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Cadogan, Marjorie

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Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: April 6, 2010

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Hello, today is April 6th, 2010, we're at Fordham University and today we are interviewing Marjorie Cadogan, a graduate of Fordham College and Fordham Law School who is an Executive Deputy Commissioner of the Human Resources Administration and has played many important roles within New York City government. I am Doctor Mark Naison and joining me in the interview is Pamela Lewis and our videographer Dawn Russell. Marjorie could you please spell your name?

Marjorie Cadogan (MC): I will spell my full name, M-A-R-J-O-R-I-E, Cadogan, C-A-D-O-G-A-N.

MN: Okay, and as we always do with these interviews, begin by telling us about your family and how they came to The Bronx.

MC: My family is of Barbadian descent, both of my parents are from Barbados, they came to New York at different times. My father came to New York twice. First in the 1940s, seeking job and other opportunities and then returned to Barbados and came back in the mid '50s. My mother came to The Bronx in the late '50s, they had met in Barbados but kind of it was a bit of a chasing. And she lived with a distant family friend, while she was pursuing her nursing career here.

MN: Now, what neighborhood in The Bronx did your mother move to?

MC: My mother moved into Wakefield. First, she lived on Laconia Avenue, between 220th and 221st Street.

MN: Now was this in a private home?

MC: It was in a private 2-family home.

MN: The family she was living with was Bajan?

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

MC: The family she was living with was a woman of Bajan descent who had come to the United States when she was a child. My recollection was that she came to America when she was 12. So her formative years were in the United States and she was recommended to my mom as someone who could essentially teach her the ropes of New York and would be very supportive of her and providing her room and board while she found her grounding in terms of work here.

MN: Right, now did your mother study nursing in Barbados?

MC: Yes, she did all of her nursing training in Barbados.

MN: So she was a licensed nurse in Barbados?

MC: She was.

MN: And did you have to go through an alternate licensing procedure in New York?

MC: When she came here, I here her tell, in her regaling of that experience, that she did have to go through licensure here, in fact not only did she have to go through licensure as a condition of her licensure, she had to become a citizen. So—and she did not know that immediately upon reading the material, but a colleague of hers, where she was working, when she had a conversation with her about her reticence about becoming a citizen, said you better read the fine print because within a certain amount of time you have to become a citizen—you have to complete your citizenship or you run the risk of having your license revoked.

MN: Now, was your mother able to get a healthcare nursing job even before she was licensed here?

MC: I don't know fully the details, but I think she came here with a commitment toward work because she first started working at Beth Abraham Nursing Home.

MN: Now where is that located?

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

MC: Beth Abraham is on Allerton Avenue and Bronx River Road I believe. And it still exists at this time.

MN: And what sort of work was she doing there?

MC: Private duty nursing generally.

MN: So your mother is living in The Bronx, has a place to stay with somebody she trusts and has a job in nursing and when does your father come to join her?

MC: Well my father was here, again, he came in the '40s initially, went back to Barbados, came back in the mid '50s, my mother came later. So when he came, he came first to Manhattan because he had a brother and sister-in-law living in Manhattan. So he lived with them and actually worked with my uncle, who then had a street newsstand on 148th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. So he did a number of different kind of, I won't call them odd jobs, but variety jobs at that point. My father, I recall telling, he's now deceased, that when he came, he came here having mechanical ability, he was mechanic in Barbados, worked at one of the major garages in Barbados and came here with the aspiration of being an airplane mechanic but was not able for discrimination reasons to get into the industry so had to go different routes.

MN: Right, now did he move in with your mother in this apartment?

MC: Yes. After they were married and they were married here, he moved--.

MN: In what year were they married?

MC: They were married in 1959. And they moved to The Bronx to the woman that I call granny, because essentially she served as a grandmother figure, on Laconia Avenue and lived there until they found their first apartment and then moved into the house where my mother still lives now.

[Crosstalk]

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

MN: And so this was—was everybody from Barbados who was, you know, involved with your family were not the granny--?

MC: Well, granny, Ms. Martini who her name was Ruth Martini, I think was a fully acclimated New York woman. And speaking with her you would never detect that she had had any Bajan background. She'd worked here many years, the last maybe 20 or 30 years of her life she worked as a kind of supervising housekeeper in a rectory in Manhattan with Our Lady of Lords Church. So she was a very savvy New York woman. And that's how I would identify her. I think most of the folks that my parents came to know as they established their first home in The Bronx, and then with her, and then moved into their own home were a mixed bag of African Americans who were born in the South and moved here, a variety of folks of Caribbean descent from all over, Panama, Jamaica, Trinidad, in fact one of the tenants in—one of the early tenants in my parents' home was a Trinidadian couple that we became close to. So it was a whole variety of people that they came to know in their experience.

MN: Now was your—you know, what year were you born?

MC: 1960.

MN: Okay, and so you were the first-born?

MC: I was the first and only.

MN: Only? So you grew up as an only child.

MC: Yes.

MN: Me too.

MC: It's a wonderful thing but it has its demands. When your parents age.

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: April 6, 2010

MN: Right, no this is true. Now, was the culture in your home visibly West Indian when you were growing up?

MC: Yes.

MN: In terms of the food and the--?

MC: Yes. The food, the discipline I would say, the values, certainly in terms of the primacy of education. Yes, I think those are some of the key things.

MN: What was the typical West Indian breakfast?

MC: Well the typical West Indian breakfast could include stuff from the typical West Indian dinner.

[Laughter]

MC: But let me see, is there really Bajan breakfast? I don't think there's a Bajan breakfast so much as other countries like Jamaica has, aki and salt fish and those kind of things. I don't know, I don't know that I experienced the kind of Bajan breakfast in that, in that way. What there was, was certainly in my home, kind of carry over of more of an agrarian culture that comes from I would say plantation life in Barbados. So that dinner happens relatively early in the day, 6 o'clock is not a dinner hour, it's you're eating dinner at 2 or 1. Because that really was, essentially as I understand it traveling back and forth from Barbados, the time when the men who were working the land would come in and eat and have their big meal before their next kind of activity of the day. So that's a kind of Caribbean but also in my home a Bajan thing. So particularly Sunday dinners by 2 o'clock you're done with dinner. You start cooking early, you're sitting down to eat by noon, 12:30, by 2 o'clock dinner is done and you're kind of relaxing for the rest of the day. So that's, that's a different kind of cultural norm.

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: April 6, 2010

MN: Did your family attend church?

MC: There's where things get interesting.

[Laughter]

MC: Both of my parents were religious and probably more so in their home country than when they came here. I don't think that they were able to find a home church that they could identify with.

Pamela Lewis (PL): What was their denomination?

MC: My mother and my father was born in quote the city of Barbados, Saint Michael, my mother is from the country and very different I think religious experiences between them. My father was Anglican so Episcopalian, and very much involved in, you know the whole Episcopalian life in Barbados. My mother was raised in what was called a mission. And that's more of, I guess what you would identify, more kind of like your storefront church here. But their, I think it is connected with more a international denomination called Church of God. So I would call it more closely, a kind of cross between Baptist and charismatic. Because I've kind of had both experiences when I've gone to Barbados so I'm trying to place the difference in those. So my parents really never found necessarily a home church.

PL: Did they ever go to Our Lady of Grace? Because that's an Episcopalian--.

MC: Yes. That's, that's--.

MN: Our Lady of Grace--.

MC: Catholic School.

MN: And what street was it on?

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: April 6, 2010

MC: 225th Street. Well, between because the school and the church are together on one block, it's between 225th and 226th on Bronxwood Avenue. And that is a largely now, and it was not then, Caribbean church.

MN: Now, are your earliest memories of your block, was it a multi-racial block or--?

MC: Very much so. Very much so, my earliest memories in fact, my mom, who's probably the oldest resident on the block now, because she was among the first--.

MN: Okay so this is again, this is--?

MC: 218th Street between Bronxwood and Pauling Avenues. Yes Northeast Bronx. That's where they bought their first home in 1964.

MN: Okay and was it a 2-family house?

MC: It is.

MN: And did they rent out one of the floors?

MC: They rented out the apartment until very recently.

MN: So they were the first Black family on the block as far as you can tell?

MC: They were not the first Black family because there was a Black family before my parents, who emigrated from the South. And there was a Hispanic family that also was there. But those were kind of the earliest residents on the block until it became populated with a whole mix of Caribbeans and others on the block.

MN: Right, and was there any tension on the block in terms of your recollection of--?

MC: Not in my recollection. Neighbors were really neighbors. Folks were able to talk to each other and socialize. My father was a big party guy so he would have lots of opportunities to kind of gather neighbors--.

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

MN: So he would throw parties in the back yard?

MC: We have a full basement and back yard. So the basement got very well used in my young years with all different kinds of parties and weddings and all kinds of things.

[Break in Tape]

MN: So it sounds like an enjoyable childhood.

MC: It was a lot of fun, it was a lot fun.

PL: What about the Edenwald Housing, that was already built correct?

MC: Edenwald was already built and Edenwald in my young years in growing up, grammar school, even high school was a place to stay away from. It always had a bad reputation.

PL: In the '60s--.

MN: Yes, and how far away was Edenwald from your--?

MC: Edenwald, it's, it's within walking distance, it's maybe 5-10 minutes. Edenwald is like 228th. Starting on Laconia and working back, yes--.

PL: Actually it goes even before 228th I would say.

MC: Right, because it's like 224th even.

PL: Yes.

MN: So in the mid '60s Edenwald was a place you kept away from.

MC: Yes, you didn't--.

MN: Now what was your experience like at Our Lady of Grace Elementary School, what are your first recollections of that?

MC: Well let me, let me go before that because I started, when I started school I went to public school for 4 years. I went to P.S. 76 which I think now is not called P.S. 76 anymore but it still

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

exists with a new name. And I went there until my parents were concerned about my landing in Evander Childs High School as the go to high school for students coming out of public schools so with granny's help we managed to get me moved into Our Lady of Grace in the 4th grade. And that was—it was a fun experience.

MN: Was there a big difference between the public school and the Catholic school in terms of what was going on in the classroom?

MC: From a discipline point of view absolutely. Absolutely, absolutely. At the time that I went to Our Lady of Grace, which would then be in the late '60s, let me get this right, '74, it was very much controlled by nuns. The principal was a nun and I cannot remember her name, but I can see her face and her habit. And she instilled the fear of God in you, if not of the rap on the knuckles and she would deliver.

MN: With a ruler?

MC: Absolutely, absolutely. And that was, that was that era.

MN: Did you ever need to be reprimanded that way?

MC: I had good parents for that, I didn't need the nuns to do that.

MN: So you knew enough to--?

MC: I knew enough to be, to be obedient, although I was somewhat talkative in class and that got back to my mother which did not make her happy. But I knew enough that—I knew where my beating would come from, so, so I knew enough to be obedient.

MN: Did your parents tell you from an early age that education is going to be of great importance to you?

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: April 6, 2010

MC: I think they always instilled how important education was and I think from a very early age both of my parents by their spending time with me around reading and math and homework and all that stuff, kind of lived that principle.

MN: Now were you precocious in terms of being an early reader?

MC: I have to say by reputation I've heard that I was.

[Laughter]

MC: And the way that, maybe say an early learner, I don't know if necessarily an early reader. But my parents always kind of worked different work schedules so that someone would be home. So most of the time my mother was working nights and my father was working days and I—in my young years spent a lot of time with my dad at home. So he was reading to me and we were seeing stuff on TV, he was quizzing me about it and then would have, you know, occasional friends over and I'd identify things in commercials and they'd say wow, she can read. Which I don't think I was reading necessarily at 2 but was kind of an early learner.

PL: I don't know if you said this but what was your father's highest level of education?

MC: My father's highest level of education? Was probably equivalent to maybe 7th or 8th grade.

MN: Wow, and did he ever go back to school in the United States?

MC: He did not, he did not.

PL: The reason why I ask is clearly, even if you don't have that high of a education yourself, as a parent growing up in the West Indies, the education is still a primary factor.

MC: Yes, and I think one of the things with Barbados and parentage from—and those descendent from Barbadians is that education is a major value in Barbados. Since education essentially free and the standard of education in Barbados is very high that is something that

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

carries over for most Barbadians when they come to this country is the principle that your children will be as well educated as you can make them.

MN: That raises an interesting question in terms of identity. Was your—as a child—was your primary identity Bajan or Barbadian, West Indian, or Black, or all three? And which one did you think was more important?

MC: To some extent it kind of depends on the environment that you're in. When you're home with your parents, you kind of identify with the West Indian, Barbadian cultural norms that rule your house. When you're in school I think I was more of an African American girl. Because that's how you identify with your peers in class, with your little friend, hang out group, activities that you might've been in, although in grammar school there wasn't necessarily, you know, kind of identified ethnic division per se. Well you know, Blacks stuck with Blacks, Hispanic you kind of get that generally, but I would say in the school setting I identified more African American.

MN: Now what about something like music? What was the music you were exposed to in your house relative to your own emerging musical tastes?

MC: I would have to say that I had a very deep schooling in jazz by my father. Who was a very serious jazz aficionado from his years in Barbados, furthermore coming here. So he had a phenomenal album collection at the time.

PL: Who were some of his favorites?

MC: Oh my goodness. Well he had, you know, Stan Getz, and Oscar Peterson, and let's see if I can remember some of--.

MN: Your father sounds like—he sounds like an intellectual.

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: April 6, 2010

MC: A practical intellectual I would say. Yes he kind of learned by experience and conversation. He was a wonderful conversationalist. He would talk to anybody about anything. And engage people relatively easily. So I think all of the jazz greats, and even some of the jazz unknowns, he educated me about. He was a big saxophone guy.

MN: He played saxophone.

MC: Listened. He was, he was a, he was—he loved music, my dad loved music. So I really kind of learned it very well.

MN: Did you play a musical instrument growing up?

MC: I played piano. I don't play it as well as I used to, but I studied it for a while, classical piano.

PL: You said your mom was from the countryside, what type of music was she into?

MC: My mom was very much from a household that was focused on Christian values. So her music generally church hymns, Christian music and to this day that's her preference. She'll, you know, kind of listen to popular music but you know—my dad and I would talk about anything from jazz to classical to R & B to soul. I'm sure if he were alive he'd try to figure a little bit of hip-hop out but I don't know if he would like it. But he—he would run the gamut of musical taste.

MN: Now where were you sent for piano lessons?

MC: To the home of a family friend who to this day teaches piano. And she was an organist in Barbados who moved here with her husband in the '60s, Judith Barnum. She's an organist here at many churches as well.

PL: Is she a teacher as well, did she ever teach her family?

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

MC: Well, she teaches a couple music classes at Incarnation which is a church in Washington Heights. She also is an organist for Incarnation as well as other churches. Her children are organists as well.

MN: Did she live near you?

MC: Yes.

PL: I know a Barnum that lives in that area--.

MC: She was on Barnes Avenue and 220th.

MN: So it sounds like you were in a really culturally rich environment in your home and neighborhood.

MC: Very much so, very much so.

MN: Now, did you ever develop musical taste independently of your parents with your friends?

MC: Oh, yes. I mean I think I listened to all of the popular music of my time. So I listened to, you know, everything that was kind of going on in the '60s and the '70s. From all of the R & B and soul to some of the more kind of contemporary, I mean I'm a big Chicago fan. So I think my tastes kind of again run the gamut. Because I've been exposed to a whole range from school and home.

MN: Now, you mentioned your parents had this trepidation about Evander. Does that mean Evander had a bad reputation?

MC: Absolutely.

MN: And this is in the late '60s, early '70s?

MC: Absolutely.

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: April 6, 2010

MN: Now in terms of—was Evander and Edenwald considered like—like 2 sides of the same coin?

MC: I guess, you know, I don't know—I would have to say yes in kind of the short hand.

Evander was its own high school for the schools in that—I guess region then of The Bronx. And it just had a reputation of having disruptive students, not good outcomes, generally and if you had an alternative to having your child go there, the place to avoid having your child go there.

MN: Now, Our Lady of Grace was an 8th grade school--?

MC: Yes, it was K through, K through 8.

MN: K through 8. And so you would go directly from there to whatever high school you were going to?

MC: Correct.

MN: And what were the feeder schools? Where did they send most of their students?

MC: A lot went to Spellman and then some went to the same sex school, which I ended up going to myself. So Aquinas.

MN: So you went to Aquinas?

MC: No I didn't go to Aquinas. I went to Saint Catherine's. Aquinas is one of them, Saint Catherine's.

MN: Now where is Saint Catherine's located?

MC: Saint Catherine's is on Williamsbridge Road and Pelham Parkway.

PL: I used to live right there too.

MC: We just follow each other.

[Laughter]

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

MN: Okay, so what color uniform did you have at Our Lady of Grace?

MC: I had a green plain uniform and I can see the plaid because I hated it. Green plaid uniform with a white blouse, green tie and to this day I will not wear green.

MN: Now do you have any pictures or is that a bad question?

[Laughter]

MC: I hope I don't have any pictures from that time.

MN: And so you went from there to Saint Catherine's. What was the Saint Catherine's uniform?

MC: The Saint Catherine's uniform was more palatable. And I think uniforms are a wonderful thing frankly. I think they're a wonderful thing, I think they save parents money and kind of avoid a lot of the nonsense that goes on among young children about besting each other with clothes. So it was a kind of cobalt blue, it was a nice blue.

MN: Cobalt blue, which is a dark or a lighter blue?

MC: It's kind of a vivid, tending toward the dark but not too dark. That was a skirt and vest and white blouse. And you had to wear knee socks.

PL: Was there a requirement, a length requirement for the skirt?

MC: Oh yes, there's always a length requirements that doesn't mean that you abide by it. These Catholic girls come on now.

MN: Now were the teachers you had in Our Lady of Grace and then in Saint Catherine's supportive of you in terms of high aspirations?

MC: Absolutely. Very supportive. In Our Lady of Grace and the teachers that I remember most, were all nuns at the time. Most with habits but one without. Who were all very supportive, I think of all of the students in terms of pushing them past their, kind of comfort zone. And we had

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

2 wonderful teachers in 8th grade, I think both now who are dead who really were, you know, very much a cheerleading section for their students.

MN: Now, did you have a sense by 7th or 8th grade of what you wanted to do with your life?

MC: Yes.

MN: And what was that?

MC: Become a lawyer.

MN: So becoming a lawyer was something that was impressed upon you very early?

MC: Yes.

MN: Is this something that came from your parents? Or its something you chose yourself?

MC: I think it might've been a little bit of both. Certainly at the time when that aspiration came into my head we were kind of watching the, the civil rights movement of the '60s and watching people like Constance Baker Motley and Thurgood Marshall break new ground in the law. So that was compelling to me.

MN: Was there something about—were you somebody who was—who spoke out a lot, very verbal? You know, in other words there are people who have high aspirations who might choose medicine or teaching. What for you, what made you gravitate to the law, let's say rather than medicine.

MC: I think I've always been a talker. So I think the ability to express and debate was certainly of interest. Although at the time that I was forming the desire to be a lawyer I didn't fully understand all of--.

MN: Now were you somebody who ended up as a class president and things of that sort or--?

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: April 6, 2010

MC: Not necessarily class president but had a variety of kind of leadership roles in different parts of my school experience.

PL: I was going to ask you as far as being in a gender school, all girls school, how do you think that played out as far as giving more umph maybe to become a leader?

MC: I think there--.

PL: Was it like more empowering?

MC: Well yes, I think gender schools and Saint Catherine's in particular when I was there was about kind of shaping women who could be leaders. So the push good basic education but also kind of looking at yourself as a feminist.

MN: That's fascinating—so you were getting a feminist consciousness from a Bronx Catholic high school?

MC: Yes, yes.

MN: Was the term feminism used?

MC: It was clearly used by one of our senior English teachers, yes.

MN: And who was a nun or--?

MC: No, she was not.

MN: And what was the teacher's name?

MC: Ms. Gaber.

MN: So Ms. Gaber was--.

MC: No she's still alive, I wonder--. But she was a literature teacher and had us reading, you know, a lot of kind of I guess on and off curricular materials. But would definitely inculcate a kind of feminist mantra in the class.

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: April 6, 2010

MN: Fascinating. It's not what you would expect in Catholic high school.

MC: Yes, well Saint Catherine's was an interesting place at the time.

PL: I have a, I have a friend who goes there and—she went there I should say, she's around my age and she told me that it was very feminist, I just wanted to know if it was like that, at that time.

MC: Yes, it definitely was.

MN: And what was the religious order that was—ran Saint Catherine's?

MC: I think it was the Dominicans.

MN: Dominican sisters. Because I've met a lot of very progressive nuns over the years who are involved in social activism and so it's not surprising to me, but it's interesting that this was a niche where that took place.

PL: What kind of classes or courses did they take if you remember?

MC: Oh, God let me see if I can remember.

PL: Were there any interesting electives, Dr. Naison teaches From Rock n' Roll to Hip-Hop.

MC: You know, there probably were but for me to recall them at the time, I can't, I can't say that I do.

MN: Now, one question, did you make friends in elementary school and high school who are still your friends today?

MC: Yes. I have a friend from 4th grade at Our Lady of Grace who's still very actually—we kind of followed each other and separated at high school because she left Saint Catherine's in her junior year, she graduated early. But we're still very close. I still have contact with some of my other classmates from Our Lady of Grace and some also from Saint Catherine's.

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: April 6, 2010

MN: Now when it came time for college was Fordham the main school on your horizon? Were there others as well?

MC: It was one of a select few. Harvard was another.

MN: So they were—students at Saint Catherine's were encouraged to aspire to the Ivy League.

MC: Many of them were. The African Americans among us got mixed messages from our guidance counselor.

MN: Explain [inaudible].

MC: There was an episode particularly as I was thinking about, you know, the group of schools and you look at your, I guess your kind of aspirational schools and then your safe schools and I had a conversation I recall with a guidance counselor as I was trying to package applications and I don't recall exactly what she said but the tenor, when I told her I was thinking of applying to Harvard was that you should be careful because that may be a little bit out of your kind of range and maybe you should think about nursing programs. That did not sit well when I brought that home to my mother.

MN: Did any of your classmates go to Harvard?

MC: No, no I don't think any of my classmates—and I did not go to Harvard after an unfortunate interview with a Harvard alum.

MN: What?

PL: --made it unfortunate?

MC: The greeting when I came to her door and she opened it and her jaw nearly fell to the floor and said oh I thought you were Irish. And it was kind of down hill experience after that.

MN: Wow, and was this in New York City?

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

MC: It was in the Upper East Side in Manhattan.

MN: Wow, that's not even subtle.

MC: No--.

[Laughter]

MN: Ah, okay. This is in the mid '70s?

MC: Yes, this was, this was '77, '78 yes.

MN: Wow.

MC: A shall we say, and uneducated, educated woman.

MN: So Fordham was on your list of schools. Did you apply both downtown and uptown or just uptown?

MC: I just applied this campus.

MN: And you applied to Fordham College or--?

MC: Yes.

MN: Okay and did you live on campus or--?

MC: I did not, but I might as well have, as much time as I did here, you know either studying or in a variety of activities.

MN: So what was Fordham like for your?

MC: Fordham was lots of fun. As I was walking on campus today I was thinking that, kind of the life on campus probably hasn't really changed dramatically because of the kind of infrastructure of the campus lends itself to this kind—a little bit more cloistered feel in relation to Fordham Road and certainly Fordham Road right now is very different from the Fordham Road that was when I came to school or when I was growing up.

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: April 6, 2010

MN: Maybe explain that. What was your recollection of Fordham Road growing up as opposed to Fordham Road now?

MC: Fordham Road when I was a young girl, I would say in elementary school and maybe even into high school was almost like the 5th Avenue of The Bronx. It was a destination place that you—at least my parents would dress up to come to. The Concourse was pristine, it was largely inhabited by then I guess, middle-aged Jewish population, predominately. It was very difficult for African Americans to get a foothold into some of the pre-war buildings on The Concourse. So it was just a very different feel. There was Alexander's at the top of Fordham Road which was a major destination store and it was kind of the Macy's, Gimball's of this part of The Bronx. So it—Fordham Road was kind of the place to come to—as like a promenade. It is not that. It is now the kind of urban, somewhat grungy thoroughfare for the now emerging population that's in this environment. But it's, it's not that draw that it had been at that time.

[END OF SIDE A]

[BEGIN SIDE B]

MN: Now the campus itself, you're, you're commuting what—did you join student activities relatively early?

MC: Not I think—not the first or the second year because I was focused on making sure that I was bringing home good grades but after that I joined, I think there was a Black student's association at the time that was active and I joined that. And then I also joined the chorus. Which I was very active in. So those were the 2 things that kind of took up my extracurricular time.

PL: This was during the '70s, the late '70s?

MC: Yes, this is late '70s because I was here from '78-'82.

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: April 6, 2010

PL: Were there racial tensions?

MC: I think there definitely was a racial divide. And that probably was felt even more in terms of the students that lived here. Because most of the students who were living here were White. And most of the students who were commuting were African American or Latino. So there was that kind of, you know, the campus looks one way when we're not here and it looks--.

MN: Now, now were you in HEOP?

MC: No, I was not.

PL: They had HEOP back then.

MN: They had HEOP right back into the early '70s, you know Doctor Mangum was involved with that and upward bound and so all those things were there. So what did you major in?

MC: I majored in English and Spanish.

MN: Now were you fluent in Spanish when you were in high school?

MC: I was not fluent when I was in high school but I became fluent while I was here and in fact spent a summer in Spain while I was here. And that's when I was the most fluent and it's been downhill ever since.

MN: Now, you know, the late '70s, you know early '80s is a golden age of hip-hop in The Bronx. Were you aware of that going on at the time?

MC: I don't think I was aware of any of it. And I think that probably was because, again, the focus on doing well in school and I think there was an air, at least it was communicated then about hip-hop on the edge, therefore the culture being on the edge--.

MN: Right, and, and the parties being a little bit dangerous?

MC: Yes, yes.

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

MN: Which is not an unrealistic view at the time.

MC: I missed participation in that life of The Bronx.

MN: Did you go to any live music in Manhattan when you were at Fordham?

MC: Yes, I went to, I went to the Philharmonic, I went to see jazz with my dad, those kind of things.

Unidentified Person (UP): Did you have any interest in reggae, you know Bob Marley and--?

MC: Yes, not that I kind of sought it out in terms of live performance but certainly listened, you know, reggae and ska and all that variety of music and world music for that matter beyond even reggae.

MN: Did the movie, *The Harder They Come*, was that something which crossed your radar screen.

MC: It did. I don't think I saw it on screen but yes, I did see it probably years after.

MN: Were there teachers at Fordham who made a big impression on you?

MC: The teachers who made the biggest impression on me were my Spanish teachers at the time. And I had one who actually was a very good, kind of support to me because ultimately I was involved in the honors program when I was here at Fordham. So I had to write a thesis and I developed a very complex issue to write on which nearly killed me at the time.

MN: What was that?

PL: Now I need to know.

MC: It was comparing a particular novella that I had read in a literature class, structurally to a sonata.

MN: Wow.

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

MC: Yes, I don't know what possessed me to do that.

MN: Okay, now who ran the honors program in those days?

MC: You're going to ask me something I don't even think that I can remember.

MN: Was it in that little house?

MC: It was, it was. So I had a Spanish teacher Ronald, Ronald Mendez.

MN: Oh, Mendez Clarke?

MC: Yes.

MN: He's a great guy, he's a very good friend of mine.

MC: Oh, God well I would love to--.

MN: He's still here.

MC: He's still here!

MN: He runs the study abroad program. Ronald is a great guy.

MC: Fabulous, fabulous, fabulous man.

MN: So Ronald was your--? I'll have to tell him that I ran into you. I see him all the time.

MC: He was kind of a co-advisor as I was developing this thesis, the person that encouraged me to do the summer in Spain. Very, very—great guy.

MN: Now did you, did you take any courses in the political science with Pedro Caban?

MC: That name sounds really familiar I may have taken one, yes.

MN: Because Pedro and Ronald, you know were friends. And we all played softball together.

MC: Oh, cool, but Ronald really kind of cultivated I think my love of the language.

MN: Wow, now you're still thinking about law as goal?

MC: Yes.

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: April 6, 2010

MN: Did you join the debate team?

MC: Not at all while I was here.

[Break In The Interview]

MN: So okay, you're not in the debate team but you're, you're directed towards law school. And what're the law schools you were encouraged to apply to?

MC: I think looking at my SAT scores I was encouraged to look safely because I was not the highest score, nor the lowest. I applied to Fordham and Pace and I think one other school if I recall. Heard from Pace and the other school, Fordham I heard very late, when I did hear initially, I was wait listed. And I think I spoke to a dean here and some other folks and got off the wait list and got accepted formally to the law school.

MN: Now, when you went to Fordham Law School were you still living in The Bronx and commuting or--?

MC: I was commuting yes, yes, commuting back and forth from Lincoln Center to home.

MN: And what was that law school experience like?

MC: That was an interesting experience. Fordham Law School at the time, and this '82, was a very unique place in terms of a law school sitting in the center of New York but not reflecting—at least in the day division the diversity of the city. I was 1 of 3 minorities in a class of—how large was that first year class? It could be about 3 to 400 students.

MN: So when you're saying 3 students of color out of over 300 students?

MC: Yes.

MN: And the other 2 students were--?

MC: 2 African American women.

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

MN: Okay, so there were 3 African American women, there were no Puerto Ricans?

MC: There were, there were—well let me say this, there were some that identified themselves as Latino and then there were some that had Latino surnames that lived in Great Neck that did not identify themselves as Latino.

MN: Got it.

PL: Did you see people changing their last names, trying to take maybe the vowels off the end--?

MC: You know, what I found, one of my friends was Michelle Cruz, and you would never tell that Michelle was a Latina in any way shape or form because she really identified herself as a suburban White American.

PL: How was that image for African Americans at this time, or even just to say for yourself?

MC: Well the 3 of us that were in class became very close. Because we really felt that we needed to support each other in a place where there weren't a lot of folks, even at the faculty level that looked like us. And I think after the first year, myself and the other African American woman who was in my class kind of banded to help figure out why the numbers were so small. Because Fordham at the time, and I think still has a day and a evening division. The evening division in the law school was much more diverse. And I think also by virtue of the students who came in the evening, a lot of police officers, correction officers, etcetera, so that drew a population. But that population relative, to I think the larger class was still small. We were fortunate at the time to have John Ferrick as the dean of the law school. And some of my, friend and I and some in the evening division kind of sat down with the dean and said this is not right. And there has to be some other way for us to multiply numbers in a school sitting in the middle

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

of New York City. And we worked with the dean and we worked with some of the professors to develop some, I guess the best way to describe them were tutorial classes for first year students particularly. Because what we learned over time was that the minority students coming in first year were not succeeding. They weren't, you know, kind of getting past either mid-year or doing horribly on finals because they couldn't find study groups, you know, they just—they didn't have a support network. As others did to carry them through.

MN: Now my recollection of like the '80s at Fordham Rose Hill was that the student population was becoming more conservative. Was that an issue at like the law school? Was this like, were the students there not only White but fairly conservative or that wouldn't be the case?

MC: Well I can't say that I run across a radical contingent at the law school at that time. So I would have to say that the folks at the law school at the time were about the business of doing well in law school, getting as high as they could in law review or otherwise and getting the firms. So there wasn't necessarily, I mean except for the U.S. Attorney's Office a push toward public service per se. There wasn't necessarily a push toward, which is not to say that there weren't opportunities in terms of clinical programs that you could participate in. But a push toward, kind of civil rights issues etcetera, etcetera.

MN: Were there any professors who made a big impact on you?

MC: Yes. There's one who's now a federal judge. Deborah Batts. Who was very supportive of our effort of kind of increasing the numbers of minority students at Fordham. The dean, Dean Ferrick is a salt of the earth human being and really made it his business to listen to our concerns and provide resources and support to carry things forward. Georgine Barrow who I don't, I don't

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: April 6, 2010

know if she's also on the bench, was another kind of, very supportive of students in general but also minority students in particular. Who else? Those are the ones that stand out immediately.

MN: Now, I guess now after their first year in law school students get their internships, is that—was that something that happened as clearly then as it does now?

MC: Yes. First year in law school is kind of a dividing line between those that are going to get, you know, their offers from the white shoes firms to have a—you know participate in their summer programs and the rest of us who have to figure life out.

MN: Now was there any sense that you were going to go for those white shoe firms.

MC: That was not available.

MN: It was no matter what.

MC: They would—unless at that time as and African American individual I think, female or male, unless you were probably in the top 10 and on law review, they were not talking to you.

PL: You spoke of support networks and not having any, were there—I know Fordham is a Jesuit campus so we didn't have fraternities and sororities but you could still pledge in other places—did they have any or were you aware of--?

MC: Yes, they had, I think they had sororities here, I think AKA was here at the time.

PL: At Fordham?

MC: I think so. I think so. But I was not a sorority kind of girl so that never--.

MN: Now at law school you thought that study groups were important?

MC: Study groups are critical at law school. And what I think made it harder for minority students is that study groups tend to be a microcosm of the social environment of the school. So that like people gravitate to like people. And it was very difficult to kind of wedge yourself into

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

the all White study group, although myself and my colleague figured out ways to do that because we're like, we are passing first year and moving forward, so we have to figure this out. But the kind of social dynamic of working your way into a study group or with the people who can really stretch you is a difficult thing.

MN: Were there White students who reached out to you and your friends?

MC: Yes.

MN: And you ended up making some good friends in law school?

MC: Absolutely, absolutely, yes friends that I still have.

PL: Did you feel the need to assimilate as far as self-image is concerned, meaning hairstyles or trying to fit in--?

MC: I would say not so much that I felt the need to assimilate but was always, I think my parents always instilled kind of putting whatever the best face forward was. So I didn't have the hair that I have now, then. I had relaxed, relaxed or kind of pressed hair. So I guess there was a feeling of doing what you needed to do to succeed and be perceived well. So yes, I would say that more was impressed by parents.

UP: What do you mean when you say perceived well? Do you mean like as not being a radical?

MC: Exactly, exactly. Not being radical, not being troublemaker, not being—not being a difficult Black woman, you know that kind of thing.

MN: Oh, wow. Now were there people who like, when you were in college and law school who embodied all those things? That were in your cohort?

MC: I probably was the most like that in law school.

[Laughter]

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

MC: Around the issue of why aren't there more people that look like me in this class? And I have to say that probably, there probably were a few folks like that at Fordham, not that stick out for me but probably in the Black student's association then because again I think the divide really was, we're the Black folks coming in from kind of the city onto this campus what's the deal? So yes, there probably were a few.

PL: Do you feel like there was color discrimination among African-Americans? Light skin, dark skin?

MC: I can't say that I really saw that. Not to say that it didn't happen but I can't say that I was aware.

MN: Now, you know after your first year, did you have a sense of where—what kind of law you were going to go into?

MC: After my first year and it becoming clear based on my grades and that I was not going to be in law review, that the opportunities of the firm life was not going to be open to me, I focused on public service. And trying to get internships that would give me a bird's eye into what that was like. So I worked in The Bronx court system a summer, I worked in the American Arbitration Association for a summer in a program that was developed to increase the number of Black mediators, so it was kind of, you know, finding those places where you could get the best breadth of exposure and experience. And similarly when I completed law school in the, kind of early interview process that I guess would kind of start now, again the firms were not the places that were looking for me, so I was interviewing with the DA's office, with the New York City Law Department, those places.

MN: And so you ended up in the New York City Law Department?

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: April 6, 2010

MC: Yes, I got an offer from the Manhattan DA's Office. And was very heavily courted for that. By Linda Fairstein at the time. But I thought about it and considered that one of the things that I heard about starting out with criminal law is that if you stay in it too long you get branded as a criminal attorney and I didn't want that so then went to the law department.

MN: Now all this time you're living in The Bronx?

MC: Yes.

MN: And did you feel—okay so the law department, you're working downtown?

MC: Working downtown, yes on Church Street.

MN: Did it ever occur to you to move to Manhattan?

MC: Never, never, never. There was not an appeal. There was not appeal of quote the big city necessarily.

PL: Where do you live now?

MC: I live on Valentine Avenue.

PL: So you're still a Bronx girl?

MC: I'm a Bronx girl--.

MN: Valentine between where and where?

MC: Valentine between 201st and 202nd Street.

MN: There's a good Korean restaurant pretty close to there.

MC: Yes, yes. A whole Korean enclave. The man of the food. It's a great way to be. I have a photography colleague who's similar.

[Laughter]

MC: Knows where the good eats are.

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: April 6, 2010

MN: Yes, but so, I mean this is interesting because it contradicts everybody's image of The Bronx. Here you are, you know, highly successful, you've come through, you know the Catholic schools through Fordham, you've got a good job downtown and staying in The Bronx?

MC: Staying in The Bronx.

MN: So what, did any people tell you, why are you staying--?

MC: Oh, constantly. Why don't you move to Manhattan? Why aren't you in Brooklyn? You know, because I have a lot of friends in Brooklyn. I love The Bronx. It's—there's nothing that you miss from Manhattan by living in The Bronx, I think. Particularly if you are one who likes a neighborhood. Which is not to say that there are not neighborhoods in Manhattan and certainly there are neighborhoods in Brooklyn but it's just a different feel. My sense of Manhattan and that being perceived as the core end be all and end all of New York City and for me it's not.

MN: And so at this time you're living in the same neighborhood as you grew up in?

MC: Yes.

MN: In a different house or the same house?

MC: Same house. Same house, my mother still lives in that house.

MN: So did you get your own apartment in the house?

MC: I actually no, I kind of got to a point where I think by the time I had my third legal job decided it's time to spread your wings and kind of have your own space, so that's when I moved to Valentine Avenue.

MN: Wow, so you lived in the same apartment as your parents until your third legal job. Now maybe we should wrap it up. Because it is kind of late. Why don't we say a few final words for this interview and then we'll do another one to take you further. Okay, you know, I mean, how

Interviewee: Marjorie Cadogan

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Date: April 6, 2010

did you resist the peer pressure for you know, to sort of go join everybody? Here you are, you're living with your parents, you're a highly successful person, how did you stay on your path?

MC: When you ask, when you ask me that—I'm not sure what you're asking.

MN: Yes, it's like, knowing like—even in a university people are very curious and, you know so, you know it's, I think it's a tribute to The Bronx that you stayed.

MC: Yes, well I guess, I'm very rooted. So again, there is, there is nothing that Manhattan or Brooklyn has that is inordinately tempting or ever was for me to leave The Bronx if there's something better there.

MN: Okay good.

[END OF SIDE B]

[END OF INTERVIEW]