homes, and they took care of their homes. And whenever there were fundraisers, the lady next door to us Mrs. Stripper, belonged to St Augustine Presbyterian Church. And once a year her auxiliary would give a dinner, and the people of her church would come to her backyard. Well my parents would roll back the fence between our yard so the people could expand in to our yard. And I could still smell the backed bread and the fried chicken. And they would light up both yards, people would cooperate. Everyone didn't have a car of course families didn't But when we went away to summer camp, our neighbors would drive our family up on visiting day to see us at camp. When the doctor who lived next door to us on the other side bought a home up in Dutchess County he would take my brother and I up to spend time up in his country home. Because it was like a big beautiful mansion with a lot of yard for us to run around. But then he had two daughters who were about the same age as my brother and 1. Which we knew, because when he had his office next door to us when he had home visits, doctors made house visits, he would take us in the car and we would sit in the car while he would go

and visit patients. And he had some nice cars. Haha. He had Cadillacs and Packards, you know and expensive cars. And of course we didn't have anything like that in my family. There was a lot of sharing, a lot of nurturing by every, all the adults.

Smith: You seemed to live in a pretty good neighborhood it seems, no class. You had doctors next door. Now did you have any friends, since you went to a public school, that lived in a house like the Patterson Houses. And how did that differ from the type of life that you ...

Pruitt: Ok, the first housing project in my community, where 1. .. you know the Morrisania section that I lived in, was the Forest House. That was under construction when I was a student, so that was like ...

Naison: It opened in '56.

Pruitt: Ya, but I was in Morris, from 53-56. I remember every brick that was laid. I remember what was there before, it was the Forest Houses. But, I see it as a middle class neighborhood. My very best friend lived across the street from me in the basement of an apartment building where his father was the janitor. But I don't think of any class distinctions, in my head any how. And we are still friends today.

Naison: Now did you worry about kids from tough blocks ...

Pruitt: You mean around the comer?

Naison: Haha,

Pruitt: Ya you go around the comer, you know what you do when you get your head handed back to you when you come racing home.

Naison: Ok so it seemed when I described Crown Heights, my block sounds a lot like your block. But around the comer was this Italian neighborhood called Kick Town, where the kids were poor and tougher, and loved to get their hands on ...

Pruitt: Right, there were kids who were tough kids. And because the neighborhood was rather stable, I mean very seldom did everyone move in or move out. So everybody knew everybody, if you got beat up-if Curtis beat you up, then everybody knew Curtis. And they would go to his family and complain or whatever. I do not remember the police being called for anything. But everybody knew who the good kids, or the soft kids

were and they left them alone. And the tough kids you didn't mess with, you know they had their own thing. And I don't think there were any such organization, there wasn't any organized crime, there weren't any gangs per se.

Naison: Right, and this is in the ...

Pruitt: The 40's and 50's.

Naison: The forties and fifties, now you know a lot of people talk today about peer pressure, in some neighborhoods for kids are attacked in school for doing well in school, and made fun of. Was there any of that there at all.

Pruitt: No achievement was measured by your athletic ability. If you were on the football team or the basketball team at your school, you were one of the gods. But it wasn't, people were recognized for their academic achievements if they could get in to a school like Bronx High School of Science. That was something to be recognized and appreciated, not put down for. School was valued, attending school, getting good grades at school, getting in to what became the City University. Because when I went to school there was no City University, it was City College or Hunter College, Brooklyn.

Naison: What was the shopping like? Did your family do most of shopping within walking distance? Or. ..

Pruitt: Safeway and A&P. Safeway was at the corner of, it was Boston Rd. next to what became Sylvia's Blue Morocco, and the A&P was at McGinley Sq. Now those were, one was four blocks the other was five or six blocks. One of the jobs my brother and I did was, we got a cart or wagon and we would help ladies home with their groceries. Which meant standing outside of the store- Ma' am can I help you with your groceries today? And take the groceries home with them, pulling the cart as people walked along the streets, and finding out that the ladies lived on the top floor and they had sixteen bags of groceries. And you would take the bags upstairs and she would give you twenty cents. But it was a way for us to have a little pocket change for us so ...

Naison: What about candy stores, little restaurants ...

Pruitt: Mrs. Keel was on the corner, candy store. I don't remember who Mrs. Keel was, but she had a big jar of pickles and grind on the top of the counter, along side the newspapers. And I never got in to that, pig ears pig feet all kinds of candy and

informally the news of the day. She could tell you who was sleepin with who, what kid got shot and what was goin on in the neighborhood.

Naison: Now she was black?

Pruitt: No she was not, Keel I don't know what she was.

Naison: Could be German.

Pruitt: German. That was on one comer, and on the other comer up the hill was a similar type store. But it was grocery store as well as candy.

Naison: So you didn't grow up with many black owned businesses in the immediate area?

Pruitt: There weren't many there were some. There was a grocery store on 168th St. and Franklin that was black owned. And I think it was some kind of a corporation because I think my father had stock in it. And the owner or the operator was the member of our church. And it was something like the Frederick Douglas Association or something like that.

Naison: Now you had mentioned the St. Augustine Presbyterian Church as having a lot of youth activities. What other youth activities were available when you were growing up? Did you go to after-school centers in the public schools?

Pruitt: They were available, once the housing projects opened up then all had community centers. Other than that there was PAL, NYC Missions Society had leadership training programs in a lot of the churches in the South Bronx. And then there was the Forest House, which was a ... had one time what was called the council house which was like a community center. I guess there must have been paid membership for that, and that was on Forest Ave. near Morris High School. And they taught music lessons, piano lessons, things like that.

Naison: Did you take music lessons when you were growing up?

Pruitt: In my home.

Naison: In your home.

Pruitt: I learned from a young man named Harold Brown who lived down the block.

Naison: Was it common for families to give their children music lessons if they could afford it?

Pruitt: Yes, yes.

Naison: In the home the way you were ...

Pruitt: Right well we had the piano; if you had a piano you had an advantage. Harold Brown was a member of, was one of I think seven children in a family, everyone was musical. Urn, and they lived down the street, our parents were friends they were, the Browns were from South Carolina. They lived in an apartment, and I loved to go to their apartment because they had two pianos. And to see a family eating breakfast around the kitchen table, and in the living room and the adjoining dining room were these huge pianos, one was an upright piano the other was a grand piano. And they played, and some of the girls sang, they had operatic type voices.

Naison: What are your recollections of elementary school? Were the teachers encouraging or were they strict and mean? Or a combination of the two?

Pruitt: Urn, I liked school. My, well this is an aside, but my introduction to elementary school came when I was about four years old. My mother was a volunteer at Prospect, PS 40, which became Prospect Junior High School. But in those days it was a 1st -8th school. During the war, WWII, they needed volunteers in case of an air raid attack. So she went to the school and she sat in the hall and would help with teachers, what they call school aids today. And in exchange for her service I got to sit in the kindergarten room. So I was younger than the other kids in the kindergarten room, but I got to you know, I got to have the milk and cookies along with them and sit in class and whatever. When I was old enough for school I went to PS 99 where in the first and second grade all of the teachers were white, and Jewish probably German decent. Names like Heiman and Langna. Then in the third grade I had a woman whose name was Ms. Lady and I thought she was the oldest woman in the world. I mean she was old, kind of heavy set, she was slow moving, and very strict. The class each day would take a trip to the bathroom and everyone would have to line up outside the door in size place and the class would march from door to door down the hall to the bathrooms. On one occasion, and this was the second month of the term, we were headed back to our room and I was the next to the last boy in the line cause I was tall. And she for some reason

was reprimanding him behind my head and I shuddered and she thought I was laughing and she smacked me. It was a Friday, ok I went home and told my parents about it. And Ms. Lady didn't appear on Monday, and on Tuesday we were told that Ms. Lady had passed away. So, there wasn't a lot of remorse or sympathy, but she was replaced by a black woman whose name was Lodi Smith, and the woman was a sub who lived up the street. She lived on Lyman PI. two blocks from the school. Lodi Smith had a daughter who was the same age as all the kids in the class. The daughter went to Parochial school, but after school the daughter would stop by and pick mom up for them to go home, so we always got to see her daughter. And when the daughter had a birthday the whole class was invited to Lodi Smith's home, which was very different because it was like a social thing with a teacher in the neighborhood. And I thought Mrs. Smith was just wonderful and she owned the candy store on 16th St which was just the other end of the school block, that was even more wonderful, her husband ran the store during the day. She was replaced by another black woman by the name of Inez Singletary. Now, I have a sister, my older sister's twelve years older than me she was in college in Hunter. And Inez Singletary had been one of her friends at Hunter, so it was like having ... now I had a new teacher who was young and active and very very well concerned about the kids and our learning process, so I felt very special. So the school was ... the faculty was changing and there were more black woman teachers. I had the impression that the other teachers that were white, I had the impression that they were the wiser professionals, because teaching didn't pay that much. But they always dressed in a very professional manner, they wore suits and expensive shoes and what not. There was a change over from the old fashioned shoes, high-up shoes that the ladies used to wear. So, you know it was, I thought I got a good education there, in elementary school.

Naison: Now do you remember any racial tension in the community when you were growing up?

Pruitt: Not at all. The only ... my observation there was no tension I could say that. Because people that didn't like blacks were moving away from the neighborhood. More black families were coming and more Latino families were coming in to the community. It was apparent to me that PS 99 was in the center of a community that at least in terms of where people lived was divided. The white people lived on one side of the school and the black people lived on the other side of the school. SO the school ground was like a meeting place for all of the groups. In High School there was a, I remember there was incident where the

Fordham Baldies, which was a gang, of supposedly made up of young men from Fordham Rd.-Belmont section. They were all blond and blue eyes so they must have been Irish, so I guess that's University Heights area. Were supposed to come down and attack our school, and we were all really concerned about it and the principal let us all out early.

Naison: That happened in Brooklyn by the way.

Pruitt: Well I guess that was part of... the Brooklyn gang was called the Chaplains.

Naison: No this was the baldies scare. They were worse ...

Pruitt: So we, that was something to be feared, but we didn't really know anything about gangs, per se.

Naison: Now was there, when you were growing up, was there much political discussion in your household among your parents or older siblings? Did people talk about political issues at the dinner table?

Pruitt: Not well, when I .. .in my formative years the only president I knew was Franklin Roosevelt, and he was president forever as far as I could tell. I mean when I was one he was president, when he died there was a big pall that came over the community. I mean everybody revered him for his management of his nation under both the depression and the war years. Urn, Truman we were not as much aware of except you know the Marshall Plan and the Post-War period. Rockefeller was the governor, and he was a hero I guess for some of the things that he did for the black community, the Rockefeller community was well known. Local politics we weren't too aware of, although James J Lyon was the president of the Bronx. Which we got nothing from as far as I could tell. My mom worked on the polls for the board of elections, and later on I worked on the board of elections. But I had to join the Republican Party in order to be able to work on the polls because all the democratic slots were filled. Haha, I changed that later. .

Naison: What kind of music was played in your household? I assumed that the piano lessons were classical music.

Pruitt: As far as we got my brother and I took ... drove the piano teacher out of the house one day and he never came back. So our lessons kind of stopped after a year and a half. So ...

Naison: What kind of music ...

Pruitt: We listened to two things, the impact of the movies, so you had show tunes ok. And then the movie ... then the theater came out with musicals, so we had the albums from all the Broadway musicals. Then we had, I forget what you call it, but the music radio programs that were earlier than Dick Clark. That, the only black music that was available to us was over WWRL.

Naison: I think one of the shows was "Make Believe Ballroom."

Pruitt: "Make Believe Ballroom" right, you know that kind of music. But it was late, that was late at night. So one of the things that we could do to buy music was to go a local record store, there was a local record store on Prospect Ave near the Berlin Theater. And you could go down there ...

Naison: On what street was the Berlin Theater on?

Pruitt: Prospect.

Naison: And where?

Pruitt: Between 165th and 163rd.

Naison: Was this one of those really big ornate movies? Or normal sized?

Pruitt: No the Berlin had probably been a Vaudeville house, because I think one part of it was out doors. In the back there was like an open-air theater that had been used earlier, I never went to it when it was opened. Then down the street there was another theater called the Franklin, and then down even further was another theater near the subway station called the Prospect. There were lots of theaters.

Naison: So there are lots of movies ...

Pruitt: But a lot of them had been Vaudeville houses.

Naison: So the movies were very popular?

Pruitt: Right. The music of the movies, influenced peoples' appreciation for music. Since there weren't a lot of black movies, there wasn't a lot. .. so we got our music over the

radio. And you go to record stores and play the records before you buy them, and that way you decide what you like.

Naison: Now you were in high school between 1953 and '56 which is sort of this ... what many people identify as the take off period for rock and roll. Were you very in to Rock and Roll or Doo-wop or Rhythm and Blues at that particular era?

Pruitt: No I think I became aware that rock and roll was replacing black music, and there was a little resentment. But you know if the tune was good and the rhythm was right you could appreciate it.

Naison: What was the black music that you sort ... examples of the black music that people listened to before the marketing of Rock and Roll?

Pruitt: The Platters.

Naison: The Platters ok sure.

Pruitt: There were probably some other groups but I can't, I don't remember. The Cadillacs some of the groups that are still around, I can't think of the names offhand.

Naison: The Chantelles came from ...

Pruitt: The Chantelles ya the woman, one of them came from 163rd St, between Prospect and Union.

Naison: Ya and she went, Marlene Smith went to St Anthony ...

Pruitt: Right, a lot of groups got started around there.

Naison: Where did people ... how did you know, today hip-hop is the sort of grassroots industry. How did groups start up? Where did they start singing?

Pruitt: A lot of times it was either, well some groups had started in the churches but those were religious type. And then there groups that got started in high school. Some of the groups got started right on the stages at Morris High School and Theodore Roosevelt, where groups got together for a talent show.

Naison: Oh so they had talent shows ...

Pruitt: In the high schools, as extracurricular activities.

Naison: And do they have school dances also?

Pruitt: Oh ya.

Naison: So I mean today it is pretty hard to hold a school dance in a New York City Public High School.

Pruitt: Well they do, but everybody has to get searched. Hehe. You know they still have some.

Naison: How, when you were growing up how big was the Latin or Puerto Rican presence in the community and in the schools you went to.

Pruitt: Well it got, by the time I got to high school there was a definite presence. And we were learning Latin dances, I mean people of my generation mambo and do pachanga and some of the other Latin dances of that period. Later generations don't know how to do that.

Naison: Did you ever go to like places like the Embassy Ballroom or the Palladium.

Pruitt: Na, I went to the Palladium.

Naison: You went to the Palladium?

Pruitt: Ya, ya.

Naison: And would a whole group of people go down?

Pruitt: A group would go. Urn, since it was in Manhattan we had some friends, my buddy and I Joe, had some friends who went to Minisink but they lived in Jersey.

Naison: Now

Pruitt: So it was easier for us to see them at the Palladium.

Naison: Where is Minisink located?

Pruitt: The camp or the.. See Minisink is the name of an organization that has, it was a youth training program. And it was run by NYC Missions Society and the purpose of the program was to develop leadership within the black churches, mission

society. And so they had a base in Harlem where they did the training.

Naison: Now was the Missions Society a black organization?

Pruitt: No it is New York City's oldest charity, it started in 1812.

Naison: Wow.

Pruitt: Ok, it gave birth to the Visiting Service, Nurses Service, ok that is one of their initiatives. The Community Service Society is another one of the initiatives; those organizations were begun by Missions Society and were spun off. With the leadership training program in the black community what they did is, they went to all ministers and persuaded them to send their youth to Mission Society weekday programs to train them. And the idea was the youth would be able to go back to the churches and provide leadership, that didn't always happen. They came to the Minisink program but didn't go back to the churches to give service. Now in the summertime they owned a 650 acre camp, in Port Jervis, NY. And so the skills that were taught during the school year were actually demonstrated at the camp where the kids became junior counselors.

Naison: Now did they ever run sports programs also?

Pruitt: They didn't have a big sports program because there were no facilities for it. They had a swimming ... you know they had two huge lakes but they didn't have a sports program. In the 1960's the City Missions Society built two community centers, one in Harlem on 142nd and Lenox Ave and the other in the Bronx on Jerome Ave and about 170th St. And when they built those centers those centers had gymnasiums and weight rooms and all kinds of facilities and what not. But you know the boards of directors of the City Missions Society had a lot of wealthy people in it. People like Dena Merryl who gave ... or had contacts with people with a lot of money who just give you know ...

Naison: Now you had said that gangs were not a major feature of your time growing up.

Pruitt: I don't remember them really. There might have been some small groups but people wore jackets you know but usually had school names on the back of it, say Clinton or Morris

Naison: Were there any neighborhoods in the Bronx that you were afraid to go in to when you were growing up?

Pruitt: Well if you took the bus from where I lived on Prospect Ave. and you came to Fordham Plaza the bus would pass through 188th St., which was the Belmont Section, the Italian section. If you got off the bus before it got to Fordham Plaza you might get beat up, that was the threat.

Naison: So you couldn't get off the bus in Belmont?

Pruitt: Right, and the feeling was that people report incidents of them like throwing things at the bus at black faces and what not. I don't know how true it was but it was considered a closed community. We weren't welcomed there so we didn't go there.

Naison: Did you go to places like the Bronx Zoo?

Pruitt: Ya we went to the Bronx Zoo. But we didn't have to go through that area.

Naison: Ya Yankee Stadium?

Pruitt: Oh sure.

Naison: Now what about Orchard Beach?

Pruitt: Absolutely. Ya, you know we took advantage of all those kinds of facilities in the Bronx. We went; my brother and I went to the Bronx Zoo it seemed like every Sunday for eight or nine years. Haha. Because he was, he still is interested in wildlife and animals and what not. So when he retired he became a ... for the Bronx Zoo.

Naison: Now, housing projects were built relatively late. When you were growing up were housing projects places to be afraid of?

Pruitt: No. They were an opportunity for people to get decent housing. I wasn't aware that they were ... that they had any problems until much much later. Because they weren't managed ... my wife, as part of her childhood, she spent time with her cousins who lived in the Harlem River Houses. Now the Harlem River Houses are America's oldest public housing project. And the people who lived there were so proud of living in a decent place that it was well maintained, and it was kind of an ideal setting. And because of the success of that particular project, other projects were built. Except that the decision makers

decided that if a few people could live in houses like the Harlem River Houses then why not build bigger Harlem River Houses all over? And that was a mistake they put too many people in the same place and then they didn't set the same standards, there were no penalties for abusing the property. And so people lived there and didn't know how to operate or take care of elevators that might go up to the twelfth or twentieth or twenty-fifth floor and if they were not working people would have to walk or do without them. People would airmail their garbage out the window as opposed to putting it in the appropriate places, and those were some of the problems that arose. And then when you had large numbers of families from low income living in the same space and the children were unsupervised, or there were no supervised activities for them after school they began to take over. You know.

Naison: You said you remember watching the Forest Houses being built, brick by brick. What was there before?

Pruitt: It was streets and apartment buildings

Naison: Was it a particularly run down area?

Pruitt: No not particularly. I don't recall that being a run down area. It had some of the older housing stock in the Bronx. If you go down to the South Bronx today you will see wood frame buildings that are three stories high some with porches on the front some have been updated. But those were the kinds of buildings that were in there, small apartment buildings maybe you know two-story three-story. It was an area that I guess some of it was run down, but the commitment on the part of the city to put in new housing I guess up until that time I don't recall and I may not have been aware of the city's commitment to the black community and that was like a first major effort on their part to improve the community.

Naison: Now so was this seen as something positive by your family?

Pruitt: Yes, well yes. Because along with the housing project came they had a nursery in there that I remember my niece attended, there was a community center. So it brought facilities to a community that didn't have the same kind of facilities. And everything was available not only to the people who lived in the Forest Houses but the people ...

Naison: But people didn't think oh my God a housing project is going up ...

Pruitt: They had no experience with anything like that, so they didn't know, they didn't have any reason to fear it.

Naison: So there was no housing project that this ferocious reputation or is there?

Pruitt: The first, the area around Webster Ave. from 16St^h St to about Claremont Park was tom down and they put in housing, public housing and middle income. You know if you are in a project you are poor, if it is a development that means your middle class. They put in a combination of projects and developments that were all high rises along Webster Ave.

Naison: Ya I know it well.

Pruitt: And because they put in too much and too many in the same place at the same time it was a disaster.

Naison: They call it Claremont Buildings now.

Pruitt: They call it Claremont Buildings. So that is ...

Naison: Ya one of the people we interviewed was somebody who grew up in the Butler Houses there and you know ... it is a pretty devastating story at what happened. Urn did the blacks and Puerto Ricans in your neighborhood get along pretty well or were there tensions?

Pruitt: I don't recall any tensions. But for a long time Puerto Ricans were such a minority they never, they weren't a threat. The only challenge we had was communicating, in communication. And the kids spoke English but the parents might not.

Naison: When did white flight begin in Morissania? In very visible forms?

Pruitt: Probably right after World War II.

Naison: So it was the late '40s.

Pruitt: Right.

Naison: What was Morris High School like when you were there?

Pruitt: Morris High School was probably one of the most wonderful high schools in the city. They you know the whole school system was different so they had academic curriculum, they had a commercial curriculum, and they had a general curriculum. I know, as a teacher you know I am a retired teacher, but comparing my self to the teachers that I had I had some of the most skilled individuals as teachers in high school that I have ever seen, any where. You know in math, science, and social studies the reason I taught social studies was because of my high school social studies teachers were all terrific.

Naison: Are there any individuals who stand out that you know that you want to give special recognition to?

Pruitt: Well this guy name Lenny Litman who was a vet, a Wodd War II vet. And he always brought his experiences in to the classroom, he later on became principal of Stevenson High School. Urn, there were some women whose names escape me now, who were excellent. One of the women who was, I think my social studies teacher in the tenth grade, was a woman named Joy Schrizer. And she went on to become a teacher of social studies at John F Kennedy High School and I later became her colleague, and still friendly with her today.

Naison: Oh ok. Um, and it was at that time a very integrated high school?

Pruitt: It was very integrated, there was-every group was represented there.

Smith: Did you see interracial dating there at all, while you were at that school?

Pruitt: Not really. Urn, I don't think.

Smith: Did it happen or..

Pruitt: It probably happened; I don't think there was any concern about it. Urn, I don't recall a lot of dating. You know people went out in groups. Or there may have been a lot of one night stands, you know activities. But people generally return to their own community during the day, you know.

Naison: Now do you, when you were growing up was it unusual for a white kid to visit a black family and come over and play or for dinner, or vice versa?

Pruitt: I had a friend. We had a house and most of my classmates didn't. So I had white kids over my house, I mean I had a yard - come on. My house after school, we cooked some mickeys in the backyard.

Naison: Right Ok.

Pruitt: So it was not unusual for me to have the Larry Colombos and Barry Kahns and Stanley Channersmans come to my house. And I would go to there house because they had televisions and I didn't. And so there was an exchange like that, not as often. I mean it wasn't an everyday kind of thing. But I think like in the first three or four grades of school I did that.

Naison: When did you have your first encounter, or first visible encounter with racism or racial discrimination? Was this something that happened relatively late?

Pruitt: I can't remember, I can't remember. .. Urn, I started teaching at Morris High School in 1964. And the teachers would, in their off time, would go to the teacher's cafeteria. And I was the new kid on the block and one of the older teachers, well two things happened- one of the younger teachers who was not accustomed to seeing black teachers, especially black male teachers, assumed that I was a school aid. And made rather disparaging remarks about me just out of ear shot and one of my peers, colleagues defended me. And informed the woman who turned all kinds of shades of red that I was not a school aid, I was not the elevator operator neither was I an ... there, that I was her peer. You know, so that happened and then my chair person ... I ate lunch with two black women everyday, they happened to both be nurses who were teachers at the school. And apparently there must have been some discussion among the senior faculty about the black people eating together. And so my chairman came to me and asked me if I would join him for lunch, and I sad the union contract is my own and I can eat with whom ever I want to eat with. And not that I had anything against him but I valued the relationship that I had with these other two colleagues and I chose to eat with them. Because he was concerned that all the black people ... and I informed him that the black people were eating together, but so were the white people. And he was an assistant principal and there was discrimination where the assistant principals weren't eating with the teachers, that was a form of segregation. And all of them had grey hair none of us did. So there were all kinds of ways to look at segregation. But those were the only things that I can recall.

Naison: Now, you know it is interesting because this experience that you are describing is very similar many people that I have interviewed about the South Bronx in that period. Given this pretty multi-ethnic, multi-racial tolerant environment what do you make of what was the Civil Rights movement and what was going on ...

Pruitt: That was real fascinating because urn, and I often wonder what happened to my quote un-quote white friends, after or during the movement, what side did they come out on. Cause you know you lose contact because everyone kind of retreated to their own safe ground. Urn, I well let' s see ... 1954 the Brown decision brought to the surface some things that I knew about discrimination in the South. I traveled in the South as a child and I lived ...

Naison: Oh, so your family went back and forth?

Pruitt: Well I had relatives; I had aunts who lived in Alabama. And my brother and I went to Alabama as children, and we sat in the balcony in the movie theater and didn't know why. We sat in the back of the buses didn't know why. We didn't know why my aunt couldn't put on a hat in the department store. You know she couldn't try them on, she couldn't try on shoes. Yet they lived in an integrated community in a middle class area, my aunt was a teacher my uncle was a barber. My uncle cut the hair of the mayor in that town.

Naison: And what was the name of the town?

Pruitt: Jackson, Alabama. Urn and he got, in his being a favorite by the politicians he got to hear a lot of stuff that was going on in the town which he would bring home, but never really did anything about. When the town, when integration became mandated the blacks in that town lost their property. And my uncle was allowed to take his house and move it to an area outside of the town, or move up on a place called Shinbone Ridge. Where all the blacks, the white political structure actually put a section for black people to move. They put in streets, they put in sewers, they put in sidewalks, and they divided up the lots for black people to move up there. And where the black people lived they tore that down for urban renewal. And those are some of the most beautiful homes, they had ponds and swimming pools and whatnot and whites and blacks lived side by side, but the world had changed. And I was aware that my father's sisters had gone to Tuskegee for their college education and they couldn't attend the white Alabama

universities. But that was fine because they got good educations and they lived well as a result of it. Urn, trying to understand the segregation in the North you know we rationalized why schools were segregated. You know it was not by choice it was by where people lived. If too many black people lived in Harlem, then Harlem can only have segregated schools.

Naison: Right.

Pruitt: So where were the schools in Harlem, Benjamin Franklin High School was on the, you know the extreme east side. So they could only be integrated if they brought kids in from downtown, because that is where the white community was. Otherwise it is going to be a Latino and black school just because of who lived around it, so how are we going to integrate the schools? Then they came up with the concept of busing, and whatnot. And there was, in the sixties when I went of to college urn a lot of my friends went to southern schools and they got involved in the Civil Rights movements ...

Naison: Now where did you go to college?

Pruitt: I went to Lincoln University.

Naison: uh-huh.

Pruitt: Which is America's oldest historically black college. And we tried to be r. .. in Pennsylvania.

Naison: Now what years were you at Lincoln?

Pruitt: '60-'64. So, we, Lincoln we forced the community ... Lincoln is in an area that is twelve miles from Maryland, OK. And maybe six miles from Delaware, but it the school was established ... (tape cut off)

Naison: Now one of the things that struck me in interviewing many people in your cohort is how many people went to traditionally black colleges. How ...

Pruitt: Ok, here was the thing in the Bronx in the 1950's and '60's the opportunity to go to college, it was there but a lot of families couldn't afford it. Ok, Hunter College and City College and perhaps Brooklyn and Queens I believe were free, but in order to get one of the seats you had to have a decent average. You know and depending on the number of student coming out of high school from the city at that time, that would

determine what the average would be. So it could be an average of. .. to anyone who had to go you had to compete for a seat with an 85 average. So your average and then you took an entrance exam and the combination of your average and the exam, score would determine whether or not you got in to the college of your choice. If that didn't happen that your parents would have to pay for you to go to college. My four siblings were smart enough and on the money enough to go to Hunter College for free. And they all, the books could be rented, they could rent textbooks ok. So there was like a free public education and they all became teachers. OK, urn I did not earn that kind of a score, I think it was part of my development growing up I was not a serious student in high school. I enjoyed high school I had a ball, what didn't. ..

Naison: What kind of extra-curricular activities did you participate in high school?

Pruitt: I don't think I did much of any thing other than the Minersink programs, which were after school and you know down the hall. You know I did a lot of that, you know I was in the fraternity order of the feather, I was in the choir, I was in the leadership training program, you know that was like three or four days a week. Not too much in school. So, you know a lot of the people, you know the parents that sent their children to school, black colleges were always less expensive than local colleges. Ok, except that they had the room and board of course which was higher. When time came, when I graduated high school I didn't go to college. I went Hunter in the evening, but that was a general studies type of program. And finally my mom says to me one day, when are you going to college. And so I began to away for applications and I knew someone who was a Lincoln alumnist and he wrote a letter of recommendation for me and I got in. And I think I had the richest college experience of all of my siblings. Because I lived on campus, I was at a University that was financially struggling, but had such a rich curriculum. I was president of my class, I was business manager for the Glee Club, I worked in the Alumni Office. I had friends that I met, one-third of Lincoln University in the 1960's- one third enrolment was African from Africa, directly from Africa. Another third were from Pennsylvania, and then another third were from the rest of the world. Nundi Ezekwe's brother was one of my classmates. Some of the people in the school at that time have become quite prominent, well established in their own fields. I mean we got a really good solid education, and at graduation maybe five of us went to education and the rest went to law school and medical school and became rich. Hahaha.

Naison: Now did you always know that you were going to become a teacher? Was this something you always wanted to do?

Pruitt: I avoided becoming a teacher because my sisters and my brother were teachers. And you know, my mom had trained to be a teacher. And you wanted to find out maybe I don't want to do that, maybe my life will be something else. In my secret desire was to be a television news broadcaster. And they didn't have any black television news broadcasters but that was something that I was interested in. And it is funny because I was an old student; I was a freshman at 22 years old. Urn, Ed Bradley of 60 minutes was a vet who went to Chaney State College, which was just down the road from me at the same time. He may be a year or two older than me, he followed his dream became who he is, which is a television news broadcaster Ok. He pursued it and I didn't, so I took the safe route and went to the classroom. Which was something I knew how to do, I knew I would be comfortable with, and I knew people who did it and I knew what the risks were involved in it. So I came back and was fortunate enough to get my first teaching job from the school I graduated from which was Morris High School.

Naison: Now when you were in High School, did anybody at Morris teach what I guess they would have called it Negro History?

Pruitt: No.

Naison: Were you exposed ...

Pruitt: I was the first teacher at Morris to teach Negro History. I wrote the curriculum.

Naison: Do you have the curriculum?

Pruitt: I don't know, that would be forty years ago.

Naison: Ya, that is interesting because one of the people we interviewed was Joan Tyson Fortune and she wrote the Black History curriculum for junior high school in District 7 and she actually still has it.

Pruitt: Whoa, good for her. I probably have mine too, but I couldn't put my hands on it.

Naison: Ya because with that ...

Pruitt: What ... in the sixties you know the thing was there was a demand for it. So I was a brand new teacher, and someone came to me and asked me in could write it. Well now having graduated from Lincoln I was a history major so I took all these courses, you know traditional courses then I took all these Black History courses.

Naison: They had a Black History curriculum at Lincoln?

Pruitt: Ya they had a Black History curriculum, they had an African History curriculum, they had African politics curriculum. And I took courses in that I must have had maybe forty or more credits in various history courses. Urn, so I you know plus I had professors, some of them, who had lived a lot of those experiences and what not. So I was ready to teach that. I wrote the curriculum at Morris, and initiated the course. After I had a club, I had a club that was an extra-curricular activity called the African-American culture club. And once I got a group of students who were interested in finding out more about that then we went to the principal and I said I had all this interest and the kids in the club would like to have a course.

Naison: And there was no such club when you were at the school?

Pruitt: There was no such club.

Naison: What about the churches people belonged ... Grace Congregational Church or St. Augustine's- did they have Negro History in as part of. ..

Pruitt: There was Negro History Week. Grace Congregational Church had among its members a man by the name of Edmund G Haynes. And he was one of the founders of the National Urban League. And his wife was an active member of the National Association of Negro Life and History OK. Also in that church was a woman by the name of Dorothy Robinson Homer who was a head librarian at one of the public libraries, and they were like- and there were two other head librarians in that church. And they were like active members of that association of the Study of Negro Life and History. So that is how I got it, but it was only for the preparation for the celebration of the Woodson Society. Urn, I'd learned about what Negro history, Black history, African-American history whatever you wanna call it, through my parents and through the personal experiences of people we met or knew.

Naison: Did your parents emphasize this in the household?

Pruitt: Not particularly, you know my mother went to a Historically Black College Claflin.

Naison: Were there books by Carter Woodson or Du Bois in the house?

Pruitt: Yes, yes.

Naison: What about Paul Robeson Records, was that some thing ...

Pruitt: There was all that right. There was it in the house.

Naison: Did your parents have any connections with either the Garvey movement or Left wing you know black ...

Pruitt: No, no they were pretty conservative about those kinds of things. But now our lawyer, our family lawyer, Ellen Gordon Bailey her husband Joe Bailey who incidentally graduated from Lincoln University was a Garveyite. And he was active in the Garvey movement urn, but he had a law degree and that is what saved him.

Naison: Now was there, you know was the Garvey movement in Harlem or in Morrissania?

Pruitt: Harlem.

Naison: So in other words ...

Pruitt: It might have been, you know there might have been some kind of group in the Bronx but I wasn't aware of it.

Naison: Now, in the neighborhood do you have any recollections of 1964? Of Bronx Core? Were they a visible presence?

Pruitt: Oh, absolutely. They were visible, I don't know. Innis had a nephew who was actee at Morris. I am trying to think of his name; um he got arrested at Morris High School. There was a plot to burn the school down and he was, Cerryl Boyns, and he wasn't charged he was later let go they couldn't prove it. But somebody brought gasoline in the building with the intentions of setting the auditorium on fire. And they actually splashed it around and lit it up.