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Bronx African American History Project
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Transcriber: Scarleen Gabriel

Brian Purnell (BP): Today is January 24, 2007. The Bronx African American History Project is interviewing Ms. Joanne Colley who is a resident of California now, but grew up in the Sedgwick Houses in the 1960s. Ms. Colley could we please start by you spelling your first and last name and if you could also please provide your date of birth.

Joanne Colley (JC): Joanne Colley, J-O-A-N-N-E, last name C-O-L-L-E-Y, date of birth November 18, 1954.

BP: And where do you currently reside?

JC: Los Angeles, California.

BP: Where did you live when you lived in the Bronx as a child?

JC: I lived in Sedgwick Projects. Do you need location?

BP: Yes, your address if you remember it.

JC: It was on 174th Street and University Avenue. I can't quite remember the address.

BP: No, that's fine. And what were your parents' names?

JC: Marie and Richard Colley.

BP: Marie and Richard Colley. Did you have any other siblings?

JC: Yes. Two brothers and one sister.

BP: Two brothers, one sister. All older or younger?

JC: Brother and sister older and younger brother.

BP: Ok. Perhaps we could speak a little bit about your parents. Were you born in the Bronx?

JC: Yes.

BP: And you lived in the Sedgwick Projects the whole time of your childhood?

JC: Up until age thirteen.

BP: Up until age thirteen.

JC: Well I still lived in the Bronx but we moved out of the Projects.

BP: Right. So up until 1967---

JC: 68' actually.

BP: 68' you lived in the Sedgwick Houses. Did your parents live in the Bronx?

JC: The whole time?

BP: Before you were born. I guess the question that I am asking is how did they come to the Bronx, were they born in the Bronx or did they—

JC: Oh no, they lived in Manhattan, I believed on 99th Street. I believe that's Manhattan. And they moved to the projects, I think when my sister was born, which was 1952 they might have moved to the projects.

BP: So they moved from Manhattan into the Projects in the Bronx?

JC: Yes.

BP: What kind of work did your parents do? Did both of your parents work?

JC: No, my mother stayed at home to raise the kids and my father was a carpenter.

BP: A freelance carpenter or did he work for a particular company or union?

JC: At the time I don't know when he started as a carpenter but I know at some point he was with the union, but I'm not really exactly sure, all I remember is him being a carpenter, I don't know how far back that went.

BP: Alright. We just try to trace where and how people came to move from the Bronx.

Do you know why they might have moved to the Bronx?

JC: For better life.

BP: What were the Sedgwick Projects like when you were growing up in the 50's?

JC: Well I was quite young in the 50's, I don't know---

BP: Or the early 60's. I guess what were some of your earliest memories of living in the Sedgwick Houses?

JC: I just remember going to school, snowing, I remember at some point meeting Valerie Rooks and Rosalind Lawrence, we grew up for a long time together. I remember we had certain friends you played with all the time. We had certain games we used to play, certain season we did things as far: jump rope season, marble season, play season in the winter. We just had certain times we did certain things and it seemed like each year we always did the same thing at the same time. I know that it was a great childhood growing up in the projects. If I could go back to it I would. It was just a wonderful childhood.

BP: What made it so great, what made it so wonderful?

JC: It was just carefree, we had our friends, we didn't worry about things at that time.

BP: Yeah. There was no—you parents didn't worry about you being out playing and things like that?

JC: No, not at all. They didn't worry about us. Not at all and as far as income I'm sure we didn't have an abundance of money but at that age we didn't worry about it and everything was just wonderful. I couldn't have picked a better childhood.

BP: You said that the group of young children you played with, was it mostly girls, or all girls?

JC: It depends on what we were playing.

BP: Ok

JC: As far as the jump rope and double dutch, it was all girls but when we played tag, I forget the other games, [inaudible] I forget how we played that, but it was boys and girls running around the projects. It just depended on what we were playing. Marbles were played by both boys and girls.

BP: Was it mostly African American kids or was it---who was living in Sedgwick Houses when you were growing up?

JC: When I was growing up it was mostly Jewish people and a handful of African Americans.

BP: Only a handful of Black folks at Sedgwick houses?

JC: Right. And basically you knew who all of them were. There wasn't that many.

BP: So your group of girls that you played jump rope and that you played with as a child, was it all African American girls or was it mixed?

JC: Basically all African American.

BP: How did you meet Valerie Rooks and Rosalind Lawrence? Did you meet them through living in the same area or did you meet them through church or school?

JC: Living in the same area. Because we actually went to different schools certain buildings in the projects went to one school and the other public projects went to another school. It was like 104 and 109.

BP: Which school did you go to?

JC: I went to 109.

BP: What was that like?

JC: Well that school was majority of Jewish kids and because I remember on Jewish Holidays there was maybe one, two people in the class of African Americans but I know

as far 104 that was more of a mixture. There were more African Americans going to that school.

BP: Did you get along well with the children in your school?

JC: Yes, as far as I remember.

BP: So there was never any feeling of being different since you were African American and it was predominately Jewish?

JC: No, not a problem as far as I remember. And then being in elementary school you really don't---at that time I just don't remember any prejudice or anything.

BP: How were your teachers? Were there any memorable moments that stick out with your teachers in that elementary school?

JC: I just remember maybe at 1st grade or something, I just had a teacher that I really liked. I can't remember her name but I just remembered at that age there was one that I really liked. The rest of them they were, to me, like older Jewish ladies though, that's all I remembered.

BP: Were any of your teachers African American?

JC: Not that I can recall. Not in elementary school.

BP: And where did you go to junior high school? I guess that's what comes next.

JC: Junior High School 82, I think it was on University Avenue, maybe three or four blocks away, I don't know. At that time, distance seemed really far which at this point, this age it really wasn't that far. Things seemed a lot bigger then because when I go back to New York and go to the projects they seem really small.

BP: Did you go to school with your friends from Sedgwick Houses at that school?

JC: Yes, yes because we all basically went to the same junior high school.

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BP: Was that school predominately African American or was it mixed Black and White?

JC: You know I just remembered a lot of African Americans and maybe Puerto Ricans at that point. A lot of Puerto Ricans had started to move into the projects. There were some white but there wasn't as many white as when I was going to elementary school.

BP: Uh huh. And relationships between Puerto Ricans and African Americans what were they like at school or even in the housing projects where you lived?

JC: I can't quite remember. I don't remember any problems between the Blacks and the Puerto Ricans, not back then.

BP: Did your circle of friends, when you moved into junior high school, did it expand and include more girls or was it only the girls that you hung out with at Sedgwick?

JC: It basically remained the same ones from Sedgwick.

BP: What was your experience like in junior high school? Did you remember having a positive learning experience in school?

JC: Junior high school, I am trying to remember. I don't remember too much at junior high school, I basically remember, I am trying to think. I don't know, junior high school wasn't such a happy time as going to elementary school maybe because maybe as you get older there is more responsibility. But it wasn't such a happy experience as elementary school, that's all I remember.

BP: You don't remember why?

JC: I guess maybe it was more responsibility, harder classes and maybe things were changing-- the group of people were not quite the same. I can't quite remember junior high school too much.

BP: When you say things were changing, what do mean, what was changing?

JC: The way people behaved, the things that they did, I didn't feel as safe and secure as I did when I was younger. You know how the difference between years ago how it was and now with the gangs and stuff, it was that sort of difference.

BP: So more gangs started to form?

JC: Well not at that point, not gangs but the people were not as nice I would say as they were in my younger days.

BP: Do any example stick out your mind, examples of people not being as nice?

JC: Not in particular.

BP: But you just noticed the difference?

JC: Yeah. And maybe it was because the different crowds of people from the area.

Because I remember that there was like down the lane from the projects, we called it down the lane. Featherbed Lane I guess it was.

BP: Featherbed Lane.

JC: Featherbed Lane, yeah, the people down there were kind of different I would say.

BP: Different how?

JC: They were-- how could I word it?

BP: You could just make it plain. There is no worry about wording it a certain way.

JC: Ok, they were just a little rowdy maybe I would say. And they kind of changed a little the safe haven I felt as I was going to elementary school. I don't want to say a difference between the whites and the blacks but basically I guess--

BP: So people that lived down the lane were predominately African American?

JC: Yeah

BP: Did they start moving into the projects?

JC: I don't think those people started--I don't know which people started moving into the projects. I mean I don't know where they came from, but I noticed that when I left in-- moved out 1968, I noticed that a lot of the white people were moving out to Co-op City.

BP: In '68?

JC: In 1968 yeah the white people were moving out to Co-op City and the blacks and the Hispanics were starting to move into the projects and that's when the projects started changing. That safe haven wasn't really the same anymore. I don't want it to sound like a racial thing but that was how it felt to me.

BP: Well I don't think for this history project it doesn't necessarily have to be a racial thing but you did notice just the change and how you felt in the neighborhood.

JC: Yeah, there was a difference.

BP: Was it because there was more of this rowdy type of behavior that you described?

JC: Yeah I believe so.

BP: Any examples of what made folks down the lane seem rowdy, come to mind? I mean were they fighting, were they playing their music loud, what was it that made them in your memory rowdy?

JC: They just said things I believed that weren't, to me--maybe they were drinking, smoking, drugs, I don't know, different things like that which I wasn't used to.

BP: When you were child, what was the adult presence like in the Sedgwick Projects?

JC: The adult presence was like, you knew to behave and not do anything wrong because any of the parents of the other kids would tell on you or would discipline you.

BP: Did that happen?

JC: Well, not to me because I was good [laughter]. But they would watch us like they were our parents the other parents would watch the kids of friends like they were their parents.

BP: You know one of the other interviews I did with one of your friends, I can't remember if it was Ms. Lawrence or Ms. Rooks, she said that she remembered the housing security guards, the housing police--

JC: Oh yeah that's right. The porters, I think they were porters; they took care of the buildings.

BP: Yeah people who took care of the buildings, but she also said that there were security guards who were very like sergeant parents for young folks.

JC: I don't remember security guards, all I remember were the porters that would take care of the buildings and they would actually, if you were in the hallways they would make you get out of the hallways and go outside or if you were doing something to mess up the property they would be there to let you know that. But I don't remember any security guards, I don't remember that.

BP: Well it sounds like you're describing the same thing though.

JC: I remembered that we called them the porters and they were certain ones assigned to each building. Sometimes you know, it's so far back you don't remember things until somebody mentions it.

BP: Yeah. Well its forty years ago.

JC: Yeah.

BP: Where did you move when you moved out of Sedgwick?

JC: We moved up to the North Bronx, which was like 241st Street, which was actually maybe six blocks or something from Co-op City where the other people in the projects had moved to. But they moved into Co-op City, we moved into a house.

BP: Oh, ok. So your parents brought their own home?

JC: Yeah.

BP: Do you remember what neighborhood that was?

JC: Hmm-- I don't know what it was called-- I don't know what the area-- what they called it. I know it was two blocks from Westchester county Mount Vernon.

BP: Oh ok. And the exact street was?

JC: We moved to Pitman Avenue.

BP: Pitman Avenue near Co-op City.

JC: Yeah. I mean you could walk there. It's a little walk but you could walk there.

BP: And what was that neighborhood like, who lived there, and did you have any memories of that neighborhood?

JC: I remember it was boring, I felt like I was living in the country. [laughter] There were no people, I mean young people. There were hardly any young people that I became friends with. There might have been a few but it wasn't like being in the projects where everybody is right there. I didn't like it.

BP: Where did you attend school when you moved?

JC: At that point I was going into high school so I went to Evander Childs High School.

BP: And what was that like?

JC: Um--

BP: Was that a predominately African American school, was it mixed, or did you have--

JC: I think it was mixed. It was pretty much mixed, blacks, whites, Puerto Ricans.

BP: What were the relationships like between the kids, the young people at that school?

JC: I guess they were, relationships were pretty much like, hmm--I have to think.

Because I didn't attach to too many people and at that point I was wearing a brace on my back because I had scoliosis.

BP: Oh.

JC: So I was sort of like to myself, I didn't deal with too many people.

BP: Did you stay in touch with your girlfriends from Sedgwick?

JC: Oh yes, always.

BP: So you guys formed a pretty tight group.

JC: Right because we still talk to each other, we see each other, matter of fact I just saw them this year, I went to New York.

BP: Wow. That's rare.

JC: Yeah.

BP: So in high school, did you go to high school with any of them?

JC: No, because we had to go to different high schools because of the area that we lived in.

BP: Wow.

JC: But they went to--people from the projects went to, most of them went to Taft High School. And that was where I had wanted to go but it was too far away so I had to go to Evander High School which--I wasn't too happy with that school, I just wasn't happy personally, I don't know if it was because of the fact that I had the scoliosis and had to wear the brace or--

BP: When did you find out that you had that?

JC: Scoliosis?

BP: Yes.

JC: When I was shopping to get a graduation outfit, graduating from junior high school and then my mother noticed it.

BP: Oh. Did that prevent you from playing certain games and things like that?

JC: Yeah, it prevented me from doing a lot of things.

BP: Wow, I didn't know that, I guess I wasn't--

JC: Yeah that was kind of a hard time in my life you know you are dealing with being a teenager and you have to wear this thing and people starring at you, it was really hard. That wasn't a happy time at all.

BP: No, and that happened just when you started high school?

JC: Yes, I was wearing the braces in high school?

BP: Did your parents go to church when you were growing up?

JC: Yeah. We went to church in the projects, Featherbed Lane Presbyterian.

BP: What was that church like?

JC: That was a wonderful church, it was like a family church, we enjoyed going there, we had our programs when we were young, we would have church picnics you know it was a family church.

BP: So you have a lot of fond memories of there were children and--was it predominately African American?

JC: You know--I can't quite remember. I think it might have been mixed in the beginning and as time went by it might have been more African American, because I remember

when we started going the pastor there, he was white, I don't remember the one after that, then I know that the third one was African American. I can't quite remember the membership, I just remember going to Sunday school and enjoying it and it was just like a family church.

BP: Sure, sure. So how long did you live in the Bronx after you moved out of Sedgwick? And the new neighborhood that you moved into was it predominately white or African American, or mixed?

JC: I believe at that time it was predominately white. There were few African Americans.

BP: Were your parents friendly with any of their neighbors, were there any other young people, I know you said that it was boring, but were there any young people in your neighborhood that you were friends with or became friends with?

JC: There was one girl that I was friends with but we didn't really see too much of each other. And then there was a--when I got a little older a Puerto Rican girlfriend that moved in and we became good friends and then after a year or two she moved out, she moved to Connecticut. But, there weren't too many friends up there that I can recall.

BP: So there just weren't many young people at all?

JC: No.

BP: So how long did you live in the Bronx afterwards?

JC: I left New York in 197--I graduated in '72 so I left in March of '73 and moved to L.A.

BP: You moved to L.A. upon graduating from--

JC: Well I worked for maybe nine months and then I moved to L.A. Only because my sister had moved to L.A. in 1968 and I used to come out to L.A. to visit and I liked it. So

when I finished high school and worked for a little bit and made a little money to pack up and leave, then I was gone.

BP: Right. So did you notice when you were living in the area near Co-op City was the Bronx changing at that time?

JC: That part of the Bronx or---

BP: Well both that part of the Bronx and the part where you had grown up.

JC: Well I know where I had grown up was really changing and where I was not particularly in that area that I was but down before you get to Co-op City there were some projects, Edenwald Projects. And I think that was predominately African American there and I'm trying to think--I'm a little confused--it might have changed a little but basically it was still the same to me, I don't see a great amount of people moving in and out there at that time.

BP: Right. The area where you had left though was changing?

JC: Yes, that was definitely changing.

BP: How so?

JC: Well, I mean as far as the people, when I was growing up there, it was basically predominately Jewish people and right before I moved out, like I said the Jewish people were moving to Co-op City and the Black people were moving in, and it just didn't seem the same. We used to have milk machines on our porches and stuff and then they had to get rid of the machines because people were breaking into the machines and trying to steal the money and stuff and so things were changing.

BP: Right. Did your parents, did they remain in the Bronx, after you and your sister had moved to L.A.?

JC: Yeah, they remained there for several years, I guess until my mother retired.

BP: Any other memories about the Bronx that sticks out?

JC: Well I remember how we used to walk across the bridge and go to Highbridge Pool and go swimming and that was an enjoyable time.

BP: Where was Highbridge Pool?

JC: Highbridge Pool was across the bridge, I think [inaudible] considered Manhattan, 181st Street, it was like going towards the George Washington Bridge, which took to Jersey. It was before---you would get there and then you would go to the left, I don't know which direction it was, east, north, south,...I don't know. But it was, maybe a few blocks down from the George Washington Bridge. The little bridge near the projects was called the Washington Bridge I believe and the big bridge was the George Washington Bridge and every summer we would go over there and just swim and have fun. And I remember to in the projects we had the fire hydrants they would come, I guess the porters or the fire department, they used to put the little thing on the fire hydrant with the little hole and just let the water come out, and it was like the sprinklers or something and we would put on our swim suits and go out there in the sprinklers and play and then what they would do is they would take it off and let the water fly out and we used to call that the floods. [laughter] And then we used to--I am trying to think--It was such a good time, there were so many things that we used to do. You know we would go to other friends' houses and spend the night and we would be out playing in the summer time and then it was time for us to come in and we would holler out the window "mom, mom!" How would she know who was calling because everybody is a mom and we would just holler

at the window and they would come to the window and we would ask can we stay out till
so and so and they wouldn't worry about us.

BP: So for the most part you would say that you had a very good experience growing up
in the Bronx?

JC: Wonderful.

BP: The schools, the neighborhood.

JC: Yes, it was the greatest thing. I would say that that was the greatest part of my life.

BP: Wow. Ms. Colley I want to thank you very much, this is a wonderful, wonderful,
interview, and I really appreciated it.

JC: Well I hope it was somewhat helpful.

BP: Yes it was. If you have any other memories that you might want to share please feel
free to give me a call.

JC: Oh, I will.

BP: And I will send you a copy of this transcript if you would like after we do it. I am
going to turn the tape off now.

JC: Ok

BP: I am going to turn the tape off now. Thank you again.

JC: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]