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Blakeney, James

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Transcriber: Jon Ray Johnson

Mark Naison: 132nd interview of The Bronx African American History Project. Hello, this is the 132 interview of The Bronx African American History Project. We are here at Fordham University on November 8th, 2005 with James Blakeney, a long time resident and community activist and political leader from the Patterson Houses in The South Bronx and now lives in the Mitchell Houses.

James Blakeney: Yes

MN: Well let us start off a little bit with your family. Where was your family from before they moved to New York City?

JB: Okay, my family is from both North and South Carolina, they had been raised as sharecroppers. My father served in World War Two, and after getting out of WWII, he was married before he went in, but they decided to move to New York. So when they first came to New York, they moved to Queens, and we lived in Queens for about, I could say I know for my first three years of my life, we were in Queens. In August of that year, 1950, my parents moved to the Patterson Houses in The South Bronx, but the vast majority of my mother's family still lived in the South.

MN: What sort of housing were they living in Queens? Was it more crowded than the apartment that they had got in Patterson?

JB: It wasn't so much crowded, it was dilapidated. It was rat, and roach, and mouse infested. It was a mess.

MN: Really?

JB: Yes.

MN: Do you remember what neighborhood it was in?

JB: It would be almost possibly somewhat you could almost say South Jamaica, but it was somewhere in that area.

MN: Were they excited to move into the Patterson Houses? Was this something that represented an opportunity for your family?

JB: Yeah, they were very excited about it. I think, I know, we talked about it, I know my mother talked to me about it as I got older, they got frustrated during the interview process, the screening process because at that time there was a very, very, serious screening of people who moved into the projects. There was no single parented households. There were no welfare recipients, most of the men were veterans. There were a lot of Italians and Irish, African Americans, and a few Latinos, but everybody lived together and that was the neighborhood. And my mother said at one point during that interview, they got very pissed off. I won't use the words she said, but, she said, I think she said, she asked them do you want to know when we are going to die, because they had to bring in their birth certificates, my birth certificate, my older brother's birth certificate, they had to bring in life insurance policies, everything under the sun. Marriage licenses, whatever basic documents they had, they had to bring them in. And then they went through all of these questions.

MN: So it was highly selective.

JB: Very selective.

MN: What sort of work was your father doing when you moved into Patterson?

JN: My father worked at the mess hall at St. Alban's Neighborhood Hospital. And he worked there until in reality they shut it down. If they wouldn't have shut it down, he would have still worked there until he died.

MN: So he was a cook?

JB: Yeah, he eventually became a cook.

MN: Was he doing this in uniform or was this a civilian job?

JB: A civilian job.

MN: And did your mother work?

JB: My mother did domestic work to help supplement the family income. And then when they separated, she was the sole bread winner.

MN: How old were you when your father moved out?

JB: Ten years old.

MN: Did you mother work in Manhattan when she did domestic work?

JB: Most of the work was primarily in Queens.

MN: What are your earliest recollections of the Patterson Houses? You were three years old?

JB: Yeah.

MN: Do you remember moving in?

JB: To be honest, it was probably some of the greatest time I had in my life, because I was able to go outside. We could be outside, put it this way, as long as my mother was willing to let me be outside, I could stay out almost half the night and be safe.

MN: Everybody looked - -

JB: Everybody looked out for everybody's children. So I mean, as growing up, when we got our little bright ideas and wanted to say something or do something, you had to look to see whose parent was peering the window, who was outside to see, because we knew they were going to tell, and guys knew my mother would tell for sure. [Laughter] And she would tell the parent, yes, let them know that I told. She didn't duck and play like, no, no, and looking back, I am glad she was like that. And my friend had said, you know, that made sense, because we survived it, a lot of us.

MN: What were the grounds like in Patterson? And the halls and the elevators, the lawns, was it well kept?

JB: It was pretty, it was fantastic. To be exactly frank, when I first moved into Patterson, there was a doorman in the building in the evening. [Laughter] We had a doorman; yes we had a doorman in a uniform. The doors were locked at night, and they had a group that patrolled the grounds along with the police. At that time there was no Housing Authority Police, just the local police from the 40th Precinct, but yeah, they had a special set of security guards that patrolled also.

MN: What sort of activities did you have before you went to school? Was it all of the parents looked after the kids and they kind of took care of themselves in the playground?

JB: I know I would go outside if my mother was home. In the early years, I had baby-sitters who would watch out for me, but basically you know, a lot of times I was able to go outside with my mother and I would go outside and play, or she would let me go downstairs and people would look out to make sure that everybody was safe, but it was fun.

MN: What level of education did each of your parents reach?

JB: [laughs] I don't know how much my mother had, I know my father's level, and recently I told that to some young teenagers. My father, when we first moved back we moved to the Patterson Houses, he went to the local junior high school, which I call the old Clark. Not the one that stands now, the one that now is an apartment building. He went there and got what was known as an elementary school diploma. Now I don't know if that was up to the sixth grade or the eighth grade, but I know that that's the most that either one of them completed.

MN: So both of them, they came from sharecropper families where in those days African American children didn't go to that much school. What about in terms of your education, and your brother's? You had an older brother?

JB: Yeah.

MN: Did they emphasize education with you?

JB: They tried to do it with him, he chose not to. I think what it was, my brother was raised most of his life in the South - -

MN: How much older was he than you?

JB: He is ten years older than me.

MN: Okay that's a significant - -

JB: No, eleven years older. But what it was was that his mother died almost when he was a newborn and he wound up being raised pretty much by his grandfather. So when my parents got together in New York, he was brought to New York and I remember when he came to live with us. But he went to school, while he was here, he was going

[inaudible] in their minds said, you're not going to be staying here and not going to school, you have to go to school. And he, I gathered for what it was worth, that wasn't what he really wanted to do, and he decided that he wanted to go back and live with his grandfather, and he did so, and we still remained close. So he doesn't have a high school diploma, but he is doing very well. He has his own house and everything else. For me, it was drudging for me to go to school. My mother really stressed it, because she was there, each one of them. For my mother, her thing was go to school, get your education, she said this is the one thing the white man cannot take away from you. I didn't necessarily understand it, but as I got older, I suddenly understood what she was talking about. So yes, go to school, and she pushed that.

MN: Was there a political consciousness in your household growing up?

JB: Not really, and it's interesting and there should have been because my mother is from the town of Moonville, South Carolina. She knows it, she knew it, my family knew it. My cousins, I've talked about it, I am going to visit them this summer, we are going to talk about it, yes, my family knows it because that's where they lived, my aunts and uncles. I've got aunts and uncles still in that town.

MN: What about your father, did he ever talk about politics? Did they ever talk about the South to you and things they had gone through?

JB: Yes, yes, they did, they talked to me about it and that's why they stressed to me to take on responsibilities, to go to school. We didn't have this, and my mother told me that basically. I didn't get the time to spend long periods in the South until I had finished the seventh grade. Because my mother said to me I couldn't take the risk of you going there

and having been raised here in the city where it was one way where everybody talked to everybody, you could speak and play with everybody, she said, I don't want anything to happen to my baby.

MN: Now did you grow up with stories of things that had happened to people in your family in the South?

JB: Yes.

MN: What are some of those stories that you remember.

JB: Okay, my mother's youngest brother wound up going to jail. I don't remember what the final charge was, but I knew it was about the fact that he had killed this white man, I think it was his son or one, who my grandmother was sharecropping from. And somehow there was a fight and he wound up killing him. It was self defense, but he went to jail. So I knew about that and I was told [inaudible]. My uncles didn't really push too much politics, neither would the [inaudible]. I think I became probably the most political of the bunch.

MN: What was your elementary school experience like? You went to PS 18?

JB: PS 18.

MN: And what was that like?

JB: You know it was interesting. A couple of things stand out, my kindergarten teacher stands out, her name was Ms. Boozer, I'll never forget this name.

MN: Boozer?

JB: Yeah.

MN: B-O-O-Z - -?

JB: Yeah.

MN: Was she African American?

JB: African American, very fair skinned. And she had a thing with me, a couple of times she smacked me and my mother went to see her. And the last time my mother went to see her, she asked her two things. She said, what's this about you continuously smacking my son. She said, well I'm not used to working with colored kids. My mother said *and?* Well let me tell you something now, if you put your hands on my colored son and you are not going to put your hands on nothing else, I guarantee you that. [laughter] She let her know. That stood out from that period. Pretty much though most of my teacher were pretty good. My sixth grade teacher stands out, she was an African American woman, kind of heavy set, but she took no nonsense. She had no favorites. She made everybody work, there was no playing around. Came close to time for graduation, we had to have our notebooks in order. If your notebooks were not in order, you're not going to graduate, she didn't care, and a couple of guys didn't have their notes, their handwriting was atrocious, so we did their notebooks over for them. But She loved this, Rockin Robin - -

MN: Oh the song?

JB: Yeah, that was her song and she would play that for days.

MN: Oh that's a great song, she rocks in the tree top, all day long - -

JB: Yes, that was her song, and she had a daughter who was our age, and all the guys pretty much liked her daughter. Like I said, looking back, she was great, she didn't let us get away with no nonsense, she would call in our parents, and let us know. No, she

didn't have favorites. If there was a white kid, so, I don't care. And everybody had a great deal of respect for her.

MN: Was the school racially mixed when you were going?

JB: Yeah, there was a lot of Italians. Because where PS 18 sits, that neighborhood over there was Italian.

MN: Right

JB: And the Italian neighborhood started from about where the school ended, around it, and all the way up to about 153rd Street where there is another project, Melrose.

MN: Melrose.

JB: yeah, all in between there it was Italians.

MN: Did they have an Italian street festival in that neighborhood?

JB: Yeah, we would go, that was their, they had a carnival. And the two projects, Patterson and Melrose were constantly at war.

MN: [laughs]

JB: And it was interesting because a lot of us were talking about who was going to control the carnival? Looking back I said you know, for what it was worth, neither one of us controlled this carnival, neither project. I said, the Italians controlled it. They were making all of the money. That was the situation. Now what's interesting is the fellow from that generation can get together and have a great time.

MN: The Melrose and the Patterson guys?

JB: Yeah, we laughed, and the guys would laugh and they would talk about it. I wasn't involved in it, but I knew quite a few.

MN: Which building were you in?

JB: I was in 281.

MN: 281, was that 281 Third - -

JB: 281 E 143rd Street.

MN: Because Dukes and them were in 414 - -

JB: 414 Morris Avenue.

MN: How close were those two buildings to each other? Were they on the, both on the north side?

JB: I would say the on the South side, the bottom part. From my house to theirs was no time, just go out the building, around the back door and in two minutes I was at their building, it was right there.

MN: Now were most of your friends from your building or from all over the place?

JB: I had friends, pretty much so, a lot of my friends were on my side of the street because of the fact of the school, but I knew a lot of fellow from the other side also.

MN: When you were a kid like first second and third grade, what were the games that the kids were playing?

JB: We played Skelzies, we played Johnny on the Pony, we played Stoopball, we played Off the Point, - -

MN: I don't know all those games.

JB: Those are the games that the guys played.

MN: Did the girls play with you or there was pretty much separate - -?

JB: No, the girls played their games. The girls played jump rope and things of that nature. They didn't play the games that the guys played.

MN: Now at what point were you becoming very aware of music? Was there a lot of music in your parents' house?

JB: My mother listened to music, my mother listened to jazz a bit.

MN: And what were some of the artists she had?

JB: She listened to [inaudible], she listened to a little bit of Coltrane, and that was her - -

MN: Do you recall hearing any Latin music when you were growing up, or hearing the drumming?

JB: Here's what was interesting. I know for a fact that I graduated from the sixth grade, we had a party in the gymnasium in PS 18 and these two guys came to the party and they bought these two albums by Johnny Bocceco, the [inaudible] sound and that rally became for the sake of argument, the first real introduction, I had heard some, but that started to go - -

MN: Right, and you started dancing to that?

JB: Started listening to it, and then when I went to junior high school and high school, that was the music.

MN: When you were, those elementary school years, were there any signs in Patterson of some of the problems that would come later? Were there in retrospect, warning signs? Were there family tensions?

JB: [inaudible] when I was in elementary school, the neighborhood was pretty much the same. As far as the change near, I guess near the end of elementary school and middle

school where now you start to get white families moving out because they are getting the G.I. loans to buy homes. And some moved and then when they opened up the Motthaven Houses, primarily the white people started to move out when they started getting the G.I. loans.

MN: And they were going into private housing in other parts of the Bronx or in Queens or something?

JB: Yeah.

MN: So in the first years, it was a very integrated development, with a lot of whites as well as Blacks. And not that many Puerto Ricans you would say?

JB: They were here, but not that many. The dominating two groups were the African Americans and the white population.

MN: Did you or your family in The Bronx have any serious encounters with racism in your early years that you can remember?

JB: I'm trying to remember.

MN: Anything in other parts of the city or in school or in - - ?

JB: In elementary school, basically the only thing that happened was with my kindergarten teacher, which was a horse of a different color [laughter].

MN: Literally [laughs]

JB: Not too much, it really wasn't so pronounced if it was. It was very, very subtle because what's interesting, I think they are still there, there was these two white girls that grew up with us, who, what's interesting, they have yet to ever date anybody white, they cant even, their whole phrasing of words and they hold conversation as if they are totally

African American. [laughter]. In their mindset, they have totally become that. And their mother was, you really saw their mother and father in them. Because it was fine. Like I said, there wasn't really too much problems. I think the problems start to occur as we get into the sixties, then it starts to hit because of the changes that occurred within the country.

MN: It was almost like you were in your little bubble here in the South Bronx and the rest of all the racism in the rest of the country was something abstract, it was just sort of amazing. Do you have a lot of those pictures from those days by any chance?

JB: I think I have some pictures of my classes. Like I told Victoria, I have pictures from kindergarten, but I have a lot of my pictures from school.

MN: Did anybody take home movies in those days?

JB: Not to my knowledge, not to my knowledge, I could check and see.

MN: Now, in junior high school, you go off to Clark Junior High School. Now in between then, are you going to any community centers with organized sports when you were in elementary school? When did you start running track?

JB: It's interesting because when I was in elementary about third and fourth grade, around there, there used to be a TV show called star time and I saw it and I wanted to learn how to tap dance. And my mother signed me up, and I went and that became something that I did. The only thing that I hated about it was that we had to do ballet, and I hated the ballet.

MN: Now where were you doing the tap dancing?

JB: Downtown at Star Tapping Studio I think it was around about 53rd Street on the west side.

MN: And how long did you - -

JB: 50th Street, it was on 50th Street.

MN: And how long did you do the tap dancing?

JB: I did it for about two years.

MN: Can you still do it?

JB: Not really, no not really.

MN: [laughter] You're not going to give us a demonstration?

JB: And it was interesting because that's what allowed me to eventually become a runner, a sprinter - -

MN: And that's what got you in shape?

JB: Yeah, because I became limber from all of the stretching from it.

MN: Now, what about, did you kids race each other or chase each other?

JB: Yeah, we used to do a lot of that and we used to go to a Boys Club, in Gramercy and what we used to do when we got out at night, we would race all the way down the block to the projects and it was basically a block and a half, because the Boy's Club was down the block between Third and Willis, and when you get to Third, you would hit Patterson, so we used to do a lot of that. And when I was in the fifth grade, there was an announcement over the loud speaker about this track meet and they were having try-outs to do it, so I decided I would try out. I made it, I was in the fifth grade and I had to compete against the sixth graders also, and I ran the 40 yard dash, based upon being 75

pounds or less. And I was beat by a young man who grew up in the same project as me, he was a year ahead of me. And after the race, one of the [inaudible] in charge of the meet overall, he was also the dean at Clark, but he also coached a local PAL team. And he told me, he said listen, why don't you bring him around next year to come run. So I was saying yeah, yeah, yeah, it didn't happen. So the next year I went back to the same meet, at the same race, and I won. [inaudible] had took second. When I got to junior high school, I started to run PAL and I started to run for my school. That's when I started to really get into it. For me, which most folks, I'll let people know now, that was my way of dealing with my shyness, because I was shy. This was something I could do pretty well, and I could compete against my peers and definitely hold my own, and it became a way of like, okay, you get to fit in, and I didn't have to say but so much because - -

MN: That became your way of fitting in, Allen Jones told me his way of fitting in was doing outrageous things.

JB: Yeah, well, I didn't do all of that. So you didn't do that, you didn't do like you know - -

JB: I was afraid of my mother, too much. So that's what I did, I started to really seriously get into track and field.

MN: Right, and this was in junior high?

JB: Junior High.

MN: now one of the things that a number of people talked about, and I wonder how visible this is to you, the numbers in the Patterson Houses. Was that something you saw as a kid?

JB: People playing numbers?

MN: Yeah.

JB: Oh yeah, that was automatic, that was like, that was the number one thing. If you didn't play the numbers, you were almost strange. My mother played the numbers.

MN: And the people who collected, they were respected people?

JB: Yeah.

MN: And there was never any, was there ever any violence associated with - - ?

JB: No, no, no, no, that's [inaudible]

MN: That was a part of the community?

JB: That was a part, yeah.

MN: Were there any people who were known as like drug dealers in those days that you could see?

JB: No. Here's how interesting it was. The older fellows who may have been doing drugs or whatever, they would smack us upside the head and send us home. We couldn't be around them, they wouldn't allow us to be in that vicinity, when they were doing whatever. For them, it was like, no, no, you're too young, go home.

MN: Were there any sort of places, disreputable spots, bars that you knew where - - ?

JB: There were some bars, we had a load of bars. The most famous of the rough bars was the Blue Flame.

MN: Oh really? Yeah, because that had live music also.

JB: Yeah the Blue Flame was no joke.

MN: Tell me about the Blue Flame.

JB: The Blue Flame, it lasted a long time, and it moved from one side of the street to the other. I'm trying to remember if it started out on the side that Kentucky Fried Chicken is on, or the other side, but it moved from one side to the other. It was the bar that was there, but we had, there was, that was it, the bars. We had bars and liquor stores all over the place.

MN: did you see a lot of drunkenness or winos, or people visibly inebriated like as a kid, like --?

JB: I had to see some of it when every night when some guys would come home and they would be drunk, but it wasn't out there.

MN: It wasn't out like visible, like a whole bench full of winos?

JB: No, and you know [laughter] I'm trying to do is think about, when did we start getting the winos [laughter] out there. And we did have some, and it was interesting because the winos were the winos. There was one who was very hilarious, his nickname was Old Twelve. He played softball and all that stuff, but he worked for Housing. This man could hit a softball like I have yet to see. He did it a couple of times, inside of PS 18, he hit the ball out the park, to St. Rita's Church, and he hit the bells.

MN: I know that side.

JB: This he did, he used to drink, and you know we would see him, but he was cool. He didn't bother nobody.

MN: It wasn't, things weren't in your face.

JB: No, there was more, I think because of our parents made for us, knowing that, so, what, that's none of your business. Which was good because they made us still have respect for that person.

MN: What about hookers, was that something that you as a kid were aware of?

JB: No.

MN: You never saw any of that near the bars or on any corner?

JB: No.

MN: So this was a neighborhood which was you know - -

JB: It was really a community.

MN: It was a community and you didn't have these spots with down and out or dangerous people?

JB: no, none of that. Put it this way, when I got to middle school, and in high school, I [inaudible] they would tell you, they couldn't have boyfriends who didn't live in the projects, they told you that right? Their boyfriends had to live in the projects, if they didn't, that boy, he couldn't come to the projects, they had to sneak him in.

MN: They also told me about the booty train.

JB: From Clinton?

MN: Yeah, and that the girls from Patterson, if they said they were from Patterson, guys would leave them alone.

JB: I just know that it was unbelievable. A lot of times I didn't get to ride because I was running track, and we had practice around that time, but it was interesting, it's a tradition.

When I say a tradition, there was a, at one point the associate director of East Side

Houses, Black dude, he graduated from Clinton in 1948, and one day we were sitting around inside talking and he brought up, he said the booty train. I said the booty train, from when you were in - he said yes.

MN: Describe to princess what the booty train was.

JB: Okay, here's what it is. DeWitt Clinton was an all boys school. The school Walter, was all girls. In between the4 two, you had basically Bronx Science and Lehman College. Now, the girls from Walton got out about 3:16, 3:17, somewhere around that time. The guys from Clinton got out earlier, so technically, we should not have been around to see them. What they would do is, they knew which train, they had it down to a science. Which, this is the train. And they would get on the train and what they would do is when it got, when the girls got on the train at Kingsbridge, now sometimes they would start right then basically where they would be grabbing the girls behinds and stuff, but definitely by the time the train got to 149th Street and Grand Concourse, after the train left 161st Street, it went inside the tunnel. Now when I went to Clinton, they had the old trains, so all you had to do was unscrew one light bulb and all the lights went out in the car. When this went on, it was unbelievable. I remember my senior year, this guy got me some [inaudible] I don't want to ride this man. When we got to Kingsbridge Road, the girls were jumping up and down to get on the train. The cops were trying to stop them, they knocked the cops out the way. I said, my gosh, this is out of order here. At the same time, it was wrong and disrespectful, but it wasn't a thing of being malicious or being a pervert or things of that nature in anybody's mindset. It had just been something that was a traditional thing.

MN: And nobody went too far?

JB: No, and if they did, they would get their behinds beat.

MN: Because they had sisters and friends from school.

JB: Yeah, but the guys didn't allow it to get out of order either.

MN: In Clark Junior High, when did you first become aware of events in the Civil Rights movement in the country? When did those issues begin to grab your attention, is there anything that stands out? Do you remember the Emmett Till case?

JB: Yes, I remember that very vividly. I don't remember what grade I was in, but I remember very vividly, I saw the pictures, my mother used to get Jet Magazine - -

Princess: What case was that again, I'm sorry.

JB: Emmett Till. That was a 14 year old African American young man from Chicago, who went to a town in Mississippi, you heard about that but yeah, I think, I don't know if it was then or a couple of days later, I know I said something out my mouth and my mother ended up smacking me in my mouth because I just couldn't handle that kind of no, no, no, this is ridiculous [inaudible]. So I'm starting to get into this thing of no, this doesn't make sense, so I'm starting to become very much aware of the Civil Rights Movement. And the summer of the seventh grade, I spent the whole summer in North and South Carolina. And as long as I pretty much stayed on my aunt's and uncle's property, well, where they lived, because they didn't own it, because they were sharecropping, it was cool, my cousins whatever, but whenever I went to town, it was clear. We were called nigger, boy, no second thought right quickly. I went with my cousin, the oldest one, he wanted to go to what was called the watermelon market down

in South Carolina to sell watermelon you know to load the trucks and get paid. And it was open out there, boy, nigger, come here nigger, and they had separate water fountains, separate bathrooms, and the best way I can describe the water fountains, the water fountains that said colored were like the water fountains in the schools with the cross-lift. And the other ones for the colored were the metal ones with the filters and stuff like that. That was the big difference, so you could see it was clearly like, it's safe to say. My cousin's schooling, my youngest cousin that I stayed with that summer, school was, almost had been around since my mother, it was that bad. The school had totally segregated, my oldest cousin was in high school, and at that time they drove the bus because there were no white bus drivers driving the black kids, so the older guys drove the bus; totally segregated. The books were inferior. The only good thing I could say about the schools there, for what it was worth, they learned a certain amount of camaraderie and respect for one another, whereas they could function easier, they could see themselves possibly going to college over time, much easier, and the schools were there for them.

MN: When you were in junior high school, were people telling you that you were college material.

JB: Yeah.

MN: So you were getting reinforcement as being an intellectually gifted kid.

JB: It occurred in the 7th grade. In the 7th grade, I was in this class 7.4. They had two top classes, 7.7 and 7.8, and they had this science teacher, a Black gentleman, very sharp, this man was the man. He always came dressed, had wore a shirt and tie everyday. He

addressed everyone as Mr. or Ms. but nobody messed with him, he taught science. And I had him for science, and he discovered that I was in the wrong class. It may have been based upon my reading grade, because I didn't do a whole lot of reading, so he got me switched over and in 8th grade I wound up being in the two top classes. So he noticed it and he pushed it, he really pushed it. And he became, now I would say a mentor, back then I thought he was a pain in the behind because he checked on me everyday, he let my mother know how I was doing everyday.

MN: At that time, was your father in the house or no?

JB: No, he was gone. By the time I got to, when I was in the 4th grade, he left. So when I was in middle school, it was just my mother and us.

MN: Now is this something that was happening to a number of families, fathers leaving?

JB: It was starting to happen, it was starting to happen.

Princess: Why do you think so, I'm sorry. Why do you think that was the case?

JB: [inaudible] just kept, probably maybe around I would say the days of disillusionment, that occurred because of the job market, and some men wanted to buy a house, and being told it doesn't happen.

Princess: Was it African American Men?

JB: Yeah, veterans. There was what they called G.I. loans for veterans who were in WWI, they gave them this special loan, and for the longest, African American men couldn't get those loans, they primarily went to white men. And when they did start to do it, they built select communities for the African American population. And I didn't realize that until about a year ago.

MN: Well let me give you an example, the biggest community for a lot of these veterans was Levitt Town, in Long Island, until like 20 years ago, but this whole issue about men leaving the family, you know, it happened in Vicky's house, and that, so that's an important thing that was, it was, you could see it in a few cases with some of your friends?

JB: It started to really happen, it started to happen, yeah. And at that time, being there, I wasn't completely conscious, we just kept on going like whatever, but yeah, it was starting to really happen.

MN: Did you have male mentors other than this teacher? Was he the main you know, other people - - ?

JB: Yeah, what was interesting, my mother used to go to church in queens, and that's where they had started my mother and father when I was a young baby. And so did my aunt go there, and it must've seventh grade or so, one Saturday I was out to my aunts house, and I went with her to the church this Saturday, and they had this group they called The Boys Youth Group, and they had these young Black ministers who dealt with us.

MN: What denomination was this?

JB: It was Baptist. We learned some scripture, but they would take us to the park, we would play handball, they took up to play basketball, so we got to do all the things at the same time. And for what it was worth, there was no forcing us to be, oh you have to go to church, no, you would wind up going, but it wasn't forced. You started to enjoy it.

And I lived in The Bronx and I started making this trip and whenever I could on Saturdays to go out there.

MN: At what point did you become sort of diverged from other guys that you knew and becoming politically conscious? At what age did you take the issues of Civil Rights and race and Black consciousness really seriously?

JB: It must have been about when I was about 18, 19 - -

MN: So this was after high school?

JB: Yeah, after high school. Because in high school, I was somewhat conscious, but not politically active, but I had gotten enough knowledge to really start to think and see things.

MN: Where were you getting the knowledge from? Was it from reading, from the newspaper?

JB: Yeah, reading, watching stuff on the T.V. because I would watch all the demonstrations and stuff. When I got to college, students. Then it started to be speakers boards then. I saw Ron Caranga speak in 1968.

MN: At which of the colleges?

JB: At Eastern Michigan University, I saw him there, I saw him speak. I said okay, I his material, I read some of Baraca's material. I started to read some of the material from the Panther Party and I'm saying okay, this sounds good, it makes sense. And I really started to devour this material. I'd go to the library and get books. I'd go to the bookstore and get books. My world became the books, to the point where, right now I have a library in

my house. I started to really start to research African American history, and African history.

MN: Did you get any African American history in elementary school, junior high or high school?

JB: No. Yeah we got it, on the level that we were slaves. And that was it.

MN: You never had a teacher who said go read this?

JB: No.

MN: Not at any level of school?

JB: No.

MN: It was never emphasized?

JB: No, that was never really pushed.

MN: And it wasn't pushed in your family or - -

JB: I think my mother was more concerned that, she was worried about me getting killed, so she was going to push that. Having been raised in The South and seeing what she saw, she was like, not my son. She was going to protect me until the end.

MN: Now how important was track to you when you were in high school? Was that something that was a center piece of your life?

JB: When I got in high school, I don't remember my sophomore year, but my junior and senior year, I really ran more so. I met this young man who lived in this other project, Millbrook, the summer between the 10th and 11th grade, and we are close to today. He was really into it in terms of the research, the technique, so they got me involved and I

was like yes and I really started to take this very seriously. I started to take on heroes for the sake of argument in the tenth and eleventh grade, in the eleventh and twelfth grade.

MN: Who were some of your sports heroes?

JB: in terms of track and field, my heroes were Bob Hayes and Henry Carr. They were phenomenal. It was interesting because to me, I looked at bob Hayes and I saw him run in high school, I went to a couple of races at the Garden. I said, man, this boy runs as awkward as all hell, but he can run. And he wasn't a bragger. He never talked mess. I remember one night when this young dude, a freshman named Charlie Green told him, six flat is not going to win tonight. At that time, that was the record for the sixty yard dash, and Bob said nothing. He went out and he beat him, his time was five nine. And like he said, I didn't want to set no record, I ran as fast as it took me to win, and that made sense. So I really liked that. Then he played football - -

MN: He was from Florida A&M right?

JB: Florida A&M yeah. That's where I ended up going because I said uhm [laughter]. Like I said, I really started to really get into it. I started to learn how to long jump in high school. And I started thinking about going to the Olympic Games, those stuff started to occur for me.

MN: What was your major event as a runner?

JB: In high school, it was pretty much the 200 meters and the long jump. And when I went to college, it became more so the long jump and I would run the relay, four by one.

MN: Now when did you first start to notice drugs coming into Patterson, especially heroin?

JB: It must have been about, because I know it was when I was in high school, and it was really around about eleventh grade at the latest, maybe before that. I started to really see it then.

MN: And what were the manifestations that you saw? What were some of the things that like you know - - ?

JB: Well, certain guys started to nod out.

MN: And when you talk about guys, how old?

JB: They were pretty much my age. I'm talking about folks that were my age. I'm not talking about a bunch of men, I'm talking teenagers.

MN: Teenagers nodding out?

JB: yes, because they were the ones who were dressing up in almost a thousand dollars worth of clothes, and skin popping.

MN: Now did the men of your father's generation, all those veterans, did they ever get into clothes the way these young guys of your cohort got?

JB: they probably did, because the men dressed then, they did dress. As children, we were taught to dress by our parents. All we had - -

[END OF SIDE A]

[BEGINNING OF SIDE B]

MN: Do you think that the kids in the sixties were taking it to a step beyond, or it was just a logical extension?

JB: I don't know whether it was a logical extension, but it became our downfall in a sense because as I said, they were doing it, it was one thing for them to dress, but at the

same time they were getting high, and that generation, we lost. Who knows what could have come out of that generation. Like we said, that's my generation, what more could we have produced? And the generation behind us?

MN: And if you're looking at it as a historian with a conscious, how did this tragedy happen, and it seems like it sort of caught everyone by surprise. Yean, it was interesting because prior to that, it was [inaudible] you found some folks smoking some refer. That was, let's say six were [inaudible] half a dozen on the other. Then all of a sudden, it was like the refer dried up, and the only thing out there was the heroin. And the heroin was it. And America, for what it's worth, got caught up in this same thing across the board. The best way I can say it to you is this, there was no talk of a war on drugs or America having a drug problem until Art Linkletter, this guy who had this show, Art Linkletter, this guy who had this show, the Art Linkletter Show, his daughter jumped off the roof, she was high on LSD. Then America started talking about, we have a drug problem, we have to do something about it. But as long as it's just [inaudible] the kids in Harlem, The South Bronx, Bed-Stuy, it didn't matter. And it didn't happen to just pop in here by accident. Like I tell people, we're not talking about something that comes here the size of an aspirin tablet and we drop something on it and it becomes the size of this room. We are talking about something that comes here the size of this room, and gets cut up and dissected some more. And we don't own no ships, we don't own no planes. We don't own none of that. You know, there's no thing in blaming it on now the Nigerians [laughter]. No, no, this was going on long before Nigeria was independent.

MN: So this thing, it was your cohort, and you had friends who get caught up in this>

JB: Yes, lots of them.

MN: Guys who were going to Clinton?

JB: Guys who were going to Clinton, there were guys who didn't make it too many years after we left high school, they're dead behind it. Yeah, it really really hit. Between the problems with the drugs, and being shipped off to Vietnam.

MN: Did you have friends who ended up going to Vietnam?

JB: Yeah, yeah.

Princess: When drugs started to come in the neighborhood, did you see a change in the projects?

I saw the change in the guys, because initially, you know, they still spoke and stuff, but I started to see them start to hang out in cliques together, and I would take not from time to time, they started to nod out. And then with time going on and it finally became a real problem, a real mess for them, some of them changed the way they dressed. They no longer could afford the expensive clothes.

MN: Did it make the projects less safe to have the drug people breaking into mail boxes or people being mugged?

JB: Yeah, that became a real problem. And did that push a lot of people to try to move out?

JB: It pushed people to move out, yes.

MN: And then you had different people come in?

JB: As fast as someone left, there was some one coming in.

MN: On another slightly different - were there Nation of Islam people around Patterson selling Muhammed Speaks?

JB: Yes, they were there; loud guys.

Now did you pay much attention to them at first?

JB: I got into pitched arguments with them.

MN: And this was when you were like in junior high and high school?

JB: Pretty much so, after I left high school, I got into some serious debates with them and they didn't like the fact that I challenged them. And I challenged them on the whole logic of Elijah Muhammed's program, so they were like, there's no difference between him and Rockefeller, it's just that Rockefeller was white and he was Black. And they looked at me like I was crazy.

MN: When did you get to the point where politics was the most important thing in your life? When did that happen? It was after high school?

JB: Yeah, it was about 1967.

MN: And then when you come back and talk to your friends, what was their reaction to the new political James Blakeney?

JB: Some listened, some didn't, but I was constantly talking to them.

MN: So you kept it going?

JB: Oh yeah, I kept it going.

MN: Who are the people you think responded the most or were most interested in what you had to say?

JB: You know what's interesting is that about 1968, 69, we started a group of brothers and sisters with our own organization in Patterson.

MN: Really?

JB: Yeah. If I remember, I think the first name that we took was the Babylonian Party, something like that, based upon Eldridge Cleaver talking about calling America Babylon.

Yeah, I think that was one of the first names we took. And we started to get involved.

We started to do clothing drives, food drives, we did testing for Sickle Cell Anemia.

MN: So it's like modeling yourself almost on the Panthers - -

JB: Yeah, pretty much like the Panthers.

MN: To serve the people.

JB: Yeah. And that's how we started out from that and that was it. And like I said, about the beginning of September, 1970, I got accepted to Queens College. And it was there that I got a clear understanding of politics. I couldn't talk rhetoric anymore. I couldn't read somebody's writings on Marx. No, no, no, you have to read Marx himself. You have to read Lenin, you have to read everybody else. You have to read it, and I started to do it.

MN: And you were still living in Patterson at that time?

JB: Still living in Patterson.

MN: And going to Queens College?

JB: And going to Queens College.

MN: Do you have any of the literature from the Babylonians?

JB: I might, I have to look and see.

MN: Because that would be an important - -

JB: I have to check and see, and I'll check with some of the guys from that period.

MN: Did you operate out of one of like the community centers?

JB: We operated out of Patterson Center. We had a room in the back, it was known as The Black Dungeon, and that was our room. And that was an interesting room because that room had a hot water tank in it, so you know it used to be hot in there but you know we used to throw parties in there because we would raise money and stuff, nut yeah, that's what we did.

MN: Who were some of the musicians who had the biggest influence in you, or poets or artists in that period?

JB: In terms of music, I'm getting into Coltrane, and I really fell in love with Coltrane and this whole era and this thing with jazz. There was a young lady I was going with whose mother had a jazz collection that was unbelievable and I would go to her house and listen to the music, and I would listen to the jazz. Poets, Baraca, what's the name that started to come out?

MN: Sonia Sanchez.

JB: Sonia Sanchez.

MN: Nicky Giovanni.

JB: Nicky Giovanni and them yeah. I listened to them.

MN: how did you deal with, this is in the seventies, you are getting into the Superfly era, and all the guys who are you know getting into that whole hustler thing, you know

around all the drugs and the pimping, and Iceberg Slim. Was there a bunch of those folks in the Patterson?

JB: Well put it this way, what was interesting, when we formed our group, we started out by setting what we called a youth patrol, where we patrolled the projects.

MN: Wow.

JB: And looked to make sure the drug dealers and the drug runners who were out there couldn't attack nobody in the projects, and to prevent the muggings and everything.

MN: Did you have any dealings with Guy Fischer in those years?

JB: [laughs] What's interesting, we graduated together from Clark, so I have known him pretty much a good portion of my life, yeah, I have known him that long.

MN: How did he deal with your guys patrolling the projects? Did he deal with it as a threat to business?

JB: He just didn't pay us no mind, which in some ways is good because we really couldn't have handled it in reality. But I wound up, well, we always could talk to each other, so there was never this thing of a threat. So even after the group I was with dissolved, if I saw him we could speak, if I saw him right now I would speak to him. I wouldn't duck him, I wouldn't make like I don't know him. If the police came up to me and said do I know who this is, yeah I know who this is, I have known him since I was eight, whatever age old, and I am not going to stop speaking to him. He has never approached me to do anything illegal, so we could talk till the cows come home.

MN: In the late sixties and the seventies, were the kids in Patterson having a harder time than when you were coming up?

JN: There started to be somewhat of a change. The kids are starting to be – one, you're starting to have a change in terms of who lives there, because now there is the screening and [inaudible] good bad or indifferent, so there is a change in clientele that lived in the project, and it starts to move toward what the projects were created for. Two years ago, I read a book entitled American Apartheid by Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton and it was interesting because what they say in there, yeah, and I have always said this here, here it was with the documentations saying that in the thirties and forties, the government decided to build the projects to control the growth of the Black ghetto. I know that with Housing, there is this thing of whoever is there, just removed has the first chance to go back, and there was the screening process so it was no big thing at that point. But over time, the policies changed, and they made for what we are now, and they have lost it.

MN: So you lost control over the level of civility and it became for some people a scary place to live?

JB: Yeah.

MN: How did you handle it being scary?

JB: It was interesting because I started to work in Patterson community center in 1973.

MN: this was after a couple of years at Queens College?

JB: yeah, and I started to work with young people. I worked with youngsters in our after school program, and I also worked with youngsters in our teen program. And my teen program was no joke, because I had the gang, the Black Spades.

MN: That was in the early seventies?

JB: Yeah, they were there every night, that was the group I had to deal with every night, and over time, we developed a relationship where they were just like okay, I'm straight, I'm not going to play games with you, I'm going to let you know what it is, and we could half way talk and function. And I started coaching sports, and I would talk to youngsters. I told them about going to school, being responsible, being able to be someone that your children could look up and say you're their father, and over time it paid off and worked out. But, I saw the changes, and the changes started to really occur in the projects when the Spades come in because they break down all of the barriers that were there to keep people out. They broke the wall. You talk about the Great Wall of China and the other walls, this wall, because prior to them, the projects was the projects. Everbody who lived in the projects was safe, everybody was down. I f you didn't live in the projects you had no business in there, you had nothing to say and you couldn't do nothing. You weren't coming into the projects to start no trouble. These young men, went off the hook. They started shooting one another up and it was over basically in a lot of ways. So parents didn't know what to do with their kids at that point because their kids were out there in those gangs now.

MN: And the gangs went all over The Bronx?

JB: Yes, all over The Bronx, all over the city, it became a city wide thing, the gang era. And I think the gang era in that time period grew out of the repression that occurs after the FBI decided to crush the Panther Party and the Young Lords.

MN: So once the political groups were taken out of commission, then the kids had nothing else to turn to that was constructive and then they turned to, they just created gangs.

JB: Right, because the Panther Party was hyping them up on the idea of the gun.

MN: Right, pick up the gun.

JB: Yeah, time to pick up the gun. And these young people picked up on it and followed it.

MN: Except they used it against there own people instead of against the establishment. Yeah because they had no political education, no knowledge, and it was amazing because – I had wound up breaking up with the group that I was with because I challenged the logic of Huey P. Newton. Huey P. Newton, not too long after he came out of jail, he went to Philadelphia and he gave a speech and he talked about what he called inter-communalism and about how the state had disappeared, blah, blah, blah. When he first told me I said, okay yeah, then I got to read it. When I read it I said no, this is totally incorrect, this is not true. And they looked at me like I was crazy. They say hey what's wrong. And I started to quote to them, from books that I had read, giving them information that none of them had read. They had no clue about it and I said no, this is wrong. And it was like, how dare you challenge Huey P. Newton? Why? Is he God? He wasn't, and he is wrong here. And we wound up splitting. Some of those brothers I got back with, some of them I didn't. One of these young men, I know you interviewed, his name was Malik Catcher.

MN: Right.

JB: His father was on the opposite side, but we got back together and I think he realized later on that I was correct. Well it sounds like you were always going to think for yourself.

JB: Yeah, because like I said, when I got to Queens and these brothers made me start to read, I read. I wasn't just talking the rhetoric of it. See it's easy to talk the rhetoric, they use slogans. People say miles says political power this that and the third, but what does he mean there? Where does this statement come from? Read the essay. And people started reading those essays, and they weren't reading none of this. All they knew is what was said.

MN: Wow. So you started working as a community center director - -

JB: No, I wasn't a director there, I was a group worker.

MN: You were a group worker. And this was a social worker, like a social work position?

JB: Social worker, yeah.

MN: And you were still living in - -

JB: Patterson, I had just moved out of Patterson. No, I was still in Patterson because it was right after that I wound up moving out of Patterson and I moved to Mitchell.

MN: And were you married at that point?

JB: I was married. And the reason I took the job was because I had a four month old daughter and I needed money.

MN: And was your wife part of the political group?

JB: Yeah.

MN: So you had a political family.

JB: We did, we did, and for me, like I said, it was great, I enjoyed that.

MN: And you have been working with kids ever since?

JB: Ever since, since 1973.

MN: Were you around, you were around there with the Black Spades and the Savage Skulls and all of that stuff. What about the rise of Hip – Hop? Did you see that first hand?

JB: Interestingly enough. And we talked about it, one of my former bosses talked about it. He said years ago, I remember when Flash used to come to the centers and wanted to use our centers to rehearse and we never paid any mind to it. He said boy, could we have cashed in on that. So we used to let them use the centers.

MN: For dances?

JB: No, not only that, but to rehearse too.

MN: Now, who was the first person you ever heard with two turn tables?

JB: It probably was Flash.

MN: Did Pete DJ Jones ever come to Patterson, somebody told me?

JB: He might have, but I don't know.

MN: okay, but Flash was the one - -

JB: Because Flash went to all four of our centers. He went to Patterson, Motthaven, Millbrook, and Mitchell. He used every one he could get in, and any one he could get in. Yeah.

MN: When you saw this you didn't pay it no mind?

JB: No, I played jazz, it wasn't my music. And I listen to it vaguely now, I listen more to find out what the lyrics are being said because I have to deal with kids and I have a grandson that made fourteen on Saturday and I want to know what he is listening to so I could say no, that is not happening there.

MN: 50 Cent.

JB: That's a no, no. I don't understand it at all. And the saddest thing about it is that people talk about it as so bad and so rough, but they endorse it on another level. You have Snoop Dogg doing a commercial, two commercials, with Leanna Coca.

MN: I know, but Snoop is everywhere.

JB: But I'm just saying to do a commercial with someone that you talk about like a dog and to have him dealing with one of the largest corporations in the world, you are telling my kids it's okay to be like that because look at the rewards.

MN: And he is at the same time doing all of this stuff with the pimp culture. I guess you could say Leanna Coca is pimping Chrysler.

JB: Yeah!. And to me, the ones who are going to lose the most are my kids because they don't see no difference, they can't make that distinction.

MN: Now one of the things I have wanted to ask you, because we have done a lot of research in Morrisania. Did you ever go to hear live jazz in The Bronx? Or mostly you went to Manhattan?

JB: I mostly went to Manhattan.

MN: You didn't go to the clubs on Boston Road?

JB: No, I went primarily to The Blue Note, I went to ones on 125th Street, and Lennox Avenue.

MN: Did you ever go to hear Latin music in The Bronx?

JB: Yeah.

MN: And what were some of the venues you went?

JB: I went to Hunts Point Palace, and that was the spot. I have been to the Palladium, just for the music. Now this was growing up. Now I go to wherever they might be, if there's a JVC Jazz Festival, I might go to one of those.

MN: Did kids in your programs get music instruction or was that something that got pulled out with the fiscal crisis and stuff?

JB: What's interesting, we didn't necessarily have a person who taught music, but would play music for them. I was the oddball, and my kids said you know, you were right. What they did, they would let the kids play the Hip Hop and all of that, and the R&B. And they were bouncing all over the place, and not finishing what they had to do. I played Jazz for my kids. They would sit there, listen to the music, and they were doing out work. And a guy noticed and said you know, you played the music for us and we got to listen, but we got our work done.

MN: Do you feel that even through the hard times, you were able to establish rapport with kids and keep them from falling off the cliff. Yeah, I could say that honestly, that occurred, I mean really came home down front about two or three years ago. My oldest step-son got married and at this wedding, I looked, I'm looking around and I said, my God, everybody that's here, pretty much so in the wedding, or in the wedding party, is

one of my former kids. And I realized it, and during the evening, people were coming up to me saying thank you for being there when I was growing up. Some guy said thank you for smacking me upside my head because I don't know where I would be. My oldest step-son, when he was growing up, he was no joke. One of the guys said to me, he said, what did you do to him? I said, listen, let me tell you straight up, first of all, I was limited because I wasn't his father, so I couldn't do but so much. I could only verbally talk, do it that way. I didn't have the power to discipline him any other way. And I used to do it by showing by example. And he said well let me tell you something, you did one hell of a job. He said because he doesn't hang out anymore, he goes to work, he comes over to the block every now and then, [inaudible], and like I said, he pays for his kids to go to school. I told them and I told my step-sons, both of them, I said if I were to have sons, I would want them to be like you.

MN: Now, as the project became more Latino and more Puerto Rican, were there tensions between African Americans and Puerto Ricans, or did people pretty much get along pretty well?

JB: We had no real problems so much in the projects. Maybe on the outside situation, but not in the projects because I know. Working in the center, I had a lot of Latino kids. And it was interesting because when I had basketball, most of my kids were pretty much African American kids. When I had softball, it primarily was Latino kids and with some African Americans, but we all got together, and there were certain relationships that developed between all of us and I got to know their parents also and it became like fine and yeah.

MN: What about the schools? Do you think the schools deteriorated in these years or it got better?

JB: Deteriorated, to the utmost.

MN: Really?

JB: Yeah.

MN: And what did you see happening in the schools that made them different from when you were going there?

JB: I could say it this way. I went to PS 18, PS 18 was pretty good. Then there was this school PS 31. PS 31 was up on the hill. It was divided in terms of the kids in Patterson who lived on one side. The side that Victoria and I come from, we all went to PS 18.

The kids who grew up on the other side, Guy Fischer and them, they went to PS 31.

Every now and then, a few kids were taken from PS 18 to 31 because 31 had basically this IGC class, but 18 was no problem, we did it, and like I said, we went to the Clark, it was there. Clark had in the ninth grade, there was about six classes that took a foreign language, and about four or five classes that took algebra. But you know, you could go from that to high school. And we had the music program.

MN: With Eddie Vladimir - -

JB: Yeah, that was slamming. But classes kept, we had a rivalry, in terms of academics.

What is now MS 222, which used to be Junior High School 139 Berger. Now, like we said, we had Eddie Vladimir, Berger had Donald Bird.

MN: What!?

JB: Yeah.

MN: He was a teacher?

JB: Yeah, he taught music at Berger.

MN: Donald Bird taught, and what street was that on? Donald Bird is one of the greatest jazz musicians of the last fifty years.

JB: Oh longer than that.

MN: Donald bird and his Black Birds.

JB: That's right. Put it this way. Probably, his most famous student that you know is Willie Colon.

MN: This is, what street was this on?

JB: It's on about 141st Street and Brooke Avenue.

MN: And it's called Thomas Berger Junior High School?

JB: No, at that time it was Junior High School Berger. It's not that anymore. Now it's Middle School 222.

MN: it was called Berger Junior High?

JB: Yeah, Berger Junior High School.

MN: And how long was he a music teacher there?

JB: Quite a few years. I have a friend that had him, and was in the band - -

MN: And he was living in the Bronx at that time.

JB: And I had a friend who had him at that time, and was in the same class with Willie Colon.

MN: Willie Colon is one of the greatest Latin music, Salsa artists in the world, wow. So you had, and - -

JB: And academically, they were just as sharp as Mark. So you had two schools in the neighborhood where kids could go and graduate and go to decent high schools. Like I said, I left Clark in 62. My daughter went there, and not too long after she left, it started to really go downhill. Berger had already gone downhill.

MN: Now this is the eighties when your daughter went there?

JB: My daughter was there in the late eighties.

MN: So it held up in the seventies, and in the eighties it started to really go down.

JB: yeah, because by the time, I could say for me, in the ninth grade had a foreign language and like I said we had algebra. My daughter had Spanish in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grade. She took the two year exam in the ninth grade. If she would have been native speaking, she would have too the three year regents and finished all of her high school foreign language. Eighth and ninth grade, she took what they called at that time sequential math. She took one and two with the regents. And in terms of, she had biology in the eighth grade with the regents, no, earth science in eighth grade with the regents, and in ninth grade she had biology with the regents. So when she gets to the tenth grade, she is pretty much finishing up her class work academically. And I'm still trying to figure out, how do you allow a school of that magnitude to come that far apart. And to where basically, most of the folks that talk about the area, they have no clue. Because Jonathan Cozier, in his writings, says that that school 139 has always been a bad school. No, it has not been a bad school, but he has no knowledge of the history, and has really yet to talk to someone to get that history.

MN: That's interesting, because he only goes back the last fifteen years and nothing beyond that.

JB: Because I got to meet him.

MN: Before we wind this up, are there any other things that we forgot to talk about from those years, before 73? Because in a subsequent interview, we'll do things like the crack epidemic, and the fiscal crisis and the black out and all that stuff.

JB: I think for me, when I get into the sixties and I get to high school, and I start to become more and more conscious of myself, like I said, in middle school, I start to read and - -

MN: What were some of the first books that you read that made a big impression on you?

JB: Before the Mayflower.

MN: Okay, Leon Bennett.

JB: Leon Bennett's book, Before the Mayflower. And I read some books from that period, and it was interesting because when I was in about the eighth or ninth grade, and we were sitting around in the classroom, and we had our report cards, it listed your reading grades. And I looked at mine and I looked at my friends, and mine wasn't with there's and I decided that I was going to start reading, and I went to the local public library, and I got out sports books. And I tell people, it's not what your child reads, let them read, because if they don't read and you try to give them something, it's not going to work, and they have to read, and I said for me, that got me into reading, so that later on

I could read other material. But I developed a feeling and a love for reading and my reading grade went up.

MN: how did the Vietnam War affect you?

JB: I made a decision early on that hell no, I'm not going to go. That was a different era now, and it was really interesting because I fought them tooth and nail. I was very diabolical about it. When George Hamilton used the fact that he had to support his mother, do you remember how he got out? Because at that time, he was dating, the president of [inaudible] he was dating his daughter, he was dating his oldest daughter. And he said that he couldn't go into service because he was taking care of his mother, and he got a deferment, and I said if he can do it I can do it too. [laughter] And I went through this thing for almost a year with them about that and we went through these battles. They finally turned me down, but I said hey, I wasn't going. About 1968, around about 68 or so, or close to 69, I dislocated my foot, my right foot, and for the longest from that point, I felt like I couldn't run or anything. I really had a real problem with lateral movement in my foot. And I had gotten married already, and still got a train token. At that time when you got drafted, it was free to go, they sent you this train token in the mail, and I got this train token to go down there, and like I said, I was married, I was in college, why am I getting this? So I told my mother, I said listen mom, I'm going down there, but if they try and refuse what I am going to say, I'm not going, I'm going to jail. I let her know I would be in jail, your son will be in jail, and we went through it. And I told them and they saw my foot and I told them what I couldn't do, and they had me talk to the FBI and then I told them I am not going, and they allowed me to leave, and

I was determined not to do it. I think another thing for me was when I was in high school, like I said, I developed a real, I really started to get into track and field. I developed this thing of I didn't care who you were, let's get it on the floor, and I would race anybody. And in my junior year, by the time I left my junior year, going into my senior year, I was the number one sprinter coming back.

MN: On the team?

JB: On the team, by far. I wound up fracturing my ankle, so I couldn't run for most of the year, but I didn't care. I still went to the meets and I started long jumping, and the young boys started talking too much mouth, I got tired of it. So towards the end of the season, I told the coach listen, I want to run, I want to sprint. I said I want to run the 880 relay. I said I don't care. I don't care what team you give me, I want to run. So okay, he let me do it, and I had probably one of the worst teams we could have almost had out there that day, but I was the starting leg, and we got put in what was called the seeded heat, with the team that was the best in the city, almost on the east coast. They were one of the best teams out there. They were beating boys on a regular basis, so I said okay. I looked and I see the heat that we're in, and I go in there and I told my boys, I said look at the heat that we are in, they said oh my gosh. I said, well, what the hell, it's going to be. So I started against their starter who was beating everybody. I beat his behind something terrible. People were like oh my god, they couldn't believe it, and all the young boys shut up from that point on, I heard no more mouth from them.

MN: Well Dukes remembers you as, say ask him about his track. Did you ever watch Dukes play basketball?

JB: Yeah.

MN: because people tell me he was sweet.

MJB: he could play his butt off. He could play. I saw him play in junior high school and high school. In my senior year, because this was the only year he played for the school, [whistles] he was the man. I remember when we played against Franklin, and he did some move on this kid, and people still talk about it to this day. He went this way and all of a sudden cut, and the dude was standing there, and he was gone, to the basket and laid it up. Everybody in the gym couldn't believe their eyes. They were like oh my God. But yeah, Bubba could play. I think he still holds the scoring record at Benedict. And the record he broke was my former boss at one time.

MN: And who was that?

JB: This dude named Jim Sampson. He held the record until Bubba broke it.

MN: I'll show you some pictures; I have pictures of Bubba from Benedict. Okay anything else, because it's getting late and all that.

JB: That's about it, I can't think of anything else.

MN: Okay, thank you very much for this interview, and then we'll bring you back - -

[END OF INTERVIEW]