



3-26-2008

Chianese, Dominic

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

Follow this and additional works at: https://research.library.fordham.edu/baahp_oralhist



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chianese, Dominic. March 26, 2008. Interview with Bronx African American History Project. BAAHP Digital Archive at Fordham University.

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Bronx African American History Project at Fordham Research Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Fordham Research Commons. For more information, please contact considine@fordham.edu, bkilee@fordham.edu.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese
Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Transcriber: Mary Maxwell
Date: 03/26/2008

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): We're here in Fordham University, with Dominic Chianese, who grew up in the Bronx, who is a well-known actor, singer, and personality. Who comes out of the Bronx neighborhood we're located in. This is an interview of the Bronx African American History Project, with me today, Professor Oneka LaBennett, I'm Mark Naison, and also Charlie Johnson is our videographer. Mr. Chianese, could you give us your date of birth and then spell your name?

Oneka LaBennett (OL): Excuse me for one moment, I'm just concerned that the music is going to interfere with the transcription.

Dominic Chianese (DC): My date of birth is February 24th, 1931. And the location, I was born in the building of 751 E. 182nd St. And the building is still there. It's right there on the corner of Prospect Ave. And Brian Anderson, Commissioner of Records for the City gave me a picture of the building and Mayor Bloomberg gave me my grandfather's papers, when he came to the United States at Ellis Island. In 1904.

MN: He came in 1904?

DC: 1904, he was 22 years old.

MN: What part of Italy did he come from?

DC: He came from La Flagora, Naples, I guess a village in Naples. He came here. And that's my father's side. My father's father. My mother's side, I'm not sure what year, they came around the same time, from a place called Moriano, which is in the hills of Sorrento.

MN: Now how did your family come to the Bronx? Was their first stop in the Bronx in the Arthur Avenue community or did they live in another portion of the Bronx first?

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: Grandpa came to the Bronx, because he married my grandmother Saint Philip Mary Church at the Grand Concourse. 100 and something 200th St. and Grand Concourse.

MN: Yes, I know where that is.

DC: They were together 19, my father was born in 1908, they got married early 1907 I think.

My father was the first son.

MN: Now, in terms of understanding the migration, how did your family, did they come here to find work? Did they come here to get away, or was their intention initially to make money and go back?

DC: I'm not sure what grandpa's intention was. He was a craftsman, he was a stonemason, 23 year-old stone mason, who had that craft already. So he must of learned it in Italy as a young boy. So he came here for work. He met my grandmother, Francesca, here. She was 17 and he must've been about 23 something like that. And they married, and had five children immediately. My father was the firstborn. He was born in 1907.

MN: Now where were they living, when they first got married?

DC: They were probably living in the Bronx, probably right there on Arthur Avenue. In that section. Because my father was born there, Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church. He was born there. He was baptized there. My mother's family was from Brooklyn. So my sister used to visit and all the Italian ladies got together and decided that my father was going to marry my mother. So they gave my mother a place to stay, I heard this from my Aunt Rose. They gave my mother a place to stay with my grandmother so that she would always be around, and he didn't have a chance, my father.

MN: Now did your grandparents ever learn English?

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: No, grandpa never did. Grandma always, this is my father's parents, my grandma Francesca always had books and was always wanting to learn English. But her heart was bigger than, the time she spent for studying. She was always going around, calling everybody, una bon cristiani, but she had books, she wanted to learn. She really did want to learn, and she did try much more. But she would pray over me, she would pray in Italian, and then she would say half in English. She spoke enough.

MN: Now in that Arthur Avenue community could you get along speaking only Italian? With the merchants, with you know, the people around the community.

DC: I spoke English.

MN: No, I'm interested in your grandparent's generation.

DC: They spoke Italian mostly, with the merchants. I know, I remember that as a child. They spoke Italian. When they went to Mr. Maiser or Mr. Brenner, the Jewish candy store and the Jewish grocery store, they would send me to talk to them.

MN: Now, were your parents bilingual, English and - -?

DC: Yes, they were. Yes, they were bilingual. But Neapolitan dialect, they weren't educated in the Italian language, they could get by, speaking to their parents.

MN: Now what level of education, of school did your father go to?

DC: Junior High School 45 that was it. They finished 45 and that was it. 9th grade, they never went to high school.

MN: Neither of your parents?

DC: Neither one did.

MN: Now how old were they when they got married?

DC: Poppa was 22, Ma was 11 months older. She was born in 1907.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

MN: So they got married in 1930?

DC: Yes.

MN: And that was in the beginning of - -?

DC: April, 1930.

MN: And that was the beginning of the Depression.

DC: Yes, they got married April 1930, and I was born February '31.

MN: So you were growing up in, in the middle of the Depression.

DC: Yes.

MN: Was that something that was etched in your memory, or was the Depression eased by growing up in the community?

DC: Definitely eased by growing up in what I call this Italian cocoon. Italian-American cocoon. I never felt that we were in any way, I was born '31, so by the time I could read, I was reading early. 1935, '36, I was always protected against that. I do know that there was a sense of not having enough, a lot of money in the house. And I remember milk bottles, I remember there was something about a milk bottle being stolen or something like that, the milkman used to leave bottles of milk. I knew there was something going on, and I remember saying to my mother, when I get older I want to go to work, because I wanted to help the family you know? I never felt underprivileged, there was always food on the table. Looking back on it now, I realize the food was limited, and there was a lot of tomato and rice, and a lot of beans and soup. But always something fresh and my school was right there, so - -.

MN: What was your elementary school?

DC: I'm sorry?

MN: What elementary school did you go to?

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese
Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: P.S. 74.

MN: And that was - -?

DC: Right around the corner. And I was a star pupil. I was one of the smartest kids in school.

MN: Right. Now did they track the schools, so the classes were like, 5, 6?

DC: They tracked them yes. I was in the top class always. In the first row, top class. And I had a lot of pressure as a kid, but I was bright I was very bright.

MN: The pressure came from your family or from the teachers?

DC: Pressure came, I think, I guess it wasn't a lot of pressure. Let me put it this way. I felt loved and appreciated by the teachers. Especially Mrs. Francis X. Conlin, was like she knew I was a special kind of kid. I had a special kind of sensitivity to mathematics and English. And I remember her taking me up to see my mother and father one time, and saying he's special, he's special. And that's a nice thing for a kid to know.

MN: Now in growing up as somebody who did well in school; how did the other kids in the neighborhood relate to you? Did they resent it or did they just accept it as one of those things?

DC: In the classroom I always felt I was a little bit apart. You know, and I did feel that. I always felt that there was, I don't think, they may have resented it. But until I got into 45, elementary school was pretty much, I remember it got to be a little, because they made me get up in front of everybody, and show off my intelligence. Mr. Fox did that to me, I still remember, it's still traumatic.

MN: Mr. Fox, what grade was this?

DC: I was in 3rd grade. He got me up there in front of the whole auditorium, Dominic 7 times 4, 28.

MN: So you're like the trained seal.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: I was like a trained seal. I was like a role model, this is what you have to do or else you know - -.

MN: Right.

DC: We thought he had a spanking machine. Well I did know there was definitely a connection between family and school. Family and school. There was no, if you did anything wrong in school your folks were gonna hear about it. So I had that kind of pressure.

MN: And your family put a lot of emphasis in education?

DC: Extremely amount. Especially my mother, my father too.

MN: Now, where there any musical programs in your elementary school?

DC: Yes, there was a auditorium program. Follow the bouncing ball you know. They had slides, we were singing the English version of Solo Mio, which even then I knew there was something wrong. Calm breezes blowing - -. I knew the difference between Italian and English.

MN: Now in terms of your elementary school, what was the ethnic composition of the school. Was it mostly Italian?

DC: Mostly Italian. I remember there was a Cruz in the class. Celia Cruz, I had a crush on her. And there were a couple of Jewish girls, I had a crush on them too. Course I loved all the Italian girls too. There was one Swedish kid I remember. His name was, he was Swedish, he was an immigrant, Swedish immigrant.

MN: Now did any of the kids in your neighborhood go to Catholic school?

DC: Catholic school. I think they all went to Junior High School for it as far as I know. Our Lady of Mount Carmel was our church, but I think I grew up under the influence, my father, perhaps my grandfather, you know the priests don't really work for a living so - -. They appreciated the church.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

MN: Were your family, were they union people?

DC: Yes, my father was a union man. He was a bricklayer. He used to take me to the union meetings, when I was 7 years old, until I was 20.

MN: Did they discuss politics in the house?

DC: I knew he was a Democrat and I knew that he was happy when they were throwing eggs at Wendell Loukie. They were throwing eggs then and my father was always for Roosevelt but then he wasn't sure if Roosevelt could have a 3rd term and then he thought of turning Republican I think. I'm not sure but - -. He understood unions, and he believed very much in the union.

There was one guy who came to the house, I think he was trying to sell him on Communism, way back in the early '40's. I remember that, I remember he had a bald head, and I could see his veins moving around. He talked a lot. He was an American-Italian. And my father was yeah, yeah, yeah, but then, you know he didn't.

MN: Now describe what the sort of street life was like in your neighborhood.

DC: Street life?

MN: You know like, the stoops the streets the whole scene, did you play ball in the street?

DC: Yes.

MN: What were some of the things?

DC: Dr. Naison, you know just what to ask. We played stoopball, we played stickball, and we definitely had kind of a 7-8 year old kind of gang. My Uncle Joe, I gotta tell you this story. My Uncle Joe, was my father's younger brother. So let's see, he was born 1916, so he's about 15 years older than I was. So I was 7, he was only 22. And Uncle Joe, he was a helluva nice guy, but he didn't like to be told what to do sometimes. He worked for the Bronx Park.

MN: He was a parkie?

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: No he worked for the ponies which was great. He put kids on the ponies, he did that great.

And then he also worked for a man who did the rowboats, who didn't like him. So he threw him into the lake. And three cops came, and he threw them into the lake too. He only weighed 170 pounds. So naturally he a choice, he had to go before the judge, and this is a true story, my grandmother went up to him, to the judge, said judge he's a good boy, you know. The judge says he just threw guys into the lake, so he says well this is what he has to do, this is 1938, well what do you have to do now? He has a choice. Either we put him in reform school, not reform school, he serves a jail sentence, or he has to join the National Guard, so naturally he joined the National Guard. The reason I tell you that you get a feeling, what Uncle Joey was like, and he was in the Second World War, he was a wonderful guy really. But I was 7 he lined up all the kids in the Bronx, in my grandmother's house, in the backyard, lined them all up. And he made me, at 7 years old, say can you beat him up? And I have to give him an answer. Then he'd go to the next kid, can you beat him up? So that was the school he taught me. The neighbor heard a lot of that, so of course the next day I got a big beating from Victor Vedragory, because I said I could beat him up. And his big brother came up - -.

MN: Did your elementary school have rankings, of who could beat each other up in each class?

DC: I never got into that.

MN: I remember I fought Tommy Degatti for the number two position.

DC: Who won?

MN: I won, and then Barry Hamer kicked the crap out of me, that was the bookie's son.

DC: You come from Brooklyn. That macho thing was important. That was important, yes, that was very important.

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

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: Now we get into psychodrama here. Because my first love, Charlie my first love, Olita my first love, believe me. My mother told me I used to go to sleep with it. With the violin. So in the 3rd grade Mrs. Obadiah, was teaching at P.S. 74. Now Mrs. Obadiah, she was probably Dutch or German, she was about that high with a black dress and a stick. And I was playing the violin and any minute that stick would come and hit you. But she knew that I had talent. And my father was against it. He did not want me to play, he said what're you taking violin lessons for? My father had a problem with that. But as long as I lived, I'll always remember the fact that music was my first love.

MN: Was there music in the house? Did they have--?

DC: It got even later on, I'll tell you later.

MN: Did they have, like I guess was it called a victrola?

DC: They had the victrola with the heavy, metal.

MN: And what would they listen to?

DC: Opera, opera classic. My grandmother and grandfather. My father was more into Bing Crosby--.

MN: But music was part of your household?

DC: Definitely. My mother had a piano.

MN: A piano?

DC: Not in the original house, later on they had a piano when I was a teenager.

MN: And where did they move to from there?

DC: They moved to Prospect Avenue, just a couple of blocks away.

MN: Now what floor were you on when you had the house with the piano?

DC: Second floor off the street.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese
Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

MN: So it was a private home?

DC: It was a three family house.

MN: You didn't have to get the piano to the fifth floor?

DC: No. The house I was born in we moved next door to the other house, 53, and those were tenement homes. I was on the third floor.

MN: Those were a walk-up with the fire escapes?

DC: That's right.

MN: Now, what about fire escapes?

DC: The fire escape was an oasis in the desert for us. It was a place to get cool in the summer and a place to--. But my mother was very fearful, she wouldn't let me go in the fire escape much. She was --.

MN: What about the roof? Did you ever go up on the roof?

DC: Once in a while I did. Uncle Joey was good at pigeons, he like pigeons.

MN: You had pigeons?

DC: Joey. Until they ate them one time. One time they ate a pigeon during the Depression, he got very mad.

MN: You mean somebody ate a pigeon?

DC: Yes.

MN: These were homing pigeons, he did.

DC: Yes, they were homing pigeons.

MN: Was this a common phenomenon in the neighborhood?

DC: In the neighborhood there were a lot of people with pigeons, yes. You know like Marlon Brando in On the Waterfront.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

MN: Now, in the street, like were people speaking Italian, speaking English?

DC: Both, it was both. It was both. They had Italian and English. You had Italian with the old timers, my father would have to speak to a cousin. Because we had cousins who had a food stand, the Chianeses had a food market on Hoffman Street. And a lot of, my grandfather and his brother, and his sister spoke only Italian. So they only speak Italian. And a lot of the store owners would speak Italian too, even to my mother. Unless, they knew, the thing with my mother she was born here. It was both.

MN: Now, what was junior high school 45 like for you? Now, was your school and eighth grade school or a sixth grade school?

DC: No it was eighth grade school.

MN: So you went--.

DC: 45, seventh and eighth. Seventh and eighth. Ninth, and then I went to Bronx Science High School.

MN: So what was 45 like?

DC: 45 I remember was interesting in a way because my mother and father had both gone there. And I studied some Italian there, but I think I was getting a little fed up with the academics at the time. By the time I hit 45 I didn't want anymore. I didn't want to excel anymore necessarily in the academic field. The most thing I remember in 45 I think was the music. Their music class. We had a music appreciation class. Some of the kids called it music depreciation. I liked it.

MN: Did they have a school band with instruments, or an orchestra?

DC: They probably did, but I didn't join. I didn't qualify.

MN: Now when you're turning off the academic stuff, what else is getting your attention? Is it girls, is it--?

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: I did fall in love later on in high school. But what caught my attention then, I think, softball, softball, softball. Was definitely into softball. And I would go from my grandmother's house in Kingsbridge. Because they had moved to Kingsbridge by that time.

MN: Would you play on the blacktop or in--.

DC: Softball, that's why I went to Kingsbridge they had a field.

MN: They had a field?

DC: They had an actual field. It was a playground field. But I would spend all summer long there. After school I would go over and play too. I got away from the neighborhood basically. Because when I finished 45 I had to make a choice about where to go to high school and I found already that I really wanted be a baseball player or a performer. So I was already singing. 45, already, I was already interested in singing for some reason.

MN: Now where did you get a chance to sing?

DC: Well, I always sang at home. I'd fiddle around with the piano and sing songs. And that's a good question?

MN: Were you encouraged by your family? You know like, if there's a family party- -/

DC: I was always encouraged to sing. Well now we're talking, I'm thinking 13, 14, 15, 16, those teenage years. Then I was going through a lot of turmoil, though, thinking about what I really should do. And I had to leave the neighborhood to go visit my grandmother so that I could sing there. And in Kingsbridge with my friends, my Irish, Italian, Jewish, German, French-Canadian friends, we used to hang out on the corner and sing.

MN: So you were a part of the street corner singing?

DC: Over in Kingsbridge.

MN: In Kingsbridge, this is what the late '40's?

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: This is 1946, '47, '48, '49.

MN: Okay, because people often associate street corner singing with the doo-wop era in the '50's but you were doing it in the '40's.

DC: Oh yeah.

MN: Who were your models for street corner singing?

DC: The models were Crosby, Joelson, Nat King Cole, Vaughn Monroe. All the big band sounds. Sinatra came just a couple years- -. He was famous but he wasn't--.

MN: Were you guys singing harmony? Or it was more in the individual vocalist.

DC: It was harmony.

MN: Harmony? Wow.

DC: Myself, and Frankie Tomasulo, and Al Con, were the main singers. Then Pete, Dean, and McKenna, would hang out. Some of the WWII vets would join in sometimes.

MN: That amazing. I've never heard that before. About harmonizing. We interview the people like, the Chords and the Chantelles and Arthur Crier from down in Morrisania and they were doing this stuff '53, '54.

DC: But they're younger. I'm 77, Frankie's still around he's in Florida he's 77. Al Con is 78 and we get together we still sing. I think it was just a natural thing that we wanted to do.

MN: Did you ever feel like, growing up, that there were certain neighborhoods that you had to be careful going into, in the Bronx? Because of gangs or stuff?

DC: I never went into certain areas. What I heard is that you don't go to Harlem. Because the African-American people are different. I heard that. So I never knew any black people until I went to college.

MN: So there was a certain fear--?

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: You didn't do those things. You didn't go around. There was definitely separation in the '40's. I never had any black kids in my gang.

MN: In your gang?

DC: I don't want to sound like it was intimidating, my group. They were all Caucasians.

MN: Now, when you went to science, what was the composition of Science as a school?

DC: When I got into Science, I remember starting late because I had broken my leg. I was in Fordham University for four months with a broken leg. So that held me up a bit, which is good in a way because I got out of Science too early, 17 and a half. Composition of Science I would say about 70, 80 percent Jewish. Maybe more. And myself Danny Gazzani, and Hugo Yuttucci were, came from 45 and we were smart enough to get into Science and three of us went to Science.

MN: So as Italians you were a definite minority in the school.

DC: Yes, I knew I was different.

MN: And what was that exposure to Jewish culture like?

DC: I felt I was very much back into competitive days because I wasn't good at chemistry and physics. And I found it exhilarating at the same time. Because I found that the kids were bright and the teachers were respectful to students. These kids were really bright kids. And I was good with English, and I could express myself. And very good at the early math, but as it went on I don't why it got very hard for me it seemed.

MN: Did you see yourself as going to college when you were in Science?

DC: Not really. I saw myself, with a, that I knew I'd have to make a decision by the time I was 17, 18. And I thought about college, but I was thinking more about poetry and English and performing. I was more into the English field.

MN: Now when was the first time you performed in a, in a venue with a--?

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: I would say junior high school. In junior high school I used to sing with quartet, Harvey Margelin whom I met later on was one of the group. We're still friends from Science. Harvey, myself and two other kids would do quartet work, and the great song we sang was If I Had My Way. And I was the lead singer of it.

MN: Could you do a passage for us?

DC: [Singing] If I had my way, dear forever there'd be a garden of roses for you and for me. A thousand and one things, dear I would do. [Not Singing] Then I would go, [Singing] just for you. [Not Singing] I'd be thinking Bing Crosby, just for you. Just for you, and I'd always get applause on that. I was a star like that.

MN: Where did you start singing in front of audiences? Was this at clubs?

DC: As teenagers, after I finished high school I would go around with this guy who would hire people, not hire people. He would take us to saloons and bars and we'd sing. And I'd probably get up on the stage by 1 o'clock in the morning.

MN: And this was in the Bronx mostly?

DC: Yes, mostly in the Bronx. I forget his name, but he would hire, he was an agent. And he would say c'mon you're all gonna sing, gonna get a free drink and you're all gonna sing. You're gonna get a chance to sing. Meanwhile he would make money on us you know?

MN: Yes. Now what other, did you have another source of income, other than the singing, when you were- -?

DC: Well I was laying brick by the time I was 17. When I got outta Science, I went right into bricklaying for my father.

MN: Now, was this a union apprenticeship program?

DC: Yes.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

MN: So it was done by the brick - -?

DC: BMP union, Bricklayers, masons, plastering, international union. Now it's called Highlife Craftsmen. And I just went last year down to Washington, laying brick down there, I went down there to take pictures because my father was a bricklayer. They were very proud that Uncle Junior was once a bricklayer.

[Laughter]

MN: Now what was, where when you were sent on jobs was it mostly in small scale construction, or sometimes large buildings?

DC: It was large buildings. We build, I remember we built Dyckman St. at the Inwood section, I went up on those high scaffolds and all like that. And my father, that summer was the foreman, so he would get me work. So I always felt protected there because my father was a manager. I just wanted to emulate him a little bit. But I liked to do is put them in a straight line. I had no real talent, I had a talent for putting them straight, but I didn't have a talent for building you know. And I wasn't that interested in building, but I just wanted to do something to build myself up. I was skinny.

MN: This is physical labor, to get those muscles.

DC: And it was good for me, and a way to make money too.

MN: This was in the late '40's so the economy was pretty decent?

DC: It was exactly 1948, '49, '50, '51, '52, '53, '54, '55. Off and on.

MN: Did you ever have to work at heights? Was that an issue for you, you had no problems?

DC: The first time I saw it, I said wow it's pretty high. But it didn't bother me no. I wasn't afraid. Because it's a space between the scaffold and the building. 6,7 inches of space, you can see. But after a while you get used to it.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

MN: Now, summers. Did you ever go to the beach?

DC: Never had a vacation, I couldn't afford it. What I did summers, I would go to my grandmother's house and the teenagers. And hang out with the guys in Kingsbridge and play softball every day.

MN: So did you ever go to like Orchard Beach or Coney Island or any of those places.

DC: Maybe when I was a baby but my mother was very afraid of the water. My father had a bad ear, and she, my mother put a lot of fears into me. And my sister.

MN: So you didn't go swimming much as a kid?

DC: Not too much no. I did go to Orchard Beach but I wasn't crazy about it there.

MN: You'd rather do the softball?

DC: I'd rather softball, yes I wasn't a swimmer.

MN: Now, in terms of the, of you know performing, what was your first break? You know, beyond doing the bars and the neighborhood stuff.

DC: As a singer?

MN: Yes.

DC: Well that didn't have until I went to Champlain College. The State University of New York, Champlain College. That happened up there.

MN: And what year was that, that you went there?

DC: 1951, September '51 I was already 20 years old, I had spent--. I got out of high school at 17 and a half, so for two years I was laying brick and running around, thinking about becoming a singer. Or just doing it as a past time, not realizing that this is going to be my life ambition, you know. But when I was in Champlain College, I was immediately chosen, as a freshman there, to be kind of a spokesman for the freshman class because I have an outgoing personality when I got

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

onstage. And so they made go onstage and introduce all the freshman class to the dean of the school and they asked me to do something for the stage at Champlain College. They asked me to read to the freshman class, they all had blue and gold sweaters on and they said when you get up there on the stage now you have to acknowledge everybody, and I had a good memory from there, so I acknowledged the provost and the mayor of the city.

MN: How far up was this college? Plattsburgh?

DC: Plattsburgh, yes.

MN: That's way the hell up there. Is this now SUNY Plattsburgh?

DC: Could be. Could be. I remember it was called Champlain College.

MN: It was called Champlain College, yes.

DC: Part of the State University. Free you didn't pay for anything except maybe some books or something. It was a free school when I went there. And that was an important part of my life, Dr. Naison. You know why? Because that gave me, I realized then that, I really, really enjoyed the applause. I really enjoyed the applause.

MN: You liked that being in front of the crowd?

DC: Being part of the crowd. It reminded me of again, of the Bronx when I was a little boy, they would always ask me to get up and sing.

MN: This is in your family, or in school too?

DC: It's both. I mean the family really started, now I have a cabaret act and I tell people about that. They made me a singer.

MN: Now, I wanna go back to your childhood because a lot times--. When was the first time you remember, somebody asking you to get up and sing?

DC: It was my mother's family room. It was on Ralph Avenue.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

MN: I know where Ralph Avenue, Ralph between where and where?

DC: Near St. Marks, it was in east New York.

MN: I know exactly where that is.

DC: The old Italian Jewish neighborhood. And it had a glass door I remember the front and that was maybe, let's see, 1937.

MN: And they asked you to get up and sing?

DC: My grandfather died already, I think it was 1938. He died in '38, my mother's father. And they would say c'mon sing, because my mother's family they were all more or less, a lot more outgoing than my father's side. My father's side had builders and prizefighters, things like that.

MN: We'll get back to the prizefighting in a second. So you were six years old when they asked you to get up and sing. And I would sing probably, playmate come out and play with me, slide down my cellada, that was one of the first ones I remember. Or maybe I would sing something like, I don't know I forget, it wasn't Italian it was in English so--. They would all applaud and Uncle Phil would give me a quarter, which was like forty dollars then. They knew I was a smart kid and they'd make me sing. I was the first grandchild.

MN: Did this ever happen in school would the teachers say Dominic will you please sing for the class?

DC: No, it wasn't an academic thing. That wouldn't happen, I would be joining a group or something, I wasn't pointed out.

MN: It was more family?

DC: Family, they really encouraged me to sing.

MN: Now, did your family ever have large get togethers?

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: Yes. On Sundays we'd have all the, when I was 10, 11, and 12 years old, you know my father's sisters would bring their husbands over and then my cousins were getting older. We'd all sit around and watch, we played everything in the P&D you know. But it was wonderful to listen to.

MN: Now did your family ever socialize with people who were not in their family? Did they ever have friends over on weekends or it was mostly family members?

DC: Well you know they had a small apartment, they would always have friends. Yes, my father had friends, Francis Kramer he used to work for the, films for the U.S. government. He was a filmmaker or something, he'd come over. There would be definitely, my father had friends. My mother threw one of the ladies downstairs one time because she was sitting on my father's lap, I remember that. I was thirteen, they were drinking beer.

MN: And she got a little drunk and sat on your father's lap?

DC: I don't know. She went too far she was a stranger. Some guy brought this lady over, you know, and sat on my father's lap and my father--. I was fourteen at the time.

MN: Now this is a good way to segway into the boxing tradition. There were prizefighters on your father's side?

DC: My father's middle brother, my father was one of three brothers. Three boys, there were five in the family, two girls. Uncle Denny or Anthony was the prizefighter, he was a golden glove fighter he was very good. He was small he was a featherweight, but he was like a Willy Pap. And the night I was born my father, actually went to see him fight in the golden gloves and I guess he had to make a decision whether to stay with my mother, but I was born in the house, I wasn't born in the hospital, I was born right there in 751 E 187th, 5th floor, in the home. So it was a home birth.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

MN: Was that common in that community?

DC: Yes, it probably was. We'd have birth and funerals right there in the house. They'd put the body right there in the house. They couldn't afford funeral homes.

MN: Interesting.

DC: It is interesting a lot of Italians did that.

MN: So that was the home birth?

DC: Right there in the house. And they went right from there to the graveyard I guess. It was cheaper that way. I guess they couldn't afford, they were luxuries you know?

MN: Now were there famous prizefighters from your neighborhood when you were growing up?

DC: [inaudible] Immediately Lewis got up and clocked him, 1 minute 22 seconds. And that's a great story. Because we were listening to it on 187th St. and I was by the window, I was 15 years old, 1946 and '47 I forget. Tammerd was fighting Lewis and we're all listening to the radio, before T.V. and my father had all his friends from the neighborhood there and I was by the window and you hear Lewis is down and everybody starts screaming and I was yelling out the window, my father says wait a minute, wait, wait, wait, wait because they're screaming. And he says wait, and we hear, 1, 2, 3 and we're all screaming, and Lewis got up and--. That was great so it was a great fight. He just died a few years ago. I have pictures of him, but my Uncle Billy--. He was a second World War veteran with a purple heart he was a great, great man.

MN: Was there a boxing club nearby?

DC: The club was nearby, I never went to them.

MN: Where was that located.

DC: I think Belmont Avenue, Belmont.

MN: So it was a neighborhood boxing club?

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: It was a neighborhood boxing club, a lot of fighters came from there, but I mean you know.

LaMotta was from the neighborhood, a lot of champions came from there. Yes, that was a big thing in those days, like it is now. Now you see mostly Latino fighters.

MN: Now, when you, you mentioned before we came in here that you sang at the Stardust Ballroom, was that in the '50's?

DC: It was 1956, '57. Mack Angelo. In fact I sang the Stardust Ballroom and at the same time the Crossroad Ballroom in Yorkville on 86th St. You know, back in the days.

MN: Now did you have an agent at that time?

DC: No, I just had Mack Angelo who was an old time trombone player, he came from the Big Band era, and he came over to my mother and father and said this kid can sing. He's gonna be another Sinatra, he's gonna be another you know that kind of thing.

MN: So that was the image you know?

DC: That was the image, yes.

MN: Another Sinatra. And that raises an interesting question, what did Frank Sinatra mean to the people in your family and community? As a cultural figure?

DC: I think well, they liked pop music. My father used to sing popular music with the brothers, they would hang out. I'm sure they were proud of him. All I know is I saw him in '47, I was 16 years old and I took one of the kids from Kingsbridge with me, who happened to be Irish. Bobby McKenna and Bobby would say what do they see in him? You know, but I knew what they saw in him, you know, I remember even how he was dressed, and the women were there the Barbie Sox's they were nuts for him. And that was another thing. So subconsciously that must've made an effect on me, because he knew how to sing. And he can get people to get their emotions going and he actually came to the neighborhood. He actually came to Walton High School and

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

sang for U.S. government, all the U.S. the waves they called them, the women's part of the league. And they were told, they were told not to scream, because they're government people you know, so had to stand like this when Sinatra was singing, but I remember being there watching, waving to him from the fence, we were kids. That was the first time I saw him get out of the car. And then I saw him live and it had a big impression on me. Really big impression.

MN: Now when you're thinking about a career in entertainment, was there anybody from your neighborhood that carved that kind of route or did you have to sort of invent this by yourself?

DC: I had to invent it by myself. I had gone to a neighborhood saloon, five guys from the Conch Basie Band were there and Lester Young, no it wasn't Lester Young, Earl Warren, he has the same name as--. Earl Warren was a saxophone player and he had [inaudible] and he needed work so somebody in the neighborhood let him play the saloon on Fordham Road. 1954, '55.

MN: Do you remember the name of the place or where it was located.

DC: It was right down Fordham Road near, Hoffman Street, neighborhood saloon. And these five guys were down at this bar on stage and my Uncle Joey would check up on me. You know my Uncle Joe, he would check up and make sure I didn't get into trouble and he made sure that all the guys took care of me. I'd wonder how I got in there.

MN: You sang with them?

DC: I sang. They asked me to come up, I didn't get paid, they asked me do you want to come up and sing kid? And that's when I learned I had a lot to learn as a singer. But they encouraged me, these wonderful accomplished musicians. All African-Americans, I remember they were playing, body and soul one day and said c'mon up and sing.

MN: Sing Body and Soul?

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: You know here I am 22 years old and they're playing this wonderful music, then I realized I had a lot to learn and Bob Pope was an African-American, in between he'd sing with a guitar, and he would tell me about the upbeats. I would learn from black musicians, that you had to really, really get into the moment. I didn't know how to do that.

MN: Now when did you first pick up a guitar?

DC: Not until later on in the '60's.

MN: So that came later, and when you sang, you didn't play instrument, or did you play the piano.

DC: No, I didn't play the piano, I sang straight up and my knees would shake, you know all through those days, that guy used to take us around until 1 o'clock in the morning. I learned to get very nervous, I was really scared. I was self-conscious. But I wanted to sing, so it was a real battle, real battle. And I would get nervous.

Oneka LaBennett (OL): How did you make the decision from being in college? Did you finish college and then decide you're going to go home and become a musician, was that a conscious choice? I mean to sing or--.

DC: When I first went to Champlain College, what had happened there, had a great influence on my life. Because what happened they made me part of the Champlain College Drums which is an all male Acappella group, guys older than me from the Second World War veterans who could sing. And Dr. Miller, Dr. Miller, was a great influence on me. But this is 1953 and he said you have the makings of a popular singer. But of course rock 'n roll came in then. You know, so it wasn't easy to go from there to, that wasn't the kind of music people wanted to hear by that time. 1953.

MN: So you were a song stylist from an earlier era?

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese
Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: Yes.

MN: And you never said I'm going to become a rock 'n roll singer?

DC: I didn't hear a rock 'n roll. The first time I heard a rock 'n roller was, the Bill Haley and the Comets the movie. You know--.

MN: Blackboard Jungle.

DC: Yes, that was the first time. By that time I was in Brooklyn, and I fell in love with a girl and we got married and finished, that was my first divorce. We don't wanna get into that.

MN: Now, so you were living in Brooklyn, where in Brooklyn?

DC: Sackman St.

MN: So you married a Jewish girl?

DC: No, no she was Italian.

[Laughter]

DC: Jewish girl come later. She was Italian she was a singer.

MN: She was a singer too.

DC: We fell in love off Broadway, but the point is that I needed, by that time I needed a partner to go through this life journey of mine, it didn't work out.

MN: Now you mention Broadway, when did you get your first opportunity in theater?

DC: Theater itself, I did a lot of off Broadway and some stock, I didn't get to Broadway until 1965.

MN: What was your first actual being part of a company in any sort of--?

DC: I would say it was 1957, some stock. I went to Maryland and served my apprenticeship.

MN: Now was this a singing role, or acting?

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: I'm sorry, no before that 1952, my first, after I left Champlain College in '51, '52 because they took the college away, actually. I was very angry at that I remember, Governor Dewey had promised that we'd have a state college they took it away because the Korean War was going on. They needed it for barracks, they needed to build it for barracks.

MN: So this was a free college they got rid of?

DC: They got rid of it yes. I wanted to go on Barry Gray, I came to New York I met an activist kind of person, but I was really, really incensed and I couldn't get on the Barry Gray show to say Governor Dewey promised us this. So I felt bad because I enjoyed that college, I was the big man on campus, I was part of the Champlain College Drums and Dr. Miller and we used to--.

[End of Side A]

[Begin Side B]

DC: We used to go to Colgate, we went to Williams College, we used to compete against all these wonderful Acappella, so I felt betrayed.

OL: Did you not get to finish your degree, because they took away the college?

DC: That's right, I never got a bachelor degree.

OL: So you're enrolled in college and in the middle of your enrollment--?

MN: They eliminate the college?

DC: Yes, they eliminate. About six months later, but I was so anxious I didn't want to go back. I figured let me get into show business. But Champlain College gave me the impotence to be a showman. Because what happened I had done a [inaudible], a play there. The Gondoliers, by Marco and Giuseppe singing Good Little Sullivan, you know, and I could relate to that.

MN: So the Gondoliers?

DC: The Gondoliers, yes.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

MN: What were some of the songs from that?

DC: Gondoliers, they would do an Italian thing but then they were making fun of it because they were making it Mexican too. Guilder and Sullivan did wonderful things like that. But while I was there I was a big man on campus because of my singing talent, I like that, I enjoyed that. What happened when I went back to New York, I went back to bricklaying again because I was depressed. I went back to bricklaying and one day on the bricklaying bus, everybody knows this story there was a daily telegram, I forget the Herald Tribune or something had singers wanted, 351 E. 74th Street. And I was in the back of the bus, sitting with my cousin Mikey Chianese, Mikey said where you going? And I got up and I went up to the front of the bus, spoke to my father who was sitting in the front of the bus, he was foreman, sitting like this. And I said Pop, can I get off the bus? We're going down 2nd Avenue now, it's 351 E. 74th St. right. So we're about 90th Street so when I finally got the nerve up to go up to him, and he said what for? And I said, for an audition. He said, what's that? I said for singing, for singing? It's a long wait. Yes, he said. Got off the bus. Knocked on the door of the Jan Hus Church, 351 E. 74th St., and a beautiful blonde girl said to me, what do you want? I said I've come to an audition, it's awfully early, because it was like 9:30 in the morning, 9 o'clock in the morning, so I said I'll wait you know. And I met Dorothy Readler the head of the American Society of Arts.

MN: What is that?

DC: Gilbert and Sullivan Repertory Company. With connections to England. Richard Walker would come down, this was really legitimate show business. She thought, she said I was a diamond in the rough the next day I went back I auditioned and I got onto it. And next thing you know I'm traveling all over the country with a contract. That my mother had to come and sign because I think I was still under 21.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

MN: And so you're traveling around the country doing Gilbert and Sullivan.

DC: That was great. That was made. That hooked me for good. What I did, I hedged my bets and I go and I you know, I try to have my cake and eat it too. I try to be a family man, so I find myself in a big dilemma. Through the years, all through the 20's. And even when I hit 30 and I decided I'm going to be an actor, come hell or high water, again I got married. I kept trying to both things and you can't.

MN: It's very hard in that life.

DC: I know but I thought I could do it because, you know when you're the first grandson in the Italian family you think you can do anything. I'm serious.

MN: Well that's interesting.

OL: It is.

DC: I mean that was my journey. This is great. You don't charge for this therapy doc?

MN: No. I mean it's sort of, it's kind of amazing, I mean that all these things happened to you. I mean just like a kid from the neighborhood goes up to, this college, near Canada becomes the big man on campus then they eliminate the goddamn school. Hey Charlie, I hear Fordham's closing next year, so you're going to have to go back to Milwaukee.

DC: It's weird. But this is the 1950's you know. There was a reason for it, there's always a reason for it.

OL: What was your father's reaction when your career started taking off and you were becoming successful at it.

DC: Well, I never really became successful until, I never really became until Sopranos. You know, I did a lot of work, I've done hundreds of plays and stuff, but I never became successful, meaning money, until I was 68.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

MN: So you know all those years you were, you know, in the business, but not--?

DC: Working, working on it. But I would do typing, I would do things to keep me going.

MN: So you always had to have other careers to support--?

DC: I had skills.

MN: Other skills?

DC: But not careers. But I always stayed with the show business. All through the 60's and 70's and 80's and 90's. I started to realize my life's work, my real life's work when I was about 50.

Which is 27 years ago, I moved to the suburbs and went into senior centers and was playing for seniors. So if you're 50 years old and you're playing for seniors it's like playing for your own mother and father. There were people there 72, 73, 77, 80, 84, 90, 91 you know, and I was 50 years old and I would do music with them. I would play the old songs and they loved it. I would do that in senior centers on my own, I'd volunteer. I'd go in, then I went into St. Cabrini and I got on the recreation staff. So I went through a redeeming period, I went through about 12 years of changing my life.

MN: Has anybody filmed you in the senior centers? Singing?

DC: They just did a thing on, it was on Channel 13 the other day, they filmed me singing with the people down at the, it's a documentary on Italian-Americans in show business. It was on Channel 13.

MN: So it's a documentary on Italian-Americans in show business with a section about--?

DC: A clip of me playing with the seniors. But that was a talent I had, that's a throwback to the neighborhood.

MN: But I could see this, just listening to this, made me feel that.

DC: It's sentimental.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

MN: It's very sentimental, nostalgic.

DC: Nostalgic is the word, nostalgic. It can be a good thing. Nostalgia can be a good thing.

MN: I mean especially for older people to connect them to that experience.

DC: So what I said before now, I'm following it through. My real, I'm thinking deep down, my father was right, he always wanted me to be a teacher. So he knew something about me that I never knew. Because an artist, to me, what I really am is a teacher. I like to see people get involved. When I sing it's always a connection with the audience. It's as if I'm telling who I am. So therefore they should know who they are. It isn't about ego with me. People always said to me, Dominic you don't seem to be like an actor because I don't have that kind of an ego. I like to be a center of attention for a reason. That everybody has a good time. I learned that as a child. There's something about being an entertainer, if you want to call it that, like a tribal leader. He's there to heal the community. You see, so my father was right. So now what I want to do for the rest of my life is, God willing, is to create this public charity, where I bring artists into the community and encourage them to get the people out. That's what I'm starting now. That's why I called the Ravitson Center today. I asked you about them. I called them and left a message for them. They do research in aging. But I want to bring it together with the kids. With children, so that's my ambition now, that's what I want to do. And I'm hoping that, that's why I'm doing this thing too, because I really now, that's my real, real, real--. So Pop was right all along. He always wanted me to be a teacher.

MN: Well, it's interesting, I'm also having a new life as I do educational raps in the public schools about history. And I mean, it sounds ridiculous the 60 year old white guy, rapping, but the kids, it connects to kids. The history, whatever works, to build community. We'll talk afterwards about some of you know, your ideas.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: It's about building community. Making people, energizing them. Self-fulfilling them, and that's what my mission statement's going to be. And I know, I'll get now, because I did this in the 80's. In Westchester County, when I was living there. For 12 years I did this, I used to get people together and do skits with them. Different centers and people would just love it. Only two hours a week, they couldn't wait to get there, you know?

MN: Oh no, I can see this.

DC: What do you talk for an hour?

MN: Yes, more than an hour for the kids is a little much.

DC: You use music at all?

MN: I have a whole music of the Bronx CD. I'm going to have to put you on it.

DC: You actually do the rap?

MN: Yes.

DC: We'll do it together.

MN: They call me Notorious PhD, I don't hear blame I spit history.

[Laughter]

MN: They come to the BX from the BK, MC's know that I don't play, they may be shocked to see my face, the words I say don't match my race. But the jams I bring you are hardcore truth, they'll make you rock from floor to roof. I may be old, I may be white but my flow is funky and my rhymes are tight.

DC: Great.

MN: And they just crack up.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: I'm telling you Nas has nothing on Naison. I met Nas he's a nice kid, smart kid. I asked him

I said how do you do that? He says I think about it all day. So he's like an actor preparing a script.

MN: Yes, but there's a whole thing about Jay-Z, growing up.

DC: Who is Jay-Z?

MN: Jay-Z is another guy, comes out, very talented, now he's a producer. He came out of the Marcy Houses in Brooklyn. He described, like sitting at the kitchen table in 5th Grade, writing these rhymes and trying to get the right beat. You know and practicing over and over again.

DC: Practice there's the answer.

MN: Over, I mean these guys just don't come out, it's work. But to me--. What you're doing, I mean I, you know, in the senior centers sounds amazing, and if you can also reach kids, you know.

DC: You gotta read this book, you gotta read this.

MN: Free play, improvisation in life and art.

DC: Great book. Barnes and Noble.

MN: I'll get it from Amazon.

DC: Stephen Nachmanovitch, it's an incredible book. It's about what you're talking about.

MN: But this, to me this is very interesting. I mean one, it's like, a good friend of mine is a very famous historian named Nell Irvin Painter, and two years ago at my age, 62 she announced she was retiring from history and going to art school. And she is now remaking herself as an artist. And she says, she called this an encore career, that today when people are live much longer and you know, you can, you know in your 60's or 70's do entirely things than you've done most of your life and find your own purpose and mission in doing so.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

DC: It's finding out what you really want to do. Now I realize now, I'm inspired with the idea of this non-profit, you know. And I know I'll get the funding because people trust me, they know that I want to do this. And I know my biggest challenge is to find the right artists, who'll go into the community and I've seen some artists that can do that. They can do something even with a guitar. When I go into a senior center with the guitar I get everybody, and it happens. I get everybody to connect. It's about connections. So I'm with you on that. I'd be happy to come and give you a little background on the guitar.

MN: Sure, sure and I'll also, you know, I have a lot of connections in Westchester.

DC: You do it in Fordham? Fordham, here, you do your stuff in Fordham or you go out?

MN: I'm mainly am doing it in schools. You know in Bronx schools.

DC: That's good.

MN: The schools want kids to get excited about history. I've done presentations for teachers, where I do the history--. Well why don't we take a cannoli break while we--. We'll give you the first choice.

[Cannoli Break]

MN: When did you decide to, you know, get into acting as a career and did you take classes to do that?

DC: At the end of the 50's, well during the 50's, I was going to night school at Brooklyn College. Was working during the day, laying brick and going to night school and then by the end of the 50's I realized, I kept looking at the college, kept looking college. Kind of like I kept automatically going up to the theater section. And Brady Barrow, wonderful teacher Dr. Barrow, giving a class on Theater 101, and I had been theater all through the 50's. So I said let me take this night class, of course, I got it and then I got hooked again. I said I gotta be an actor. And

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

Bernie was very encouraging, Bernie died about 6, 7 years ago, maybe longer then. But he was close to my age and he had been a real actor and had been a professor of acting at Brooklyn College. And he and Professor Wilson Lehr were my two mentors in Brooklyn College. Skipper Davidson was loved there, at Brooklyn College, but I didn't do too much work with Skipper, I did more work with Wilson Lehr and Bernie Barrow, who saw my talent and I was a 30 year old. By the time, I was a 29, 30 year-old, student with some acting experience. It was good for me to be in a dramatic classes, because I could play the older parts and what I liked. So Brooklyn College was great for me and I think that's when I decided that I was gonna really, really be an actor. This is really my life. The way I decided now I'm gonna be a teacher and promoter of the arts, creative arts, to bring people into community. Then at that moment, I decided, I really gonna be an actor no matter what and I immediately got married to a nice Jewish girl. And I already hedged my bets again, I said well maybe I can do both. She was 19 years old brilliant. And it only lasted six years. But I went, Wilson Lehr got me a job as a lead role in the Male Animal, James Thurber. And we went to play for the soldiers and sailors and Marine bases around the world. We went to Tuli, Greenland, we went to St. John, Newfoundland. And I had the lead, the lead of Professor Tommy, I forget his name, in the play. James Thurber play and then in the play too there's a letter he reads from Sacco and Vanzetti talking about freedom, you know. It was a great, powerful message and I think then I realized I'm gonna be an actor, so I told Meryl, my wife, I said I'm gonna be an actor. We're already married 11 days.

[Laughter]

DC: And you know we loved each other, she was a very smart young woman who had been Ms. Beatnicker 1959, you know she was a very progressive Jewish girl whose family were very progressive people too. You know the type. So we get married, and then of course like a plan, I

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

never had to make another decision in my life, when you marry a. Wives are supposed to do that.

But the [inaudible] didn't work. But what I did learn from that was that the acting was really in my blood. So when we broke up, I combined my love for music and my acting, I went down to the village and I became an emcee at Folk City. And I learned the guitar.

MN: Now wait a minute, what years were you the emcee at Folk City?

DC: '64, '65, '66, '67, '68, '69, '70, '71.

MN: I probably saw you there. God almighty, you could not be in a better place. Mention who some of the people who played there were.

DC: Johnny Cash, Amy Lou Harris, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGee, Jose Feliciano, David Bromberg was still playing. You name it they were all there.

MN: I used to hang out with David Bromberg.

DC: David's still playing, he went back. He started to make violins, but now he went back. He's about your age.

MN: I mean that was, that was the spot. Down there.

DC: Down there. And the reason I got the job was because Mike Porko, the owner, was the guy from Calabrias, spoke a little bit of English you know. Dominic, eh I never heard of an Italian folk singer before.

[Laughter]

DC: You wanna be the emcee? I said yes, he said how much you want? I said 100 dollars a week, I'll give you 90 I said alright. But I wanted to get away from the responsibility of a marriage that wasn't working. Not from the kids, just from the marriage. And it created problems, but I knew I was in my element when I started to pick up the guitar. Then I said, because my mother and father came and I knew I'd get even with them for that Ireland thing.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

MN: So you learned to play the guitar in your late 20's?

DC: 35. 35, that's the 1960's. 34, 35. I started in 1965 down there. But I got to meet all these wonderful musicians. And of course you learn from them.

MN: Did Dave Van Ronk ever come through?

DC: Yes, Van Ronk played there, they all did. I read Dave Van Ronk's book. Phil Opes I knew, there's an interesting story there because Phil Opes was one of those genius kids who probably had trouble handling fame or something, because he was so--.

MN: I know I was there.

DC: I remember singing a song called Bore Morir. It had four lines to it. [Singing in Italian].

When I finished, Phil Opes he said what does that mean Dominic? Said it means I said I should like to die just a little death. Wake up in the morning, go up into a pear tree and see who would really weep for me. Powerful stuff. Phil Opes, he killed himself a few weeks later. But I always wondered why he asked me about that, later on, years later he died, maybe ten years later, but you wonder what he was thinking. Sad, you know it's very sad. But Mike Porko was a big friend to me. He was a great friend to me and he kept me going, he kept me going. Only of course I was still acting and across the street they were doing Man of La Mancha, right across the street. And the stagehand would come in and say Dominic, Kylie is dressing up to look just like you.

Because I looked like [inaudible], skinny with a lot of crazy hair you know. So it's interesting how all these things happened. I honestly believe the journey, we are not in control, I honestly believe that. We have to sort of get on the right path. And that's a very spiritual thing. I really believe that, I really believe that. Because all these things now I look back on and you say how do we renew ourselves? We renew ourselves because I think, because we have to have the history of ourselves. You have to think about what you were doing, you had to go through that,

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

you had to be a professor first before you could be a rap artist. Right? So what's the difference.

We play many roles in life. You know Dr. Landi right from NYU? You know Dr. Landi.

MN: No.

DC: He does drama therapy, he does. He talks about the roles we play. The persona, the persona plays roles and I think I learned a lot by being, playing all these different roles. Whether they were amateur, whether they were in college. Or whether I was getting paid for it, there's still roles that you play and sometimes you get in touch with the real you. And it takes a long time to find out who you really are. It took me years and years to find out.

MN: Well the one thing I, there's an energy coming from you right now which just is contagious. And it's really a cool thing to see.

DC: It's the pastries.

MN: The pastries were only the icing on the cake. But you know I want to thank you for an amazing experience in terms of bringing you know a certain period in a certain neighborhood and community, the life. But also a unique experience, which is, there is something universal in sort of the path you carve and what it means for how people make choices in their lives.

DC: I didn't realize it until recently, that's true. That's true. And it's a great teaching thing isn't it? And it draws people out, the word dracar, means to draw, I forgot to mention that I had been teaching 5th grade in Brooklyn, in Bed Stuy, while I was married to Meryl.

MN: Now so did you end up getting a college degree at Brooklyn College?

DC: Yes, eventually I got a Bachelor of Arts in Speech and Theater. But I had some credits in education too. So I always kept that in mind. But when I was teaching 5th grade, it took me a year and a half to reach these kids, I broke about 42 rulers. But I didn't care because that's acting. They knew I was acting. So they hated me and they loved me at the same time. One particular

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

kid really, was emotionally disturbed, Robert. Ten years old, he wouldn't do anything, he would never get involved with anything. But after a year and a half, myself and Meryl, my wife at the time, we took the Caucasian Chalk Circle by took out all the political stuff and made it the fairy tale that it is. And we put it in 8 pages and I went to school one day and I turned off the speaker and they were chewing gum by the time, I let them chew gum. These kids come to school starving. And we worked on the Caucasian Chalk Circle for about two months. And every time we had to go down to the principal and show him the curriculum I would say well gee I forgot to bring it in. What do you call it the curriculum?

MN: Lesson plan. The infamous lesson plan.

DC: You couldn't rip them up because they had hard covers. So I went to the kids and I said, we're gonna work on drama. Wow, Mr. Chianese we're gonna work on drama? Teach we're gonna work on drama? I said yes, you're all gonna be actors okay? So here you have 34 kids, 10 years old, I assign the parts, you know, I gave one of the girls the main part of Priscilla, I don't know if you know the story. It's about a castle, famous castle, and the queen has a baby but she doesn't want to do deal with the baby, she gives it to the maid. Gusinka, who gives the baby and gets very attached to the child, the castle goes on fire and the queen departs. She just leaves forgets about the baby, of course the maid sacrifices, practically sacrifices, grabs the baby. And at the end of the play, the queen decides she wants the baby back, just like King Solomon. So here's a circle, put the baby in the middle, put the mothers on each side and grab the baby's hand and pull and the baby will go to the real mother. Of course the queen pulls, Gusinka let's the baby go. The real mother doesn't want to see the baby hurt. So I'm telling you there wasn't a dry eye in that auditorium and these 10 year-old kids got a standing ovation. Not only from me, but from every teacher there, and the school 10 year old kids. And I didn't have to go onstage once

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

because Jose who was playing captain of the guard got a little, he was a little, Jose said gee I can't do it. I went up, that was the only time, I said Jose are you kidding? You're a sergeant, not you, you can't win. Okay. He was brilliant. Makes me cry when I think about it. The next day, Mark, Dr. Naison, the principal said you can't do that. That's when I left the building. That's when I left school. I went home and I told Meryl I don't know if I'm gonna be a teacher anymore. I can't do this after a while. I said I can't, this is not right. They're not giving me my chance to educate. Mind you it is 1963. You know, I was pushing the envelope. I was rebelling against the system and you can't do that. But that's why, I would've stayed in teaching I think, I think I would've, I'm not sure.

MN: Well, there's still--.

DC: It's never too late.

MN: It's never too late. I mean--.

DC: These kids were brilliant. They were brilliant. And even Martha, I remember Martha she talked, Martha was like this, I don't know if it was some kind of autism or something but she was a poet. I found out she was a poet. She was there, that's right, in the middle, toward the end, the kid came running down the same, I forget the name of the other girl, Linda can't do it she got scared, she doesn't wanna cross the bridge with the baby, got scared. I said to her well tell her she's gotta do it. The time comes for the moment, it's Martha. The girl who goes like this, she took the baby. She did it on her own. And it had the people cracking up. Because she did it in her own inevitable way, and they were screaming like cheers. These kids, you know, I couldn't see the kids again. They're in their 50's now, I would do anything to see them again.

MN: I bet we can find some of them.

DC: I hope you would.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

MN: That's the internet. Spread the word.

DC: I forget the number of the school, 230 something.

MN: If you find the number of the school I'll try to track, I'll see if I can track down some kids.

DC: In Bed Stuy. We were there recently in Brooklyn. With the legal services. It makes me cry when I think about it. I always felt that I abandoned them. I didn't want to I had to. Because teachers are a part of your life, it's very sad.

Unidentified Person: What about the Soprano's how could we not mention that?

DC: The Sopranos came along when I was 68 years old, it was the greatest role I was ever given. I auditioned for it like everybody else. And it was a great part, and it was an easy part for me to play. In a way. It's never easy to be an actor. Because to me Uncle Junior was a combination of all the people in my neighborhood. Including the guys with the hats. My father said those are racketeers, they're bookies, he knew. I mean it was easy to play Uncle Junior. And then you had the ensemble, they were smart enough to create a wonderful ensemble of Italian-American actors who were good in the streets, we trusted each other. We were all happy to get to work. We were all unknowns, including Jimmy LaFavona, the only one really known from the movies was Lorraine Bracco, I had some reputation. I had done some films but it was such a perfect.

MN: So most of the people there were people who were like moving around?

DC: They were characters, Edie Falco was still waiting on tables a couple years before that. These wonderful, wonderful actors got together, the casting was very carefully done by Georgianne Walken and Dorthea Jaffey. Casting is everything when it comes to theater arts, it's important. You know, very important. But this has been a wonderful experience for me. And very

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

energizing for me. To realize what my work is now, is to make a neighborhood. I think we always wanted that neighborhood to happen.

MN: Now that's an interesting thing. Do you think your desire as an artist, to create community is a reflection of the fact that you grew up in a community?

DC: Probably is.

MN: I mean, this is what struck me when I was at, I was almost dreading to ask you the question about the Depression, because I knew how much scarcity there was in that time for my family and yet you don't. The community was so nurturing that it wasn't a traumatic time.

DC: No, it wasn't.

MN: And that's an incredible thing because if you probably would go back and ask how much money they had and what they had to sacrifice--.

DC: My father I remember he told me a story. He was walking on 187th Street with me and I was three years old. And he had a penny to buy two cigarettes and I wanted a lemonade. He told me that story. And he didn't know what to do. And he was yelling at me or something and he said somebody stopped in a car in the neighborhood. And the lady got out of the car and said you're abusing that child, or something like that, I don't know what he did, but he must've been frustrated. He was tired, he needed a cigarette, and I was screaming that I wanted a lemonade. You know that kind of story. I don't remember it but he said, that thing could've happened many, many times. It was very hard. And then the story about the milk bottle. So I'm sure he went through some terrible hardships.

MN: But you grew up surrounded by love.

DC: Surrounded by love. By all these uncles and aunts and cousins and you know, and the first grandchild.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

MN: And also it gave you confidence.

DC: Tremendous confidence, tremendous. Well that's why I wanted to get up on that stage at Champlain or go into Mike Porko, see I can play guitar and I knew two chords you know. But I kind of had the confidence to be the emcee and that's why he kept me you know. Because I connect with people, and that's what counts.

OL: Do you still feel a connection with the Bronx today?

DC: Yes. Walking on this campus was like coming home. My father couldn't afford to send me to Fordham. I may have had a little heartache about that because he had promised me like 500 bucks, he didn't have it. So I went to the free college. But look what it did? That free college was better than going to Fordham. It all depends what was meant for me to be. The role I was playing. That's a journey that we have to take and I can't say gee I wish I could've gone to Fordham, I can't say that I wish I didn't get married and do all that. I had to find it my way. But I think all's well that ends well. Shakespeare was right. Never too late to be a father, grandfather. But I do regret not having the guts to stay with those kids because I would've made a great teacher but I just couldn't do it, couldn't do it. I couldn't teach any other way, they would give me Dick and Jane books. Dick and Jane books with the white picket fence and See Spot Run. I mean, it's ridiculous. These kids, when I got them to drum, they were asking me. How do you say this word, you know? I didn't have to do too much direction. But imagine the feeling of these kids when they come off that stage. Powerful, it's like a movie.

MN: It's still going on. I mean I work with a school in the South Bronx at 163rd St. between Eagle and Caldwell Avenue and they do a schoolyard jam honoring the musical traditions of Morrisania and these kids are breathtaking. And I have them down at the Hilton Hotel on Saturday, performing in front of a historian's convention. And these kids get into it. I mean, and

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

it's to see them, you know, become, and the school understands that that's as important as a math or a reading test.

DC: It's important for the child. To be accepted, to be, they enjoy that. I did it, I remember in '74 looking down at my silver buckle, we were doing the signings of the Constitution and maybe I was 6 years old I think, maybe that was the first time I really must've said, there's magic here. I remember it was nighttime the windows were open, it wasn't daytime and there was a moon shining. And I'm looking down at my silver buckle. And I'm saying this is nice, it's a funny thing you mentioned about the kids. Because of that experience down in Brooklyn, I decided to help out an organization who asked me to be the spokesperson for the [inaudible], learned by Dr. Newman, I don't know if you know who, Leonore Furlani, you know those people? So I said I'd be honored, I told them the story about the 5th grade. So I said I'll be the spokesperson, but then they started putting my name in print with a political message and then my manager called me and said Dominic, I said they're not supposed to use my name. I said I'll be a spokesperson for the kids, but then when it became political I had to leave. Because I think they were using it as political.

MN: Yes, I know those folks. They were a little--.

DC: They have to be, because when I left I got a nasty letter.

MN: Yes, they're pretty shaky, that's you know.

DC: It's a political purpose. They're hiding behind these kids and I don't like that. I don't like to use kids. A lot of people use it for political power. That's what I'm learning. Because you can't change the world, you can only change the world one person at a time. You can't, you know you have to create an atmosphere where people want to change. You know you can't lead them into it, that's not right. Mussolini had that thing. You really can't. I don't think life works that way.

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese

Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

You gotta join them, you gotta go there and be with them and everybody has to benefit. The community is a different thing, the word community is wonderful and we've put an onus on the word you know. Can't use the word community it sounds a little bit like a political statement and that's scary. We'll four people in this room, there's things going on here that we know is either based on love or hate. And we know it's about finding out something about ourselves.

MN: I mean, we found that these interviews can be just very powerful experiences. I mean we've been crying with people. I mean it's, reliving these experiences is a very emotional thing. It's emotional for the person being interviewed, but it's emotional for us. Because some of the things you experience, we've experienced you know there's a lot of empathy and connection.

DC: That's why I want to start the non-profit because I realize there's a therapeutic advantage to it. It's an interesting story. Remember I told you a story about getting off the bus and going to 351 E. 74th, Jan Hus House, I was talking to the Bergen Center for Aging and I said where is your center? They said 351 E. 74th St. So it's funny thing you know. So I went down there and I took my guitar and I got the aids and the staff and all the people, a 99 year old woman got up and started dancing, they said, she'd never done that before. So you wonder, when you know you're doing your right work, when you've got that energy. So you guys I really appreciate this, you're giving me another impotence to do it. I know I'm in the right spot now.

MN: Well you know this is the way we feel, like you know. Oneka and I, Oneka's been here for about the last 6 months but it's like she's in the right spot because--.

DC: Oneka, your name?

OL: Yes.

DC: I'm saying Jualita. My wife said I gotta get a hearing aid.

MN: But I'd like to end with a little more of your singing if that's okay?

Interviewee: Dominic Chianese
Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Oneka LaBennett

[Crosstalk]

DC: And David Chase was living in Clifton, New Jersey.

MN: That's incredible.

DC: The day when I was going to that place. He called me up one today.

MN: Now this is song on Apollo Tono, that's an original song?

DC: Yes.

[End of Side B; End of Interview]