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Chappell, Marguerite

Bronx African American History Project
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Transcriber: Danielle Lund

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): This is the 180th interview of the Bronx African American History Project. We're at Fordham University on July 17, 2006, and we're here with Marguerite Chappell who is an administrator at The City University of New York, who grew up in the Morrisania community. Marguerite, tell us a little bit about your family and how they came to move to the Bronx.

Marguerite Chappell (MC): Well, my mother was from Atlanta Georgia and my father is from South Carolina. I gather just like a lot of other blacks they migrated to New York City for work, a better way of living as far as I know, and then we end up - - at first they moved to Brooklyn I understand, and then eventually when the Forest Houses were completed we moved in in the early '50s.

MN: Okay, so they were among the first families to move into the Forest Houses.

MC: I don't know if they were the first family, because there's fourteen different projects in the Forest House, but we were building number fourteen I believe. They probably were one of the first groups of families that moved into building fourteen which is 695.

MN: Now what are your earliest memories of the Forest Houses?

MC: I remember when I used to make mud pies. [MN Laughs] Across the street, they were just completing what you would call Woodstock. I can recall them building Woodstock. McKinley was probably in the process of being built, because if I can recall McKinley wasn't built yet. And I remember the groundwork being put up. I remember us - - I remember making mud pies, and just looking at different structures - - people putting up the buildings.

MN: What kind of work did your parents do?

MC: My mother was an educator. She worked at Public School 140 in the Bronx and she also -
- she was a paraprofessional. She worked at Paul Lawrence Dunbar Junior High School 120.

The Chappells were quite famous in that part of town.

MN: Now was your building facing 163rd Street?

MC: Yes it was.

MN: Okay. What was the ethnic composition of the families in the Forest Houses when you first moved there?

MC: From my recollection you basically had a lot of two family houses. You had husband, wife, children. We had some Italians that lived in the neighborhood. We had Jewish families that lived in - - so we did have - - not a whole lot of the white population, but they were there though. They were surrounded by that area.

MN: Now did you feel it was a safe environment growing up?

MC: Oh yes. I loved growing up there. If I could do it again I would.

MN: Were the grounds well kept?

MC: Grounds were well kept. You could not play on the grass. We were very familiar with the housing police. You could not play ball up against the wall. You would get a fine. You walked on the grass, you would get a fine. So pretty much, the order was kept at that time. And the projects were also kept very clean.

MN: Right. Now - - what - - how old were you when you first went to elementary school?

MC: I was five. I went to kindergarten, at Public School 140.

MN: And what was that like? What was that kindergarten experience?

MC: Oh that was great, you know, I - - it was fun beginning to learn A-B-Cs and all of that. It was a community and everybody cared about each other, and I can remember if my mother

couldn't take me to school she might have on of the neighbors take me to school, or my brothers and sisters take - - but I had a very good time at Public School 140.

MN: How many siblings did you have?

MC: Altogether there were four of us. I was the baby.

MN: You were the youngest?

MC: Yes. I was the youngest.

MN: So everybody looked after you?

MC: Everybody looked after me.

MN: What sort of music did you grow up with in your family and in the neighborhood?

MC: Well my father loved Billy Eckstine. So really thought he was Billy Eckstine. [MN laughs] We grew up with a lot of the doo-wop. I grew up with a lot of the R&B. I knew Sarah Vaughan. I knew Billy Eckstine. I knew Count Basie, Cab Calloway, because of my parents - - loved music, and we were always surrounded by music.

MN: What - - do you recall kids singing in the street? Was that kind - -

MC: Oh yes. I recall when it was - - hot, hot summers the bongos playing because you had the Latinos on one side, and you had the blacks on the other side playing music, but not - - not that they were segregated but they were just playing their own ethnic music - -

MN: Right you had the different traditions that you grew - -

MC: Yes, so I can remember - - recall countless nights when it was hot and hearing the bongos, the doo-wop guys on the corner singing and the females watching, so I grew up with a lot of memories of music around that area.

MN: Was school very important in your household?

MC: Oh yes. That wasn't an option. You had to go to school. You know my mother - - my mother was a Civil Rights person, pioneer - - it was about people died for you to go to school, so utilize your talent, get an education, and then you'll find your way. She was very big on education.

MN: Did your parents ever talk about what it was like living in the South? Was that something that - -

MC: My mother never talked about it much, but all I knew - - she said she wasn't going back. My father didn't talk about it much, so I really don't know much about the South at this point, so - - my beginnings will start in the Bronx.

MN: Where are some of the places you went like on weekends when you were - -

MC: When we were kids we would go to Palisade Park which I believe now is Co-op City. We would go to Coney Island. We would go to Orchard Beach, Bear Mountain, Seven Lakes. So, even though we were I guess classified urban, we did get around. So yes, my father had a car, and not a lot of people had cars back then, but my father had a car, so we went a lot of places, so he was pretty much around all the time, at that point.

MN: Did you have any favorite teachers at P.S. 140?

MC: Ms. Fein was my first grade teacher. I remember my - - Mr. Teaman, Mr. Munson - - those were a few of the teachers that I do remember in P.S. 140. I probably had some others, I just can't remember them right now.

MN: Now you had mentioned that your brother was a basketball player. How much older than you is he?

MC: My brother is six years older than I. A lot of people will know the Chappells. We - - we have a pretty good name in [MN laughs] Morrisania. My brother was All-American at Roosevelt

High School. He played with Tiny Archibald in 120 Park, Ron B. Hagen, so there's a lot of history there. He went to NYU, so he was on the team at NYU. Probably one of the last basketball teams that NYU had.

MN: Right, before the ended the - -

MC: Yes.

MN: Now is 120 Park where Hilton White - -

MC: Yes. Mr. White, yes.

MN: Now do you remember - - what are your memories of Hilton White, because he's like a Bronx hero.

MC: He was my brother's mentor. Once again you had two family households - - I had a mother and a father, but Hilton probably took my brother under his wing, and probably taught him a lot of the fundamentals about basketball that made him All-American from Roosevelt, and Hilton was very nice when we used to go to the community center. So he was to me, one of the few male black people I can remember that took on kids to try to help the neighborhood. There were others who had softball teams, but - - there were a lot of, to me, positive black male images at that point.

MN: Now you mentioned the community centers, so he ran this program indoors as well as outdoors?

MC: Yes he did. Yes he did.

MN: And it was in the junior high, or was it in the elementary school?

MC: If I remember Hilton - - I only remember it from the Forest House Community Center.

MN: Oh, so he worked in the Forest - -

MC: House Center. He might've worked in the schools, but I was much younger. My brother would know more about that than I would.

MN: Now, when you were in elementary school, did you go to after school programs and - -

MC: Oh yes. We had - - after school they used to have community centers in the high school - - in the schools, where you could learn - - we learned how to do - - the stitching. I just can't remember - - the box stitch, the stair case, the - - the fellows would play basketball. The women would play jump-rope, but we learned vocations there that we could take with us. Some learned how to sew. Some learned how to knit. I didn't learn how to do any of that, because I was more of the academic person, but you had an outlet to go. You didn't have to worry about standing on the street. You didn't have to worry about - - a lot of the violence that is going on now with young people. We were a community.

MN: And it - - so, it's a very different atmosphere then than it is now.

MC: Oh yes. I think we cared about each other, and we cared about each other excelling. So, and, and academics were stressed a lot back then. I don't know now, but it was.

MN: Do you, you know, today they say occasionally kids who do well in school are made fun of. Was that an issue when you were growing up?

MC: Oh yes. I remember in junior high school. I was always in - - mostly in elementary - - the 1 classes. The 1 and 2 classes were the smartest classes and the top classes. The Chappells were always in the top classes. We just did very well academically. Junior High School 120, Paul Lawrence Dunbar - - I didn't come in in the top class, but my class ended up being one of the top. That was class 7-7. I got to the eighth grade then I was put into SP which is the top - - oh yes, we were called the nerds. We were called everything, but it didn't bother me because I

knew who I were. I can go either way. I can hang out with the nerds. I can hang out with the not so highly motivated students. Didn't matter. Didn't stop me from gaining what I wanted.

MN: See, but this is a very important issue for kids I think today. How can you be popular and accepted, but also excel in school, and read, and have this whole other life in your imagination?

MC: Well it was - - it probably was due to my mother's educational back - - she always stressed education, and I didn't find education negative. I loved learning. And I knew - - there weren't too many ways out for urban kids. Either you went academically or you were sports-wise, but I knew back then that I had something else more to offer.

MN: Were there negative influences around that you had to avoid by the time you reached junior high?

MC: The drugs scene, because at that point - - heroin was big in the '50s. It probably was big before that, but you had heroin then, you had marijuana back then. I don't think cocaine was big yet, so you still had those influences, but most of the people I associated with didn't do that.

MN: But could you see heroin - - the influence of heroin in the street? How would you know that there was heroin around, let's say as a ten or eleven year old?

MC: Because most of the young ladies I hung out with were much older than I was, so they would tell me, yes, this person's on heroin, and I knew basically at that point - - there were a lot of TV shows stressing that. *Scared Straight* was out that had drugs and all those - - but I knew from the from the looks what they were, but that didn't bother me, because a lot of that - - people who were on heroin made certain that their, their children got education. They were still functional.

MN: That's interesting. So, you know, even people who were on drugs still kept a certain community spirit and didn't take it beyond that point.

MC: But plus they didn't cause harm like it is now, and I'm not saying there weren't pedofiles back then, but they didn't cause any harm, and you basically knew, and you tried to help them, but you know, basically they did well, and you know some of them still around today, but they were still functional to me. They were friends to me. I didn't consider them drug addicts.

MN: Now today, in hip hop folklore, the projects have this very tough aura. Did - - was that true when you were growing up or - -

MC: Yes it was. You still had your gangs - - the Savage Nomads, and all of those other gangs, but it - - but we all had dreams, and we didn't follow the dreams - - a lot of us chased the dreams, and I found with hip hop it's kind of - - everybody's trying to chase one dream, and let's face it, I would think ninety-five percent, and probably these statistics aren't - - will not make it, so I think there needs to be another outlet. You have to have a plan A and a plan B, and I think a lot of programs were taken out of the schools, like the music program, which might've helped students learn instruments, plus get into hip hop. You know, I think hip hop is becoming so focal. You know, a lot of young people are not following their dreams, and they're not - - they're following their dreams, but they're not chasing their dreams, and as we all know, certain people are geared for hip hop. Certain people are geared to be doctors and lawyers. Not everybody's going to be put in that same box, and I, I see young kids all trying to focus on this one thing, especially black males, and it's devastating.

MN: Now when - - did you participate in music programs in the schools?

MC: Yes. We were all in the music program. Junior High School 120 had a good program, Mr. Lewinson was a music teacher. We all went under - - all went under his - - my brother - -

MN: Did you play an instrument?

MC: No - - I - - at the time I came in - - I didn't play an instrument. I don't know why. I think my mother thought it would distract me academically, but my brother played the sax, my sister had the clarinet, but I didn't play an instrument.

MN: Was there like a school newspaper at Paul Lawrence Dunbar?

MC: I don't recall. It might've been something mentioned, but I just don't recall at this moment.

MN: Did you do a lot of reading on your own?

MC: Oh yes. I was a reading champion at P.S. 140. I came in first place in reading, so I've always had a good basic thing with reading.

MN: Where was the nearest public library to - -

MC: From where I was at, 163rd and Trinity, I believe, wow, it was 161st - - I believe back there on Forest Avenue, back then.

MN: It was a public library?

MC: Oh yes, yes. We would have - - they would - - we would - - we would go there. They would have puppet shows. They would have people come. And you know it was, it was a nice environment though. You learned in there. You could hear yourself read, and not be disturbed.

MN: What about the Forest Community Center? What sort of programs did they have in the - - in the Forest neighborhood houses?

MC: As I was growing up, I took tap dance. So I learned how to tap dance there. My brother learned how to play basketball there. They had educational programs, bus trips, all kind of activities that would keep young people's minds occupied.

MN: Where did you end up going to high school?

MC: Well fortunately going to junior - - being that my mother always was big on academics I got accepted into a private school, prep school, and I went under a program called A Better - - it's called A Better Scholar now. Back then it was called A Better Chance, and we're probably - - the program - - I began - - I think began in the late '60s. I probably was one of the third groups of people from junior high school 120 that was accepted into A Better Chance, so I didn't go to public high school, but I - - everything else was public. And I went away to prep school. Now you're talking about coming from being a minority - - excuse me - - being a majority to now being the minority. There were only three black students at the school I attended [Crosstalk] - -

MN: What was the school?

MC: It was called Walnut Hill School School of Performing Arts. It's part of Wellesley's College. They gave me [Crosstalk] - -

MN: Wow, so you went all the way up to Massachusetts.

MC: Yes. I was fifteen at that time, yes.

MN: Wow, that's - - must've been some experience.

MC: I had no idea where I was going. They asked me - - Ms. Chappell would you be interested in going - - I said okay. I had no idea where I was going but before we got to our respective high schools, we had to prepped, so for three weeks, we were flown to Minnesota. We were on the - - I can't remember that campus now - - we were so - - Northfield, Minnesota where for three weeks they would tell us what prep school was going to be like, try to prepare - - but no one can be prepared for the cultural change. They prepared us academically. Now, the rest was on us.

MN: And what was that like?

MC: A lot of ABC students couldn't handle that. That versatility of you being - - it being - - coming from black and Latino environment - - now you're thrown into a majority white. How

do you deal with that? Being that I was a versatile person, it didn't matter. I mingled in, and I met people, still keeping contact, went to school with some of the richest kids in the country, Wise Potato Chips, Helena Rubenstein's granddaughter, met Bill Cosby's godson, met a lot of famous people's children. Caroline Kennedy, yes, we met a lot of people. It was a fun experience. Excellent academics. I would never trade it.

MN: So you ended up in - - really enjoying yourself.

MC: Yes. I had a good time. Not everyone had such a great time. I'm not going to say there weren't racial overtones, but it wasn't so overt, whereas it kept me from going and learning.

MN: Now were you better prepared than most people for this transition because of your family, or because of your personality?

MC: I think both. My family and personality. My personality's very sociable so I - -

MN: Yes, you're very outgoing.

MC: [Laughs] So I, you know, I come up with the best - - either I like you or I don't like you that's the way it is, and I found a lot of the Caucasian girls, but remember now, they were from all over the world, so I was mixed in with people I never would've seen in my life. I never would have gone to someone's with - - who went to school in Brazil, or a person who was from Spain being here, so I think that helped me grow.

MN: And what was it then like coming back to - - to the Bronx.

MC: At first I hated when I had to go to school, but then when I came back, I couldn't stand it. I said oh the noise is just too much for me. I was in a classroom where there were only four students to a class. My - - my history class there was four students, so if I wasn't there, they knew I wasn't there. The whole school was no more than about a hundred and fifty girls. It was an all girls school, so you, you got acclimated to that, but I was always able to balance both

worlds, because I knew eventually I would have to come back home to this, but - - it's the knowledge that I learned that I wanted to take back, and then can I use it elsewhere.

MN: That's interesting. Did your friends at home look at you differently?

MC: Oh yes - - oh, so you're one of them. My own people - - oh, so you're one of them, and I kept saying, what do you mean, one of *them*. You know, I'm just, you know, to me, I'm just keeping the dream alive. I just went a different route. By whatever means necessary, my mother was determined - - my children were going to get an education.

MN: And where did you end up going to college?

MC: I went to New York University. NYU.

MN: Oh so there's a family tradition.

MC: [Laughs] Yes, and my brother went, I went, my sisters went to New York City Tech, but I went. My mother was a graduate of Madam C.J. Walker, so - - which she was what the first black female billion - - millionare, so she was a graduate of her school, so we sort of had that academic background from her.

MN: Now did your family remain active in the Morrisania community, and if so, in what ways?

MC: My mother always remained active. She was on Community Planning Board 3.

MN: Oh, so she was in the community.

MC: Oh yes. She was one - - one of the people who with pivotal - - in these, the new houses that were on Charlotte Street, the first one was closed on Boston Road.

MN: Really? Is she still alive?

MC: No, she died in 1986. She was on that committee, so she knew Mr. Jerome Green. We all knew that. She always remained. She went to Mount Saint Vincent College, so she always

remained active until she died. Always. PTA, paraprofessional, always worked at 120 - - a lot of people remember Ms. Chappell.

MN: So she was one of the group of people who reshaped the new face of the neighborhood.

MC: You know, I consider my mother - - my mother may not have been a Nobel Peace Prize winner and all of that, but in my way, my mother was an activist to me.

MN: Now do you have a record, or a file of her organizational involvements, because we might want to put it in the Bronx Historical Society.

MC: I would have to ask my brother who may still have some of her awards.

MN: Because I think it would be a good thing to have, you know, a written record of somebody who was a neighborhood activist.

MC: Well I consider my mother the Coretta Scott King of the - - of one of the - - along with other people - - now I don't want to sound like she's the only one. There were a lot of dedicated people who were in there, but she was my Coretta King to me.

MN: No but this, we're - - we're starting a big archival project to collect materials, so if there is a file on your family that would be one of the things we'd like to put in the historical society.

MC: You know, I'll have to ask my brother, do you have some of the awards she won, and some of the pictures she won.

MN: Or did she save even like, the minutes of meetings - - things like - -

MC: I have no - - they had a secretary, but I don't know. I would have to contact some of the people who were on the boards.

MN: Is - - she didn't leave a big file cabinet in the basement or anything like that?

MC: No. If she did, when she died, it all got thrown away. I don't know if my brother kept any of that - -

MN: Now what does your brother do now?

MC: My brother works with young adolescents. We sort of took up that cause of working with young people because my mother worked with young people, so, so now he works at a group home - - I'm not certain yet, so he helps young people shape their [Indecipherable]. I will be graduating with my masters in Urban Affairs from Queens College and my main thing was education. What do we do to continue the dream, so we sort of have that, you know, humanitarian fight in us, all of us.

MN: Now when you went to NYU, did you live in the residence halls?

MC: No.

MN: You commuted from - -

MC: I commuted. My brother was one of the last people who lived in Bronx Community when it was on - - when it was Bronx Community - -

MN: Oh in the one on - - uptown

MC: He lived in the dorms because he was an athlete.

MN: Right. So you went to NYU downtown?

MC: Yes, and he went uptown.

MN: And was - - what was that like that commute and - -

MC: Oh, that was, that was fine. I had already lived on campus going to high school. A lot of my friends wanted to go away, live on campus. I had been there, done that, therefore, I was a film major, and a film, and dance, and theatre major, so there were two places I wanted to go. Either I was going to go on the West Coast that had the film, or the East Coast that - - NYU was one of the best, better school when you dealt with film, and I'm a graduate of Tisch Hall, the film department.

MN: Oh really? Did you ever get involved in the film industry or - -

MC: Never could get involved. It was a tough industry for me. I had the academics, but didn't have the experience, and I think a lot of the arts, you have to know someone, and I think that was one of my things. I didn't know anyone. I don't think I pushed hard enough to get there, but I'm pretty content with what I do now also, because education was a minor for me.

MN: So you were an arts major, education minor.

MC: Yes. [Laughs]

MN: Now, was there a point at which the neighborhood you were living in started to get dangerous, and if so, when was that, or did it - - were you somebody who always knew how to work around it?

MC: You know what, I never felt victimized in my neighborhood, but I could see the deterioration came - - I would - - when I - - I would say probably around mid '70s I saw it coming. It could be because crack started being introduced. I don't know, but I saw the deterioration going on.

MN: How did - - what train did you take downtown to NYU?

MC: I took the number 5 train to 14th Street, and then the number 6 train I - - at Astor Place.

MN: Now do you remember the - - when the buildings started burning? Was that something that you - - you saw or - - because you lived in a built up area, it didn't really hit you very much?

MC: I saw - - yes, I started to see the decay eventually. And I would say I started to see the decay, probably, what, as I started coming back home from high school, little by little buildings were burning down, Boston Road was beginning to disappear, because Morris High School was always behind us and a lot of people came from Morris, then - - then it started to get a little bit dangerous, I think the gangs started becoming more prevalent, and - - I still never felt fear in the

neighborhood I grew up in. To this day I still not would feel - - that was just my hometown, so -
- a lot of people see the projects as - - as I heard it was just like almost the Nazi concentration
camps I heard we were thrown together, but they don't realize that the difference is - - Nazi
concentration - - they really came to exterminate them, kill them. I don't think that was the idea
between the projects, I said, but eventually the projects grew into communities, and I said there's
a big difference there.

MN: Now Fat Joe - -

MC: Yes, yes. He's from Forest - -

MN: - - talks about Forest as this sort of dangerous place. Do you think that that's part of like
this exaggerated sort of hip hop, you know, invented thug thing?

MC: Well I think - - I guess you got to keep that thug life going. I never considered it
dangerous, but then again he's younger than I am, so he may see it from a different point of
view. That's the persona he has to keep. I - - living in New York City can be dangerous for
anybody. Just living can be dangerous for anybody, but I don't think if you look at crime
statistics you're going to see someone getting killed everyday in the Forest Houses, no. And as a
person who worked in police headquarters, you know, the whole atmosphere of the city is
changing, because, you know, we got videos, we have all of this. We've become desensitized to
violence, so - - but a lot of what Fat Joe said is true. He is from Trinity. He is from the Forest
Houses also, so I guess I have to give him his props though, and agree with him.

MN: Did your family belong to a church when you were growing up?

MC: Yes. My mother was Victory Baptist Church, which was on Union Avenue. We belonged
there. My - - my oldest sister was baptized there. I don't think we were, but yes we did.

MN: Now, who was the minister at that time? Was there - - was it a strong personality that you remember?

MC: Yes. It was a male, but I just can't remember. I basically went for the barbeques.

[Laughs] I shouldn't say that, because I was much younger at that time, but I just can't remember who, but I remember the church.

MN: But that was yes - - on Union between 163rd and 165th.

MC: Yes, yes, yes.

MN: Did your family go to live musical events very much?

MC: Like plays and stuff? My mother always took us to plays.

MN: To plays?

MC: Yes. [Laughs]

MN: So that was a - -

MC: Well back then you used to have famous groups that would come to the city. Mount Morris Park they would perform.

MN: So there was outdoor performances - -

MC: Outdoor, even the Crotona in - - every now and then would have a performance. So I remember, I remember block parties. Then you could have block parties, with - - without people getting all shot up. I remember that. And you know, you'd have the community [Crosstalk] - -

MN: Where would - - where would there be block parties that you remember like - -

MC: Big block parties, like Boston Road, around 165th, 166th around that area. I remember Tinton Avenue near Jane Addams, because I believe Johnson's Barbeque would donate some of the food at times.

MN: Right, one of my favorite places.

MC: Yes, so I remember, and we - - then you had that Goodman Plaza that was built now over there by the Forest - - before there - - it was a house - - believe it or not it was a house for men, so you know - - and right on the corner over there by - - there was one white family that owned that house.

MN: Right, now did you ever leave the Bronx?

MC: No, only when I went to school. I didn't leave the Bronx.

MN: Okay, so where did you go from the Forest Houses?

MC: I moved to Sedgwick Avenue, which is across from the VA Hospital.

MN: Is that Fordham Hill?

MC: It's close to Fordham Hill there, yes.

MN: And what years was that in?

MC: I moved there in '79, and I've been there since, so, you know, when I moved up there, that too was a nice neighborhood, because it's behind Bronx Community College and stuff back there, behind so - - it's changing too, because you know, everything is changing, but the building in that particular area still remained nice though.

MN: Now were - - what were your recollections of the beginning of hip hop? Was that something you saw, or were tuned into?

MC: No - - I consider myself part of the evolution of hip hop. I remember them coming out into the street, whether it was the - - what is it Melle Mel and the Furious Five. I remember Kurtis Blow. I remember Heavy D and all of them, just on the street, coming on the parks to show their hip hop skills, so that's what I remember - - a lot of them that I remember from the Fat Boys on the back, to Kool Moe Dee. All of them, I remember them.

MN: Now where are some of the parks in the Bronx that you recall like - -

MC: 23 Park, Crotona Park - - I just - - I'm trying to remember 225th Street, but I don't remember the name of the park up there. 18 Park, which was back there by Melrose - - it's back - - I can't remember the - - the first part is giving me problems - -

MN: Patterson.

MC: Yes, behind Patterson Park - - I remember a lot of those, and that's where I saw a lot of the hip hop artists on the streets.

MN: Now were you also into disco and funk, because - -

MC: Oh, yes. I lived for disco, yes.

MN: Where are some of the places you went dancing?

MC: In the Bronx we would have - - I'm trying to remember the Bronx. A lot of my stuff was in Manhattan, like the - - wow, the - - boy there's so many now. I got to think of all of them. The Black Watch Room, there - - oh wow. Now, you know, and I know this all the time, and I can't think of one of them now. The - - in the Bronx it was on 167th Street, and I can't even remember it right now. Grand Concourse, they used to call that the - - it was the Concourse Ballroom at some point, but they didn't call it that at that time. The Savoy Manor we used to have parties at - -

MN: Did you ever go to the Boston Road Ballroom?

MC: Yes. Boston Road Ballroom which I don't know if that's still open, if it's still up there.

MN: There's a big church there now, yes.

MC: The Bronx had a few - - a lot of nice clubs on that Jerome Avenue Line. That's what I remember - -

MN: Yes, down by Jerome.

MC: Yes.

MN: What - - there's a very famous one - - there's the Tea Connection uptown - -

MC: That used to be on - - wasn't that on Gun Hill?

MN: Gun Hill.

MC: Gun Hill, yes, and then there was a hundred - - there was one on 167th and Jerome, used to go upstairs - - that's where our hip hop artists came.

MN: I - - I know there's an Italian guy who owned it, right.

MC: And then we had the strip joints, that were in the Bronx, over there by Prospect.

MN: Where, where - - there were strip - -

MC: Oh yes. It was a famous strip club. Hottest Spot in the Bronx was around.

MN: Do you - - what - - do you remember the name?

MC: Wow, it was on Prospect.

MN: Prospect and where?

MC: 161st Street. It used to be right there.

MN: Was - - was it Club 845?

MC: 8 - - 845 Club, yes.

MN: So that was - - became a strip joint?

MC: Well I was able to look through and see - - I could see the dancers, but I couldn't - -

MN: Was that in like the '60s?

MC: Late - - probably late '60s, yes. I was - - [Crosstalk]

MN: So then it became - - so it was a great jazz club once.

MC: Yes. They had every - - all the elements there. We were only - - I was too young to go in, but I was able to peek in at that point. That was a great place. The Hottest Spot in the Bronx was on 163rd and Third Avenue.

MN: It was called The Hottest Spot in the Bronx.

MC: Spot in the Bronx. [Spoken in unison]

MN: And that was also a strip club?

MC: No. That was more so like a - - musicians came, you know, night club, but after hours spot, so a lot of my [Indecipherable] now hung out - - that was a disco area in Manhattan, when you had Club 54 - - I mean Studio 54 - -

MN: The Nell Gwen's - - is that - -

MC: Yes, Nell Gwen's, Captain Nemo's.

MN: Now did you ever see this guy Pete DJ Jones spin, because he was the mentor of Kurtis Blow.

MC: Probably.

MN: Six foot, nine inch guy.

MC: I mean I knew a few DJs at that point who would, and then they had the 371 Club which was on Clayton Avenue. There was a lot of nice stuff. I knew - - I knew a few of the DJs.

MN: Now when did you get into education as your profession?

MC: That came about probably in the early '80s, when I saw that I was having trouble getting into the film industry and trying to get what I wanted I said well okay let me see what comes with my mind. So I was introduced to The City University by a friend, and I went in for an interview, and I got the job part-time, and that was in '82, and I was - - been there since.

MN: So you started out at Central?

MC: I started out, yes, part of Central, which is the Office of Admission services off 42nd Street. Now - - it's on 42nd Street now. It was on 31st Street before. Now I'm the coordinator, and I do

the territory Bronx, so my job is to recruit in the high school, and you know get - - let students to know about the education and new opportunities within City University.

MN: So your territory - - you're on the road.

MC: Yes, I'm on the road.

MN: Now what's - - so you're in a lot of Bronx high schools.

MC: Every one of them.

MN: Now what do you think of this small school movement?

MC: I did one of my theses on the small school, and one of my theses for a writing class was, do I think these small theme schools are better than the traditional high school. I'm pro and I'm against. I - - I don't think the answer is small schools. I think the answer is smaller classes. And a lot of these theme schools don't have the same academics in place as the large schools. They don't have a lot of electives, and one thing I do point out, when I did my report, I said to me, I almost look at these small themed schools as like the Brown versus the Board of Ed. because the only people I see in these schools are black and Latinos. I find it kind of segregated.

MN: That's - - I - - yes.

MC: I do and I'm happy that Bill Gates - - Linda & Bill gave up the money. I just thought that perhaps they could've used it in the traditional schools, and done something with that. Perhaps have the first, like you know, like they did in the old days. They let the twelfth graders and the eleventh graders would come in early, the ninth and tenth would come in late. That way they wouldn't have the overcrowdedness, and I think all these small schools are popping up, but I think they're going to end up being large schools. You still have the same kids that were in that large school, so I don't know, and I think some schools would do better than others.

MN: So have you been to the Morris Campus - -

MC: Yes, yes - - [Crosstalk]

MN: - - and what do you think's going on over there?

MC: You know, I used to always - - my, my older sister graduated from Morris High School. I always considered Morris High School a landmark which it is. To me, I - - I look at Morris today and I shake my head. I say this school has so much history, and I look at - - a lot of the - - and I - - I consider the high schools like the colossal buildings of learning, and as I said rest in peace, because they're gone, with the exception of - - Clinton is still not broken up, and I've gone into Jane Addams - - they're not broken up.

MN: They're not broken up.

MC: No, so, and I don't know if - - [Crosstalk]

MN: What about Truman? Is - -

MC: Truman is broken up into about six different middle - - six different theme schools. I said what - - I just think we're heading for a disaster with these schools. These school are going to get big again - - what are you going to do?

MN: And then they broke up Stevenson - -

MC: They broke up all of these schools that I - - [Crosstalk]

MN: Except Clinton.

MC: Clinton didn't break up, Jane Addams didn't break up - - those are the only two I know right now that did not break - -

MN: That's unbelievable. What about South Bronx High School?

MC: I remember South Bronx. Yes they broke it up in, into academies, academy for sports. They broke it up into international school. Walton is broken up. I said - - I think they didn't do a justice with there.

MN: Now if you look at the numbers, are we graduating more kids with this new system, than we did before?

MC: If, if we - - you know, I don't know the statistics done on that. I would love to do a PhD on that. If they are graduating more kids, my question would be, these students that are graduating, are they prepared to go onto higher education. So what your numbers are ninety percent graduation rate, but how many of those students that you graduate actually complete college within, whatever, within the three or five year period. That's my problem with these themed schools. They don't have the same teachers, like the other traditional schools have. Some teachers are great in these themed schools, but other teachers, like don't have a clue.

MN: A lot of them very young?

MC: Yes, and I think parents are so through new schools, bright lights, computers that's it, but you have to look between the lines. Yes, you have these beautiful computers, but are your students going to be able to compete with students from independent schools, parochial schools, Catholic schools, whatever. That's the key. Are they getting the education that other kids are? Are they getting a fair education? I don't think so.

MN: That's interesting, so to be continued. [MC Laughs] Any other things that you'd like to say sort of - - did your family get back or involved in organizing the Old Timers' Days?

MC: No, but see, my mother and father are dead, so my brother will come back to the neighborhood. Both my brother and I will always come back to Old Timers' Day. So, what we're - - I was trying to do - - I was trying to see if we could get a reunion of Paul Lawrence Dunbar Junior High School crew. Let's have a reunion of that and see what happens.

MN: I will tell you right now that Paul Cannon would love having a P.S. 140 reunion, and, and he is working with the principal at Dunbar, you know - -

MC: There's a lot of history there.

MN: - - so he's a perfect contact.

MC: Yes.

MN: The two of you have to get together.

MC: Yes, it is, and we have a few people, you know, I should be - - I still used to recruit for 120 when I do the ABC recruitment, so I - - I just think, you know - -

MN: So you still recruit for the - -

MC: Yes, they'll call me twice a year to come in to do it, and you know it's nice. I just think that area has a lot of history - -

MN: It sure does.

MC: - - that other people don't realize, and it was once upon a time there were communities.

MN: Any other things before we wind this up that you haven't had a chance to say?

MC: Only thing I can tell certain parents, you just have to - - I think you need to be involved in your child's education. I think you need to know every step of the way, what should they be learning in elementary school, that will follow in the middle school, that will take them to high school, to get them to a higher level of education.

MN: Do you spend much time talking to parents?

MC: Oh yes. I do parents conferences all the time.

MN: Now it seems to me in talking to teachers that - - a lot of people say that the parents today are very different than the parents when you were growing up. It's a kind of - - my child right or wrong, and the teacher is the enemy.

MC: Well half of the parents don't come to the teachers and parents meeting. Only the good kids' parents come. I've done parents' conferences, and we try to make it convenient doing it

during the evening, and I just think it's a shame if you have six schools in your building, only twenty parents show up. That - - that's saying a lot. My mother went to PTA meetings and she had four kids, so I don't buy that I don't have the time. If you, your child is the - - one of the biggest investments you have, so you want to make certain that they get what they want, and you won't know if you don't go out there, but the parents today are younger I think, having kids younger, and I don't think you can teach somebody if you haven't learned yet.

MN: So you think it's an age and also just a loss of something that was there before?

MC: And I think the difference is you have a lot of single family households now. When I was growing up you had more two parent households, and I think that somewhat kept the males in line, and I do believe females need to see the other side too, you know, and you had parents that - - my father didn't have a lot of education, but he knew that my mother would know the way to get the education part, but he was there for the other support of it, so and I think if you don't, if you have too many things to worry about, you worry about where your next meal is coming from, you worrying about will my child grow up with a father, see those are stressful events that take away a lot, but I think sometimes, you're in control of your own destiny too. I don't think you have to have children at fifteen. It's a choice you make.

MN: So how do you reach these younger parents?

MC: I mean what we do, we at City University we try to have conferences for them. On August 13th I think, up in the Soundview area they're having kings and queens with DJ Cool J Pride, so he's asking me to be part of that. You know, we have to try to get them, and our males are losing the war, it's too bad you have more in prison than you have in school. I don't know what happened.

MN: Yes, I mean that was the question, is where - - why do the men leave the family, and sort of opt out?

MC: From what I hear, school is boring, and I keep telling them, I said it was, you know, it was boring sometimes when we were in it, it was boring. What do you want to do with it? And I'm sure this has to do with the teaching profession also, and I think the Board of Ed. or the Department of Ed. is in chaos. They don't know what to do, and I think you need to go back to the basics, reading, writing, and math, what got a lot of these urban kids there, and I think if they do statistics from back then and now, you would see more males graduated. So, why then and now, what's the difference? Maybe it is the two family household, I don't know, but you got to associate yourself with positive people, and unless, you're not going to succeed. Because I tell the kids, I say you decide what hall you want to walk down. Do you want to walk down the halls of the Supreme Court, or do you want to walk down the halls of Rikers. You make the choice. It's not easy, but we had to draw a line somewhere.

MN: Okay, well anything else?

MC: No, I think I've said it all. [Laughs]

MN: Okay, thank you very much.

MC: You're quite welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]