



11-10-2005

Cannon, Paul and Williams, Jerald and Johnson, Woodrow

Bronx African American History Project
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Recommended Citation

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Mark Naison (MN): Here we go. Today is May 18th, 2012 and we are doing an interview with the Bronx African American History Project at the home of Annie Calhoun who has lived in this community for over fifty years and has been a leading activist in this neighborhood. With us today is our – I'm Mark Naison, our lead interviewer Maxine Gorden, and our videographer is Dawn Russell. And possibly joining us later will be Annie Calhoun's son, Will Calhoun. So Annie begin by spelling your first name and giving us your date of birth.

Annie Calhoun (AC): First name is Annie Calhoun. Date of birth is 2-5-25.

MN: Ok so what we always start by asking is how did you end up coming to the Bronx?

AC: Well I wanted to go to school at NYU and I was from North Carolina. So then I called my sister and she asked me to just come up. And so I came and I did attend at the college.

MN: Now which, when you talk about NYU, were you going to NYU in the Bronx or in Manhattan?

AC: In Manhattan.

MN: In Manhattan. And what neighborhood in the Bronx was your sister in?

AC: In the Bronx.

MN: But what street was she living on?

AC: I think it was Petrov Street.

MN: Ok was it in this neighborhood or a different neighborhood?

AC: In a different neighborhood. I moved in this neighborhood later.

MN: Ok –

Dawn Russell (DR): OK, could we hold a second. The problem is – there is like – the lawnmower, I am definitely hearing it through all the mics

[silence]

Part 2

AC: So then we got that working alright now. They have some working there. And one lady said, you know, I shouldn't have said it because I might got the man in trouble. But it's the person that I was concerned about – for that patient got enough food and not -

Maxine Gorden (MG): So this area – you said Fish Bay right?

AC: Yes

MG: Well what is – what's the formal name of this part of the Bronx?

AC: Well Fish Bay was the name of our organization.

MG: organization, but what –

AC: But this was the north Bronx

Will Calhoun (WC): Baychester

AC: Baychester

MG: Baychester is the formal

WC: It's actually called Baychester, New York. I checked with the post office one time when I was getting a P.O. Box. I just asked them historically about it. And it's called Baychester, New York; they didn't call it Bronx.

MG: Is that like Riverdale?

AC: No

WC: Same concept

MG: But you know how Riverdale, they don't, sometimes they don't call it the Bronx.

AC: Ok alright

MG: They separate, even though it is the Bronx. We know that. So Baychester and now it's the North Bronx.

WC: The manager in the post office told me that when I was asking questions and talking about the history of that post office. I asked why you had to put a certain address, you know, on your form [inaudible] and I was asking him, you know, why does it have to be P.O. box blah blah blah, Baychester Station and he said because once this was called Baychester, New York.

MG: Did you know that? I didn't know that.

AC: We had post office Baychester on Fish Bay Avenue

MN: Now when you first moved here were there people who had chickens in the backyard or anything like that?

AC: No, in this area, no.

MN: This was before co-op city. Do you remember Freedom land?

AC: Yes

MN: When that was there?

AC: Yes

MN: Did you ever take the kids there?

AC: Yes

MG: Why did you ask about chickens in the backyard?

MN: Because when people moved here in the 1940s, you know, some of the Caribbean families, they said that some of the Italian families had like, you know, chickens in the backyard.

AC: You had to go to the post office and say that there were chickens here.

MG: Oh. Good. Yes.

MN: Now you ended up sending Will to private school. What – what precipitated making that decision? Did all your kids go to private school or some had - were in public school?

AC: Well I worked in Brooklyn so I wanted to send my kids to a school wherein I could be home with them as early as possible. So it took me one and a half hours to get to Brooklyn, so I had to get a school that was close enough for them to walk to school, close enough for me to get to school. So that's why and from there, from elementary school they went to private school all the way. That's timing mostly because I wanted to be with them as much as I could.

MG: A lot of your decisions were made on timing. Have you noticed?

AC: Yes so that's the way it was. See my husband was out most of the time because he was in service.

MN: Right, so he was at sea a lot of the time.

AC: Yes and I, and somebody had to be home with them. And I had to be with them. So I turned down my doctorate because of kids. An opportunity –

MN: To get a doctorate in nutrition.

MG: You could go now.

AC: OK

MG: You could – no you could go back and get your doctorate now.

AC: No my doctorate was given on a scholarship basis so I was getting a grant. I had gotten two grants from my master's degree. And the lady in charge of the nutrition department said you can't go because something that I did. We were getting the grants and each month we got three hundred dollars. So that three hundred dollars could help me with my house – paying for the house. So I said ok then I'll do that. So when I went at the end of the – at the end of three months, they gave us too much money. So I said well then I have this money now what should I do? I know it's too much. And I spoke to one of my friends; I said did you get your money? She said yes. I said did you get too much? She said yes. I said well what are you going to do with it? She said I'm going to keep it. So I – She said that's what you should do, you need it. So I brought the money home and then I couldn't sleep. I said that's not my money, you know. If they help me to get through maybe this would help somebody else to get through. So I wouldn't keep it, I took it back the advisor. And she said oh you got the money, can you imagine how many students at NYU got this money. So she said we going to have to close that department down.

And I said so you can tell them they got the money, you can tell them to bring it back. They never got all that money back. So her husband – this lady's husband was in charge of finance and she said that they wanted me to have a doctorate. She said you just come to school because that was so much for us and for other students to have gotten that money back so she said you were due for it. But she was leaving and she couldn't do it. Cause she and her husband were leaving from finances. So I would have gotten that doctorate for honesty.

MG: Yeah good.

MN: Now by the time you formed the Fish Bay Association was this neighborhood mostly black? Had the Italian families moved out by then or was it still mixed?

AC: Some of them was still mixed.

MN: And what was going on that made things so bad? If you were going to analyze what was going on in the city at the time?

AC: I don't know what it was but it was here when I got here. Because when I got here it was really really terrible.

MN: So even when you moved here problems with lights and problems with streets and problem with schools.

AC: Yes, yes, yes.

MN: So it wasn't worse in 1970 than it was in 1958.

AC: No, no, no. It was the same. It just didn't look too much into – into education. And that's why a lot of people, you know, didn't send their kids away. And then they had some really queer problems here. When the kids came from the West Indies, they figured those kids were backwards or something because the kids they had a class with the children and one lady kept saying that you put them back a year. That was just – that's what the thing was. So then they would put them back, and then they had to move up to the level – the grades where these kids were so – and anybody came in they would say oh where did you come from and then they say you know you supposed to put them back. So one lady was running a store with her husband and this lady was talking that she had to go to the school. And I was on the next side of her and I said why do you have to go to the school? She said because my kid had to be put back and I said well wait a minute. So I came over and told her no your kid don't have to be put back. If you gave them – I said give them a chance, just give them a chance

MN: So they were automatically leaving a West Indian kid back just because they came from –

AC: That's some standard, I don't know where it came from but it was some standard. I said well give that – tell them to give your kid a test. She said oh yeah? She said I was going to see that my kid – I said don't send that kid back. Send them back to the school, you go with your kid, tell them to give your kid a test. So they did. That kid passed. And I told everybody else to tell that kid that passed to give them a test first. Even in Sunday school it happened, at Sunday school classes, and I had to go to the teacher and tell them – test the kids first. I don't care what school they came from. You can't say because you came from somewhere you supposed to go to the school. So I had them to test all schools.

WC: Interesting because in my generation, let's just say three generations down from that, when I started to go to school, all of the kids from the Caribbean got skipped.

AC: Yeah but then they changed it.

MG: They said they had a better education.

WC: The kids had a better education so I'm just saying –

AC: They did even in Sunday school

WC: They weren't given the opportunity but once they were given the opportunity – all of the friends that came from the Caribbean that were my age when they came here – 10, 12, or 13, or 14, well supposed to be a sixth grader, seventh grader, eighth grader at our age, every single one of my friends, all were skipped.

AC: Were skipped.

MG: What school did you go to, I forget.

WC: I went to Grace Lutheran first. Went to Montessori very first, then I went to Grace Lutheran

MG: Oh Montessori

WC: Grace Lutheran then I went to Our Savior Lutheran. And then I spent one year in junior high school in public school because I was having issues with the private school. Well it was just she has a lot of informative books in the house and I researched and read and I had a problem with class, keeping my mouth shut when it came down to history and certain topics – that's her fault.

MG: We're so proud of our children, aren't we?

AC: Yes

WC: So then I went, so that was one year. And actually that was the year I told my mother that my schoolteacher had psychological problems and they wanted to kick me out of school for that and they tested that and she was put into a mental institution.

AC: Yeah, they were telling me something was wrong with him, they had to prove that. If it's wrong let me know what's wrong and don't tell me three months after a child didn't do well that he didn't do well. If he didn't do well, tell me then.

MG: Tell you that day. Right, right.

AC: He doesn't even know what he's talking about.

WC: They kept her because her husband was a religious guy and he was a very prominent guy in that private school so one year she let me what I call out of the prison. I went to a public school where I could wear what I wanted to wear. Most of my friends in this community went to public school so I could go to school with my friends which I never did. I played ball with them and went to summer camp with them

but most of my local friends, friends in the neighborhood, went to school in the neighborhood. And I was excited to go to school with jeans and sneakers. I never thought that what you wore had anything to do with what you learned, what you were learning. Not in our house, she was very strict on us and it was clear when it was homework time. It was clear to study. It was clear to read. We had - she had the SRA things and reading machines telling us your level of reading and stuff for now. So we had the things we could work on in the house. But I never liked this idea of wearing a uniform. I never - to this day - I haven't bought a tie and shirt since private school. I won't do it. But that situation for me - I felt was punishing. Fifth grade I went to only one for that one year. Then she put me back into private school for sixth grade and I went to tenth grade and it was just a combination of me no feeling or being - I feel a suitable environment for me to learn and I'm forced at that time - at that time William's Bridge Road was a racist Italian neighborhood where we went to school. By the way three or four generations deep and I felt like there was a problem that we were playing basketball or playing in the choir, what have you, and we weren't being protected. We knew the neighborhood was racist, for me, I told my mother we can't do this anymore. When I saw thirty-five year old Italian guys chasing us - we were in the fifth grade or sixth grade and had grown men chasing us, wanting to beat us with pipes and car jacks and stuff, that didn't get to me. What got to me were the parents coming from the grocery store with a cigarette or just walking by and I knew in this neighborhood we could never chase a white kid or any kid down these streets and have somebody's mother come out of the house and not chastise us. It wouldn't be acceptable. It'd never happen. And that was when I realized that of this was the level of the community's attitude towards us that I shouldn't be going to school here. I shouldn't be educated here. That was the final straw for me so tenth grade I left Our Savior and I did what I thought was two fabulous years at Evander Child. I thought the school had more, they had a - they had something that teachers lab, a college lab that you could talk to people about the universities; they had a room with all of the books of all of the schools.

MN: This is in the eighties?

WC: This was in the eighties. I graduated from high school in 1980. So, and I went right to school at summer school right after that. What I like about the public school for me was you could take shop, you had crafts you could take, you could learn a trade. We had a college and career counseling. That's what it's called so children whose parents were not connected to universities. I grew up fortunately in a family where my mother was very literate and went to universities. We had Thanksgiving dinners where the aunt went to that school you know. So we could talk about schools in Boston, Philly, D.C. You know, black colleges, whatever. We talked about those things as a family. But some of my friends were not connected to that situation so there was nowhere for them to be able to discuss their goals and what they like to do - fix a car, go to the moon, invent something, whatever. There was no dialogue, there was no narrative for that. And Evander Child had this college and career counseling office which I thought was tremendous and there was a woman in there who could tell you about every school in the states and some overseas. And there were books so we didn't have - we wouldn't go online in those days. We would say I want to go to Boston University. Ok here's a book on Boston University. She would interview you - what do you want to study. Pull your grades out - you don't qualify for this school, you're going to have to go to summer school. There was some kind of dialogue happening with us. We could get an idea of what we were getting ourselves into. It wasn't this idea of college as something where we go and hang out and play ball and meet beautiful girls. Or you study and all your professors are going to be amazing. It was reality. She was telling us - some of your professors are going to suck. Some don't care. Some just want parent's money. Some are great -

MN: This was at Evander – the college counselor.

WC: This was at Evander Child High School – had an office, you could go any time. Even if you got in trouble and you were in the office, you could say – excuse me, I want to go to the College and Career Counseling Office. You could leave your classroom and go. And that was my introduction to realizing a different kind of education outside of being – private school was good for certain things but being in a religious house and going to church every Sunday I didn't feel like I needed to be around that environment of Lutheran schools and everything. But I was impressed with that scenario, that different scenario for me – it was new to have that experience. So, you know, I want to just combine those educational things because it changed for some generations. And, you know, I remember a lot of my friends from the Caribbean, as I said, they were laughed at because of their accents. But every last one of them skipped one to two grades – that were my age. Every, none of them were in the same grade we were and they came in at our age. That goes for Costa Rico, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic. Maybe they did their math differently than we did but it was advanced. They were past our age range for academics. That was very clear. The point here – maybe it changed from what she's talking about to my generation when if a child came from the Caribbean they were automatically, you would assume, and the public schools had, which I thought was great – they had bilingual teachers and bilingual courses because you had some kids who didn't speak good English because they didn't know how to speak it. That didn't mean that they were not intelligent but there were teachers in their schools to get them to study their lessons while getting them to learn English at the same time. They had a bilingual – half of the building was cut off, quarter of the building was cut off and bilingual class so for the Latin speaking children they could learn English while also being one or two grades ahead which was great. That wasn't available in private schools.

MN: Now you mentioned –

DR: Now just a second could Mark especially you guys put feet – yeah because it's kind of in front of your mouth – Mark especially.

MN: Yeah now, you mentioned the racial hostility on William's Bridge Road from the Italians. Were you aware that in 1963 there was a huge riot at the White Castle on Allerton Avenue and Boston Road.

WC: I wasn't aware of that. I wasn't born yet.

MN: But you weren't aware that there was – CORE was demonstrating at White Castle, you know, for jobs and that hundreds of kids came – you know, Italian kids from the neighborhood and attacked the people but this was not something that was known up here.

AC: No

WC: That White Castle is still there.

MN: One of our colleagues wrote about it. But it wasn't something that came up to hear that you were aware of there were riots there.

AC: No

MN: This is '63. Ok I'm just curious.

WC: I mean, just for clarity too it wasn't – we road our bikes around here we went to Washington Bridge Park, we went to the Valley sometimes – our parents didn't know – we would go into these neighborhoods. I never looked at it as Italians being racist because I had Italian friends that I played ball with. I had Italian fathers who took us to –friends' dads took us to play baseball and what have you and fathers from Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic or whatever. We never as children were running around thinking that but yeah it was clear like Howard beach – it was just clear. However you want to – it was factual. Sheep's head bay – certain places you went in the city where you knew it was dangerous for you to be in this neighborhood if you don't know someone directly, if you're not with one of the local children that's here. But William's Bridge Road bothered me because our parents were working hard and paying tuition for us to go to school and when we walked that side of the building we were not protected.

MN: Now this is William's Bridge Road between where and where.

WC: Morris Park Avenue.

MN: Oh, so it's in the – it's south of Pelham parkway.

WC: 1734 William's Bridge Road is the exact address if you want to drive by there.

MN: Ok so it was south of Pelham parkway, ok that neighborhood is a dangerous place.

WC: Yes, yes. And we were out there. I played on the basketball team almost every year and ironically you would only be attacked and jumped if there was two of you and fifty of them. But if there was ten of us, there never seemed to be a problem. It was always cowardly –

MN: So that's in the Morris Park neighborhood.

WC: Morris Park neighborhood.

MN: That makes –

WC: extremely, extremely

MG: Your siblings went there also?

WC: My siblings went there also. And me watching my brother go through it and hearing about my older cousins go through it, I told my mother I'm not going to do it. I'm going to defend myself which is going to get me in trouble so it's better if you take me out. Because I saw – when we were running and I saw parents just walking by, smoking a cigarette, paying no attention at all, that shocked me more than the guy that wanted to hit me.

MN: See Maxine, see my students used to write about Morris Park – it was a neighborhood where in the seventies it was impossible for a black family to rent and apartment. It was notoriously as a center of racial hostility, that particular neighborhood. But you had already also mentioned, Will, you went to Bronx house.

WC: Yes

MN: Which was near that neighborhood

WC: But nowhere near as dangerous

MN: Right

WC: I walked outside Bronx house all my life. I never had a problem being in Pelham Parkway area. It wasn't that there were African American people living over there. It just was that kind of climate wasn't happening. Now that kind of climate, in my opinion, was just in that area because the Motor Vehicle used to be over there as well and there weren't any problems in that section. Something about that Williams Bridge Road - Morris Park area that was racially really [inaudible]. Pelham Parkway was no - we went to summer camp, we went over there to horseback riding, piano lessons, all those kind of things and never did I ever feel we - as a kid, 10, 12 years old, walking - sometimes she sent us in a cab, sometimes one of our parents dropped us off over there - never a problem. Going to school we had to get dropped off in front of the school cause we went to a store or somewhere, someone attacked us. And it could be a kid your age which you can deal with but when you see somebody your friend's dad's age coming at you with that kind of wickedness, evilness, then you realize I shouldn't be - I shouldn't be in this area. It doesn't make sense to me to be attending school with this kind of violence. So many of us, we stuck together. It made us tight, it made the parents tight. But by tenth grade I told my mother - that's it, you know, I refuse to submit myself to that kind of scenario.

MG: Where you the only one? Of your siblings that stood up.

WC: As far as I know, I was and unfortunately I was the only one in my class that convinced my mother because I said something bad is going to happen. But I asked the principle why can't you put a teacher out here on the corner? A cop or one parents? Cause they don't bother us if someone is out here but if there's only one or two of us out here. And we didn't all travel - the basketball team, they didn't bother us because we were all fearless and willing to fight them or just they said well leave these guys alone. But whenever they saw a couple of kids, look a little nerdy, glasses, schoolbag, by themselves, they were attacked or had racial things said to them or stuff thrown at them. It was horrible. Or we got on city buses sometimes, in that neighborhood and they would do their, you know, - get up and give your seat to a, you know. What are you talking about -

AC: Willy was always into something.

MG: That's what I was going to say, is he the one

AC: Yeah, I worked in Brooklyn and sometimes the teacher would get angry with him or something they would have done and they would call me - Mrs. Calhoun can you come to the school and it takes me one and half hours to get to Brooklyn and the teacher's telling me to come to school. I said what happened? And the teacher said, well you know, your son is in trouble. I said well what did he say? She says well he's saying that we are prejudice. I said why is he saying that you are prejudice? So she said they had some type movie going on Little Black Sambo or something and he said that animal or whatever it was was Little Black Sambo because he was black, you know 0

WC: What happened, it was historical, religious sort of a historical religious movie. And the movie was talking about, incorrectly talking about the history of Europe in my opinion, and South America and Africa. I didn't like the film anyway - we had to watch it in school. I asked the teacher - the guy, the gentleman who gave - who curated the videotape had a jet black dog - in the movie. He was walking

around with – he travels with this dog and at the end of the documentary, the gentleman whose interviewing him says – what’s the name of your dog? And he says – dog’s name is Sambo. So I just raised my hand and the guy said – did anyone have any questions? And I said did anyone else recognize that the guy’s dog – was all I asked! And he said that’s not a question pertaining to the movie. And I said well it is in a way. I would just like to know if you showed this film to every grade for the last twenty years, have you every recognized the fact that this guy’s dog is – can we talk about that. So he called her.

AC: So I – so the solution was I said why do you think. Why do you think he mentioned something about black? She said because I think he’s prejudice. I said well it’s you who have to accept the facts. So I’m not coming from – I’m not going to ride and hour and a half so you prove to him that it’s not prejudice, uh that it is prejudice. So she said ok then you’re not coming. I said no. You know you have to be careful what you saying. So if you can’t spell it, it’s not right.

MN: Now Will you had mentioned that at Thanksgiving or Christmas you have, you know, a lot of people who have varied education experiences. Were these mostly your siblings who, and their children, who went to college or became professionals?

MG: Did any of them?

MN: Did any of your sisters go to college? Or brothers?

AC: Yes, all of us went to college.

MN: So almost everyone in your family went to college?

AC: Yes but we were told – we were taught if you think you’re right, stand up for it.

MN: Well it sounds like your mother – that was what she did in North Carolina and then passed it on, would that be fair to say?

AC: Yeah

WC: Absolutely, absolutely. I mean, you know, there was conversation. I’m the youngest probably of the youngest in all of the family. A lot of my siblings are even older than my brother and sister are. And family times were discussions – where do you want. We talked about it. My aunt would say where do you want to go to school? Where do you -

MG: Not do you – are you going, where are you going

WC: Where do you want to go to school and have you researched that school?

MG: Right

AC: But see every Friday night, we had a conference

MG: Family conference?

AC: Every – family conference. So whatever you did at school, or in the homes, whatever you did, I didn’t say talk about whatever you did – I just say talk and then they would talk. Even they’d tell me

things that they thought that I did wrong during the week. And that's the way it was. Everybody had to tell something that they thought went wrong – went wrong during the week.

MN: This is every Friday night?

AC: Every Friday night. And you tell – you talk also about what you did – activities. The kids, whatever they saw, like they was smoking a lot of pot or something and they even told – I learned from them because they with the young people. So I found out a lot just from listening to them.

MN: Now was this a tradition you took from North Carolina? Or is this just something –

AC: This is from North Carolina.

MN: So this is what your mother and father did there?

AC: Yes

MN: I mean it sounds like this is an amazing story. You have this African American land-owning family, you know, tobacco and cotton which means, you know, they're fairly well off.

AC: And same with the animals. In fact the animals they had babies – babies was supposed to be born – my father took us out, night or day, to come and see the birth of animals.

MN: Wow

WC: He was a very special man in that, being a child and –

MG: You knew your grandparents.

WC: I'm named after my grandfather

MG: But you knew him?

WC: My grandmother died before I was born. My grandfather's name was William too. William Baker. And I took almost all of my friends from this community down there because I knew what it was like – my grandfather caught and kept bobcats. Kept them

MN: Bobcats?

WC: Bobcats, nobody -

MN: In a cage?

AC: Yes, they would come out and eat right from his hand

WC: He had bobcats, he had foxes, he had minx. He was the only one that could go to cage open up the cage – and he would kill the chicken and throw the skin, the animal into the cage but he was the only one that could go to cage and feed it. And these animals were in great condition. When he got to be much older, in his nineties, the North Carolina Zoo took the animals and said they were in perfect health – checked them all.

MN: Wow, so his name was William Baker. Have people done oral histories with him down there?

AC: I think everybody knows him

MN: So he was a legend in the community

AC: Yes

MN: I mean that – this sounds like an absolutely extraordinary family

WC: He's an autonomous – he said some things. I mean I was young, young, younger being around him but he said very powerful things. He would say things like - a person who's free is a person who doesn't have to ask anybody for anything. So we – we watched the cane and the tobacco and the corn, you know, and I was a city kid so I was nervous about – first of all for me it was dark then. Going into the henhouse to get eggs and I was frightened. It was worse than going against a gangster here was going to get eggs from the bird. Put your hand into the bird and the bird looks at you like – you touch that egg, I'm going to bite your hand off. So we had those kind of things, that kind of relationship which fortunately my mother took us down there every summer.

MN: So you went down there in the summer. How long did you stay?

WC: She stayed with us.

AC: I'd say that something I stayed for weeks, two weeks.

MN: So the kids stayed there the whole summer?

AC: Well I had one nephew that stayed there the whole summer. But I would just take them down. And sometimes they would take their friends –

WC: Yeah cause when you tell your friend your grandfather has a lynx - it was like, you know, what are you talking about? I mean or it was like he has foxes that he captures and there you could see them, as well as, you know, we didn't have this growing up here in New York. We didn't have this birdhouse relationship with chickens and hens and geese.

MN: So how many acres did he have?

AC: He had about eight acres.

MN: 8 acres.

AC: And he would, we had family reunion at any time that my father thought we should get together. Ok I think it's time to get together – and we would say oh no, he's got something up his sleeve. And he never said anything that he thought we shouldn't have had. So there were nights we talked about sex and I was a little girl but we talked about everything that happened. We talked about sex so when we got the kids into the Lutheran school the lady told me – I think you're taking your children too fast because they all, everybody else is snickering and wondering what things are, your children are always able to know. But my father would always tell us about sex. He was the first one who told me about menstruation. It wasn't my mother. It was him. And he told all us about it.

MN: Now what level of education did your father and mother have? Did they go to college?

AC: No, but my grandmother had the books, you know. She would have the geography books that they had and everything. And if she hear us say something that's not correct then we have to go upstairs and sit down and look through the books until we find the answer.

MG: Did everybody leave North Carolina? All your whole family?

AC: Except one daughter , one – my sister.

MG: One sister stayed?

AC: Yes

MG: Was she the unmarried sister?

AC: No she's married. Her and her husband had a daughter.

MG: How many were you?

AC: Five

MG: Five children

AC: 1 brother and 4 sisters

MN: Did they all go to North Carolina Central or some went to college up here?

AC: No, up here. So but my father was in, you know, for education – I don't know what they said the schools didn't go any further than the sixth or seventh grade but they were pretty good to not have gone to different schools. My father used to close the door, put the blackboard behind the door and he sat like – who is the first president? And I used to be scared to go in the room during the week at a special night, especially geography night I couldn't keep up but that's the way he –

MG: He had geography night?

AC: A night for everything!

MG: Wow

AC: This hour, you know it's Monday night, you know what's going on. It's Monday night, come on! And he would get the chalk and write on the blackboard.

MN: Wow this is amazing, did your parents participate in the Civil Rights movement in North Carolina?

AC: No

MN: So how did –

AC: He would just read and he read a lot and would ask a lot of questions and things like that.

MN: Now when the sit-ins started in North Carolina were you very aware of that? You know all those events going on down south?

AC: Yeah most of them and he would tell us, you know, why it's important to know -

MN: Wasn't it North Carolina Central that those students came from? What was the name of it? North Carolina A and T or -

AC: yeah A and T.

MG: A and T, that's right.

MN: And that's in Greensboro, no in Greensboro?

MG: Greensboro

AC: Greensboro

MN: Yeah and North Carolina Central is in Durham.

AC: Yes.

MG: Yes, in Raleigh, Durham right?

AC: Raleigh-Durham

MG: Where's Duke?

AC: Duke is in Durham.

MN: In Durham

AC: That's a nice school.

MN: So you have this amazing family tradition and so your children were aware, because they were always in North Carolina, were aware of that strength and pride and passion for education and standing up for yourself.

AC: Yeah

MN: Now how did you get to start an organization in the neighborhood? What are the different ways that you met people - other than the church?

AC: We met them, black women, at the sports things and they had - they would always have, like, prayer meeting. Everybody, I think, thought they need the prayer - should have had the prayer. So they would have the prayer once a - once a week. People would go pray - you'd find a lot of people there.

MN: Did you have block associations in this neighborhood?

AC: In this neighborhood they had - they started out with a block association but it got so mixed up they don't - Fish Bay is just - the organization in the neighborhood where everybody would go.

MN: Now did the ministers participate in Fish Bay or it was mainly the – just, you know, citizens?

AC: Well we – very few ministers. But they do have a program for the ministers – for all ministers in the area. So they go – and the minister organizations are good too because they often give out scholarships to the children who can't go and I thought that was nice.

MN: Now did you find that the elected officials were helpful when you organized - or not that helpful?

AC: Some were and some weren't.

MN: Who were the good ones – that you remember?

AC: Well the good one was the first one who started – the president . Another one that worked with me and he was good, you know, in helping get the organization up. Our politicians from this area was good.

MG: Are you still involved with the –

AC: When I can go. My son tried to get me to stop because it's too much work.

WC: It's been forty years. She's been president of the organization and I like her to be involved in some things but it's a lot of work. And, you know, I want – if the other ladies or men in the mission aren't going to be chipping in at least on the same level, you know, they still want her to kind of have that take charge thing. And it's – I just think it becomes a little excessive.

MN: So you – you're president of the association. And you've been president for forty years?

AC: I was assistant to the president first and then when he died and I came –

MN: And so what year have you been president of this since?

AC: Since it must have been about 12 years.

MN: Wow, so you're president of this association for 12 years and –

MG: When did you retire?

AC: Where?

MG: When did you retire from –

AC: ninety-one

MG: Oh yeah, ninety-one?

MN: Wow

AC: But we have done a lot. We have done a lot, yeah.

MG: We, thanks to you.

AC: Yeah but with the children there wasn't maybe a place for them for the summer – we got the summer camps going on for them. And then at the church we had – we had our after-school program 'cause I walked these blocks to find out what was happening with the kids after they came back from school. And the thing was that these kids – some kids were left at stores, different stores – maybe in the drug store, the shoe store, and the library. So they were – they were just – parents would drop them off – they had to go to work – so they just leave them there. So I go in the stores and see kids sitting up here and going in and out – I don't know why so many more didn't get hurt than did get hurt. Then the librarian was saying that the library was becoming a babysitting area –

MN: Well that happens all over the city because what happens is they used to have very good after school programs in the public schools that were closed down in the '70s.

AC: Yeah but the after school program charges a lot now so the people can't afford to send their kids to after school programs.

MN: They charge?

AC: They charge! You know, nothing is free.

WC: And there's penalties too – after a certain time.

MG: Yeah if you don't pick them up by –

AC: At a certain time, right then they have to pay more.

MN: And this is even in the schools, you have to pay?

WC: Yes, yes.

MN: What! You have to pay for after-school?

AC: That's right.

WC: If you're late, if you don't get there by 5 it's one thing - you don't get there by 6 o'clock, it's one thing. After the third one they call the police or something.

MN: When I was in – when I was growing up it was free – three to five, seven to nine, every public school was open.

AC: No, it's not like that now and I feel sorry for these single mothers.

MN: Oh boy.

AC: You know, it's really, really hard. And if they late, they have to pay a certain fee, for being late.

WC: Isn't that clever to start your bike –

AC: Yeah, yeah he starts the bike and then he puts it on the ground and goes inside.

WC: He had one stolen already.

MG: He did? Well he gonna have another one stolen.

WC: That's really smart.

MN: He left it on?

MG: He left it on and went in the house.

WC: You don't start your bike up and then run into the house.

AC: He went racing this morning, early.

WC: He's going to be walking if he's not careful.

AC: But it's bad for the parents. You gotta work and if you're taking the subway, you know, you can be late – this happens, and I've seen it – people just say well I can't do both.

MN: Now are you still –

AC: And you gotta pay for the bus - the bus that bring them back and forth. Yeah, that's another thing.

MN: Ok, now where – are you still involved in the same church that you – so the Presbyterian church?

AC: Yes

MN: And where – where are the meetings of Fish Bay held?

AC: On – it's part of that - Gun Hill and Fish.

MG: Right, it's about three blocks.

MN: Is it in a storefront?

AC: No, it's the Knight's church. We had it remodeled last year.

MN: Right and does the association meet in the church?

AC: Yes

MN: Ok so you – so the church is the base for the –

AC: Yes

MN: Wow

AC: For any of the meetings, because once I was walking with the pastor and we saw a yellow ribbon around the church so the pastor said – why don't we just walk and see what the ribbon is for. So I said ok. So we walked there and the police said – you can't come in. So I said – why can't we come in here – which is the bottom of the store. So he said three kids were there with their necks – with their throats slashed. And he said - the pastor said to me – Annie what is this saying to us? So I said – it's saying that we got a job to do. So that's what we did – we start a –

MG: Patrol?

AC: No, we started a diction unit at the church. So they – some comes during the day and some people come in during the day once a week and we got people coming twice a week at, you know, for the same program. I even have people coming from Brooklyn.

MN: Wow.

MG: Oh, that's good.

AC: 'Cause they're free. They can cook – we have cooking night. So they cook and, you know, themselves. And then the thing that's more interesting that I've seen is that when they testify as to what happen to them now and what was happening to them before. So I remember one night I would – I think the fellow was about 18 years old and he said he wanted to say something and they allowed him to say it. So he say – I hate my mother. And he was about 18. And then – I couldn't say nothing because I was supposed to be participating. So someone said to him, said – why do you hate her? He said - because she yells at me, she doesn't want to speak to me, and I don't like her. So after the meeting, I met with him and I said – well, why do you hate your mother? He said – she just yells at me, she just screams at me, and I can't do nothing right. So I said – 'cause you always have to say – I said well what are you? He said – I'm an alcoholic and I deal with drugs. So I said – your mother doesn't hate you, your mother loves you. And he said – why would you say she loves me? I said – when you get high, she's high too, so you're – I said – so you're hurting not only yourself but you're hurting your mother. He said –I hadn't thought about that. So I went the next night to see if he was coming back. So he came to me, he said – hi grandma! He said – I know now why my mother hates me. He said – you know what I did? I said – what? He said – when I got in the house, I hugged my mother, she loves me.

MG: That's nice

AC: I thought it was so good.

MN: You know, listening to you, have you ever thought of doing a family history?

AC: No

MN: You know, that captures all of this because it seems to me – please don't hit my car, missed it – that – he was very close but

WC: I was checking too so it's ok.

MN: So because this is a really extraordinary story of family leadership producing community leadership – in two places and across generations and I really think – I'm putting this on Will – that this is something that's worth doing. You know, really

MG: You've thought of it, I'm sure –

MN: But to actually go interview, you know, the other siblings and get records and get all the pictures because your, you know, your parents sound like absolutely extraordinary people. And these were the people who held the community together and built it to the point where there could be a civil rights

movement and also who, you know, involved in the migration and came up here and build communities here

AC: But we as a family – see in the south they usually have the blacks to take care of their children and the blacks – it's like a family so that's what happened – that the place that we were near, even when I was small, if those people had to go out like to a party or something and they didn't want to leave their kids home by themselves, we were there with those kids. And if they – if their parents had to go out, they'd bring the kids to my mother's house and we were in the same beds, that's what I couldn't understand when I got the New York University. One girl asked where I was from and I told her where I was from and she said – how could you stand the south? So she said – I don't know how you could stand the south, the people down there are so bad. So I said – I don't think so. I said – I didn't find about the south until I came to New York so you figure it out. Yeah, because they think that all southerners are bad

WC: Are racist

MG: Or backwards

AC: Racism, yeah

MN: So you're family had close relationships with some of the local white families?

AC: Yes because when we – my two sisters went to college, we didn't live in the same neighborhood. My mother had to pay, you know, the extra for the kids going out of town. We didn't have any money – what those people did, they would find out what my mother had to pay for each kid and they'd pay for it. We didn't have a car – when it's time for my sisters to go home and come back – they did that. And before they went to school, those white people would fix packages for each one of us. And then when they had a store and before we got ready to go out to school, they would call us to the store and my mother could get anything she want for each one of us. So we were never actually separated –

MN: Do you remember the name of this family?

AC: Devenfort

MN: Devenfort ok, cause what's very interesting is those kinds of relationships may have allowed your mother to be that outspoken without having people retaliate.

AC: Yeah cause we didn't know about this business of hatred in anything. If we got sick, if we needed glasses, all we had to do was call them. We got glasses and we got food. Even though when I was in college they did that. Before I got ready to go to college they would call me to come to the house.

MN: No this is – I mean, I see a book about your family. I mean this is – somebody should write a book about this family and its experiences in North Carolina and here because this is amazing story. I mean its one I've heard before but not in this detail with the, you know. So – and I mean it's because – I mean here we have community leaders in North Carolina, community leaders in the Bronx and you transmit it to your kids, you know

AC: Well they know when they go down, they – when I go home and they ask me about each one of the kids and what happened, they didn't come by and this –

MN: Ok so the Devenfort family you're still in touch with and still -

AC: Yes every time we go down there

MN: Ok

AC: But Will can go get that little brown envelope on the table with the -

MG: What - where are the photos?

WC: Well the photos are going to take a little while to get to but we have them. It's really here aunt - we called her out grandmother and that was the only way - that was my first, she's my favorite too, but that was my first experience with seeing my mother, you know, young - like 90 pounds with your school uniform on. Or my grandmother, I never saw her dressed up really fly, you know what I mean? You don't relate to your - sometimes your relatives in that way. And then she lived to be 103, I imagine it was.

MG: And that was your aunt?

AC: I had one last died 106.

MG: Oh here?

WC: And she, at that each -

AC: In Greenville

WC: Even if you went to see her, at that age and you walked in the hospital room, she would tell you if you got fat, if you got skinny. If you were with a new boyfriend or girlfriend she would read you and that person if it wasn't up to - it went all the way to the end. She would always say, my little cousins are younger than me, she would go - that girl, that girl's too fat, she's getting too fat, her breasts is all big, and she wasn't like that last time she came to see me. She spoke - that's the real - she spoke openly about us -

AC: But everybody knew her father and my mother, so when my mother died it was more young people than there were old. The church was packed

MN: So this was - the funeral was in North Carolina

AC: Yes so they would just - they would have everybody in the white school system and the black school system. My family worked with them

MN: Right, now in what year were the schools integrated in Greenville?

AC: They were - they've been integrated for a long time

MN: Probably in the '60s it changed?

AC: Probably and this is because now they - it's just one school. It's been like that for a long time.

MN: Right.

WC: But was it - it wasn't integrated before you left

AC: No before I left –

WC: It was still segregated.

AC: Yeah but now they all together.

MN: Ok, now we've gone for a long time, do you have any more questions?

MG: Did they have any clubs or bands playing in Greenville?

WC: Social life

MG: Dances?

AC: They did but in small places, you know, they would go into Greenville. Well we were in the country so they would go into the Greenville Hall

MN: Was music a big part of your family?

AC: Yeah everybody was into music except my father couldn't sing but he talked – whatever the song was he talked

MN: But so was – did you grow up around music Will?

WC: Completely, you know who her father sounds exactly like to this day and I played my mother a song – now it escapes me

MN: Not Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker?

WC: My grandfather speaks exactly the way John Mildred sings on his record

MN: What?

WC: And he wrote a song called Annie May and her name is Annie May and I had her come into my house to listen to it and she laughed because he says the song the way I used to hear my grandfather call her when I was a kid.

MN: Really? That's amazing.

WC: And you can think about how John Lee Hooker speaks in his songs, that's exactly the talked

AC: But my grandfather actually didn't have a tune. He would just say it, he could say the whole song over

MN: He would say it and he could say it with meaning

AC: Yeah, well he didn't have a voice

MN: Now did you ever play a musical instrument growing up?

AC: No, cause we didn't have money for that type thing. Somebody gave us an organ and I don't know how my mother learned to play but she learned how to play it

MN: So Will was your exposure to music more in the family or the neighborhood or the school?

WC: Well she says that but there's quite a few things that I have to say about that. Number 1, my mother has an amazing voice, a perfect pitch voice. She never studied, she didn't study music so to speak but whenever she – like Mahala Jackson was her singer that this kind of – she would sing acappella a lot of times in the house. It always sounded perfect so I had to learn what it meant to have perfect pitch. You didn't do that but fortunately for us, we were completely exposed to music on a lot of fronts because we had the stereo down here in the living room. My father was traveling around with a lot of records. That was the first time I saw Belafonte and other artists from Caribbean records. Records from – I saw records from Iran, I saw music from India.

MN: Cause he was traveling around the world

WC: He was traveling and he brought back not only art, we had the ash trays and the African art in the house, we had the figurines also from countries – China and Russia and places. But still music was there and fortunately it was always in the house. We took piano lessons as children, we had a piano here. Once we got to be a lot older the basement apartment downstairs became the neighborhood rehearsal space. So everybody's gear –

AC: We had everybody's kids down there

WC: So I got the chance, although I'm the youngest, my older brother played before me, played really well at a very young age. But I was able to grow up and watch – he would play open minded. So he played in blues bands, gospel groups, jazz groups -

MN: What was his instrument?

WC: Drums.

MN: Drums

WC: So since everyone's gear was downstairs I was always able to walk down here and walk around to the side of the house and watch the Latin guys play, the jazz guys play, the funk guys play. I had a chance to even check out the personality differences – who's late, who's always early, who's got a girl on each arm, who's got to go take a joint, who's got to go smoke a cigarette, who's got the bottle – you know a little gin – in their bag. But you got to see – I had the chance without realizing I wanted to be a musician. And music in the house was never something that was a problem – like she didn't say don't practice. I spent a lot of time, after a certain age, practicing. I think about 16 I took it really seriously. But I could go play for 10 hours, 8 hours, 6 hours, and I never had to stop and you're making too much noise.

MN: Now what about the neighbors?

WC: Totally cool. This neighborhood fortunately, why I stayed in this neighborhood too myself was I never – we never had a problem with anything around here – no baffling, no one ever called the cops. Most people just listen and I have to be honest with you, a lot of you talked about pumpkin earlier and

you know he lived up on 222nd and Laconia. His garage was another jam session place so the guys I grew up around in this community whose parents we had basement apartments – we always used their places to rehearse and it was never recording studios. It was a garage or a basement apartment with the doors wide open, windows wide open. And there's never ever a complaint –

MN: And this is – so this is a whole music gestation area

WC: Completely

MN: And it's very interesting because it was out of private homes that you had a music gestation area

WC: Yep, but we – it was a combination though I can tell you, our outlet – our biggest outlet – for us was Haffen Park

MN: Really Haffen Park?

MG: How far is that?

MN: I play tennis there sometimes

WC: That's a five minute drive, and maybe a 20 minute walk

MN: So you would be able to play outdoors there?

WC: We, illegally, plugged into the light pole. Remember, there was all light poles, they don't make them anymore. There was a panel and there was four screws on the panel. If you took those panels off there were four outlets in that panel box and we plugged PA and a mixer into that, mic the stage, and we played the drums absolutely.

MN: And this would be jam sessions in Haffen?

AC: Here, in the park was a show

WC: The jam sessions were in the house. When we got to the park we were playing for keeps because we're competing with other bands. You knew other bands were going to be there. You knew that killing drummer you saw last week by that killing bass player were going to be there.

MN: These were battles of the bands in Haffen park?

WC: Battle in the way of respectful battles – we didn't actually go for each other's' throats.

MN: And you didn't have people who had to protect the stuff with weapons or anything?

WC: No

MN: See that was what the South Bronx –

WC: We traded instruments –

MN: Ok so this is a middle class kind of community with a whole music scene and that's a whole story nobody's written about either.

WC: We shared our instruments and the one guy – Polumbo was the one guy – Mr. Polumbo was the one gentleman, Italian guy that moved up here that had the first, what I can remember, the music store. We'd all go to 48th street which we did after a while but Mr. Polumbo had a store which we could go to and look at instruments and try them and play them. And he had a music school.

MN: Really? Now do you have any pictures of the jams in Haffen park? Are there any?

WC: There's a Latin guy I think you know who took a lot of photographs of Tito Puente.

MG: What's his name?

MN: Joe Conzo?

AC: Jr, it's Jr.

WC: Yeah he might have it.

MN: I'm going to ask Joe, Joe's a good friend of mine.

WC: Yeah because he knows me for a very long time.

MN: Yeah well this is all very historic, what you're talking about.

AC: Well this house here was a music house for everybody's kids 'cause parents didn't want their kids to make that music in their homes. So what they did, if the kids wasn't at home, they would call me to find out if their kid were here. But nobody else would let them, the other parents.

MN: So this was the music house for the neighborhood.

AC: for the neighborhood

MN: Right and then Pumpkin's house too?

AC: Yeah for the Southern Bronx

MN: Was he also a private home too? Pumpkin?

AC: Yeah

WC: Private home, 222nd and Laconia

MN: And what was Pumpkin's –

WC: real name?

MN: Yeah

WC: Errol Bedward

MN: Errol Bedward

WC: He moved from Costa Rica.

MN: Oh he's from Costa Rica?

WC: They were my first friends. I thought they were Jamaican the whole time that I was with them growing up. But Mrs. Bedward spoke with a heavy –

MN: How do you spell the name? B-E-D

WC: W-O-O-D

MN: Bedwood? And they were from Costa Rica?

WC: The parents were from Costa Rica. Pumpkin was a prodigy. Pumpkin played classical piano for real. Awesome drummer which is what his main instrument was.

MN: Like Don't Hit Me

WC: And bass and guitar. And he, in the '70s, was creating beats and loops and selling them to record labels for R and B music. Before it became popular. Pumpkin was way ahead of the curve – super genius, way, way ahead. He told me when I was 10, 11 years old that that music was going to change the world.

MN: Now how old – what was the age difference between you and him?

WC: Same with my brother, almost 6 years. Cause his, he has a younger brother and when you have the older brother thing, you have that kind of strange thing where Pumpkin like me – or I would say he treated me with a lot more respect than my brother did. And my brother treated Pumpkin's brother – he would always, Mike would come over and he'd go – Hey Mike how you doing? Mike played bass and sometimes as a little younger brother, you want to get that attention from your older brother cause your older brother's cool. Right, he's got – he's playing, he's hanging out with guys - whenever I saw him, you know, Pumpkin was a hero in our neighborhood. You know these guys were selling records out of the trunk of their cars. They were on the radio. There wasn't a record company set up for this at that time so we were aware when we heard something on black radio – that's Pumpkin's track. And that's Donald-D's track-

MN: Donald-D is who?

WC: He's a rapper from the Bronx. That's – and the person who really started the concept of that kind of park is a combination of the Caribbean culture, the big huge speakers, and the – kind of like the block party things and the musicians. It was a combination of those two communities coming together. Block parties, musicians – PA system was the block party and all of it -

MN: See in the South Bronx, the musicians weren't as much a part of it.

WC: Oh we were totally. We didn't even – DJs were considered junior high school for us. They weren't qualified to hang out with us. But the people who threw the block parties would lend us the PA gear for the bands to play so we were always in sympatico with each other.

MN: Wow, now was the stuff that you were playing funk or R and B, Latin, or a mixture of all of them

WC: There was a time when we all played together, so there were Latin guys that played R and B. There were some African American and Caribbean guys that played salsa. Now of salsa was strict at that time. It wasn't of course, you played salsa

MN: You'd better do it properly

WC: like talking about somebody's mother – you didn't do that. You played all the parts the horn, the bass, everything was proper. But yes there were Latin guys, one of my good friends, Tony Citron, who was the first, in my opinion, Puerto Rican drummer who went out and did – who did Angela Bofill, those kind of gigs. Those gigs were basically African American guys doing them. Tony was a drummer from Mount Vernon who just kind of hung around down here who also got into that R and B clique for real. He wasn't a Latin guy that played R and B. He was a first call for those kinds of gigs. So we grew up in a community of this mixture of hearing calypso music right? And then when of course, Bob Marley in the '70s changed the game. It's like reggae became this music everyone liked. I was a musician so we always liked it but we knew people who didn't like it. They would call it Jamaican music. So Bob really, in my opinion, miraclly and genius music and the simplicity of his music was so well spelled out that it wasn't about where it came from. It was just great music. It was treated like Coldtrain and Miles and Hendrix and others of kinds that we listened to. But as a kid, people first talked about Jimmy Cliff and Marley as Jamaican music and I couldn't understand that. But of course as time went on, it takes people a while to catch on. So we have these communities of the Caribbean music coming in and you know we –we played some of Haitian parties and the Calypso parties in Brooklyn. The funk guys played those shows. We were familiar with that music, we were familiar with those rhythms. And we had to – we shared the records as growing up, as kids going to school together, so it was a language –

MN: Now were these parties you're talking about in the '70s or the '80s mostly? The jams –

WC: Late '70s

MN: Late '70s, mid to late '70s

WC: That was the time period. That was when bands were at full horns, keyboard, two guitar, background singers, bass, drums -

MN: Damn and this was all in Haffen park?

WC: Haffen park man, you would see the most frightening guys on the scene. If you – Edenwald Projects and Haffen park – if you wanted to get your ego checked – go see and a band and see where you stood as a musician in the Bronx.

MN: So they had jams at Edenwald?

WC: It wasn't – I want to just be clear with you – it wasn't so much that it was jams. We jammed in our parents' house. When we got our act together, we went to the park. You didn't go to the park without getting your act together

MN: Ok but you had stuff – performances at Edenwald?

WC: We had full on 12 song set performances

MN: At Edenwald?

WC: And Haffen park

MN: Ok where in Edenwald – what streets was the place you would do that?

WC: In front of the community center, take your pick, pick your building -

MN: In front of the building?

WC: Yeah anywhere out there, out in the community center, wherever they let the power out – it was frightening bands, there was huge talent. Houses on 223rd street across from Pumpkin were few families that were very talented guys but just so you know we didn't jam in the parks

MN: Ok I've got it. Ok these are performances.

WC: Jamming was Orchard beach

MN: Right, these were set performances

WC: People came to see who you were and if you were good.

MN: Ok

WC: So the stair steps, the clothes, the background vocals. Everybody's parts were tight. It was your moment to see whether you or your band was on the level. That's what those performances were about.

MN: Unbelievable. This is – nobody ever wrote about this.

WC: And Angela Bofill, people like Michael Urbaniak. There were a few musicians who used to come pluck the Bronx guys out, the Bronx guys.

MN: So Angela Bofill knew about this?

WC: Bofill was over by the Bronx Zoo

MG: Where?

MN: She used to live there?

WC: Yeah she went to high school Music and Art with Marcus Miller and Omar and those guys, and you got to remember that community was making records when they were teenagers. They were already recording, mind you. They were doing jingles. They were already playing on records that we heard on the radio. Up here we had a niche. Steve Jordan and probably Raymond Chew lived right around the corner. His backyard faces that backyard. Ray Chew as you know, 17, 18 years old – musical director of Ashford Simpson, Diana Ross, as a kid. His house is right beyond ours. Steve Jordan was on the other block of Fisher Avenue of mine. Steve, 18 years old was on Saturday Night Live band – he was in the band already. Great sight-reader, killer professional musician -

MN: Now these guys go to Music and Art

WC: I don't know exactly where – they were older than me so I'm not sure where they to school but Steve Jordan and guys like Lee Roy Clouding and Raymond Chew were already professionals in high school.

MN: Right now Raymond Chew is Chinese?

WC: No, he's black

MN: How do you?

WC: Ray Chew – C-H-E-W. Ray Chew. And we even had our – your good friend's son was a classical violinist – he was a guy we can go to – imagine you're a kid, you can to Carnegie Hall to see your neighbor play violin. He was the only brother we saw in there

MN: Wow so the North Bronx has not gotten its due at all in terms of this music history

WC: I don't think so.

MN: Well that's a whole other project. We got to have a North Bronx -

WC: Coalition

MN: Project to do research on this, I can assign some students to this

MG: Oh that would be good

MN: You know, to focus on all of these figures

WC: Ray Chew, Ray Chew is still doing great. Steve Jordan – he's producing the Super bowl halftime. He produced a show –

MN: Are you still in touch with them?

WC: Steve is – absolutely.

MN: Ok we should interview them

MG: And what happened to Pumpkin?

WC: Pumpkin, unfortunately, passed away very young.

AC: They used to have my dishes jumping in the dining room when they start playing. Everything jump upstairs.

MG: What happened?

WC: He had a bad case of what do you call it pneumonia. He was never a guy to get wrapped up all the time and he had a bad case of it.

MN: Well let me tell you that basically -

DR: Were you surprised when Will decided to become a professional musician? Did you like the idea?

AC: I didn't care. If that's what he wanted, I didn't care. Because he was making too much noise in his bedroom anyway and I figure since nobody was downstairs, he could go downstairs 'cause he would get up during the night and start and you know I have to sleep sometime so - he's get up whenever he felt the music or something and he would play. So I said that's alright you can go downstairs.

MN: Now did you ever think of like becoming a music professor as well as performer?

WC: More recently, I'm spending time - I just did a whole Canadian tour from Western Canada all the way over to Newfoundland. I have a recording studio with three other Bronx guys. One of them named Andre Betts. Andre is a great producer, produced Madonna. Andre bought a building it's in Hackensack, New Jersey. It's a full on multimillion recording studio and all the homeboys, as we still call ourselves, we go and teach for free. We're teaching pro tools - logic, ear training, piano, drums, bass. We teach for free - it's one hundred dollars a month and the system - the program became so large that the Hackensack Educational Foundation came to us and they're starting to send the public school kids, they want to maybe improve the recording studio. 12 and 14 year olds can go into a recording studio with the power off and set up a professional recording. Get the pro-tool ready, get the logic ready, get the bass loops up. The 12 and 14 year-olds are almost better than the interns

MN: Fantastic. That's amazing.

WC: And that's getting them ready for the real recording world. Not just learning how to play a samba or barcarola or chord changes. Those things are necessary but how are these young folks going to survive in this new digital climate. So we're doing it cause we didn't have those - we learned from the cousin and the brother and the homie and so and so -

MG: Where's this? Hackensack?

WC: It's in Hackensack

MG: So Andre Betts is from the Bronx?

WC: Andre is from the Bronx. Bronx River. It's a killing facility. I'll send you the link. You can go online and look - he put his money directly back into - and he could have bought a house in you know whatever, on Palisades Parkway but he built this facility because he said - I never, nobody ever showed me anything. I had to learn everything from hustling, be around sessions, getting kicked out of sessions. No one ever said - Andre, come in the room. So he said now that I have money, I want people to come to my place, you know.

MN: I'm going to get your email and we're going to try to track down these Bronx people and put them all on record what you have cause this is a whole story. My problem is there are two books here. There's the book about your family which is a story in itself - an amazing story but you gotta have somebody in North Carolina to do that. I have friends at Duke by the way. Then there's the story - the music that came out of this community which is a story we can do from here. I don't want to have this go on forever, I just want to say that this is one of the most amazing interviews we've ever done because of the depth of what

we touched about, you know, I had no idea what to expect and, you know, thank you for sharing your amazing life, your amazing family and it's not like your still doing but I would just – I would say get on your own family history and put as much of this down

WC: Document it

MN: And document it – pictures every other way. And then we'll work with you on documenting the neighborhood. That will become the next major music research initiative of the Bronx African American History Project is documenting the musical traditions of this neighborhood.

MG: Can I say something before we –

MN: Oh yes

MG: I want to ask, I have to ask Mrs. Calhoun about her doll collection.

DR: Oh I was going to –

MG: She has the most extraordinary doll collection. How did that happen?

AC: Well when I was very small I didn't like dolls but to play with but I just liked them to keep so that's how it got so big. And then I start looking through the histories and the type of dolls and what so I got the – and now the church members have gotten involved. So people from church – I got dolls named after people from the church because everybody want their doll to be in my house so when I walk in and where's me or where are we? So I got a doll to represent whoever want to bring the doll.

WC: We got kicked out.

MG: The children are replaced by the dolls huh?

AC: They didn't even want the dolls in their room because the dolls would be taken care of and even if they left out something, if a doll hat came off when I walked in I knew that hat was off. And I asked and they would say. The boys wouldn't let the dolls stay in their room so my daughter tolerated them but now that I got the whole house –

MG: Do you know how many you have?

AC: I got over a thousand.

MG: That's what I thought and we're going to – Dawn's going to photograph them ok?

AC: Yes ok

MG: Because I think you have some kind of Guinness World Record for dolls. I mean she's got dolls.

WC: Or something, unbelievable

AC: I don't have them all out because I can't get them out of the garage

WC: She collects them, to be honest with you, I know she's an antique collector so when I'm on the road and I find nice, fine – she's educated me a little bit about porcelain and what to check for – cause as a musician I'm always on the road and you're often around flea markets. And ironically in Argentina I found quite a few bit – unfortunately probably taken – there's an area of Buenos Aires where they have this Sunday market where I think it's a lot of - to be politically correct, the furniture of

MG: the people who have disappeared?

WC: The Jews that's furniture was taken from the Holocaust – a lot of the soldiers they sent them to South American rather than put them on trial. So there's a lot of fireplaces, and lamps and furniture of these families

MG: From Europe

WC: Oh yeah, it's a huge market of just that. So there was a couple dresses out there and the guy puts antique dolls on top of the dresses as fashion pieces and I turned a couple of them over and they were from what she informed me is very valuable so when I can I try to buy some stuff or I ship them back because I'm on the road and I don't want to break anything. My sister's telling me to stop doing that now

MG: Why because she has enough? No but a collector never has enough.

WC: No, I know that being a musician, I collect – I like old instruments and I know if I'm in a certain area and I see antiques I'll go in there anyway. Or if I don't know, I'll call her and I'll say – Mom what, I'm in front of something here it looks like blah, blah, blah. And she'll tell me – no if the hair is like this it's fake or if it's plastic shoes don't bother. And sometimes if it's not that expensive I'll buy it anyway but I check because there are gems sometimes in places.

MG: Yes, yes. So it's ok if we photograph this?

AC: Yes

DR: And in fact two questions I have – first I would like to give her the portable mic so you can show the dolls and explain what they are and two if there are any family photographs that I can photograph or if you'd rather wait -

WC: Ma please be kind if you are going to show her any of my photos. Please.

MG: I think we should do it separately

DR: We could do it separately -

MN: Ok I'm going to shut the interview -