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Calderon, Nicholas Interview 1

Bronx African American History Project
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Mark Naison (MN): Nicholas could you start by spelling your name and giving us your date of birth?

Nicholas Calderon (NC): Nicholas spelled N-I-C-H-O-L-A-S Calderon C-A-L-D-E-R-O-N. I was born 1986, May 12, 1986.

MN: okay, could you please tell us a little about your family and growing up in the Bronx?

NC: Well, as like a child, I was in foster care because you know my mother, she was on you know drug addiction problems and stuff.

MN: Now, how old were you when you were put in foster care?

NC: I was about two years old.

MN: Two years old. So you were with your mother for about two years?

NC: Not even, I wasn't even really with her. I was like staying with my dad and stuff.

Noel Wolfe: Do you remember your mom?

NC: Yeah, [muffled voice] we're close now, but at the time, growing up, she wasn't around too much.

Videographer: Could you take off your watch?

NC: take it off?

V: yeah okay, thanks.

NW: She needs you for two seconds.

[Break in Session]

MN: So where were your mother and father living at the time you were born? What Neighborhood?

NC: Well, they were staying at Taft Projects over in East Harlem, O and Taft, 112th and Madison.

MN: So you were actually born in Manhattan?

NC: Yeah, Mount Sinai Hospital.

MN: And then when you were in foster care, what borough were you in?

NC: I was staying with my grandmother, but it was a foster care agency in the Bronx.

MN: You were staying with your grandmother? What was her name?

NC: Ruth Williams

MN: Ruth Williams, and where was she living? What neighborhood in the Bronx?

NC: 144th Street, Cyprus Avenue.

MN: So that was where you grew up. You were living with your grandmother Ruth Williams?

NC: Yes.

MN: And where was she from originally?

NC: She's from down south originally; but when she came up here that's where she was staying.

MN: What state was she in?

NC: South Carolina, Charleston to be exact.

MN: Okay, and when you moved in with her, which was I guess about 1988 or something, how many other children were there in the house?

NC: Well since she was a foster care mother legally, it was me, my sister, my brother and two other kids, there through foster care.

MN: Now your sister and brother, these were biological sisters and brother who were also children of your mother?

NC: Yes.

MN: How old was your grandmother when you moved in there?

NC: She's about 70 now, so I'll say--

MN: She was in her 50s?

NC: Yeah, like 58--, no I'm 24, she was lik3-- about 50, or something like that.

NW: Do you know if your grandmother took you out of your mom's home?

NC: Yeah, yes she did.

NW: She just came and took you? And then--

NC: Actually, my mother gave up her rights, parentally like, you know what I'm saying?

MN: 144th and Cyprus Avenue, was this in a privately owned building or public housing?

NC: Public.

MN: Which project was it?

NC: Beekman Houses

MN: Oh you were in the Beekman Houses, which were pretty near St. Mary's Park

NC: Oh yeah, right across the street. [muffled laughter]

MN: [laughter].

MN: So that's where you grew up?

NC: Yes sir.

MN: Now, do you know anything about the background of your mother's drug problems? What drug was it?

NC: Crack

MN: It was crack?

NC: Yes sir.

MN: And was this something that was talked about openly in your family? Or you found out later?

NC: Well, it was never really talked about openly, as I got older, I just understood more and more you know what I'm saying? Like, stuff that was happening and why. Cause my grandmother, she wouldn't tell us everything, like specifically, cause she never really wanted us to know that kind of thing. Until we got to an older age and we could understand.

MN: Right

NC: But growing up, being like around the neighborhood I was in, that's all you see. When you walk out the door you see crack pipes, people shooting up on the stoop. So the drug thing, I already had in my mind from a young age.

MN: So around the Beekman Houses, this was totally visible everyday.

NC: Everyday, everyday.

MN: To tell Noel, that's a legendary spot for drugs in the Bronx. I've had students actually write papers about it, you know at the time.

MN: So you grew up in the midst at the height of the crack epidemic--

NC: The worst

MN: With everything around you, did you hear gunshots growing up?

NC: Daily--everyday, every night.

MN: Right.

NC: I even seen a couple people get shot with my own eyes, around in that area. It was bad back then, like in the 90s and stuff growing up.

MN: Now, what elementary school did you go to?

NC: P.S 65

MN: Which was on what Street?

NC: 140th and Cyprus Avenue. It was right across the street. Now they call it-- now its called Mother Held Academy.

MN: When you were going there, was the school a safe zone, or was the crack atmosphere even into the school?

NC: It was only elementary school, so the crack wasn't really in there. But if we come out for recess in the playgrounds, across the street you could see like dealers standing on the corner, crackheads falling, dopeheads--

MN: So as a kid, there was no you know immunity from this, you saw it at school, you saw it at your house, you saw it in the streets, you saw it in the store--

NC: Everywhere.

NW: Do you remember if there were police officers stationed at your school like when you got out from school in the afternoon, if they were there?

NC: No.

MN: Now there's a police station pretty close by there--

NC: Yes.

MN: Was there any attempt by the police to try to deal with this that you could see?

NC: Nah. Not back then, not at all, wasn't too much police action at all really.

MN: Did they send undercover into your neighborhood?

NC: Yeah, they was like kind of scared, to come in, it was really bad, really bad.

MN: Did your grandmother work?

NC: No. She worked from home; she was a foster care mother.

MN: So she made income by the foster care and how did she try to protect you?

NC: She didn't let us go outside.

MN: So basically you went to school

NC: And that was it.

MN: And you stayed in the house.

NC: That's all.

MN: I know all about that cause I was coaching during those years.

NC: Okay

MN: Did you have good videogames?

NC: No, my grandmother wasn't big on none of that.

MN: So how did she keep you in the house? What would you do in the house?

Dawn Russel: Was it a reading environment?

NC: I would read. My grandmother wasn't the type to sit down and like, she doesn't voice her opinion, she doesn't talk much. So when we got home from school she would send us to our room to do our homework.

MN: Academics were stressed?

NC: Stressed, heavy.

MN: And all of you did your homework, and did well in school?

NC: Yes, at that time.

MN: So in elementary school, you did well in school?

NC: I was a grade A student.

MN: Doesn't surprise me at all. Did they track school in your class, so there was a one class, two class, three class and you trade?

NC: Only when I got to junior high school. In elementary school everybody was together.

MN: Everybody was together, what they call

heterogeneous groupings. See back in the early days they tracked people you know by ability level.

NC: Yeah I know.

MN: Did you have teachers who cared about you in elementary school?

NC: Oh yes, a couple, they tried to skip me two times, and my grandmother wouldn't allow it.

MN: Wow so you caught on to the math, the reading, you had high scores and all that stuff.

DR: The whole environment, how was that?

NC: It was cool, cool.

MN: It was the street and everything.

NC: Yeah, inside it was strict that's all, it wasn't like no abusive type thing like that, she was just strict.

MN: Now did you have contact with your father at all during those years when you were living with your grandmother?

NC: Not in the beginning, cause he was also a drug addict, on heroine.

MN: He was on heroine and your mother was on crack?

NC: Yes

NW: Did your mom ever come around to your Grandmother's house while you were living there?

NC: No

MN: So that all came later

NC: Yes [muffled response]

NW: Do you know if your Grandmother kept in touch with your mom?

NC: She used to tell us things like “She was okay”, because we used to always wonder where she just disappear to, she would tell us “your mom is okay, she loves you guys and all”.

MN: Ok now I’m going to ask the fun questions. What sort of food did you have in your grandmother’s house?

NC: She’s from the South so she cooks everything like soul food, grits with fish for breakfast, stuff like that.

MN: Grits with fried fish, fried Whiting?

NC: Yes sir, no bone [laughter].

MN: They have that at this place, Jimmy’s Luncheonette, you know that place?

NC: Yes, I know that place.

MN: They have grits and fish

NC: Yes, it’s by the concourse, a little past the concourse.

MN: What about music, what was the music you were exposed to?

NC: Living in my Grandmother’s house she used to play old school stuff like jazz and Marvin Gaye, stuff like that. My older brother was also staying there; he was a teenager at the time.

MN: Really?

NC: Yeah, Marquis. So on that side of things, me and him shared a room so whatever type of music he listened to, I automatically got. Because being that young, I used to always want to be like him. I couldn’t go out at the time.

MN: Okay, so was he into Hip Hop?

NC: Yes

MN: So you got exposed to the soul music from your grandmother and the Hip Hop from Marquis.

NC: Yes sir.

NW: Was Marquis allowed to go outside?

NC: Yeah, he was old enough at the time. He's like 7 years older than me.

MN: Was church a part of your background?

NC: Every Sunday.

MN: Which church?

NC: Willis Avenue Church

MN: Oh the Willis Avenue Church--

NC: Yeah.

MN: Did you enjoy going to church?

NC: At times, but my grandmother's like extra. She used to make us go to Sunday school church, stuff like that I didn't like. But after church they had little quiet lessons--

MN: Did the crack dealers keep away from the church out of respect for the people going?

NC: Well yeah, during church hours.

MN: So even out of the crack dealers, there was some respect for church and the people going?

NC: Yeah, as long as the church was open. If the church was closed, they don't care about that.

MN: Now what about school, when school was getting out? Did they at least try to let the kids get out?

NC: Yeah, they let the kids get out. They wait until everybody cleared the streets, and then they go back to doing what they do.

MN: So there was some sort of community conscience in the crack dealers?

NC: Yeah, you could say that, not a lot, but some.

MN: Did they sponsor any events in the neighborhoods? Like block parties?

NC: No, not over there, it was violent.

MN: Your dad was Puerto Rican and your mom was African American, did you have a dual identity? Did you think of yourself as part Puerto Rican, part Black?

NC: Well, at the time, I did, but my grandmother for some reason stressed the [idea] “you’re Black with Hispanic origin, but you’re Black”. To this day she’ll stress that. She thinks all Spanish people are black, and she’s just old school like that.

MN: In around Beekman, was it mixed, Black and Puerto Rican?

NC: Yeah, yeah definitely. There was more Black. Now its more Spanish, but back then it was more Black.

MN: Back then it was more Black than Spanish in the 80s.

NC: Yeah.

MN: And everybody got along pretty well? Or there was tension?

NC: It depends, like if they had a problem with somebody from a different neighborhood, then that’s when they get along the most. But then right after that, they go back to beating each other.

NW: Did you know who the drug dealers were in your neighborhood?

NC: Yeah a couple of them were my family members.

NW: A couple [of them] were your family members?

NC: Yeah my uncle.

[DR: He’s still speaking about elementary school right?] Crosstalk

NC: Yeah he’s locked up right now.

MN: In which prison upstate?

NC: Green Haven Facility.

MN: Yeah there's two: Green Haven, Greenville.

NC: Yeah one is for adolescents.

MN: Oh so he was in Green Haven

NC: [agreeing]

MN: Was this for drugs?

NC: [agreeing]

NW: And the people who were dealing in your neighborhood, did you know them mostly to live in the neighborhood?

NC: Yeah, all of them lived in the neighborhood, right upstairs, some of them in the same building.

NW: And did they always have weapons with them?

NC: I know my uncle did, I didn't really pay attention, being that he was so known out there, I didn't have to worry about nobody bothering me or nothing like that.

MN: So knowing your uncle gave protection.

NC: Yes

MN: How old was he at the time, your uncle?

NC: He's about 36 now, so--

MN: So he was like early 20s?

NC: Yeah he was early 20s.

MN: Heroin was run by more of a hierarchy. How old were the oldest people involved in crack?

NC: --The oldest?

MN: There were a lot of young people? Young people's business?

NC: There was a lot of young people. A few kids my age was even doing it. Not doing it—but--

MN: Helping out, being look-outs, holding the drugs.

NC: Yes sir.

NW: Did your uncle live in Beekman?

NC: Yes ma'am, lived in my house.

MN: Were there people living in Beekman like men and women who went to work everyday?

Got up on the morning went to a job, came back?

NC: Yeah you had those.

MN: Were they the minority?

NC: Yeah, definitely.

MN: So this was a majority of people either on public assistance or involved in drugs?

NC: Yes

MN: Were there any sports programs in the neighborhood for you growing up? Like after school programs?

NC: Yeah, not directly in that neighborhood, but a couple blocks down on saydance, they had an after school program in a different church.

MN: In a church; What about the local school? Did they have after school at your elementary school?

NC: My grandmother didn't let us go to after school there.

MN: What was St. Mary's park like in those days?

NC: Couldn't walk through at night.

MN: Couldn't walk through at night. Was it safe in the day?

NC: Sometimes.

MN: Did you ever go to the playground there?

NC: Yeah, I used to play basketball. Only when I was with people.

MN: One of the things in terms of the Bronx, today there are gangs: the Crips, the Bloods, Latin Kings, DDP. When you were coming up, were there gangs, or were these smaller crews?

NC: It had started right in that area, the Bloods. I don't know too much about the Crips.

DR: Is that where you became good? In that area?

NC: No?

MN: So even in the early 90s, the Bloods were in Beekman?

NC: Yeah, that's when they originally came to New York.

MN: In the 90s?

NC: Yeah like 91.

MN: Because before then it was more like..

NC: West side stuff, California.

MN: Were people wearing the colors, was something pretty visible to you?

NC: Only them, you could not wear red, then in those days, if you were not a Blood member. You could get slashed, even killed sometimes. It was crazy; it was wild.

MN: So you were a great student, did your family go on vacations at all? Did your grandmother take you any places?

NC: One time, we went to a family reunion.

MN: Did you ever go to museums?

NC: Nah, only on school trips.

MN: She didn't take you to museums or to the zoo?

NC: Nope

MN: You ever go to Orchard Beach?

NC: Nope

MN: So you were mostly in your neighborhood and in your house?

NC: Yes sir

MN: Wow

NW: You said you had other siblings who were living with you?

NC: [agreeing]

NW: So you had Marquis, who else was living with you?

NC: My sister Jennifer.

NW: Jennifer, now is she older or younger?

NC: She's a year younger than me. Also my grandmother's daughter: my Aunt, her sister.

NW: What's her name?

NC: Aunt Beacka.

NW: Aunt Beacka

NC: And then my other Aunt, Olivette, she was staying there too. It wasn't really a big house
neither.

MN: How big was the apartment? How many bedrooms?

NC: It was three bedrooms.

MN: It was three bedrooms and you had about 9 people?

NC: Yeah about 7, 8.

DR: How many siblings do you have now? Brothers and sisters?

NC: Biologically...5.

DR: Where are you in that? You're not the oldest?

Marquis is the oldest, then you, then Jennifer...

NC: Then Christina and Bianca.

MN: You're an elementary school kid, you are doing well in school, you are reading. When you were dreaming as a kid of how and where you would end up, what was that dream?

NC: When I was young, I had a real big thing for computers and Hip Hop.

MN: So those were your two things Hip Hop and computers?

NC: It was more computers, but I've always loved Hip Hop, always.

MN: Who were the Hip Hop artists that made the biggest impression on you in elementary school?

NC: Definitely LL Cool J, and Biggie.

MN: And those were Marquis' people also.

NC: Yeah, Jay Z definitely, Tupac, Wu Tang, Method Man that was one of my favorite artists back in the day, Method man was my dude.

MN: When did you start writing, did you do any DJ-ing? Or was it mainly the rhyming?

NC: Really how I started writing the rhymes, it was a talent show in my school. I was in sixth grade, it the year I was graduating.

MN: This was elementary school? Wow

NC: Yeah, they wanted to put on a show, so they needed rappers and dancers. At the time I wasn't rapping you know, but I always been a joker, I like to entertain, so I took the part.

MN: So you would entertain your friends?

NC: Yeah I was a joker.

MN: Did they have, when you were coming up, what they called in my day: “the dozens”, or signifyin’ or soundin’? Where you make fun of people’s mothers?

NC: Oh yeah definitely, yeah yeah--to this day.

MN: And so were you good at that?

NC: I’m *very* good at that.

MN: [laughter]

NC: [laughter]

MN: You were like a class ‘sounder’ in your neighborhood.

NC: I was a class joker in my school. I was always a class clown, but a smart one.

MN: If you’re smart in a tough neighborhood, its good to be the class clown, cause it takes some of the heat off of you.

NC: I come from a tough family.

MN: Did you have to fight much as a kid?

NC: A lot, especially because I was so little.

MN: So people would test you all the time?

NC: Everyday.

MN: Where?

NC: At school, at the park, after school.

MN: What would they say to you to test you?

NC: They would just try to punk me, take over what I’m doing at the time, like they would come on the court, disregarding I’m there.

MN: So they would disrespect you.

NC: Yeah!

MN: So did people ever try to take your bag or your hat?

NC: Yeah, my basketball; all types of stuff. My walkman, they tried to take my walkman.

[Laughter]

MN: So whatever you had somebody would try to take.

NC: Sometimes. After a while there was no more of that, after a while they saw I was not going to let that happen.

MN: Now how did you “not let that happen?” Was it because you would stop at nothing?

NC: I would get beat up. You would have to beat me up.

[Break in session]

MN: So we're talking about your childhood, and we were discussing how your uncle who was a major dealer, was a major influence in your life. Describe how he comported himself in your apartment when he came over.

NC: He lived there actually.

MN: Oh.

NC: I seen him all the time. He wasn't nothing like--he was regular.

MN: Did he dress a certain way?

NC: No. He didn't like attention from outside. All the jewelry and the fly clothes, he wasn't with all that.

MN: So he didn't like dressing with the old school hustlers?

NC: No he used to wear the split, the flat top to the side, with the design in it. They used to dress pretty funny, I'm not gonna lie.

MN: So he did have his own style?

NC: Yeah he had his own little style, but he wasn't extravagant or nothing.

MN: And how did he deal with children in your house and in your neighborhood?

NC: Oh my uncle was like a big teddy bear to us, everybody in the family loved him because he was so caring and giving. He was just like a different person when he stepped outside the door.

MN: So he had his street persona, and his family persona.

NC: Definitely.

NW: Did he help out your grandmother with bills?

NC: Oh yeah, definitely. One time, (I don't know how much it really was) I found a timberland box, it was money knots just like this [shows hands in knots], just rolled up, bunches of them, rolled up in the box. It was crazy.

MN: When I was working with students who were in the Bronx at that time they would often be tutoring in families for somebody who was involved in crack, and they would have \$50,000 in cash and they wouldn't know what to do with it. Did your uncle ever have a way of investing in a legitimate business? Did he ever try to buy like a legal business?

NC: Not from what I know of. He used to go upstate to Monticello. He used to go up there, do his thing.

MN: Did you know anyone who went from crack, to owning a store; owning a business?

NC: Only people I knew who were doing it heavy, heavy like that were locked up, or dead.

MN: So it was a real toll on it. It wasn't like people saw this as a stepping-stone, to like buying a nightclub or anything?

NC: Back then it wasn't about legal businesses or nothing like that. Now you could probably find some that are smarter and they do stuff like that, but back then it wasn't about business.

MN: In the Beekman Houses, was there anyone who was college educated in your family?

NC: In my family? College? No.

MN: Was anybody in Beekman going to college that you knew?

NC: No.

MN: So this was basically working jobs?

NC: But you got to remember I was young. At the time, I didn't hang out with people in my brother's age bracket, I don't know if any of them went to college. The people I grew up with, none of them went to college.

MN: Let me talk to you about fighting, cause I was a kid who had to fight all the time. Did you fight with weapons, or mainly with your fists?

NC: Nah, I never had a weapon. I was like 9, 10; that was fifth grade, fourth grade.

MN: So if somebody gave you a hard time, you punch them out, throw them to the ground?

NC: Most of the time, they would be bigger than me, so I would throw a punch you feel me [laughter], just to get the point across.

MN: And run, punch and run.

NC: Nah, I wouldn't even run. I would get beat up.

MN: So you actually got beat up?

NC: A lot of times

MN: Damn! So you threw the punch to make a point, then they would beat you up. Would it often be more than one person to beat you up? Or was it always one on one?

NC: I lost a few one on ones, but I got jumped a lot of times.

MN: So a lot of times, it was more than one person?

NC: Yeah about three or four. They wouldn't beat me half dead or nothin' [laughter] like that. They would let it be known (you know what I'm sayin'), "like don't play over here, don't play with us". But I was like "Ya'll playin' with me, you took my ball; I didn't start it" but that was the stuff I used to go through.

MN: And this was everyday?

NC: Yeah, if it wasn't in school, it was outside of school, at basketball practice, at church programs after school, in my building.

MN: So wherever kids were they were testing you.

NC: Yeah wherever I didn't know somebody, if I came into the picture, they wasn't liking me.

MN: Sometimes I tell people, if you're a boy and maybe if you're a girl, there's no anonymity in the Bronx, you can't just mind your own business.

NC: Nah, you can't.

DR: Can I ask you something? I know a lot of times people just throw themselves out and don't feel too much, at this age, going through this, not having your mom, not having your dad, living with your grandma, seeing what's going on with the drug dealing--did you become numb to emotion? Did it bother you in any way? Like did it affect you in school in any way? What were you thinking?

NC: Later on it did, not like then at the time, I just kept it at the back of my mind. When I started acting out, that's when I ultimately figured that's where it was coming from, I didn't think that when I was little. But then they would explain to me, when I went to therapy, like psychiatrist. I used to talk to them, they would ask me questions.

MN: How old were you the first time you were sent to a therapist?

NC: I was about eleven.

MN: So this happened in elementary school.

NC: Yeah.

MN: So whose idea was it that you see a therapist, a teacher?

NC: My grandmother.

MN: Your grandmother? Cause she felt you were too angry, or depressed?

NC: I was angry, I used to get angry a lot.

MN: Did you show it towards her?

NC: No, its just that I was always fighting stuff like that. Sometimes I would start trouble, but it wouldn't be like--

MN: Would the teachers say, "he's a smart kid, but he's always fighting?"

NC: "He's smart, but he's disrespectful", or, "he's too smart to be hanging with these certain dudes". My school was right across the street from my building, so being that my building was like that, like that same aura, I took that to school with me.

MN: Now did you like to have a crew of guys around you? Or did you like being by yourself?

NC: In school I had a crew. I used to chill with these two dudes, Wayne and Israel.

MN: Wayne and Israel, are they still around?

NC: Israel's in the streets, he aint doin' nothin'.

MN: So it was Wayne and Israel, was Israel Spanish?

NC: Yes he is.

MN: So Israel is Spanish and Wayne is Black.

NC: Yes sir.

MN: And the three of you, did you have a name for what you called yourselves?

NC: Nah, we had nicknames for each other though.

Israel was 'Chichiti', I don't know why we called him that [laughter]. And we used to call

Wayne, 'Waynie'. And they used to call me 'Junebug' at the time.

MN: Now did everybody around there have enough to eat? Or were there food problems with the families?

NC: Well my family was straight. Out of the people I used to hang with, I was the underprivileged one, I was the one less dressed, everybody was doing better than me. So I wouldn't know if someone was doing worse, know what I'm sayin'? The only thing I know is we had was basics: the roof, the shelter--

MN: And the food--

NC: That was it, that's all I had at the time.

MN: You didn't have the fancy clothes.

NC: Not at all.

NW: Do you remember were any of your friends acting as lookouts or runners?

NC: Yeah, Chichiti.

NW: So he had money.

NC: Yeah he had guap.

MN: Guap is a great word. [laughter]

NC: That's what we call it now. Back then we called it fetties.

MN: Now how old was he when he was first asked to be a runner, or lookout?

NC: I don't know its like, the same thing with my uncle, is the same thing as his uncle. They were doing the same thing. But his uncle was like a jerk; he didn't care if Chichiti was in that kind of life. My uncle wasn't trying to hear that.

MN: Your uncle didn't want you to get involved.

NC: He wasn't hearing that. He would snap my legs if I was in it.

MN: So he wanted you to stay straight.

NC: He would do that with my older brother, he had him nervous to do certain things, so with me he was not even playing that, not even a little. But Israel's uncle, he didn't care, he like "if I could use him to get money, I'll use him too".

MN: Now I'm very interested in the therapist. Where did your grandmother find the therapist?

Was it in the neighborhood, or did you have to go to Manhattan?

NC: We were going to Lincoln Hospital.

MN: Lincoln Hospital Mental Health Clinic?

NC: Yes sir, I believe so; I don't remember the name.

MN: What was it like going to a mental health clinic?

NC: When I used to go to therapy, I used to feel like "what the hell am I here for?" you know what I'm sayin', that's how I used to feel. So when the therapist would talk to me I would give her attitude like "I'm not telling you nothing", like "I don't know you". And they be askin', you know, personal questions. So I used to be hostile at first. We switched therapists about three or four times.

[Crosstalk]

MN: Now what about your teachers? Did you get along with your teachers; or with some and not others?

NC: Only probably teachers I had a crush on.

MN: When you were giving a teacher a hard time, how would you give a teacher a hard time?

NC: Cause I'd be disturbing, like I be the first person, one of the few who's done before the class is over, and I'd be sitting there. [laughter]

MN: You did all of your work quick, and you'd be bored.

NC: I was always like that. Yeah and if I didn't have my walkman, (which most of the time I did, until they try to take it) I'd put it on in class. If I didn't have my walkman, I would start up conversation with someone else in the class, just disrupting the class.

MN: Did anybody say "this kid is really smart, let's send him to private school"?

NC: Oh yeah, they tried to skip me, send me to catholic, waiters border school. My grandmother just wasn't about it.

MN: They try to get you in ABC, or Prep for Prep or any of that stuff?

NC: I don't know names for stuff like that, but they did want me in a different school. I knew that for sure.

MN: And you didn't want to go to Catholic school?

NC: My grandmother didn't want that.

DR: She probably didn't have the money, cause that costs money.

NC: Probably, but my uncle did.

MN: Which junior high did you end up going to?

NC: My first junior high school was Clark.

MN: That's where Allen Jones went. I know exactly where that is, its near the Patterson Houses.

NC: Right across the street from Patterson.

DR: How long did you go to that Junior High School?

NC: Until they kicked me out, I was in there until 8th grade; they went up to 9th grade actually.

MN: What began to happen to you in Junior High?

NC: When I got to Junior High, I could go out for lunch, that alone right there was like a whole new world. When I went for lunch, they actually let us outside the school [laughter] for an hour. I could do a lot of things in an hour. [sustained laughter]. And being that I'm with my not so positive dudes, whatever they was doing, I was doing too.

MN: Were your friends at Clark people from Beekman?

NC: Yeah. Actually at that time, Clark was the smartest Junior High School and the hardest one to get into.

MN: So it was the lead school.

NC: I was the only one from my block in there.

NW: So Wayne and Israel?

NC: Nah, they went to the Zone Junior High School, the one that everyone from the neighborhood went to.

MN: Okay so Clark you went to because you tested high.

NC: Yeah my test scores were really high.

MN: But the school still had its share of thugs?

NC: Oh, yeah. You know, Patterson.

MN: Right, Patterson. What was Patterson's reputation in those days?

NC: They was doing the same thing my neighborhood was doing. It wasn't too far off at all, it was a couple blocks down.

MN: Did different projects have different reputations at that time?

NC: Some of them were tougher than others; they all had bad reputations.

MN: Was there any one that stood out for being tough?

NC: Mine

MN: Beekman was known as...

NC: Cyrpus Ave.

MN: Cyrpus Ave. One other thing, were there any outdoor music jams in St. Mary's or in your block?

NC: Yeah they had big events in the park, but they would never last straight through.

MN: Were the events in the park mostly Latin music, or Hip Hop?

NC: Depends on who was going, because sometimes it was just Latin, and there were times when it was no Latin. So it depends, regardless of what it was, it never lasted.

DR: What do you mean it never lasted straight through?

NC: Either the cops would shut it down, or...

MN: Somebody would start shooting?

NC: Yeah, something regular dumb, some dumbness.

MN: So you have a public event in your neighborhood, without a beef?

NC: No.

MN: No matter what it was.

NC: No matter what.

MN: The beef was always going to break out and somebody's going to pull a gun.

NC: Because when they had those type of events, ST. Mary's was behind our neighborhood, but since it's a park, anybody felt like they could come, no matter if its in our neighborhood or not.

So we had rival people from other neighborhoods.

MN: So was Beekman very territorial?

NC: Yes.

MN: If you weren't from there, you don't come in there?

NC: Its not as bad as it used to be, but definitely it was like that.

MN: If somebody from Patterson decided to take a walk through Beekman to St. Mary's Park, they wouldn't get through the streets?

NC: Nah, same thing with us though.

MN: You couldn't get go into Patterson?

NC: Nah, not if you didn't know anybody there. You just can't do that.

MN: Was there any neutral zone where anyone could congregate together?

NC: No. Down there, nobody really leaves their neighborhood because everything is so close.

You got Beekman, Milbrook up the block, Patterson, then you got Mount Haven across the street, and Mitchells is right in the middle.

MN: And each one stays to themselves.

NC: Everybody, for some reason has beef with Cyprus, my block, Beekman Houses. Now started over the gang thing, nah mean, Mitchells was where the Crips was at.

MN: So Mitchell was Crips.

NC: Yeah, still is.

MN: Now Patterson they tell me is Bloods.

NC: Yes, and they literally next door neighbors. Mount Haven is another Crip area, and Cyprus is back here.

MN: Cyprus is Bloods?

NC: Yeah. So this is like the lone zone, because we were by ourselves. Every other project they was right next to each other, but Cyprus, we right here on our own turf. So if you come in here, its like “what are you doing here?” We already know its trouble.

MN: So when you went to Clark, did you have a vision of yourself as going to college, or having a profession?

DR: And were you still living with your grandmother?

NC: Yeah I was still with her.

MN: So were you thinking, “I want to be a lawyer, I want to be a doctor”? Or were you more focused with what was in front of you?

NC: I always wanted to be a computer technician. I didn’t care about nothing else, no doctor never interested me, no lawyer never interested me. I liked Hip Hop music and computers.

DR: So did you have a computer?

NC: No, that’s why I loved them so much. I could never get to them.

MN: You could never get to them, wow you couldn’t get to them at school?

NC: Yeah, in elementary school, but it was just little games that taught you how to type.

MN: When you went to Clark, was crack dying out at all?

NC: No not really, it didn’t die out until recently. Crack just started dying out.

NW: Did you know a lot of kids who smoked crack? Or were they mostly older?

NC: I know one of my closest friends started smoking crack, when we got to Junior High, he was like 14, 15.

NW: And was he also selling?

NC: Nah, he was just smoking. I don't know where that came from. He dropped out of school one day, we didn't see him in months, then over the summer then next school year we saw him. He wasn't in school, but he came around, he looked horrible.

MN: Now when you went to Clark, were you doing as well in school as you were in elementary school?

NC: In the beginning.

DR: Why were you kicked out?

NC: Because...I hit a dean with a school chair.

DR: Why? What caused it?

NC: I don't know, he said something to me that was kind of disrespectful, it wasn't that serious though, but as I got older I started getting more angry. And plus the fact that people were always testing me, I began to start trouble.

MN: So you felt the pressure building in you everyday?

NC: Yeah, and before I got to junior high people in my family were warning me "Yeah, you're gonna be with the big boys" putting that stuff in my head, so I'm with that mentality like "aint nobody gonna be disrespecting me in junior high school, I'm not doing that no more".

MN: So you're taking no shit from anybody.

NC: Nobody. So that's when I was in the mode of starting trouble.

MN: So start it before someone else does.

NC: That's how I got known for starting trouble.

NW: When you went to Clark, did you have a certain amount of respect because you were from Beekman?

NC: Yeah but the thing was, you always had kids from other hoods, so that brings trouble after school. Like “oh you from where?..ohhhh”. They act like everything is cool in gym, we playing basketball together, when I come outside, its six dudes from Patterson like “yeah what up?”. What?! What do you mean? “you from Cyprus right? Such and such... I didn’t have anything to do with that, but that’s how it was, the neighborhoods hated each other that much.

MN: So this was like a situation where almost every kid was under pressure.

NC: Yeah pretty much.

MN: There was no safety.

NC: You couldn’t be soft.

DR: How long were you there before you got kicked out?

NC: Two years

MN: And so when did it start affecting you academically?

NC: My last year, 8th grade I was like 14, so I started liking girls. I joined a gang.

DR: In the 8th grade?

NC: Yeah.

MN: You joined the Bloods?

NC: Yeah.

MN: In your neighborhood?

NC: No, not in my neighborhood, in my school.

MN: So were all the different gangs represented in your school? So the Crips were there too? Or was it just the Bloods in your school?

NC: The Crips went to 183, because that was in the back where Mitchells was at. Its in the back of Patterson really so. When I got kicked out, they sent me to 183, for something they called the A+ program because they stopped at 8th grade. It was for older kids that got left back, and it was half of the year.

MN: So you got left back?

NC: Yeah in the 8th grade, not because of my academics though. I started cutting school.

DR: Why were you cutting, what were you doing?

NC: Smoking weed, 8th grade was the transition, I got introduced to weed, started smoking. Gang banging and stuff like that.

DR: What do you mean by gang banging?

NC: Gang banging.

DR: But like what? We want to know.

NC: Violence.

MN: More fighting people, or robbing people?

NC: It was fighting, but going past that level of 'just fighting'.

DR: For instance?

NC: Shooting, cutting, stuff like that.

MN: So it was getting pretty high stakes. So when did you realize this was going to lead you to be sent to juvenile facility?

NC: I still didn't think about it. My uncle died, so my mother came back into my life.

MN: The same uncle?

NC: No another uncle, he died from HIV, he was gay. So once he died my moms came back into my life.

NW: What grade?

NC: I was still in junior high school.

MN: So she moved in with your grandmother?

NC: No she didn't move in, she just came.

MN: Started being around.

NC: Yeah.

NW: So it was your mom's brother?

NC: Yeah. She was staying in something they call Regenerations. I was like a woman's shelter.

It wasn't far from the neighborhood either. So when he died, that's when she came back in our life. That's when I really started 'wyling', when she came back, because she tried to take on the mother role. And then she actually took us, in the middle of my 8th grade school year, she took me and my little sister.

NW: Away from your grandmother?

NC: Yeah, she took us.

MN: And where was she living, in the Bronx?

NC: Yeah, on 193rd and Decatur.

MN: So right by Fordham!

NC: Yeah right around Fordham.

MN: Yeah its right down west here, Decatur is one block west.

NC: Yeah, if you walk down here, straight down Fordham when you get to the Gamestop and you make that right, that block right there...that's where I used to live at.

NW: Did you want to go?

NC: Did I want to go? Yeah, because I never knew her, I always wondered about her.

MN: So did you still go to Clark? Or did you have to switch schools?

NC: I still went to Clark, I just kept going from where I was at.

MN: Right you took the train to school?

Yeah. That's when it got crazy because I was taking the bus to school by myself. "Oh, I'm not going to school, I can go to this neighborhood I used to chill at right here". Started smoking weed, cutting school.

V: Was your mother still doing drugs?

NC: No she wasn't, she was actually trying to be strict, to the point where I was like, "you aint been around this long to tell me that". That's how I used to say it in my head, I never physically said that but that's what was in my head. Like "you can't tell me how to live, you wasn't around to tell me from the 'get go'". After a while she got tired of me too (laughter).

MN: So, you're in junior high school, are you rhyming seriously now?

NC: Yeah round this time, we in Cyprus freestyling.

MN: Tell me about the cypher phenomena, when you get people in a circle rhyming; how did that get started, were you in Clark?

NC: I used to see it in junior high I used to come to the hood, and there would be six dudes out there in cypher rapping.

MN: Did this happen in Beekman and Cyprus too?

NC: Yeah yeah definite.

MN: So you grew up in the alley back.

NC: It was always Hip-Hop. You know Fat Joe? He doesn't live too far from there.

MN: So he was around Cyprus?

NC: Not Cyprus per say, but Cortlandt Ave.

MN: Were some of these people in Cyprus decent at the time?

NC: I didn't know what was decent; I liked everything. I didn't know about lyrics at the time, I was young. But when I got to Clark, I took to a liking, because I already had experience with writing the rhyme. I really started liking it after a while. Then my man, Akay in high school, he was nice back then, so when he rapped he made me want to rap, because he was good. So that's how I really started rap, because one of my friends was so good at it, I was like "I could do that".

NW: How did your rap go over in middle school?

NC: How did it go over?

NW: Yeah.

NC: Eh...I wasn't the talk of the town, but I started to get known for it because I wouldn't write, I would just freestyle and battle at the time.

MN: could you give us an example of what you did back then?

NC: Not really, it would all be off the top of the dome, head. So it would be a freestyle, like say me and you right now we start rapping and I start dissin you on your glasses and gray hair.

[Laughter]. It wasn't lyrical talent at the time, it was just fun. That's why I liked it.

MN: So it was an extension of the 'dozens' or signifyin'.

NC: It was just really fun.

DR: Now you have to be lyrically talented.

NC: Back then you had to be too, but for me personally, I just wasn't into it like that.

MN: MN: Now were any friends being sent to like Spofford in junior high?

NC: Yeah definitely.

MN: What was Spofford's reputation back then?

NC: Spofford...it was like how they used to make the rikers island scene. Kids was getting cut, killed even sometimes. 13, 14

DR: What grade were you when you were first arrested?

NC: When I was first arrested I was in high school, I was 15.

DR: So that was like the 8th or 9th grade.

NC: I wasn't in the 8th grade I got left back, I was in A+. And then I did a robbery.

MN: So you got sent to Spofford?

NC: No I didn't get sent to Spofford right away, I was fighting the case.

DR: The armed robbery, you just did it to do it? Or you needed the money?

NC: No I just did it to do it.

NW: You get caught right away?

NC: No the funny thing is, I wouldn't have got caught if I wasn't so dumb, because the situation happened like, we was chillen outside the building and we see the victim. We followed him up the block and he ran and stuff or whatever and we came back down the block and stood outside the building, for like a half hour.

MN: Was this victim from the neighborhood?

NC: No, that's why he got, what he did.

MN: Because he ended up at the wrong place at the wrong time. So you wouldn't do that to someone from the neighborhood.

NC: Nah. No.

NW: Did you wear a mask or hoodie, nothing...you just walked on up?

NC: That's what I'm saying, it was crazy, we didn't care about that.

NW: And so the cops rolled up to the building.

NC: You don't even know how deep they rolled up, I seen like 8 cars and flashing lights and all that. I'm like "what the hell we doing outside still"?

NW: How many kids were with you?

NC: It was two with me.

NW: So the cops roll up, they throw you against the car?

NC: They did more than throw us up against the car; they beat us up.

MN: In the station house, in the car, or in the street? So they bother to worry about Rodney King down in Beekman?

NC: Nah they didn't do us like that. But they roughed us up to the point where people from the building were like "ya'll can't be doing that". They didn't beat us up, but they roughed us up pretty bad.

DR: So you did a bid for how long.

NC: I got off of that, I got that case beat.

NW: So you got a lawyer?

NC: Yeah, my dad.

NW: Your dad?

NC: Yeah, my dad was in the army and some attorney he got.

NW: So you had a private lawyer, and not somebody from the state.

NC: They didn't have any evidence. Back then it was senseless, if I told you what we got out of the robbery, you would laugh. Eleven dollars, I got spent right then and there. We didn't have his wallet or anything, it was just somebody he pointed out. You can't pin that on us, if you got a good lawyer.

NW: Did your friend have a lawyer?

NC: No, he actually did some time for that. Cause he took the wrap.

NW: And he had a lawyer from the state?

NC: And me and him fell out because of that. Yeah.

DR: And what happened with your mom? Was there friction because of this?

NC: Nah, she sent me to go live with my dad for a while, and then he sent me back.

NW: So you were still in touch with your dad at that point? Did you call him?

NC: My dad, he wasn't around, but he was around. Like he wouldn't be there but if my grandmother got him on the phone and was like "your son is acting up" he would come around.

MN: So you said he was in army?

NC: Yeah that was a big part of it.

MN: So he was on bases, or he had an apartment in the Bronx or Manhattan?

NC: He stayed in Manhattan but he was always like away.

DR: When you said you did this and didn't worry about it, was that because you didn't care about life, or you didn't care about getting caught? What was it?

NC: I just didn't care. I didn't have a care for nothing. I didn't care about shit.

DR: Why?

NC: I don't know, I was just reckless because I had a whole bunch of problems. My mom wasn't around and that was the main problem.

MN: That's enough.

NC: That was the main reason.

DR: The only reason I ask is because you made a really strong statement and it really held with me, this was about a week and a half ago when he was here, and he said something about his

music, and I don't remember what it was that I asked

him, but he said that it was his reason for living because back then he didn't care whether he lived or died. I know that I hear that a lot, when I'm interviewing gangbangers, they really don't care if they live or die, and that's why I asked you that because its important that people know that its not something that you just do one day, but its something that is carried along with you and its an emotion that you have.

NW: Did you have any hope for the future at that point? Were you thinking " I'm going to get a job and get out of here"?

NC: I didn't have a hope for the future until recently.

MN: So you didn't think, "I've got something that the world is looking for, and they're going to find me".

NC: I didn't think highly of myself, until recently.

DR: Really?

NC: Unilt I came home from the last jail bait. That's when I started putting pieces together, like "what am I doing?" Second time will do it, I don't need a third time.

DR: The first time you were in jail for a bid, how old were you?

NC: I was 15

DR: Oh, same age?

NC: Yeah, it was right after the armed robbery charge that I had.

MN: And what was this charge?

NC: This was a violent charge. This was assault

MN: Assault but not robbery?

NC: No just assault. Hit someone with a bottle.

DR: Which area, which neighborhood?

NC: This was around over here by Washington, 187th street.

DR: So you got a bid for that, for hitting someone with a bottle?

NC: Yeah 9 months. Actually I did 3 months at the adolescent facility at ricers when I was 16.

Then the case got thrown out and I got a drug program upstate, mandated upstate to the program.

I could have finished school when I was up there, but I got kicked out of there.

NW: Kicked out of the program?

MN: The drug program? What was the name of the program?

NC: Phoenix House.

MN: And what city was it in?

NC: Yorktown

MN: Yorktown. Along the Hudson River.

DR: So you went to court, did your family go

NC: Yeah, my mother always came to court, but she didn't visit me, she wouldn't even call.

DR: So you got kicked out of the Phoenix House?

NC: Yeah.

DR: For?

NC: Not complying.

MN: Did you ever have a serious girlfriend, or someone that you cared for?

NC: At that time, no.

DR: So what happened when you got kicked out? They remanded you?

NC: Yeah they remanded me, I only had 3 weeks left anyway. I had a 10 months sentence, in the program and I did 9 all together so when they kicked me out I was like "ehh I'll probably end up

in the same house I was before I got here". So it was like whatever. On rikers island on the four building, it was crazy, so if you was there and you was untouched when you came back most likely you would be good, because they remember you from the last time.

V: I just wanted to ask you one thing, did you have the same lawyer for that case?

NC: Yeah, every case I ever had been one lawyer; and my dad, that was the only thing he was good for. But I love you though pop. (laughter)

DR: So after Phoenix House, you got out, where did you go?

NC: I was still with my mom.

DR: And where was she at then? Decatur?

NC: No we had moved from Decatur, she was on a one-year lease so we moved over to Washington and 187th.

NW: Was your mom working at this time?

NC: Oh yeah she was working as a drug abuse counselor.

DR: And after you came home, did you have those same feelings, of not caring about life?

NC: After I came back, I went back to school for a year.

MN: What school did you go to?

NC: I went to Roosevelt, but back then Roosevelt wasn't a good choice because I got wrapped up in all the dumbness. So once she got tired of me this time, she sent me to my dad's like "you got to take him, he can't come back here".

NW: How old were you then?

NC: I was about 17. So when I went to my dad, he's so army strict. So I was like "I'm not trying to deal with all these rules", so eventually he got rid of me too.

NW: Did anyone talk to you about going back to school, or getting a G.E. D or anything like that?

NC: No.

DR: No one motivated you, or encouraged you and sat you down and said “if you keep doing this, this is what’s going to happen to you”?

NC: Nope.

NW: Did either of your parents graduate from high school?

NC: No.

NW: Did the army help your dad get his G.E.D?

NC: They have their G.E.D, the only person I know that graduated from high school was my brother.

NW: Marquis?

NC: Yeah.

NW: What about your sisters, neither of them?

NC: No. My little sister is about to graduate now, but no one else.

NW: Good for her. So you’re living with your dad, what are you doing to make money?

NC: Nothing. Being a brat. Yeah “I need money everyday pops”. I didn’t have that in me to work, I didn’t know what that was. All I knew was how to work in the streets.

NW: Were there jobs that you could have got?

NC: I did a summer youth job, but that didn’t last long, because back then I had a hot temper, worse then not so much now, but then I had a hot temper and there was a counselor in there and we had some words, we didn’t get physical but the way I was talking to him , they kicked me out.

NW: Was the summer program through an organization?

NC: No it was through the school.

NW: Oh I wasn't sure if it was save the generation or something like that.

DR: So you had a felony charge before right, before the summer youth job?

NC: Oh no the summer youth was first.

DR: Okay so when you came out and were living with our dad, did you try to get a job?

NC: No.

DR: So then you were selling drugs at this point?

NC: Yeah, I wasn't consistent though, cause I was in my dad's house, so there was no way I could be on the streets.

DR: What were you selling?

NC: I was selling weed first, then I started selling crack.

NW: Did you have your own corner, or where you selling for someone else?

NC: I was working for someone else. I didn't start really selling drugs until I moved back in with my mother.

NW: How old were you?

NC: I didn't stay with my dad that long, so it was probably the same year.

DR: You went back to your mom's?

NC: Yeah, there was nowhere else to go. My grandmother wouldn't have taken me at that age.

NW: Where was Marquis living at that time?

NC: He was already on his own. Since 18, 19 he was out on his own. He was always the one with drive and motivation to go to work school at the same time. He always had that mentality.

NW: What was he doing at that time?

NC: I think he was managing a supermarket as an associate and going to school too. He was going to graduate school early around 16 in high school, he took a year off and went back to graduate. That's how good he was doing in school that he actually took a year off and came back to graduate. I was like "wow, I could have done that too". I was smart like he was, maybe not as smart, because he was older than me because he knows more.

NW: Did Marquis ever tell you, "you gotta stay in school, I can help you get a job" anything like that?

NC: We didn't have a real brotherly relationship until I was like 19, we didn't have a close relationship. He used to kick me out of his room, didn't want me going anywhere with him. He was a real big brother; he didn't want me around, he couldn't stand me.

NW: And there was 7 years between you?

NC: Yeah, cause he's 30, 7 years.

NW: Okay, so let's go back to you selling drugs, not consistently, but how did you get into it someone you know?

NC: That was at my dad's house, I'm staying with him. I would get packs and you could grab two or three get your piece and go about your business. So that's what I would do sometimes after school, I would go to school with a couple of packs.

NW: Packs and so you're talking about crack at this point. And so how many are in a pack, 25 dials?

NC: 13 dials; give them 10 and take 3 for myself. And if the flow is like you know, moving...2 or three of those I be having \$90 in my pocket.

NW: And dials are sold for \$10 each and you would pay the guy you got the pack from..

NC: I wouldn't pay him, I would give him his money

up front and then take three off the top. And I would flip two or three in a half hour, because it was bad, it was crazy like that at the time. It was a lot of crack.

NW: Did you go back to Beekman to sell it?

NC: Nah, at this time I was still away from there, I only came back to visit my grandmother but not to hang or nothing like that because I already got a different taste of life uptown. I could do a lot more stuff over here and not get in trouble.

V: So the supplier, was that someone from your year?

NC: No just one of the big drug dealers from the neighborhood who felt like "I don't have to do it, I can get one of these youngins to do it for me" and I was one of those young guys. I had to be back in my dad's house by a certain time, so sometimes I wouldn't go to school and I would just flip, then catch the bus back and make my dad think I was in school [laughter].

NW: You have your G.E.D now?

NC: I'm actually covering a school, I'm working on it, its nice. The classes I'm in are like [makes snoring sound]

NW: Yeah, terrible.

NC: I'm gonna stick it out and get it.

V: So where are you doing it? At a high school or college?

NC: Its actually in an elementary school, if I'm not mistaken. Its on Tremont, I don't know the name of the school.

NW: Night classes?

NC: Yeah, six to nine, I'm doing it Monday through Wednesday.

NW: Good for you man, that's awesome.

NC: After that I'm going to take some audio engineering classes.

NW: Good for you. That's the way; through education man, it opens doors.

NC: Yeah, now I know.

NW: So you were kicked out of your dad's

NC: Yeah, he sent me to my mom's

NW: So is that when you start dealing on a regular basis?

NC: Yeah at this point

DR: How did she feel about that?

NC: She didn't know.

DR: How did you feel about that, knowing that your mom had that situation dealing with the crack, and you were selling it? Did you care?

NC: I didn't care until later. She started smoking crack again, that's when it made me like "I'm not doing this anymore".

NW: So lets go back up. So you get to your mom's and you have a connection, But now your flipping more than 3 packs a day.

NC: Now I'm saving my money and buying my own.

NW: So how much you think your flipping a day?

NC: When I first started, nothing crazy, like \$200, \$300 a day. On a good day.

NW: Did you ever buy groceries and stuff like that for your mom?

NC: Oh, yeah.

NW: And she never asked you where you got the money?

NC: No because at the time she was smoking, but I didn't know, it was light. When I was staying with my dad, I used to hear rumors like "yo son, I don't know how true it is, but I heard your ma..." and I would be like "get outta here, my mom aint doin' that". I was just being straight dumb. I didn't want to face that fact again. So for a long time I was like she ain't smoking crack. But I seen myself a crack pipe in the drawer and it was broken and black I knew it was smoked and even still then was in denial.

NW: Did she ever smoke in front of you?

NC: Hell no.

NW: She ever smoke in the house?

NC: Not while I was there.

DR: How did you eventually find out that she was in fact smoking?

NC: I never saw her smoke crack, but once you sell crack, you know the symptoms, how they start looking, the clicking of the teeth. My mom is an extremist at everything she does. When she was smoking crack, she was smoking it really badly. Like she would go do stupid stuff, I don't know what exactly, but it was bad.

V: You left your Dad's house because he kicked you out?

NC: Yeah, he wasn't dealing with me no more. He never really dealt with me, so to deal with me at that stage when I was thinking I was a man already. He told me one day "if you stay here, I'm going to end up killing you, so you gotta leave" because I was getting wild.

NW: So your dad kicked you out, you're with your mom and she's smoking but you don't really know.

NC: At the time when I first went back, she was still working, even though she was smoking. She was still clean cut; she wasn't losing weight yet. It wasn't bad at all then.

NW: How long was it before you could tell? And there was no lying to yourself about it?

NC: I was still in denial, It was a whole year.

NW: So you're living with your mom and selling.

NC: Oh yeah I was selling everything I went out of town to Boston and sold heroine for a little while. I was wildin', just doing mad dumbness. When I came back, she wasn't working I'm like "what happened?". One day I'm just used to her getting up, getting ready for school and work and Bianca's sleeping, "why is she not in school? Why ain't you at work?". And she's just like "ahhh whatever". My mom never told me anything, she always beat around the bush and give me the story she wants to give me, like to this day, if she doesn't wanna tell me something. So I didn't take no mind, I started getting Bianca ready for school, but I started seeing that she was depending on that now, that's not my job, but that's my little sister so I'll take her back and forth to school, for months. And then one day my sister Jennifer was the one who told me "mommy's smoking". Jennifer always held a grudge toward her for that (for smoking), so I was going off of that, "you're just mad at her for such and such reason".

NW: So it's you and your two sisters with your mom, or is Jennifer still with your grandmother?

NC: Yeah when we left, we all left, but I was the only one going back and forth because I was wild. So I was like "you're just mad, cause mommy used to do that". She was like "she's doing it" but I didn't pay her no mind. Jennifer then started wildin' out her own way and got sent to a group home.

NW: The state took her?

NC: No my mom sent her. Once I saw that, I was like wait that's a little weird, "wow you just got us back and you're sending her to a group home?"

NW: You thought that your mom should have been able to handle Jennifer.

NC: Yeah, at least. Sending me off to my dad, or sending her off to our dad, I can understand cause that's our father, but you just sent her off like "I'm not dealing with you". I thought that was weird, and when she did that I was looking at her kind of funny. I didn't see her the same no more. And that day I saw the pipe, and people in the building were like "you're selling crack and your mothers smoking". They were like looking out

NW: These were older people?

NC: Yeah they were older than me, at the time I'm like 18 and they were like 28, 29. And they're like "stupid, what you doing, selling all this crack, don't you know your mother smokes that, bringing it into your house". I got into a lot of fights over that; not wanting to believe that she smokes crack. Until the day I was with one of my boys and she screams out the window, I couldn't hear her, she was in a bugged state, shes screamin' "ahhh get that motherfucker". I'm like "what she talking about?". I see a guy come out of the building she's like "ahh get that nigga right there", so we chased him, but he got away. So when I came back to building, she told me that he was trying to rape her, so he didn't but he tried to. So in my head I'm like, "why he try to rape you, what were ya'll doing?".

NW: Did you know that guy?

NC: Nah I never seen him before. And then like situations happened like that happened, when she was like "these guys tried to beat me up and stuff", she almost had me killed a few times over the dumbness she did, and not knowing she was the one starting the foolishness.

NW: She expect you to fight her fights for her?

NC: Yeah, just like any mother would. So at the time, I was known for wildin' I was a gang member, me and my boys, we were like the only teenage crew in the neighborhood at that time.

NW: So did you guys have a name?

NC: Yeah, 'take money'. That's the name of my record label now.

NW: Nice.

NC: After I noticed that she started using crack, I stopped bringing it in the house.

NW: Did she steal from your stash?

NC: I'm not gonna lie, she stole a lot of money from me.

NW: And did you have drugs in the house?

NC: And that's how I knew she started smoking too, cause I would go upstairs and get my stash and the box is missing. And I'm like "ain't no way she knew where these rocks was at. It couldn't have been her, I must have just dropped them somewhere". Cause I'm known for just losing stuff, I got a bad habit with that.

NW: And you didn't want to believe it.

NC: I really didn't want to believe it. We already went through this situation on the drugs. I don't think she would do this to us again

NW: Right, she's been a counselor and all that other stuff.

NC: But it started from there, the rocks going missing here and there...I just started piecing it together. She's smoking. That's when I came to the realization and it brought more anger. So she used to try to say something to me in a motherly way and I would be like "get out my face you ain't my mother".

NW: You didn't see her as an authority figure

NC: No, not at all.

NW: You didn't respect her.

NC: Because crackheads don't get respect' because of the things they do. They go to the low, they don't have no respect. So that's how I was looking at her, "now you just a regular crackhead to me". And once I started treating her like that, that started hurting her. Eventually I stopped selling crack, that's when I really started getting into music cause I didn't have nobody to express my feelings to. I couldn't talk to my brother, we wasn't that close, my sister was in a group home.

NW: What about your other sister?

NC: She's young.

DR: Were you closer to any one of your siblings more than you were to any of the others?

NC: Only Jennifer, cause we grew up together, but not on a deep level. Cause she was around me the most.

NW: And you two are close in age?

NC: Yeah, that's all.

NW So Jennifer's in a group home, and Bianca?

NC: Yeah, Bianca she's only 14, she was with my mother.

NW: She was with your mom at that time.

NC: She was the only one that's been with my mother from birth, the only one that my mother had since birth.

NW: And Christina?

NC: Christina never been with my mother.

NW: She stays with your grandmother?

NC: She stays with my Aunt in Oklahoma.

NW: And what's her name, I'm sorry?

NC: Christina?

NW: No your Aunt.

NC: Oh my aunt, Olivette.

NW: Olivette, right, you mentioned her earlier.

NC: She was staying in my grandmother's house when I was there.

DR: And when you were staying with your dad, and were locked up and going through transition, where was Jennifer?

NC: In a group home.

NW: So, this experience is what started to turn you more onto music.

NC: Yeah, I didn't have no way of communicating with nobody, I didn't trust anybody to talk to. So I would write it down, and that's how I really got into music.

NW: And I think that's a good place to stop because I think we'll start the next time. The only thing is I'm going to give you the opportunity if there's anything else that you want to add before we get into the music? Is there anything else you want to say that we didn't cover?

NC: Before the music? Nah, I think we pretty much touched base on everything. The fact that I was a gang banger and stuff like that.

V: Do you remember any lyrics that you wrote at that time?

NC: When I started really getting serious?

V: Do one for us, if you can remember off the top of your head.

NC: Most of the raps I had then was life story stuff. Probably not off the top of my head.

Interviewee: Nicholas Calderon

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Noel

Wolfe, Dawn Russel

Date: April 21, 2010

[Type text]

NW: Do you have notebooks? Why don't you for next time bring some of your stuff from that time.

NC: I mean you know that notebook is ripped up on the side hanging off cover, I got rhymes from a long time ago, that I never spit to nobody. I used to feel better, just getting it off my chest.