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## Christian, Samuel

Bronx African American History Project  
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Transcriber: Laura Kelly

Mark Naison (MN): [laughs] Hello, this is the 145<sup>th</sup> interview of the Bronx African American History Project. We are here at Fordham Univeristy on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February, 2006 with Dr. Donald Christian - -

Samuel Christian (SC): Samuel.

MN: - - Samuel Christian! Okay, I'm sorry.

SC: [laughs]

MN: Samuel Christian, a theatre historian who grew up in the Morrisania section of the Bronx right near the home of Maxine Sullivan and with us today are Justin Berdick, Marie Rodriguez, and our videographer, Princess Okieme. I'll start as I always do, tell us a little bit about your family background and where they came from originally before coming to New York City.

SC: Um, my mother is from Syracuse, uh, Greenwich, New York, which is near Saratoga Springs and they were the only African American family in a community of Italian and Irish farmland. And my mother didn't really know she was black. My grandfather is from Virginia, a mulatto, and always passed for white. Um, he worked on the, the electric, the wires, what am I saying?

MN: Yeah, power lines.

SC: Power lines, right, power lines. And they had a lot of difficulty at the beginning going to restaurants and that because my mother would have to choose whether to sit with her father or sit with her mother, because my mother passes for white as well and my grandmother was dark skinned. They didn't go back south much. When they did, of

course, my grandmother would have to ride in the back of the train with her daughter and my fath, grandfather rode in the front. Um, I uh, my grandmother, his mother was one of the first African-American women to graduate from college in their community. I went back to the homeland, Lynchburg, of all places - - [laughter]

SC: - - Virginia, to visit and realized that most of the community, if they were black, were mulatto. And it was okay. Me coming in as a New Yorker was a little unsettling for them. I mean, at that time, 20 years ago I was still running and so even running in Lynchburg, Virginia, you know, why are you running, why are you jogging? [laughs] Things like that just didn't set with them. But they came to the Bronx and lived in a 3 story apartment, uh, home, on 1377 Prospect Avenue, and they were 3 distinct families. A very religious family, a very loose lady family [laughs] - - [laughter]

SC: - - and then, and then my family. And my grandmother found work as a domestic with the Italian and Jewish doctors at that time. And my grandfather was a elevator operator on Grand Concourse.

MN: Uh huh. What years did they come to the Bronx?

SC: Nineteen forty something. And my mother went to the school across the street at Ritter Place, whatever that is.

MN: It was P.S., it was Junior High School 40.

SC: Right, right.

Justin Berdick (JB): Someone's at the door.

MN: One moment.

[pause in tape]

[tape resumes]

MN: - - were saying, uh - -

SC: But, yeah, she went to P.S. 40 and then went to Walton High.

MN: Right.

SC: My father never finished grade school, I don't believe. He's from a family of 12, from Richmond, Virginia. And once I was born, I'm an only child, I was born in the Bronx Hospital which I hear is no longer there, the original Bronx Hospital. Um, she stopped working, and my grand, for a while, but my grandmother really brought me up. My mother and father worked for most of their lives.

MN: Right. Now, you're mother and father lived in the same apartment or the same building as your grandparents?

SC: No, we were a nuclear family, grandmother, grandfather, father, mother. Three Samuels in the house, my father Samuel, my grandfather Samuel, I'm Samuel as well.

MN: And so you're Samuel Christian III?

SC: Right.

MN: Uh huh. So, you're grandfather was an elevator operator.

SC: Mmm hmm.

MN: Your grandmother worked for these Jewish, Italian families of physicians.

SC: Right.

MN: What sort of work did your father do?

SC: My father had retired about maybe 15 years ago from the Grand, it was Grand Central, Penn, the Grand Central rail, the railway. But he was more in with the General Motors. He took the cars off when they came from Detroit in New Jersey and put them in --

MN: So he worked in the yards like, moving around --

SC: Stevedore, that's what it was.

MN: Stevedore, right.

SC: Stevedore.

MN: And what sort of work did your mother do?

SC: My mother -- Accounts Receivable for Sachs until she retired.

MN: Right. Um, what are your earliest recollections of your building -- by the way is the building 1377 still --

SC: The building's gone about 10 years ago because the church we went to was across the street from where we lived, so I had to go to church.

MN: Right.

SC: And we went back to a funeral and the church, the house wasn't there. And I got out the car, and it was where P.S. 40 is, it's 136 or whatever it is now, and we just both, my mother and I just stood there and cried. I mean, we, our history is gone.

MN: Do you have pictures of that house?

SC: Oh yeah, millions of pictures, millions of dreams I have every night of the house.

MN: Yeah, no because one of the things we like to do is have materials like that in our archives.

SC: Uh huh.

MN: The visual reminders of that community, now which side of the street was it on, um ,1377, on the Ritter Place side?

SC: Yep, it was on Ritter Place.

MN: Okay, and it was the north side of the street or the south side of the street? In other words, was it on the P.S. 140 side?

SC: No, that's all one, that's playground and school.

MN: Right. So it was the corner building?

SC: Mmm hmm.

MN: And it was, it was gone as of 10 years ago?

SC: Yeah, at least.

MN: Now, what was the name of the church you attended?

SC: It's still there, Mount Carmel Baptist Church.

MN: Okay, yeah, and we'll talk about that because the minister is an important figure in the community.

SC: Right, who was not there. I don't know that minister.

MN: Uh huh. Now what was, what were your earliest childhood memories of, you know, of your community when you started moving out of your apartment? First memories of the street, the block - -

SC: Well I guess until, before I went to regular school I was put in dance school.

Saturdays from about 7 in the morning until 12 noon, the Irene Gary dancers which was on the next corner, you went up Ritter Place to the next corner there. She had her house,

Irene Gary did, and in the back was sort of like a garage/shack kind of thing and she made it into a dance school.

MN: Right, what was the exact address, do you remember the number?

SC: No.

MN: It was a private home?

SC: Private home.

MN: With a drive way and a garage in the back?

SC: Right. It didn't have the Ritter Place address, it had the Union address.

MN: Right. Is it still there?

SC: I have no idea.

MN: Okay, we have to do a drive through.

SC: [laughs] Yeah.

MN: Now, did your family have an emphasis in the arts that led them to put you in this?

SC: My father wanted me to join the Riverdale hockey team as soon as possible - - imagine a black child in the 60's in hockey.

[laughter]

SC: Um, because I skated. My mother said, no, he'll get his teeth knocked out!

[laughter]

SC: So they wanted to find things for me to do that were, that kept me outside of the inside. I wasn't really allowed on the street to play. Paul Cannon was my only friend really. And his mother said, I want you to play with Sam because Dwayne, the other guy, was a bad seed. So - -

MN: Dwayne was somebody on the block?

SC: Uh huh.

MN: On Ritter or on Union?

SC: On Ritter.

MN: So the families got together and said the two of you should be bonded to keep you away from the negative influences.

SC: Right, right.

MN: And the idea was to constantly have you in organized programs?

SC: Yeah. So I did that and then I got into piano lessons with Orville Williams, Maxine Sullivan's son. And I, my grandmother took me to Lincoln Center almost every weekend to the library of the performing arts. And my mom took me to shows. My first show was "A Raisin," Lorraine Hansberry's adaptation musical. Yeah, so most things were outside. And Maxine got me to go to Alvin Ailey. She invited me to Alvin Ailey, she invited me to a lot of her concerts, um, yeah, it was all outside.

MN: Now the skating, where did you learn to skate?

SC: My mother skated because she grew up in snow country, so she skated on the ponds so that just got passed down to me.

MN: Now, were, did you skate in Crotona Park?

SC: No, we went to Riverdale ice skating rink.

MN: Riverdale ice skating rink which was located where?

SC: Right under the L.

MN: Okay.

SC: Mmm, hmm.

MN: Uh huh, so you were doing this before you were four years old?

SC: Before I was seven.

MN: Before you were seven.

SC: Yeah.

MN: Right, and - - now, what was, how many people were in this Irene Gary dance studio?

SC: Oh, at least, now I was a child, each class had about 10-15 students and it ran all day long and it was enough for a performance at town hall for about 3 hours. So were talking at least 100 students and then the faculty.

MN: wow. Now who was, what was Irene Gary's background?

SC: You know, I had no idea that I was gonna be in performing arts and to be around these people and it's really upsetting, I have no idea what her dance background is. I assumed because a lot of the, what I could hear - - I danced because my mother told me to. Um, but I have no idea. I would assume, because of my dance training that she's from the school of Dunham and not Alvin Ailey.

MN: Mmm, hmm. Was there, did you grow up with a consciousness of race and its power in American life? You know, were stories about your family and about African American history and culture - -

SC: My family even until today are sort of, well, when you go to the south, the blacks sit on one side and the mulattos sit on the other. Here, my father is very dark skinned, my mother light skinned and I am and when I did go to family functions, I don't anymore

because I choose not to, the same thing happened. I didn't realize, I did not come into my blackness until my master's program with a Jewish professor, Gordon Rogove, who said, you should do your thesis on African American women because you were brought up by women, you seem to write plays about women, and you need to start doing that. So he asked me to watch "The Eyes on the Prize" collection on PBS and that was the first time I saw Martin Luther King's assassination or John F. Kennedy and the Chicago Riots. I had no idea because when those things came on the TV, click.

MN: [gasps] So this was a conscious effort, in your family, to insulate you from anything which would develop black consciousness.

SC: And of course the public schools didn't talk about it in my community. And my mother, I finally confronted her and she started to cry because we were more like sister and brother than mother and son and mother, and said, I was just trying to protect you.

MN: Wow, I mean so this, now you're, this - - as far as I know, was the community you lived in all African American?

SC: African American and Latino.

MN: And Latino.

SC: Who called me red head, loosey, faggot, beat me up, my teeth were knocked out, that's another reason why I didn't leave the house a lot. I'd have to run home from school mostly because of my skin color and because I was smart.

MN: So you were, this was very difficult being an academic achiever in your community in the public schools?

SC: Was it for me?

MN: Yeah.

SC: No, I mean that's all I did.

MN: No, no, but I mean with the other kids.

SC: Yes, they weren't interested. I mean, when I became the valedictorian it was because [laughs] there was no other choice, when I look back now. There was no competition. In fact, twice, when I was at P.S. 54, the faculty there said, you need to take, put your son in private school. And we were gonna go, they were gonna put me in John F. Kennedy which I don't know if it still exists here in the city, and my mom would have had to leave her job in order to take me back and forth to school and she said, no we're not gonna do that.

MN: Right. How long of a walk was it to P.S. 54?

SC: Three and a half blocks about.

MN: Uh huh. And this was a difficult walk for you because of this, some of these experiences?

SC: I think until I was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade my mom walked me to school because it was on her way to the subway, then I started going to school on my own. Going to school was fine because kids [laughs] weren't up yet, but coming home was a problem until Paul and I became friends. And Paul was sort of the in between, he could be the bad boy, he could be the good boy. And as long as I - - and that's probably because, a friend asked me, why were you friends with Paul? I said, I guess that was the first thing, find the guy that's kind of cool, that thinks you're cool, and walk with him. But when I didn't walk with him, I ran.

MN: Right. So your skin color was an issue?

SC: Oh god, yes.

MN: With more with black kids or with the Latino - -

SC: The Latino, no, no problems. Because up until this day, I taught 6 years at Bronx Community College, they say, you're Latino, you're Latino, you deny your heritage [laughs]. But I'm not. I speak Spanish, I can read Spanish but I'm not of the Hispanic - -

MN: Right. So this was an issue with black kids in the community.

SC: I mean they called me guinea too and now that I know what guinea means, I'm like, I just, you know, I don't get it. But it was really bad.

MN: Yeah. Did your parents know about this, or did you keep this from them?

SC: Well, I'd say we'd go to Tremont Avenue to get my, no Cornell, what was it? Cornell children's shop in Parkchester to get about six pairs of slacks for the beginning of the semester, for the first month, no lie, the knees of my pants would be ruined because they're pushing me on the ground. And then my grandmother got involved and she was Angela Davis [laughs], but a homemaker Angela Davis if you can think of something. And sometimes she would run down to the school and curse the teachers out for not protecting me.

MN: And this happened in the school as well as out of the school?

SC: Right.

MN: Um, so there, the only - - now was your block a safe zone?

SC: Uh, no, no. Sometimes. It really depended. I mean this happened up until high school. Even when I went to Christopher Columbus High School I was in the drama

department. At that point at Christopher Columbus High School there were Italians beating blacks and Latinos up on the buses before they took the 12 to Pelham Parkway.

MN: Right.

SC: So I said, how do I get out of this one. Now I'm already you know, pretty skilled in how to do it in my neighborhood, so I said, let me join the drama workshop. So I joined the drama workshop, we did West Side Story, the first one, it was pretty ironic.

[laughter]

SC: And my mother, I would take the bus about, rehearsals were about 7 or 8 - - I mean, back then you rehearsed a lot until you really got going. Uh, what's her name, Anne Bancroft, Anne Bancroft went to Christopher Columbus High School. So I take the 12 at about 7 or 8 it starts, down to Sears and then got on the 3 and at the 3, there my mother would be taking me home because she was afraid of what was happening on Fordham and also when I got back to the community.

MN: Now Fordham Road was also a dangerous spot for you?

SC: Well at 8 or 9 o'clock at night yeah.

MN: Uh huh. So, you know, you felt safest in organized programs - -

SC: Oh sure.

[coughing]

MN: - - and in classrooms.

SC: And I begged my parents from the age of what, nine or ten, let's get out of here, but my grandmother, that was her home, that's where she came from from upstate and then she started getting mugged and then my mother said, yeah, we've got to go.

MN: So how, when did you actually, when did the family move out of that house?

SC: That was another depressing thing, they moved out when I was away at college, I went to Holy Cross College first, wanted to get out, so they said, no stay, we'll buy you a car and you can go to City College. And I go, no, I'm getting out of the Bronx. So I went away for two years and at that time they moved out.

MN: Right. Now in your house, what sort of music did your parents listen to?

SC: Gospel, and then they left it up to me because I had the big stereo. I was the only child so I you know. So I listened to Boston, Air Supply, Chicago, which I was also beat up for too because I listened to all the white music. I went to Harmony Music Shop, record store on Parkchester, right around the corner when you get off the bus. And then I started listening to a little James Brown. And then they started like, wait a minute. James Brown and Boston, it just doesn't go. But I never, again, a lot of the black music my parents didn't want me to listen to.

MN: So they, they let you listen - - they listened to gospel?

SC: Right.

MN: But that was the only black music?

SC: Aretha Franklin, but I didn't like her until later.

MN: Uh huh.

SC: Nancy Wilson.

MN: Right.

SC: That's about it.

MN: Now what about, now here you have on your block, this famous jazz singer Maxine Sullivan. What were your parents' feelings about her and the music that she represented?

SC: My mom went to one of Orville's, because Orville is in their age group, her son's parties and [laughs] she said they were beatniks and she didn't understand that jazz beatnik jive stuff. So they stayed but that was about the limit of their connection with them. She'd always get off the bus or the subway and she'd say, hi how're you doing, with a cigarette in her hand.

MN: Now how much old - - how old were you - - was your mother when you were born?

SC: Just about 40. She had about 6 or 7 miscarriages before me.

MN: Wow. Okay, so she's significantly older than you?

SC: Yeah.

MN: And Orville's in her generation.

SC: Mmm, hmm.

MN: Um, now what was your contact with Maxine Sullivan?

SC: I was trying to get out of dance because all the guys had left. You know, so how many pieces can I be in and be the only guy? Um, so we tried to find something in the neighborhood that I could do and piano came up and Orville played the piano and actually, I think I asked Maxine [laughs] before I asked Orville. And she, I never knew that she was really something. She was just the lady with this wonderful house that I liked to go into because she had a house with a fireplace.

[laughs]

SC: Until today, even today on the way up in the van I could smell her - -

MN: She had a working fireplace.

SC: -- studio. Yeah, I could smell her studio space where I used to play the piano. And she did certain functions in the neighborhood. She came to church a couple of times, mother reminded me last night, and sat in the back because Linda Hopkins, whose still around, Linda, she's a jazz singer also, was a member of our church. So whenever she would really sing there she would come by and just sit in the back and listen.

MN: Now Linda Hopkins is in what age? Is she in your age cohort or --

SC: No, she's much older. Linda Hopkins is with Abby Lincoln and --

MN: Right. And she lived in the community?

SC: No she didn't. She came to the community to sing.

MN: She came to the church?

SC: Mmm hmm.

MN: Okay, did you ever hear Maxine Sullivan sing in the neighborhood?

SC: [coughs] In her house. When I played the piano sometimes I'd come in and she was singing or I would be playing and, I was never gonna be a piano player because I was doing this all the time and I think she knew that, so.

MN: Did you, where did you take piano lessons?

SC: In her home.

MN: In her, oh you took from her son?

SC: Yeah.

MN: Uh huh. Now --

SC: And then she seemed to take a liking to me and so she got tickets for Alvin Ailey, she invited me to hear her sing at the law school at NYU, this was prior to my old friends. And then she got tickets for my mom and I to see her at the Orpheum and my old friends. And my mother's not, my mother is a stage, stage mom, but she's not a pushy stage mom. She's not Gypsy - - that character. So we didn't go backstage and I always kick myself for not going backstage because when we got back to the neighborhood she said, why didn't you come backstage? And I think at that, during that time of our relationship she wanted to help me within that and then she didn't get a chance to until later when I asked to work at the House That Jazz Built.

MN: Uh huh. Now when did you start getting involved with theatre either in school or outside of school?

SC: Well in elementary school I put on shows, little plays, and then we did the dance, and then we did the piano, and then we auditioned for the music and art, the high school of music and art and realized you can't get into music and art [laughs] if you're still doing that.

[laughter]

SC: I didn't know that though [laughs]! I figured, oh I'm gonna get in, I'm gonna get in!

Princess Okieme (PO): [laughs]

SC: and then I said, you know, you don't wanna dance, you don't wanna play the piano, you wanna be on the stage. So I did the acting in high school and then I went to Holy Cross because my mom said, you can do the theatre but you gotta get a real job or a real degree. And I tried for two years but I just couldn't do it so she said, okay you get one

chance. Audition for one school back here in New York and if you don't get in you stay at Holy Cross. I got in at NYU and I worked with Lee Stroudsburg, the last 2 years before he passed away. And I worked with a lot, David Mahmet and a lot of directors at NYU.

MN: When did you start actually writing plays? Was that in elementary school?

SC: No, that was at Mount Carmel Baptist Church because I was just too tired of the things that they made the children do and I guess I was a little more mature than a lot of the students or more book mature I would say. And I went to the Reverend, Reverend Kenneth Folks, L. Folks, and said, I'd like to put on a play. And he said, fine, fine, fine. And so I wrote the play, got everybody involved, it was a major fiasco [laughs]. Nobody wanted to memorize lines but we raised a lot of money and they were still doing it at least three or four years later.

MN: Now how old were you when you wrote this play?

SC: I, um, I, the 12<sup>th</sup> grade?

MN: Okay, so this was when you were in high school.

SC: Yeah.

MN: Now tell us a little bit about Reverend Folks, because people have mentioned him as an important figure in the neighborhood. What are your recollections of Reverend Folks?

SC: Mmm, I don't know if I want to comment on that.

MN: Okay!

SC: [laughs]

MN: We're all among friends.

SC: Yeah, but I'm a minister now. I'm in ministry, I've had 2 years at New York Theological Seminary, it's too, too elementary for me so I'm trying to raise money to finish at Princeton Divinity. I don't have a denomination because at this point I don't believe in denominations but you've got to pick one in order to be ordained. Looking back as a child he was not necessarily a very good role model. Um, as a child, I probably shouldn't have known a lot that I did know. But in black families, you know everything.

PO: [laughs]

SC: You know, they say oh, the child should not be, you know, should be seen not heard, but - - and as an only child you talk more to adults than you do your peers. So I knew a lot. So going into ministry and taking the courses at the seminary you learn that a lot of this is happening and there are books on this, you should not sleep with your congregation. [laughter] You should not have children with your congregation if you are married. I mean there are books like that and believe it or not they've got the books but people are still doing it. And I think part of it is he was adored as a god. And he's not, he's just a spokesperson for God. So that's the way to get around that question [laughs].

[laughter]

MN: Now, in spite, or perhaps because of this, was the church, was it a popular church?

[laughter]

SC: Yes it was a very popular - - yeah, lots of women [laughs]. It was a very popular church. They gave me a little money to go away to college but they were unhappy that I was going to a Catholic college. But I was not, I did not have to take any course in Catholicism but they had a problem with that.

MN: Now you had mentioned that this congregation was predominantly female.

SC: Yes.

MN: Was - -

SC: But that's so in most Baptist churches I would say.

MN: Yeah, but what about the actual neighborhood? Was, were there, was this a neighborhood where there were many fathers who were present or was it, were most of the families, by the time you were growing up, female headed? Was there much of a male presence in the community or the streets in, um - -

SC: I'd have to say hands down, no. Drug abuse I don't know anything about but there was lots of alcoholism. I'd look outside my window and see a woman being beat up by her girl, her, I don't think they were husband and wife, they weren't, boyfriend. And lots of fires, this was the big thing with the landlords burning down the apartment buildings. One of my friends was a pyromaniac [chuckles] and [coughs] I don't know if I would call him a friend but it was one of the people that my mother allowed me to play with from time to time until she found out he was a pyromaniac [laughs].

PO: [laughs]

SC: Um, so we, I was constantly at my window seeing smoke and fires and my mother, being, you know, that elementary school teacher that goes, you know, fire drill, okay, everybody up! You know, major panic, that we were always running out of the house thinking that the fire's gonna come from three blocks over. But that was one of my, the most, my terrors, my night, my night terrors would be about the fires. There was so much

smoke and then when I smell smoke in the city sometimes it just brings back that memory.

MN: Wow. Now how close were the closest of the fires?

SC: Oh my gosh, across the street. You know, even in our own building, the baby, the only baby in the house, the mother had, the loose lady, uh, she had a gun that was really a lighter and the child went like this on the bed and thank god the man she was seeing at the time just threw the mattress out the window. But fires were a big thing. I mean, I remember my grand - - we had a major fire in the building, the lights had gone out, it was during the day but still the lights were out and my grandmother's on the toilet and my mother said, we gotta get out. And she says, wait a minute I gotta go to the bathroom.

[laughter]

SC: And I tell that to my students all the time. And she wouldn't come [laughs]. So finally the fireman says, don't, it's fine, it's fine, it's not gonna reach her house, stay on the toilet.

[laughter]

SC: So, uh, but this was - - you know, and I laugh about it today but a lot of the things I've had to deal with getting over panic disorder is because of, of the Bronx.

MN: I mean, so you were growing up amidst - - as a child this sounds extraordinary.

SC: Oh it is!

MN: I mean, between being beaten up and humiliated on a regular basis - -

SC: Right.

MN: - - and fear of fires.

PO: I'm sorry, why were the landlords setting fires to the buildings?

SC: I don't know for sure but I think they wanted to rebuild them or the ten - - I mean there's a lot of plays. Sonia Sanchez has this South Bronx, *the Bronx is Next*. Um, but it was happening in Manhattan too where there were, they weren't the Panthers, they were a group of black militants saying, c'mon, we're gonna tell you or we're gonna burn these down, and get out, um, get out in time because we're gonna, you now, burn at a certain time. And from my research with theatre, I found that a lot of older women just, they said you know, you wanna get out just...so they burned the old women, elderly people in these buildings in Manhattan. But it was also happening in the Bronx. I was a child so I don't know and I haven't done any research so I have no idea.

MN: Some people say the landlords burned the buildings for the insurance money when they felt that couldn't collect rent. See the people wouldn't or couldn't pay.

PO: Oh.

MN: And then other people, tenants burned so they couldn't get preference for access to public housing, moved up on the waiting list.

SC: Right.

MN: I'm more interested in - -

SC: Well I have another sensational period. Picture my window, one night, it's a Sunday night, there was a fire on Jennings Avenue which was only a block away. Then for all of, all of a sudden there was a fire down somewhere in Freeman Street area - -

MN: Right.

SC: - - happening at the same time. It was like a movie out of the pop-ups now or whatever. I mean it was like a war zone, it really - - and for a child, so that was another reason why we gotta get out of here, because I knew my parents were not, didn't have enough money to put me through college but didn't have enough, didn't have little enough to get any assistance. So were on, you know, on the cuspus there. And but I said we gotta get out, we gotta find a way to get out. And all of his other, he's you know, got 8 brothers, 4 sisters, something like that, they all had houses in Queens. Now we have a house in Queens. But they all had houses. Why aren't we going out there? So yeah, fires, fires are still in my dreams. Last night I dreamed about a fire on Prospect Avenue and the house doesn't exist anymore. So that's really my experience. Not drugs, it's fires, beatings, um, most of the people that I went to the houses in, on Ritter Place and on Prospect Avenue didn't have a problem. And my father, for one reason or another, really was always there but even people, even friends or other folks, oh you have a, your father's still alive? I said, yeah he's there but he's quiet. Um, I'm just getting to know my father now - -

MN: Mmm!

SC: - - and to talk about the problems we had and why he didn't defend me when he heard people say red head loosey and all that. But he was going through some problems and he couldn't.

MN: So your hair was red when you were growing up?

SC: Mmm hmm, beet red.

MN: Beet red?

SC: Mmm hmm. Freckles like Dennis the Menace.

MN: Uh huh. So it, do you have any color photos?

SC: Oh I got all that stuff.

MN: Okay, so - -

SC: [laughs] Or my Mom has them.

[laughter]

MN: So this was like a standing invitation?

SC: Oh sure. I mean, beet red kid with freckles trying to sing James Brown on the porch was just - -

[laughter]

SC: - - because I spent a lot of time in the porch because see if you sat on the porch in the doorway, if the bad guys came you just ran into, you know, in the door.

[laughter]

MN: Um now, okay. So, describe, the building, did it have an actual porch or - -

SC: Yeah, you had four or five cement steps and then a porch which you could stand outside and then - -

MN: Was the porch screened in?

SC: No.

MN: And then you could run into the house when you saw them coming?

SC: Right.

MN: Were there a lot of like packs of young men who walked the streets?

SC: There was a time of gangs too, yeah, big gangs, mostly in my neighborhood, Latino gangs.

MN: What were the name, are there any names to the gangs?

SC: I wasn't, I didn't know Martin Luther King was assassinated, how would I know about the gang?

[laughter]

SC: [laughs] I have no idea.

MN: And nobody talked about drugs in your house or they just didn't - -

SC: I had a cousin who was a heroin addict and believe it or not, just died a couple of years ago. We kept saying, I don't know why this man's not dead.

[laughter]

SC: I mean he had a beautiful daughter, a beautiful wife and tried, he was uh, he was a drug addict from the age of about 12 or 13.

MN: Now was he living in the Bronx or another borough?

SC: He was, you know, a wanderer. But my grandmother and I would walk down Freeman Street and see him sometimes but it was never said that he was a heroin addict or a drug addict, he was just different.

MN: Uh huh. So he was there. There was somebody in your family. But you didn't - -

SC: But I can't really say heroin for sure. I'm just thinking of, now as an adult, because I've got plenty in my neighborhood in Hell's Kitchen that you know, if you doing a lot of this, it's probably not marijuana [laughs].

[laughter]

MN: Now were you encouraged by teachers in the public schools, you know, as a committed, academically gifted student? Did you get support - -

SC: I was the prize pet all the way up until my Ph.D. [laughs], I mean basically.

MN: Prize, you use the word prize pet.

SC: Right, right.

MN: Uh huh, so you know, teachers were so glad to see someone who really was passionate and able that they - -

SC: I suppose. I didn't think about it at the time. I mean in the disser- - in grad school, it was the fact that I'm only one of - -I was the only African American theatre student in the department. And I'm going, this is the nineties, what's going on? But when you think of black people, you don't say, let me put my child through theatre history school [laughs] and then you know, they're gonna make a lot of money.

[laughter]

SC: There's still less than 100 African American theatre historians in America and so [coughs] I had to, I felt I needed to excel and I was one of the students that corrected the professor. You know, I was always correcting Professor Hatch. I mean he loves me to death but I said, no, no, no, when I read blah, blah, blah.

[laughter]

SC: So, you know, and so, I'm different as a professor. I realize that people have to do other things, they have children, they have families, they can't be in the book 24-7, but I am [laughs]. So, no, I didn't see it that way. I know I was different, special, um, I don't like special - -

[laughter]

SC: [laughs] I was the norm for that environment alright, so. And that bothered me, I mean, that meant I had less friends. And then after a while, Paul drifted off, he was more into sports. He got me to run a lot from Prospect Avenue up to West Farms and back.

MN: This was or - - like recreational running?

SC: Right.

MN: Not - -

SC: Well he was on the team.

MN: Right, he was on the track team.

SC: Yeah, and he thought I should because I was very thin, um [coughs] and we were also in a talent show at Christopher Columbus High School, the disco kids. Um, we didn't dance at the same time, you know, that pre-hip hop thing where you dance a little bit - -

MN: Right.

SC: - - and come back out. Uh, the best disco in town, those Arabian girls, I can't remember their names, had the [inaudible]. So we did that. And he was in West Side Story with me, so. He was a Jet, no he was a Shark and I was cast as a Jet.

MN: Right. Were there any - - did you ever go to hear live music in the Bronx? Did you ever go to any clubs or theatres to hear live music in your neighborhood.

SC: Other than Maxine? Maxine's things were always in Manhattan.

MN: Right. Did you ever go to the Hunts Point Palace? Does that ring a bell?

SC: No, I don't even, I didn't know that area until I was a kid. I mean, an adult. I didn't know Bronx community existed until I taught their because we didn't go to that area of the Bronx at all. We went to puppet shows in the Bronx [laughs] believe it or not, on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue. Sachs, S-A-C-H-S gave puppet shows at Easter and Christmas. And my mother worked for Sachs, that Sachs.

MN: Did she, she worked in the Bronx, at the Sachs in the Bronx?

SC: Melrose Avenue, the warehouse, way down.

MN: Right, right, that was where she worked as the - -

SC: Uh huh [inaudible].

MN: [inaudible], right. So you know, basically even your block wasn't a safe place for you.

SC: [coughs] No, no. My backyard wasn't either.

MN: Your backyard wasn't? What went on in the backyard?

SC: Well there's no gate.

PO: [laughs]

SC: So you know I tried to, well I tried to raise chickens for the science fair. I was big in the science also. I thought I was gonna be a marine biologist until I realized I don't like math or can't do math. Um, so [laughs] I don't know how to swim but [laughs].

[laughter]

SC: So, but I won a lot of awards. Castle Hill had the science fair. We went there. I was in the *Daily News*, um - -

MN: So you did a science fair project at P.S. 54 and then went - -

SC: No, this was at I.S. 167.

MN: At I.S. 167.

SC: Uh huh.

MN: Where was I.S. 167?

SC: It's still there, it's on West Farms and - -

PO: Oh that school - -

SC: Yeah, yeah, it's under the L.

MN: Oh okay, right over there.

SC: If you go to the zoo you'll always see either way.

MN: Uh huh. Did you go take that bus to get there?

SC: Yeah, uh huh.

MN: And was junior high a less perilous experience?

SC: No, I got beat up there too.

[laughter]

SC: And then my father put me in Jerome Mackey's Karate School.

MN: Where was that located?

SC: That was on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue under the L also.

MN: Jerome Mackey?

SC: Yeah it was big. They had big commercials and then they went under. Jerome Mackey's Karate School.

MN: Uh huh. And was that, did that help?

SC: No, I came home every day crying. It was too abusive [laughs]. And its amazing because I'm this big, ferocious bear now, but back then I was - - "ooh, no." Everybody loves Chris, Everybody Hates Chris, nothing compared. I watch that show, oh please, that's nothing.

[laughter]

MN: What was the cross street for the karate school? Third Avenue - -

SC: Well, 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue was 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue. I mean, Alexander's - -

MN: Was it down closer to the Hub or down closer to the housing projects you know?

SC: It was closer to the Hub, the main shopping - -

MN: Right, right. And was, okay, and so, how many people were in your classes?

SC: About 5 or 6.

MN: Uh huh. And the dojo was very stern?

SC: Yeah, he scared the hell out of me. So my mother, my father paid so much money, he paid in advance. Until this day I go, oh you were really - -

MN: So it sounds like your father was trying to toughen you up, he wanted to put you in hockey and karate.

SC: Right. So but one day Geoffrey Cayetano and I remember the day, 5<sup>th</sup> grade. I was tired of the pants, my thermoses, those days the thermoses were breakable. I went through 4 or 5 thermoses in a semester, a season. So I said, I'm not gonna take it anymore. So I just stood up for myself and screamed at him, didn't curse. And I said, I might kill you if you bother me ever again. I don't know what was in the tone of my voice or whatever, he never bothered me again.

MN: Geoffrey Cayetano, that sounds Italian or was he Latino?

SC: He was black.

MN: He was black?

SC: But it's just his father was, it's funny, I never saw his father, but I assume he was Spanish or Latino.

MN: And he was somebody who harassed you periodically?

SC: And then, P.S., we became friends for the last year. It was really - -

MN: So you stood up to him. Was this in the lunch room?

SC: No, this was coming out of school at 3 o'clock.

MN: Uh huh. And then he became your friend after you stood up to him?

SC: Yeah, I went to his house.

MN: Uh huh.

SC: It was like really weird.

MN: Uh huh.

SC: [laughs] But that's kids, you know? And he was smart. I mean, he was one of the smart boys.

MN: Now was the elementary school tracked by grade or was it heterogeneous grouping when you were in school?

SC: Grade.

MN: Grade, so you were in the one class?

SC: The one class right. And I actually tutored the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> grade reading from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. And then I.S. 167 was a new concept, no walls - - I don't know if you remember that. No wall classrooms?

MN: Oh right.

SC: Yeah, it was really bizarre.

MN: What was that experience like for you?

SC: Bizarre [laughs].

[laughter]

SC: I didn't get the concept even until today. I'm like okay I'm gonna write it out, I don't need the computer. No, I use the computer as well but I'm the old school and I believe [laughter] in the old school whenever possible and I guess that was the time I learned that I couldn't be a marine biologist because the math was just so very difficult for me. My mother put me through tutors up near Bronx High School of Science. They wanted me to go to Bronx High School of Science or Stuyvesant and I just, I didn't wanna do it. I just didn't wanna do it. So, and I didn't do it. But the teachers were fine. It was the first time I had African-American teachers at I.S. 167 and until this day I still am in touch with my French teacher who lives about 20 blocks away from me.

MN: Uh huh. But you weren't getting any black history in elementary school or junior high that made an impression?

SC: No, remember, I wasn't into my blackness so I didn't want it anyway. Um - -

MN: Okay, so if it was there you would have rebelled - -

SC: Well, no, I would have had to take it. They tried to bring this guy in in 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade on Fridays I think it was, and he taught African American history, Paul was in the class too. And I remember Songhay Empire [laughs]. That's all I remember from that. There were no tests. You know, I had no idea where - - remember, I don't know what's going on in America with Martin Luther King. Let's go back there again [laughs]. I don't know any of that so to go to that, and go what's that? You know, I have no idea and no sense of what's going on. And the newspapers, if that was on the head of the newspaper, the newspapers were put away.

MN: Now - -

SC: - - That's another thing.

MN: - - did you ever talk with your parents about why they did this? What were they protecting you from?

SC: My mother said she was protecting me. My mother's pretty articulate but she has not really, we have not really, we just let it go. I forgave - -

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A] [BEGINNING OF TAPE 1 SIDE B]

SC: - - bad that I'm supposedly teaching "Values in Black and White Drama" which we're trying to change to "Drama in Black and White" to get more students to sign up for the course, that I had got the DVD to Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Lorraine Hansberry's like, she's my girl, same birth date and I, for Christmas I took it out and let my father watch it. Now he's not one to sit down unless its those bang, bang, bang movies, so I said let's watch *A Raisin in the Sun*. This man couldn't sit still. He got up to go to the bathroom, to get chips, and humming and hemming and finally afterwards he

said, you know, I just don't like those movies. Because he was run out of the South - - we don't know why - - at the age of 16. I assume it was a white girl. Um, and he just can't take it. So then I thought about when I was a child. I said, you couldn't, you couldn't accept it, or you couldn't accept the oppression or what whites were doing to blacks and you didn't want to put that upon me. So I grew up thinking of people as no color, which was wonderful, and I still do to this day. I don't go around saying, because some of my friends will go, well is he black, or is she black, or is she white.

[laughter]

SC: And I go, uh, yeah [laughs]. But you know. And then this thing, when I speak to people on the phone they go, oh my god!

[laughter]

SC: And I'm like - - and then even when I go to auditions and when I was at NYU, I need you to act more black. And I was so bourgie I said, Well if you need another, somebody better go get the black because I'm not doing that.

[laughter]

SC: But I can do that [laughs]. Now I'll do it, but I wasn't doing it.

MN: Do you think that on your mother's side there was the feeling that black consciousness would put people who are light skinned at, on the defensive and lead them to be victimized?

SC: Well how could you, in Lynchburg, if there was so many mulattos, preach black power if your mother or your aunt was white? I mean it just wouldn't go. So everything

was, you know, everything was just milk and toast, that's, that's it. And that's what they brought to the Bronx, milk and toast.

[laughter]

MN: And milk and toast in the Bronx is a tough combination.

SC: Right. And in the church, predominantly all darker skinned congregation members, that would come up sometimes too even at church. Why are you so light? You're not black. What are you? You're not even Puerto Rican.

MN: Wow.

SC: This is with the kids. And then we found, well I found out later, that a lot of the members were saying the same thing.

MN: So there was a whispering campaign in the church towards your family?

SC: Oh sure, my mother's - - my father's family to this day, can't stand my mother because she's light skinned. She's better than anybody. I'm like, she did not choose to come out light skinned.

MN: So there's, in the family itself, your father's side of the family - -

SC: Very dark.

MN: Uh huh. And they have a lot of negative feelings toward your mother?

SC: Yeah, and me.

MN: And you?

SC: And anybody else whose light skinned I assume.

MN: Uh huh.

SC: You know, or you know, you think you're better than others, and it runs through the Latino group also with color. Spike Lee did it in *School Daze*. So, I've always lived with that.

MN: Did you find yourself at any point bonding with Latino students?

SC: Oh no. Back then, the Latinos had the gangs. So grandma said, no, I don't want you around Puerto Ricans. Puerto Ricans do this. Puerto Ricans do that. Puerto Ricans do that. Um, I wasn't allowed at all, no.

MN: Real - - now, so the Puerto Rican kids were seen as tougher than the black kids?

SC: Yes, yes.

MN: That's interesting. They were - -

SC: And the day I let, oh Pedro. Pedro, Pedro, oh I can't remember his last name, but he was the tiniest little thing, he was like a, you know, just bones.

[laughter]

SC: He came to the house and my grandmother had a knife in her hand. Well, she always had a knife in her hand [laughs] around lunch time because she was cutting up stuff to make for dinner. I said, make sure that goes down in mortality [laughs]. So, and she came to the house and she was so angry that I had brought him to the house that she just chopped and he was scared, you know he was like a tiny little thing. And then he opened his mouth and he was very articulate because I chose, even back then I taught my friends, then all of a sudden she just blossomed like a rose, [imitates his grandmother's voice] "hi would you like a soda?"

[laughter]

SC: So, uh - -

MN: So there was a perception that Puerto Rican kids were like thugs and violent - -

SC: Yeah.

MN: - - and uncultured?

SC: I don't know about uncultured. She just didn't want me to be a bad kid.

MN: Oh okay. Wow.

SC: Yeah, yeah.

MN: Now did you, uh, did you listen to Latin music at all?

SC: You couldn't help, I mean, you know, the neighborhood, when you, when I went to school they had the cars and that was the time when they had the honky car, dee dee duh dee...

PO: Oh they still have that [laughs].

SC: Yeah [laughs]. Yeah, so, and the supermarkets were run by Latinos so there was Spanish music.

MN: Did that music speak to you at all? Did you respond to it? You know, Willie Colon, Eddie Palmieri, or...?

SC: No, I mean, I ate cuchifritos, I mean there was a [laughs] cuchifrito store down, down the street.

[laughter]

MN: But you, because there was a gentleman that grew up on Union Avenue, a little younger generation, Arthur Jenkins, who listened to this music who became an African, a Latin musician. You know, that became his passion. But that didn't - -

SC: Huh, no.

MN: It didn't - -

SC: I was listening to Boston, yes.

MN: Okay.

[laughter]

SC: [laughs]

MN: So you were listening - -

SC: I think later on in high school with Santana you know?

MN: Oh right, okay. Uh huh. This is a truly unique story but it's harder - -

SC: Uh, yeah [laughs].

[laughter]

MN: Um, so you went to the record store in Parkchester to get the, you know - - now what radio stations did you listen to?

SC: Radio stations- you know I listened to WBLS but I didn't buy the music. Everyone says that I've been a sage since I was a child and the black music I was buying was, I remember seeing, finally there was a black record store in my neighborhood on Boston Road. And I went there and I asked for Roberta Flack's "Bridge Over Troubled Water."

MN: Right.

SC: I was like a child wanting that. You know, so that was the black thing but you know, I went to Harmony Record Store which I think is still there. No it's not, it's gone. Rocky Mountain High, John Denver I remember. And he'd always look at me and my grandma,

because my grandma's a short lady, very dark skinned, and so here he comes again

[laughs].

[laughter]

SC: I'm sure they had stories. And most of the titles I couldn't get right. You know how you mix things up? And that was my record collection.

MN: Were there any DJ's that made a particular impression in you from a New York radio station, I mean, um - -

SC: KC Elthin. Again, milk and toast with that. I met George Benson. Uh, he had a nephew that lived on Prospect Avenue about 4 - -

MN: Really?

SC: - - about 4 or 5 blocks down. But it didn't make an imp - - you know I'm a child. George Benson, jazz, and you know. [coughs] But uh, no, that was my music. And Broadway tunes of course.

MN: Mmm hmm.

SC: Oh I did that with Paul Cannon. That was when sometimes in the community I was accepted. Paul Cannon and I would put on shows. You know how kids in the farm areas put on shows? And we'd get a couple of the other kids, usually from kids from out of, out of state - - [laughs] out of the neighborhood, and we'd, you know, I'd put the record on to *Annie* or I'd put the record on to whatever musical was on and we would just sort of lip sync and do male/female roles and the dogs and the cats and whatever else we get. And then, the kids would actually look over the fence and watch us. And then 5 minutes later they'd wanna beat me up, so you know.

[laughter]

SC: [laughs] But that was one nice moment during the time.

MN: Now did your parents take you to museums?

SC: My grandmother and my mother were my cultural source. My father was not - -

MN: What museums did you go to on a regular basis?

SC: All of them, Metropolitan Museum, the Natural Museum - - my grandmother was also a para-professional, not paid para-professional, volunteer to go with the kids in my class to the museums through P.S. 54. Um, went to see Broadway shows, went to ballet, was in dance, went to Loewes on Grand Concourse to see movies. My mom was the one who took me to see *The Old Man* and the *Jaws*, those movies. And grandma took me to see *Dr. Doolittle* and things like that.

MN: Did your family ever go to Crotona Park?

SC: Oh, they lived in Crotona Park.

[laughter]

SC: They remember times where they would just stay out till 4 or 5 in the morning at Crotona Park. Um, and then it got to a point - - I remember when I was younger there was still rowing boats on the pond there at Crotona Park and playing tennis and then it left and then it came back. Um but, I wasn't allowed to go to Crotona Park by myself, and then I didn't want to, until high school. It was because Angel Lugo [laughs], a Latin friend who I was allowed to go to his house - - my grandmother called the mother, the mother was gonna be there. Um, P.S. he smoked marijuana, I didn't smoke it so, and everything else.

[laughter]

SC: He smoked cigarettes and drank. But you know, it's like, I can take care of myself.

So anyway, I was allowed to walk around the park to get - - there was a swimming pool in the park too.

MN: Right.

SC: Never got to do that. My parents did that. I remember maybe one guy was in the park. Those things were considered, hmm, I wanna get this right, [laughs] worded right.

Things that we were not to do as a family also. If we went to a picnic we went to Whitestone Park. Um, my mother to this day, she will not watch UPN. She says that's a black station. She just doesn't, there has to be a different type, it has to be educated. She will go see *The Color Purple* but she won't see *Booty Call*.

MN: Right.

PO: That makes sense. That makes sense.

SC: Yeah. She doesn't like, she doesn't want to read black books that have "nigger" in it all the time, she hates that. And I teach that in my plays and when I have to read it she goes, don't say that word! I'm like, well I have to say it, its art. Um, she doesn't want to see the clowning black. She doesn't wanna see it at all. She will not, that's why, you know, she won't watch *The Parkers*. I love *The Parkers*. She won't watch that. She won't watch that.

MN: Did your family ever go to beaches in New York City? Did you ever - -

SC: Yes, but again, we went out to Rye Playland. So we were like the only blacks in Rye Playland. But people were confused like, if she's Latino, he might be white, this is the black driver [laughs].

[laughter]

SC: You know, they were always doing that. What the hell is that? Because my father was always sitting 12 feet away so he had to be the driver, you know? [laughs] He was the driver but he was also my father.

[laughter]

MN: So this was like, your family was like racial theatre?

[laughter]

SC: Yes, yes! That's why I didn't, maybe that's why I didn't know I was black. I don't know. I mean I'm in - - my mother and father told me that I was black but I'm black-Irish because my grandfather's Irish. Um, then I cried, I cried.

MN: Your grandfather's literally Irish?

SC: Yeah he's literally Irish.

MN: Uh huh, grandfather on your mother's side?

SC: Right.

MN: Uh huh. And was he from upstate New York or in the South?

SC: No he's from the South.

MN: This is Lynchburg?

SC: This is Lynchburg [laughs].

[laughter]

MN: Now, what part of the state is Lynchburg?

SC: Oh Lord, it's a part that I had to take a small plane and almost died because I don't like planes at all. [laughter] Uh, that's another black thing I think, from that com, at least from my community. Um, I have no idea.

MN: Right.

SC: You'll find it on a map [laughs]. It's definitely there. And I've heard it in a couple of movies. People in Lynchburg, ooo boy. So...

MN: Um, okay, are there any questions that you have Justin?

Justin Berdick (JB): Yup.

MN: Okay.

JB: What was the specific year that you left the Bronx?

SC: I left to go to college in 1978, 1979.

JB: And, well you already answered a few of the questions. So you had no personal contact with heroin in the sense that it directly affected your life or indirectly? And you already answered - - um, you mentioned your cousin, potentially, possibly had a heroin-

SC: Yeah, he was definitely on drugs.

JB: - - a heroin, right. Uh, do you remember any other friends or anyone else?

SC: No. Big alcohol, you know - -

MN: Now, now, were the alcohol affecting young people or older, mostly older people?

SC: So bad that there's bottles all over the curb - -

MN: Really?

SC: - - the green bottles, the night train, or whatever it was called.

MN: So this was, so this is something people haven't talked about, the huge presence of alcohol in this community.

SC: Difference too. My block, you got the green bottle I remember, a small pint of Smirnoff, things like that. And then when you went to Freeman Street with the Latinos, it was Rango, the cans, not much liquor, just cans, beer.

PO: That would kill you.

MN: So it was wine in your community, more wine?

SC: Wine, no. Liquor.

MN: Liquor. Hard liquor?

SC: Yeah. Wine? [laughs] You only got that at communion in the church.

[laughter]

SC: Or you went up to Little Italy, Arthur Avenue. That was different to. Like coming back to Arthur Avenue when I was teaching at Bronx Community College. My father would get us in the car to go to the Capri Pizza Parlor because then back in Little Italy, if you were a different color you just didn't go. Um, and we'd run and get out of the cab, of the car, get the pizza, watch them do the pizza and then get back in the car, so I - - and that was - -

MN: So you and your mother could go into the Capri - -

SC: My father went too. But you knew that there was, I didn't belong there.

MN: What street was that on? Do you remember?

SC: It was right on the main street.

MN: On 187<sup>th</sup> Street?

SC: I looked for it the other time I was up there but it's not there anymore.

MN: Yeah, okay.

JB: Um, do you ever remember seeing anyone nodding off in the streets because that's some common stuff that I've come across.

SC: From alcoholism, and I do know the difference.

JB: Okay, more from alcohol than from anything else?

SC: Mmm hmm.

JB: And - -

SC: A lot of lesbianism in my neighborhood but not drugs, not so much

MN: That's interesting.

[crosstalk]

PO: I thought that came now. I didn't know that existed.

SC: Oh yeah, the blacks?

PO: I thought it was, I thought it came in the 90's [laughs].

SC: No, no, no. I mean in fact in my church it was - - but it was, what some would say the stereotypical. You know, very macho, very. But it was accepted. There were at least 5 or 6 families, the mother was the single parent, she was lesbian, wasn't talked about, and I used to play with her daughter, Jacquette was one and a couple of others. But that was a major thing too. I thought about it because I was in dance and of course I saw a lot of flamboyant men but then I saw the women and I go, hmm. But again, not put down, just not talked about, you know, and accepted. And the adults accepted it too.

JB: How much crime do you remember, muggings, things like that? Do you remember it getting worse at any point?

SC: Yes, well I was mugged by non-children at least 3 or 4 times a year.

PO: [gasps]

SC: They take my pizza when I went down to Freeman Street and the money.

MN: These are by older kids, older - -

SC: Teenagers and adults.

MN: Teenagers and - -

PO: Adults, Oh!

SC: Then I would say half and half, Latino, black. There was you know, no one thing.

MN: Did they, was this without weapons, or sometimes with weapons?

SC: A couple of knives.

PO: [laughs]

SC: No gun.

MN: How, give, describe a mugging - -

SC: Okay. Fourth of July, I remember, I remember everything which is one of my problems [laughs]. But that's why I'm a historian I guess. Um, going down to Freeman Street with, not a cousin, I think the neighbor's relative. Go get a pizza because we didn't want the barbecue. Walk down Freeman Street, get the pizza, it was a new pizza place so it's like you know, anything new opening anywhere was a big thing.

PO: [laughs]

SC: And you had to go then because it was gonna be gone [laughs] in a week or so

because everybody's gonna rob it or burn it down. So - -

[laughter]

SC: God, I can't believe I felt like this then. So anyway, we get the pizza, had change said, ooo maybe they'll give us some change. Um, we hadn't gone 8,10 feet and someone said give me your pizza and the money. And at that point I knew you give the pizza, you give the money and you go. And that's, and that was broad daylight.

MN: And they didn't, and they didn't even have to say, I've got a gun or a knife?

SC: No.

MN: It was just a larger, angrier person.

SC: Yeah, right.

MN: Now you had mentioned barbecue. Where were you eating barbecue?

SC: In the backyard.

MN: Your parents?

SC: No, the, a lady in the middle floor [laughs] - -

MN: Oh.

SC: She had a lot of parties and so we were invited. And then when we wanted to have a party she was like, you know, this is my house! And it's not her house so that was another reason why I was like I've got to get out of this - -

MN: This is, this is the person you described as the loose?

[laughter]

SC: Right, right.

MN: But was she at least - -

SC: She's no longer loose, she's a wonderful woman.

[laughter]

MN: Was she a good cook?

SC: Yeah, fantastic.

[laughter]

JB: I just have a question. So do you remember when it got worse? Like what years and stuff you started getting mugged more frequently?

SC: Mmm, no, because that sort of stopped when I started going to high school. Then I didn't use the neighborhood, I would - - we didn't go shopping in the neighborhood after a certain time. We didn't go shopping, after about 5<sup>th</sup> grade we stopped going shopping.

My mother - - my father had a car - -

MN: Oh he had a car.

SC: - - had an accident on Boston Post Road, finally got the nerve to get another car after being in the accident and we would go to the Hills supermarket in Co-op, not Co-op city, Corvette's around, you know that area, Corvette's. It's not Corvette's anymore but its over in, gosh, what is that area called? Story Avenue is over there?

MN: Soundview maybe?

SC: Yes, Soundview area. Soundview area and then we found one at Key Food's at the West Farms. And he didn't have a car again so we took the bus to the Key Food's at West Farms and stocked up on a Friday night, we're talking 12-15 bags, and it's my mother,

my father because my grandmother was getting food stamps, and then my father and then myself and then we would take these bags in the cab and then come home.

MN: So you wouldn't even shop in your neighborhood?

SC: There was nothing to get.

MN: Oh.

SC: I mean, you know, my mother wanted Del Monte corn. You got White Rose corn or, which I use from time to time even myself, I mean depending on what I'm cooking, but you know, you didn't have a selection. And my mother, no matter where she has lived has always been a diva, so she had to have her food, she had to have her clothes [laughs].

[laughter]

SC: I mean that was another thing about her. She'd come in with clothes from J.

Michael's or whatever and places downtown and we dressed and acted differently than the neighborhood. I mean Maxine was more down to earth than we were.

MN: Right.

SC: It was like, you know - -

MN: Did you dress differently than the other kids?

SC: Oh yes, I was dressed to the nines. No polyester.

[laughter]

SC: [laughs] No polyester. And I had coats and you know, sneakers. I had every game known to man, every toy known to man, Dollinger's on Tremont Avenue has most of my father's money [laughs].

[laughter]

SC: My father got paid on Thursdays and he would take me to Dollinger's on Tremont Avenue and then we'd go to the Bronx Zoo and that was our Thursday, it was the only time we really got together.

MN: Um, do you remember the blackout of 1977?

SC: Oh yeah! That was scary, that was scary.

PO: [laughs].

MN: What was going on in - -

SC: Grandma was worried about the food [laughs] because she cooked, oh great cook.

Um, mom said, don't you dare go out, Dad's at the window, lots of noise outside, but again, we had no retail right in within a block or so area. Um, but I was sort of frightened.

I was frightened.

MN: Yeah, now what sort of food did your, was, did your grandmother and mother cook? Did they have a particular style?

SC: Mostly Italian.

PO: Mmm [laughs].

SC: [laughs] I know. Mostly Italian because my grandmother grew up with Italians and Irishmen and then she cooked my grandfather corned beef and cabbage a lot which sort of juxtaposed with the chitlins downstairs. So I said, what the hell is that when I first smelled it. And my mother said, you're not getting that in our house. And my father would eat pig feet but he was only allowed to buy it outside, you know in the jar and eat it and place it in a certain part of refrigerator [laughs] because we didn't want nay part of that.

[laughter]

MN: So there wasn't a big soul food emphasis?

SC: Collard greens we did have.

MN: Uh huh, okay.

SC: But other than that, no.

MN: Corn bread?

SC: Corn bread and fried chicken.

MN: Uh huh. And this was your grandmother and mother both made?

SC: Mom was a diva, she didn't cook.

[laughter]

SC: My mother didn't learn to cook until I was out of college [laughs]. She's gonna hate me. But I tell everybody else that too. But, no, she wasn't a cook. I mean, you know, my grandmother was the matriarch. And my mother went to work and then she went to her Weight Watchers and she went to her dance class or her aerobics class. Not aerobics then, and exercise class. And she had her girlfriends. And you know, my father did whatever he did.

MN: Uh huh, um Marie do you have any questions?

Marie Rodriguez (MR): I relate to your story.

SC: Really?

Marie: I have red hair, I'm the only one in my family, and that thing of kind of watching all the violence and all this trauma taking place. And I was just wondering, as you grew up and became, I'm assuming, as a child, not aware that this is, you know you're feeling

something, but you don't label it as trauma or whatever. In your journey as an adult, have you been able to connect with other adults who have had a similar experience with you?

SC: No, not one. Because even some of my art work, which is not art work, it's sort of my own therapy at times, have been the fires, drawing photos of them. And my dreams are about the fires. And it was never spoke about in the house other than panic, let's go, what do we take with us. So I was almost like a fireman always ready to run down 3 flights of stairs.

Marie: And do you find, for example, - -

SC: [coughs]

Marie - - if you try to tell the story, let's say, is it ever minimized by others because its just a fire? You know, like maybe, you didn't do heroin or you know, you weren't, you didn't get the bullet in you, so why are you complaining about the fire?

SC: Never heard gunshot either, that's another. Um, no, no. I assume its possibly because of the circle of people that I, you know, my circle of friends go from fry cook to PhD so not Bronx people. I just wanted to say another word about Maxine though. My later time with her, once she knew I was in theatre school at NYU and acting, we sort of clicked again. No more piano lessons after, not getting into high school [laughs]. Um, ten dollars a shot [laughs], so but - - I grew up as not being a busybody or not asking a lot of questions, you know, just let people be private. But I said, I'm at NYU, I'm doing this project, it's more of a performance piece and can I use your space because you know, they weren't giving spaces out at NYU unless you got the grant which I got a grant later,

but for this one. So she said fine, let Orville, Orville will open it for you on Saturday mornings and she actually came.

MN: Where was this performance?

SC: at the theatre, the House that Jazz Built.

MN: And where was that located?

SC: Its, Freeman Street, its probably on the thing, the name of the street but its like a side street.

MN: Was it Freeman and Stebbins?

SC: Yes.

MN: Okay.

SC: Freeman and Stebbins. And it you know, was run down and there was lots of junk to clear out and to sweep and vacuum and find some chairs that you could sit in that wouldn't break. But she let me use it. And even then, I didn't say, I didn't know until I became a theatre historian, I'm in the midst of history, you know? And she had no, I'm sure she would tell me today if she could, and she might, that she had no idea what I was doing [laughs] because it was just so avant-garde. It was about a black woman who thought she was Emily Dickinson [laughs].

[laughter]

SC: At a train station [laughs] in the Bronx. So, but she sat there and I didn't realize I was in the midst of royalty. And not until I became a theatre star, and I brought the book with me today, Errol Hill wrote a book called *Shakespeare in Sable* and she was with Louis Armstrong.

MN: Um, wow.

SC: Yeah and Louis Armstrong is Swinging in the Drain, which is the Midsummer Night's Dream Frolic Musical during the Federal Theatre Project. They were doing spoofs, not spoofs, well yeah, they were spoofs on Shakespeare. Macbeth was the most known. But she was with Louis Armstrong. The Dandridge sisters, which I've written a thing that's been published on Dorothy Dandridge, she was with them in the same cast, and Jackie "Moms" Mabley all in the same cast. But I didn't know any of this stuff. And Orville has a lot of that stuff in his archives in the house, so.

MN: Does he still live in the house?

SC: Yeah, I spoke to him a couple of weeks ago because I told him that I was teaching here and to come in here about his mom. And yeah, he's still there.

MN: Okay, Princess, do you have any questions?

PO: No [laughs].

MN: And you thought you had it hard growing up in the Bronx?

[laughter]

SC: Yeah, no. Was this therapy or was this an interview [laughs]?

MN: I'm not sure. Are there any other things that you haven't said in looking back on these years that you'd like to say?

SC: Well, teaching at Bronx Community College for 6 years which was really a, it was experience but I wasn't teaching under my expertise. I was teaching voice and diction and communication theory, but most of the women that I deal with from the 19, early 19, 1915-1940, they came around to, into their own through becoming voice and diction

profs also. Anyway, I had to use the skills I had in the Bronx as a child in the classroom because my life was threatened 3 times at Bronx Community.

MN: What?!

SC: [laughs] Yes.

PO: Why?

SC: And this is recently. I have only not been with Bronx Community for 2 years now. In a day class and an evening class. And I'll tell you the best one where I said, I don't know if I wanna teach anymore and then a lot of my mentors said, it's the Bronx. You know, I was giving back to the community and teaching there. I had no trouble with the Latino students, my trouble was with the black students, the black men. Can you give me the A without me working, you know, because you're one of us, you came from us? And I go, but I had to work for it too and if I gave you an A and then you went out there and somebody asked you a question and you didn't know how to answer it, what would that say about you and me? Most of them didn't understand that. And one time a student was upset that I gave him a C and said you better watch your back because I'm gonna see you outside. So I took this, I took this to heart. And at CUNY there's no security guards its peace, peace officers. So I had to run down from the 7<sup>th</sup> floor to the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, again my running skills, even as heavy as I am now - -

MR: Where was your thermos?

SC: [laughs] Right right. And I asked them to come up to the class and he says, well did he put a gun in your face, and I said no, then we cannot escort him out of your classroom. I said well I'm not gonna teach anymore tonight. So as I was walking out, walking down

to the subway, the number 4, some of my students said, you know, we have your back. So I said, I knew what that meant but I didn't know what it meant for them. And then when I came back to get my paycheck before, a couple of days before the class, I saw one of the macho guys, and all the macho Latino guys sat in the back. And he says, we got your back, you better come back, he says, we love you, they were always saying they love me, they don't want me to go. So, don't let one person stop you from coming back. So I came back that night with someone, an escort and all the male students sat in the front row and they did that for the rest of the semester.

PO: Awww!

MR: Really?

SC: I know. I mean how do you get that? I mean, you don't get that. And that's - - a lot of the - - why I stayed for 6 years is because of the influence I had on the students, and Latino students too.

MN: Wow.

PO: That's crazy.

SC: So but, my skills came into play once again, you know.

[laughter]

MN: Okay, well, thank you for an extraordinary interview!

[clapping]

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B]

[END OF INTERVIEW]