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Transcriber: Akeim Samuels

Mark Naison (MN): Jessie Davidson, a long time Bronx activist in Civil Rights, politics, and community affairs, here to talk about his recollections of his activities in the Bronx. Start with your youth. What year were you born?

Jessie Davidson (JD): Well, I was born in 1925. I remember distinctly that I was there.

MN: And where in the Bronx did you live in your earliest years?

JD: Well, I don't, I can't tell you from memory where I did. But I grew up on Hoe Avenue.

MN: On Hoe Avenue.

JD: That's just south of 167th Street.

MN: And where did your parents come from originally?

JD: Alabama.

MN: Alabama?

JD: Central Alabama.

MN: Ok. Did they move to another part of New York before they moved to the Bronx, or directly from Alabama to the Bronx?

JD: No, no. They were in Harlem.

MN: Ok.

JD: Two or three addresses in Harlem, as I might recon. We moved to Williamsbridge at one time or another. I may not recall this in the proper sequence, but we lived back in the Morrisania area of the Bronx, two or three addresses there 166th Street, 167th Street. It's on the east side of Boston Road.

MN: Right. Now, how did your family find the Bronx? You said that you were born in 1925, which at that time the Bronx had no more than probably 20,000 Black residents. How did your family find the Bronx?

JD: I have no idea. But if - -

MN: Right. What sort of work did your father do when you were growing up?

JD: To feed his five children, he worked in a post office.

MN: Oh, he was a postal worker. And were many other people that you knew, the families in that community, postal employees? Was that a common occupation?

JD: I'd say the term that we used later on was upward bound. I'd hate to use that kind of term, survivors is a better term to me. You had quite a few in the post office. I wouldn't say that that is the only position that blacks in that particular time survived on. You had quite a few in the City Department, depending on what department you were talking about. Some of the departments of course, of New York City, you couldn't touch.

MN: Right. Now, did your mother work when you were growing up, or was she a homemaker?

JD: No, no. A homemaker.

MN: Alright.

JD: Another term I don't like using.

MN: [Laughs] Now, what is your recollection of the ethnic mix of the neighborhoods you grew up in? Were they multiethnic, have a lot of different kinds of people? Or were they predominantly black?

JD: No, they were mixed. Absolutely mixed at that particular time. Now you're asking me now, for the old grey haired men I'd go back to when he was a little kid running through the streets, and some of my neighbors were wonderful people. When we lived in Williamsbridge, we got around very well. And of course, surrounding all of that would be items of an intense segregation, prejudice, hatred at best.

MN: So in other words, you would have these “islands” of racial harmony surrounded by highly segregated neighborhoods where African-Americans couldn’t move.

JD: Absolutely, yes.

MN: Was it unsafe to go into those neighborhoods? Or was it, were they tolerant for people, you know, walking through, but just impossible to rent in? Or was it dangerous to go there as well?

JD: Well, if you want to go back that far, you are talking about my young life again. My preteen life leading into my teenage life. For the sake of the policemen, I can tell you right now, they still leave a very bad feeling inside of me. And in those days, I couldn’t walk on the concourse, two or three of us together without a police car pulling up.

MN: Right, in other words, so you are saying, this is, let’s say in the 1930s, if there were two or three black youth walking along - -

JD: My memory can only take me back to the late 30s into the early 40s.

MN: Ok, late 30s early 40s, if there were more than one African-American walking on the Concourse, a police car was going to stop them.

JD: Absolutely, absolutely.

MN: And what would they say to you?

JD: Well, different approaches you would be called a corporate example. You would be called a corporate example by the time you got over to the car. The door would slip open and bang you right in your stomach. These were the tactics and the term “nigger” would come out of a policeman in a minute, callously and deliberately. And with two policemen with guns, pulling their guns when you haven’t even said anything yet.

MN: So, the kind of things that people are talking about today in incidents, you know, the Rodney King incident, those were things that happened fairly regularly.

JD: Oh yes, yes.

MN: So when you were growing up, you know, those - -

JD: We grew up in a society where we had no friends in the police department. If you needed a policeman, you needed to be very careful on whether you were going to call him or not.

MN: Wow. What was your school experience like?

JD: If there was any racial discuss or racial hate expressed there, I don't remember. My school experience, as far as I can remember for now, again I apologize I'm talking as an old man going back through a lot of years. My experience in school was wonderful.

MN: So you had teachers who were supportive and, you know, good teachers and - -

JD: Oh yes. I can't even remember the names, but some of, a couple of people who are in my age range right now can call off a teacher's name back that far. I can't call off the names, but I have distinct visions of faces in my memory of teachers I've had, and I'm talking about in elementary school now.

MN: Right, and the school, the classes were also multiracial in those schools?

JD: Yes, yes.

MN: What recollections do you have of the Bronx during the depression? Were you aware of the depression as a time of hardship for people? Or were you shielded from that by, you know, the fact - -

JD: I would not have described it as a hardship, but some of the signs were there. Need for people to eat, children badly dressed especially in the winter weather, I would, we used to walk, I have to laugh about it now because we used to say, "You want me to walk that far?" We used to walk from our house down to St. Ann's Avenue. We had milk distribution centers down there, I

believe. I remember there was a very cheap price for those who - - whatever the qualifications were.

MN: Right.

JD: But we would walk down and get shopping bags, and look on our way back home and things like that. In fact, welfare, I know our family fortunately by God's grace or however, we never had to draw on those. But we certainly we living among those who did; in my memory there was no feeling animosity or negative feelings about that. Just people who needed help.

MN: Now, did you ever see anyone be evicted, you know, families unable to pay the rent?

JD: Oh yes.

MN: And the furniture out - -

JD: Oh yes, in those days when you put the furniture on the sidewalk, it stays right there until they find someplace to live, you know, a place to live. The laws now have changed since that time, things have been changed.

MN: Right, but that was a sight that was fairly common in those days?

JD: Oh yes, yes.

MN: Were there areas where what today we call homeless people lived that you were aware of? I guess in those days they called them "Hooverilles". Were there - -

JD: I have not, that term is not familiar to me [Laughs].

Mark Smith (MS): "Shanties".

JD: The term "shanty" I would say is a familiar term. But for me to identify in a social sense I couldn't.

MN: Right. So, you know, there were people who got, you know, there were places where you could get extra food when you needed it. And there were evictions, and - -

JD: Where you lived, that was [Inaudible]. Whether the government stepped in or not I have no idea. To this day even in all my studies in social aspects over the years, I have no idea what happened to them.

MN: Were you aware of families doubling up and having to take in relatives?

JD: Oh yes.

MN: And that was, did your family end up taking in people from, you know, relatives?

JD: No, they had five boys, uh four boys and a girl they had to take care of [Laughs]. There was no room.

MN: Now, did your family live in apartments or private homes most of the time?

JD: We lived in apartments until my parents bought a house on Linden Avenue.

MN: Ok. Now, what church or churches did your family attend?

JD: Oh, I have a whole list of churches, for me personally. But primarily, at that particular time, there was a community gospel church that I, as a little kid, used to go to. I still remember we used to question the deeds and the words of God, and be chastised every step of the way. But as we grew up heading towards a teenage life and into teenage life right into adulthood, St. Augustine Presbyterian church was the primary church that the family was centered on.

MN: Right, and they had a very famous minister.

JD: Elder Hawkins. Elder G. Hawkins.

MN: A number of people have mentioned him as a very powerful presence in the community.

JD: Well, he became president of the National, what is it, the National Council of Churches.

MN: Oh, Ok.

JD: So that gave him national notoriety, not notoriety, I forgot the word. But he became known pretty much because he was the first black [Inaudible].

MN: Right. Now, a full gospel assembly is sort of a more fundamentalist kind of church?

JD: Yes, yes.

MN: Now was this in a church building or in a storefront?

JD: Storefront.

MN: And was this, did you go there because - -

JD: It wasn't a storefront actually, it was just a storage building on Prospect Avenue.

MN: Right, it was on Prospect Avenue. Prospect between where and where?

JD: That was between, I believe, 167th Street and 166th Street over to Holmes Street. Very, very vibrant.

MN: And was there, you know, some people say that in African-American communities there was like, almost like a class structure in terms of which church people attended with, you know, Congregational or Episcopalian churches tending to have the more educated population. And the storefront church - -

JD: I'd say yes.

MN: So that was the case.

JD: I think so.

MN: To some degree. But your father was a postal worker, you would have thought he would have been more in the upper crust.

JD: Well, I'm going to be very prejudiced about it, I think I am still very prejudiced about it, I think that he covered all fronts.

MN: Oh ok. Was your family still moving back and forth between Alabama? Or once they left that was it, they weren't going back.

JD: Oh no, once they left they were out of there.

MN: Ok.

JD: I mean as the home site, it is still down there and the roads, some roads are still there. But for them and the family to go back down to live, that never happened.

MN: Now, did you grow up with stories your parents told about what life was like in Alabama? Was this something, you know, in terms of segregation and lynching and those sorts of things?

JD: Yes, yes.

MN: That was part of your family's, you know, culture - -

JD: If they didn't tell us about it, then the literature was there available to us in the household.

MN: Ok. Now, were your parents politically active?

JD: Absolutely.

MN: What were some of the organizations that they were involved in?

JD: They were Republican. My mother and father believed very strongly in the terms of the previous election. And they could not understand how anybody who was black; negro at the time you called them, African-American you call them now; but there was no way they could understand how anybody could come out of the solid Democratic south, come to New York, and join the Democratic Part when you had a clear option.

MN: Was there, were there Republican clubs in the communities where your family was located? Or did they have to - -

JD: Oh well we lived in [Inaudible]. I mean, I was at the Lincoln Republican Club that was the old 6th Assembly District.

MN: Ok, it was called the Lincoln Republican Club.

JD: Lincoln Republican Club, right.

MN: And do you remember what street it was located on?

JD: Yes, Franklin Avenue. It was – yes, Franklin Avenue.

MN: Do you know if that club is still is existence?

JD: I have no idea.

MN: Right, now you mentioned that your father was one of the founders of the Bronx branch of the NAACP.

JD: Yes.

MN: What were the circumstances that led him to help create that branch?

JD: Well pretty much the thing we are talking about is a need. The increasing need for education, as blacks were beginning to move more and more into the neighborhood, the education needs became even greater. And as I'm talking now, including the years of the second World War, 1940s.

MN: Right.

JD: And after that, when we came out of the Wars, you'd see the productivity going down.

MN: Oh. So in other words, as the neighborhood became more African-American, you could see the school quality go down.

JD: Absolutely, no question.

MN: And so that was one of the major issues that prompted the formation of the branch?

JD: Right, that and employment. Employment was atrocious. You had no job anywhere and any [Inaudible].

MN: Right. So in other words, there were like, you know, this was a time, I guess, when the economy was finally reviving after the depression.

JD: It was lively.

MN: And black people couldn't get jobs in a lot of the industries and stores opening up.

JD: That's right, yes. Extremely - -

MN: Do you, you know, when you are creating a new organization you need, you usually need a place to meet. Do you recall if this organization was created in your parents' living room? Did they use a church?

JD: Yes, yes.

MN: Both [Laughs]. Which church was involved?

JD: The cooperation in the neighborhood, I could even remember when from childhood, being in a teenage life, to after World War II, the cooperation was tremendous.

MN: So a lot of people - -

JD: There were some problems; naturally of course with humans they are going to have problems between themselves. But generally speaking, I remember distinctly that the cooperation was there.

MN: Now when your father organized a branch, was he in the post office? Was he working in the post office at that time?

JD: Oh, he was in the post office, putting out a newspaper, and involved in everything else also.

MN: Oh, he, what newspaper did he put out?

JD: It was Listener News, he had Listener News.

MN: It was called Listener News.

JD: Listener News, yes.

MN: Do you have any copies of this?

JD: I'm scared to touch them.

MN: But you have them?

JD: I still have two of them, yes.

MN: Those are very precious documents; there are ways of preserving documents.

JD: Well if they can be preserved now, I am scared to even pick them up or try to - -

MN: Oh Ok, you want me to have the Bronx Historical Society come pick them up and preserve them?

JD: Yes.

MN: Ok.

JD: If it can be done.

MN: They know how to do it; they have equipment to do this. It's called the Lis - - how do you spell it?

JD: Listener. L-I-, Listener.

MN: Listener. Oh Ok, Listener News. Ok. Remember, I am becoming a senior citizen also [Laughter]. So you're father was a member of the post office, worked for the post office, and put out a newspaper called the Listener News. Was this mostly for people in the neighborhood, or for other postal workers?

JD: No, no this was for the neighborhood.

MN: And - -

JD: The entire south and central Bronx neighborhoods, where you had colonies of, and pardon my expression, but we had colonies of blacks around. St. Paul's place was a large African-American territory there, that is, all the apartments were bought by African-Americans. But we had a big police fight one time; it was down on 161st Street, 162nd Street, and 3rd Avenue.

MN: Right.

JD: Down around there.

MN: That was in the newspapers, there was a big police raid.

JD: Absolutely, yes.

MN: See now, that I actually saw a record of. And so this Listener News, how, where did he print it?

JD: In Lower Manhattan at, what is that - - down at - -

MN: So he had a printing plant put it out.

JD: Right, yes yes he hired a printing plant, not his personally.

MN: Now, who bought the paper? Was it sold at candy stores? Was it sold at churches? This is fascinating this - -

JD: Yes, yes it was.

MN: All the questions. Do you know what its circulation was?

JD: Oh, I don't even remember.

MN: Ok. Well you know, again we will take these issues and preserve them. Because this is again, you know, if you want to find out what happens in a neighborhood, a newspaper, a community newspaper is an incredible resource. Was there advertising in the newspaper?

JD: Yes, yes.

MN: So you know, local stores and advertisers, and the churches, and all that. What else did he do, other than being a postal worker, and putting out a community newspaper, and being in the Lincoln Republican Club, and founding the NAACP? [Laughter] Did he also jump tall buildings in a single bound? [Laughter] Were there any other activities or - - so he was somebody who you would say was the pulse of the community?

JD: Yes, absolutely.

MN: Were there any other significant individuals you remember, you know, by name, who helped create this chapter? You know, who were very important to it.

JD: Oh, I'd have to go back and dig those names out. As a matter of fact, one or two of them are still alive and still active out there right now.

MN: And did they, when they opened the first NAACP, was it a storefront? Was it in an office, or on like the second floor in somebody's house?

JD: I mean, it was more strictly around homes. They would share the homes.

MN: Ok, so it was, you know, you didn't have like an office with a secretary.

JD: No, no.

MN: It was like a chapter that met in peoples home.

JD: Community people joining together to form a group.

MN: Right, ok.

JD: It is not about, that came out of, I remember distinctly, the Henry Otaner League, we had on Union Avenue. My mother pretty much ran that on Union Avenue at [Inaudible].

MN: Now what was the Henry Otaner League? What was that organization?

JD: That was uh, I can't remember that because we got involved as a force. We, it was heavily designed for youngsters.

MN: Oh, this was a youth program to help neighborhood youth.

JD: It was an adult program, but it had youth components to it, that was pretty much the concentration.

MN: Now what was the, what were the adults concerned with, you know, what were their issues?

JD: Well, that is what I'm saying, you know, young people on the streets were primarily school issues. And of course back to the social issues, as a community became more and more whites moved away, and more blacks moved in, and it became a very social problem. It was about

joining together different levels of age, to meet and talk about the problems in the community and do something about them.

MN: Right, now what high school did you attend?

JD: Morris High School

MN: Ok, what was Morris High School like when you were there? Your recollections - -

JD: I have memories of a wonderful place as far as I am concerned. I loved it.

MN: You loved Morris High School.

JD: Absolutely.

MN: What were the things about it that you enjoyed most?

JD: Oh, their athletic teams were very exciting now, but they couldn't, they couldn't beat anybody. [Laughter] We'd never win, but we were the hardest fighters on ball fields. Talk about baseball, softball, or anything else, basketball also. That with the teachers, the teachers were very cooperative. Here again, I don't know what, I think my mother became - - yes, she was one of the first community people of the new generation to become president of the Parents Association. Because, and some of the conflicts, racial conflicts that were still hanging on in the schools.

MN: So there were, every once in a while, racial tensions that would crop up in the school?

JD: Yes, yes.

MN: Did you experience any of this personally?

JD: I didn't, if I did I wouldn't even know it.

MS: In high school, I know that in the sixties they used to have Doo Wop groups that sang, and a lot of groups, you know, came out of high school. What happened in the forties when you were in high school? What kind of music was - -

JD: Well - - at '44 there was no such thing as Doo Wop then.

MS: Yes, but what kind of music did you listen to? You know - -

JD: Many types, uh swing.

MS: Swing, ok.

MN: So, what were some of the popular bands at that time?

JD: Oh, Count Basie, Timmie Dorsey, I don't know. If you want me to dig deep, I got a whole bunch: Bennie Goodman, you know, who was that great guy?

MN: Duke Ellington?

JD: Duke Ellington.

MN: Um, so it was - -

JD: And interestingly, though the music in high school, I was in the Glee Club in high school.

As a matter of fact, I was in the Glee Club in the school before then also, when I went to P.S. 51

Junior high school that is torn down now. But the music [Inaudible] was not socially restricted.

We'd sing what was called Negro spirituals, as quickly as we would sing something out of a

Bach oratorium.

MN: Right so it was very, I guess you would say, eclectic the tastes.

JD: Yes.

MN: Were you, was your family a Paul, or very aware of Paul Robeson as an artist?

JD: Yes.

MN: Did they have Paul Robeson records in the house?

JD: Absolutely, old records.

MN: Do you ever recall him performing in the Bronx, in that area? In your - -

JD: If he did, I don't remember.

MN: Other than the Glee Club, what other activities were you involved in at high school?

JD: There was this fella, what was his name? - - he lived next door to us on 6th Street. Well, skip that I can't really think of him now.

MN: Were you in any other activity in high school other than the Glee Club, extra-curricular, or any other clubs or organizations? You mentioned the track team?

JD: Yes, yes. That was uh, we didn't have such a great track team, but I worked out with them. I never got into any competition with them, intramural competition with them.

MN: Right.

MS: It sounds like you guys weren't very athletic, so did you guys have high academic standards at Morris High School?

JD: Well the academics, back then, were the key idea. I mean, that was the lead purpose of being in the school. I don't remember if Morris High School ever really had a, I mean you know, a sports hero that you would find in Dewood Clinton, for example. They've always had a reputation for that, uh, these are the fellas that everybody knew throughout the city. We never, you'd talk about Morris High School and athletes, and everybody would laugh.

MS: Now did you guys go to college after high school, or did you get a trade or go into the work force?

JD: In the social crowd that I hung out with, most of them went to college.

MN: Now did you go to college in the south, or did you go to college in New York?

JD: I personally, oh yes.

MN: Because uh, did you go to a traditionally black college?

JD: Yes.

MN: And which one was that?

JD: That was Howard University.

MN: Howard, ok. Was that the most difficult of the colleges to get into, of the traditionally black colleges?

JD: I found it easy.

MN: You found it easy?

JD: I had no problems. I have to laugh about it a little bit. I went to see, I went to Hunter College first. I was going to the after school, one of the first men who went to Hunter College. From there I went to CCNY, then I went to Howard, then I went to New York University.

MN: So you went to four different colleges?

JD: Yes.

MN: Which did you - -

JD: I had no problem getting in.

MN: And which, so you said, after Hunter and City, Howard was relatively easy?

JD: Yes.

MN: Now did you go to the Lehman College that was, the Hunter College in the Bronx, which is now Lehman?

JD: No, no.

MN: You went to the one in - -

JD: 68th.

MN: 68th Street. Now when you were an adolescent, were there gangs in the Bronx? Was that an issue?

JD: Uh, yes. I had mine, that was a joke too. We were called the Bronx Leopards. You call it a [Inaudible] but you know young men at, I guess the same thing goes on now. What, all the young men had something like that; some group like that, a social group.

MN: So it was like a social club and it was called the Bronx Leopards?

JD: That was ours, yes.

MN: Did you have, like, leopard-like, do leopards have stripes no dots right? You had an outfit that looked like a leopard outfit?

JD: Right, not a tiger.

MN: Yes, not a tiger. [Laughter] Now, what did you do if you met another group in the street?

JD: There were conflicts from time to time, there was no question about that. You had your fistfights, and every once-in-a-while somebody would get cut. But those were horrible experiences, I guess, to the mommies and daddies around. But I don't think it was anywhere near what it is right now.

MN: Right, now were these, like gangs or social clubs largely organized by race or ethnicity?

JD: Yes.

MN: Ok, so the Leopards was a black group?

JD: Absolutely.

MN: And what was the, if you were going to quote, I don't know what you would call it- "rumble", or "fight with". What were some of the white groups that you would tangle with at that time?

JD: I couldn't call it off by name, but they were there.

MN: They were there. Were there any Puerto Ricans living in the neighborhood at that particular - -

JD: Very few, very few.

MN: So it was mostly a black-white neighborhood?

JD: Absolutely, yes.

MN: And what was the ethnicity of the whites in the area? What were their nationalities?

JD: In the area that I lived in, Prospect Avenue from Boston Road, Boston Road was pretty much as I remember, predominantly Irish. You had other Irish neighborhoods around in enclaves, and you had large areas of Jewish people. When you talk about European Jews and Eastern European Jewish, I couldn't decipher. But they were predominant throughout the Bronx.

MN: When you were, you talk about Lindy Hopping, did you and your friends go to like dances, you know, at big places like ballrooms?

JD: Of course.

MN: And where were the major places you went to dance and listen to music? Were they mostly in Harlem?

JD: Harlem, Harlem.

MN: So, Harlem is where you went for entertainment?

JD: That's right, yes. Well, there's a little bit of entertainment in the Bronx, but it was nowhere near - -

MN: Nowhere near.

JD: The stature and the notoriety that you had in Harlem.

MN: Ok, what were the major places you went to in Harlem?

JD: The Savoy Ballroom had national fame. The place called the Rockland Palace, I can't even recall quite a few. Along Boston Road when, in the '60s and '70s, you had quite a number of black-owned entertainment places.

MN: Do you remember the names of some of those black-owned entertainment places in the '60s and '70s?

JD: There was Goodson's on Boston Road and 169th Street.

MN: Goodson's, ok.

JD: But that particular corner was for entertainment itself, you had a dance hall. You had a big dancehall on the second floor right across, just above 167th Street.

MN: And what was the dancehall called?

JD: McKinley's, McKinley's.

MN: McKinley.

JD: That was McKinley Square itself.

MN: And the dancehall was called McKinley's?

JD: I believe it was called McKinley's, yes.

MN: Right, do you remember Sylvia's Blue Morocco?

JD: Absolutely, no question. Yes.

MN: And Club 845?

JD: 845, absolutely, yes. One of a personal relationship there.

MN: Yes. What was that? Between you and who?

JD: Well pretty much, well I don't want to mention names, but the brothers who owned the 845 pretty much were, you know, had involved themselves in the communities, in a community life.

And we knew them, they knew us personally anyway.

MN: Right.

JD: They were somewhat, I would even call them our mentors.

MN: Oh, ok. So, they were an important influence in the community, the people who owned the Club 845?

JD: Right, yes yes. Up the block from there on Prospect you had another place the um, Rainbow.

MN: The Rainbow.

JD: It was a bar with a cafeteria-type thing on the side. Even at a young age-young adult age, that was the place where we went and felt safe.

MN: Now, you know that is quite a few places in one area. And one person who we interviewed, Ronald Davis, referred to Morrisania in the '60s as the Harlem of the Bronx. Do you think that is a fair characteristic?

JD: I think yes.

MN: So by the 196 - -

JD: In terms of the population, a population of all levels of income and educational levels. And it was no question about it that it was pretty much all African-American.

MN: Now, after you graduated from college, what was, you know, your first job in, that you did when you had a college degree?

JD: I don't even remember.

MN: You mentioned at one point you were in the post office. Was that after that, or you know, did you do other things?

JD: Before I went to the war, after I came out of the war, and then many years later when I had a young family growing up. I didn't get married until I was in my forties, and somewhat hard times hit me somewhere in the late '70s. So I went back in the post office, [Inaudible] my children and my wife were taken care of.

MN: Right, now in the '50s were you, did you follow in your father's footsteps and become politically active?

JD: You couldn't hold me back.

MN: What were some of the things that you did? This is after, you know, World War II, so what were some of the issues that you became involved in and causes you became involved in?

JD: Well, I would say that education, particularly elementary school education, was a very serious issue with me all my life. As a matter of fact, my younger daughter, I took her out of the public school system because I said that she was somewhat shy, and some teachers felt that that was a disease or something. And I put her in only Catholic schools, and most of her education came out of only Catholic schools because of the same thing.

MN: So when - -

JD: But we certainly, as a matter of fact one time we did take in foster children. And that became a battle; the schools were rejecting these children. No, there is no child that is of school age that was going to stay in our household and could not go to school.

MN: So you became very aware that the schools which you had remembered as a child were excellent became, you know, places where a lot of bad things were happening?

JD: Oh yes, yes.

MN: What about the job situation? By the '50s did the job situation improve for the black community?

JD: I don't think so.

MN: There was still, you know, pretty heavy levels of job discrimination?

JD: Yes. Remember now, we came out of, we had just come out of, within 10 years we had just come out of one of the greatest conflict the human race has ever seen in World War II. And most of us were still struggling around trying to find a career, trying to find jobs and such.

MN: Do you recall any demonstrations against, you know, factories or businesses that discriminated?

JD: Yes, yes. We created; we brought it to their doorsteps, through using the NAACP. We pretty much closed down the Hub, the 149th Street, the biggest commercial territory in there. The main thrust was against the two big ones, Hearn's Department Store they had a big store there, and Sears Roebuck. No blacks would be hired in those stores, you know, even as a floor sweeper.

MN: And this was in what years, late '40s, early '50s?

JD: '50s.

MN: In the '50s.

JD: I would put them somewhere in the middle '50s.

MN: So it's Hearn's and Sears Roebuck.

JD: Those were the main stores we didn't discriminate; none of them were any good.

MN: Right.

JD: I mean, as far as hiring was concerned.

MN: Right, so the Hub became a point of concentration for those demonstrations in the '50s?

JD: Oh yes, yes.

MN: And these were led by the NAACP?

JD: And those associated around us.

MN: And around you who were, you know, which cut into churches and other organizations?

JD: Right.

MN: Now, at one point there was a fairly strong Communist Party organization in the Bronx. Do you recall them being active at all in any of these causes?

JD: Sure.

MN: In what neighborhoods were they - -

JD: Oh, well they were there and in force, there is no question about that. And as a matter of fact, some of them are my very good friends. Um, and emotionally, we had a common cause together and the cause overrode any other kind of decisive. And who was the senator at that particular time, one who didn't want anybody to identify with Communism or anything.

MN: McCarthy.

JD: McCarthy, Senator McCarthy, we'd laugh at that.

MN: So there was, you know, there was no problem with Democrats, Republicans, Communists, all uniting to fight discrimination?

JD: They did, some difficulties, of course.

MN: Ok, um - -

JD: I remember I went to see my father [Inaudible] because before the Second World War came out, you had to [Inaudible] 'cause a depicted movie, Birth of a Nation, came out. And we had a theater, I forgot the name of the theater now, but on Westchester Avenue down in - -

MN: Was it Birth of a Nation or Gone with the Wind?

JD: Birth of a Nation.

MN: Ok, because that was, so they were trying to show Birth of a Nation?

JD: Yes.

MN: In 1940?!

JD: Yes. And my father was one of those that took the leadership to close it down. But when there was a lack of support from some of the other leaders in the neighborhood he got the Communist to come in there with him. And I think it was a wonderful thing back, we laugh about it now because we got Republicans and Communists joining together now.

MN: So you had the Lincoln Republican Club and the Communists working together to picket - -

JD: To correct a social wrong.

MN: Right. Um - -

JD: Whatever political beliefs came out of the parade it didn't even matter.

MN: Now, you'd mentioned before getting involved, that there was this tremendous, so you have issues regarding education in which you mentioned the schools. You had issues regarding employment and you mentioned this whole set of demonstrations. The issues regarding police, and police brutality, and police [Inaudible]. And then there are issues regarding housing. When do you first recall getting involved in campaigns against discrimination in housing? Was that in the '50s or the '60s?

JD: I'd put it in the '50s. The '50s seemed to be that period of time when I'd say you had a lot of people, thousands of young men coming back out of the military services. When did the war end? 194 - -

MN: '45.

JD: 1945.

MN: '46 they're coming back.

JD: That's right, and I know how I felt, these many decades later I still feel a stronger anger about what, we had a segregated army. Whites and Blacks couldn't kill together. Whites had to

kill their people, and we had to kill our people, and that's the way we killed. And we were coming back with a clear intention of ending this kind of America. It was necessary that the rebirth of a nation during and after the Civil War, we really felt spiritually that we were going to recreate that kind of atmosphere. So these things had to come about. You couldn't bring that many soldiers back here, fighting in a segregated army come back into a segregated America and accept it.

MN: Yes, so you had a whole generation of people, many of whom were educated, who were not going to accept segregated America?

JD: Right. And in their twenties and thirties, they are becoming now the daddies of kids who were growing up right behind them.

MN: Right, um, and were - -

JD: I ma not leaving out the women, of course, but that was a man's army. And the women were the - -

MN: Now, where were you living in the fifties? Were you living in Williamsbridge?

JD: No, no on Union Avenue.

MN: On Union Avenue, this is in your family's home?

JD: Yes, we had, our family had twenty-five thirty years on Union Avenue, so we grew up in the neighborhood.

MN: Union Avenue between where and where?

JD: 167th Street and Holmes Street. As a batter of fact, the Davidson is right there, is there now on that property, named after my father.

MN: Right, it was named after you father?!

JD: Yes.

MN: And it's called the Davidson Houses on what street?

JD: On, well that is between Prospect Avenue and Holmes Street, between Prospect Avenue and Union Avenue.

MN: Ok, now is this, this is when, when was this development built?

JD: I don't know, it had to be somewhere back in the seventies, sixties, late sixties.

MN: Is this public housing or is it a community-built housing development?

JD: Housing Authority. It was senior housing, specifically senior housing, under the New York City Housing Authority.

MN: We have to drive by there and take some pictures of that. And it is named after your father?

JD: Yes.

MN: Wow. Ok.

JD: I'm sorry, I take that for granted. [Laughter] Doesn't everybody know?

MN: Ok, uh, so he was clearly a legendary figure in this neighborhood. Did he live there all his life in that house? Did they move out?

JD: No, no. The house that we lived in, the Davidson House, took that place. We couldn't stop the moving to come, at that time they had a policy of the easily accessible land. Union Avenue was a road dilapidated with half-unused commercial outlets.

MN: So at that time, the section of Union was deteriorating?

JD: Yes, yes.

MN: And so they took the whole block, including your family's house?

JD: Right.

MN: And so where did everyone move to?

JD: Everywhere. [Laughter] There is a lot of economics behind that also. Because the private houses which were the main housing in there were unput. We found out that most of the private housing was not actually owned by the blacks who were living there those years. So that made it easy for the Housing Authority to move in. These were the days of the mortal season. There was quite a bit of mortal season when you're trying to develop neighbors, we thought that wherever the African-American families lived that it should not be an area except that they should have rights to move back in. That concept came out of Adam Clayton Powell Jr. in Harlem; it didn't work in the Bronx.

MS: Could you give us an idea of how the atmosphere was when all of these social and political groups were coming up such as the UNIA with Garvey and, you know, the Nation of Islam coming up with Malcolm X and seeing the Civil Rights Movement, you know, progress with Martin Luther King. What was the atmosphere in New York that you saw, you know, in the '60s, you know, late '50s, '60s, going on after that? And how did you participate in it if at all?

JD: Well, UNIA I'll take that separately now, because that came some years before.

MN: Yes, that was earlier.

JD: There is a lot of confusion, I don't want to be the historian here, but there was a lot of confusion about that and what period he latched into. There wasn't very much of an African-American across America to latch on to, so when Garvey came in and began to publicize that, that was it. Something like the Martin Luther King movement some a whole generation, two generations later.

MN: So, there wasn't much, so in the '50s, there wasn't much of a nationalist presence in the Bronx.

JD: That's right. That had to come.

MN: It was mostly the NAACP, the Urban League, the churches, and the political clubs doing all of this.

JD: Right.

MN: And with a little bit of the Communist Party.

JD: And I don't want to steer about that , don't add the political clubs in too tough either.

MN: Oh, the political clubs didn't do too much?

JD: I don't think, to this day, I don't think they did that much and they compromised everything else.

MN: Now, what about, you know, again the Civil Rights Movement and picking up momentum in the South. How did that translate into the Bronx? Or did you have your own Civil Rights movement even before then? So this was, you know, you were already fighting those battles?

JD: Again, you are asking me to be a historian of it, I'm not sure if I am able to do that. But my feeling is that they were both moving at the same pace anyway. I made several trips down to Alabama at that particular time. I was amazed what was being preached across the folks down there about false gods, the love of gold, and things like that. Just specifically gearing people's minds up to move against the segregated atmosphere down there. And there is no question about it, I mean for me, a New Yorker, coming down there, I could see the drastic difference in the lives. If I told them I went to my white sort of friend, I must go to his back door and knock on his door so I don't be seen publicly knocking on his front door.

MN: When you were doing all of these things in the '50s and '60s, were you optimistic about the future? Did you think that like that all of these battles were going to make things a lot better? Or did you sense that something was - -

JD: If there was any disillusion, it's now. At that particular time I, me personally, I believed I represented I think a lot of young African-Americans. The world was there to be conquered and I could do it.

MN: So you had no, you know, this was your time, your opportunity?

JD: Absolutely.

MN: How did you become involved with - -

JD: The only question was whether I was going to join the Martin Luther King movement or, of course that came up later on, but the movement was already developing in the North and South.

The only question was whether I was going to join Malcolm X or join Martin Luther King.

MN: Were you, did you ever have any personal contact with Malcolm X when he was speaking in New York City? Did he come up to the Bronx?

JD: Um, well he came to the Bronx, yes. Personal contact, no I had no personal contact. Though some of his people who became his adherents, them yes.

MN: When did you become involved with the Lindsey Administration? And how did that come about? You mentioned you got a - -

JD: Oh, we had the Republicans all along, we thought we were the toughest thing in the corner. Because to be a Republican in a 75-percent Democrat or 85-percent Democrat neighborhood, I mean, you had to be tough to survive. But, uh, when John Lindsey came along with [Inaudible] oh we were seasoned politicians by that time. I mean in a neighborhood sense, we carried out his first and second campaigns when he got kicked out of the Republican Party because it was too liberal for him. And we, you know, we got him elected again. We feel proudly that we were part of the whole New York City movement.

MN: And did you run for office in that time, in the '60s?

JD: I believe it was just after that I ran for office. I am not sure.

MN: When did you sense that there was a dangerous physical deterioration of some of the Bronx neighborhoods that, you know, you had grown up in or been in? Did you see that this was going to result in fires and abandonment? Did you see this coming, or did it catch you by surprise?

JD: No, it wasn't a thing that you could see planned, or anything else. A lot of things happened there that no one could predict. The welfare benefits were increased and laws were changed, more money was being available for it all. And one of the days it may be a penny, you know, in sociological minds pardon me. But, you know, it became cheaper to go in and get yourself an apartment anywhere and burn the place out and get the welfare to pay you for relocation and furniture and things like that. A lot of wrongs were committed there. In our neighborhood where we had grown up into manhood, many of us complained about the idea here, that of the reconstruction coming in. Moving all of us out, there was no right of returning.

MN: Right, so there was Urban Renewal, people were displaced but without the right of, you know, being able to come back to the same community.

JD: That's right.

MN: Now, what about the public housing projects that were built in various parts of the Bronx? What was your experience with that? Do you think that those developments were constructive or destructive?

JD: Yes, definitely it wasn't needed no question about it, it wasn't needed. And something that we had done years later, as a matter of fact today in the year 2003 some of us who had experienced a lot of that still talk about, well, we are on the losing end now. But the idea that the social worker had to be walking side-by-side with the landlord.

MN: Right.

JD: All this could not be answered in a landlord taken to court.

MN: Do you; were you, what was your awareness of the construction of the Forest Houses?

‘Cause that was the big development in the middle of Morrisania. Do you remember when that

was - - [END OF TAPE ONE SIDE ONE; BEGIN TAPE ONE SIDE TWO] - - You had

mentioned to me, could you describe the sandwich tests that you did on the Grand Concourse?

One of the things that every person that we’ve interviewed who is over the age of 70 mentioned

is that it was impossible for African-Americans to rent on the Grand Concourse into well after

Co-op City opened. Could you describe your personal experience with the demonstrations that

targeted this discrimination?

JD: Yes, primarily we were talking about, we were dealing with not door-knocking at the door

itself, but there was a young superintendent and we were dealing with an agent representing the

landlord or the landlord’s office. I didn’t do that kind of research, all we had was an address to

go to in order to get an apartment like this place here. We had teams going out, into the

buildings, and searching the buildings as much as we possibly could to see whether there was an

apartment there, you know, whether a peep hole would open up and a locker would open up so

we know there is nobody in the apartment there. And we would come back and then say ok, we

are going into that apartment, you two go into that apartment there. We would send two people

out together, and go approach the landlord or the agent, whoever is on that list at separate times.

Both of them would be turned down, then sometime later, even a week later, a white couple

would go out and go for the same apartment and an offer is made and they would move in

tomorrow.

MN: Um, where, who organized, which organization, you said it was the Urban League, which sponsored these?

JD: The Urban League was very much involved; I don't remember now who laid out the original plan and detail of organization or recruitment all those things took place. In my affiliation with the NAACP and other community organizations I became a part of, I chose what I wanted to do. I wanted to get in front of the battlefield.

MN: Now this, at this time the NAACP chapter you were working with was the same one your father founded?

JD: Oh yes, yes.

MN: And what was the, did it have a name the chapter?

JD: The Bronx Branch.

MN: The Bronx, it was the Bronx Branch of the NAACP. So, and the people who were in these demonstrations were very much this World War II generation?

JD: I would say World War II generation, whether they were in a war or not in a war. The mood of revolt, no of non-violent [Inaudible] revolt was there.

MN: Now the other thing - -

JD: It was easy to recruit.

MN: Now the other thing that is fascinating is, you said that when Co-op City was being built, the word being sent down to blacks was don't try to get an apartment there. And so there were demonstrations during the constructions - -

JD: I went there, 'cause I signed up for an apartment for a building that was under construction with the time schedule.

MN: And so this was what, 1966, '67?

JD: I cannot remember the year.

MN: So did you - -

JD: I was there with Freedom Land and the construction of the building and everything like that. Somewhere along the line I worked with housing development people there. And I was sitting in some of the conferences there.

MN: Now, you were working in the City Buildings Department at that time when this issue arose?

JD: Yes, at least some of the, I am not sure what the dates of it was, a portion of the construction was when I was working for the City of New York.

MN: Alright, now do you know if the City Commission of Human Rights was involved in these, in this housing discrimination issue?

JD: I don't know about that.

MN: Do you recall any demonstrations at the site of Co-op City that were organized or was there more negotiating than demonstrating?

JD: I think it was a combination of both.

MN: Now did Co-op City eventually, when it opened, begin to open its doors to African-Americans or was it - -

JD: At one point, yes they did. But at what point now, I don't know. They opened up the sections at five separate sections. And I believe some of them were on-line, the first section was already being occupied while the fight was still going on. As far as I can remember right now, the fight was still going on in terms of fair opportunity.

MN: Right, now you had also mentioned that the development called Tracey Towers , which I guess opened in the early seventies on right near Clinton High School. What initially was being built why they advertised as blacks need not apply? Was that the case?

JD: The word was out, don't go there. You wouldn't get an apartment. And the local people, unfortunately, I don't want to condemn everybody in the neighborhood there, but I did have a few friends up there myself. And when we talked about the whole thing and it was a disgraceful thing. Somewhere in the construction, in the building of that house, in the removal of that house in the preparation for occupancy that the word was out that Negroes would not get any apartments in that building. They would not even get an application.

MN: Wow. So this is, this is even in the 1970s? The early '70s?

JD: Yes.

MN: When did you move out of Morrisania, you know, Union Avenue? And what neighborhood did you move to from there?

JD: Oh, when they started building the Davidson Houses.

MN: Ok, so that was, what year did the Davidson Houses open up?

JD: Out of memory, I couldn't tell you.

MN: You think it was the '70s or the '60s?

JD: I would say it was the, it had to be the late '60s.

MN: Now, where did you move from there? Did you move to Mount Hope or did you move to another place?

JD: No, I bought another house on the other side of Jerome Avenue, Chessup Avenue and 170th Street.

MN: How long did you live at that house?

JD: Fifteen years.

MN: And then you moved to your current location?

JD: Yes.

MN: Did you experience the Bronx burning? And, you know, did this ever happen anywhere near any of the places you've --

JD: I never got burned out.

MN: But did you see, you know, did it affect nearby blocks?

JD: Yes, I belong now to Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition. And it is an interesting thing, like to sit down with the youngsters there and as a matter of fact a couple of the older people there that passed away already now. But we began, we did a very exciting thing: match notes what they were doing in the West Bronx trying to save the housing up there and keep the [Inaudible] from the East Bronx from spreading over. No question about it, it was spreading for lots of reasons. It was a tragic thing but, you know, some of the landlords would even arrange to have the fires, in order that the insurance policies would abandon the house, get out of the neighborhood, and that was it. But a whole lot of influences came in there to cause that thing to happen.

MN: Now, you had mentioned, you know, two of the influences that people were able to, who were on welfare, to get a better apartment literally burn out their old apartments.

JD: Whether on welfare or not, the idea was you could get yourself some money on welfare if you got burned out of your apartment, you got to go to welfare anyway.

MN: Wow, in other words even if you weren't on welfare, if your apartment got burned out you could get relocation money?

JD: Yes.

MN: So the system was - -

JD: As long as you can establish your apartment there was destroyed. Understand me now, I am not condemning the welfare structure because it is something that ,you know, godly good about the welfare system is that nobody is going to die in the streets.

MN: But this was one of the unintended consequences.

JD: That's right.

MN: Ok, I got it. So, and then you also mentioned landlords burning their own buildings for insurance money.

JD: No question about that.

MN: Ok, is there anything else a major factor that you think, you know, um, might have contributed to this?

JD: Well, I guess there were a lot of influences in there. But it was at a time when we passed the law that said that no more kerosene stoves were allowed. And the landlord didn't send any steam up so you get your kerosene hardware down the block, put it up, and the dog knocked it over and the house burned up.

MN: Oh, [Laughs].

JD: In New York City you couldn't, they finally passed the law saying that no more kerosene stoves were allowed inside residential property because in fact, we couldn't control it.

MN: When did you see things really changing for the worse in the Bronx in terms of both political atmosphere and social atmosphere? Or is there such a time?

JD: I wonder, how could you name such a time? After, in certain areas it is an interesting thing, you know, these days, you move distinctly. You are coming up from work on the subway train, and you reach a certain point on Jackson Avenue, and the train is coming around a curve. And

you look out of the train, and you look on this side over here, and you see all these vacant buildings, half of them burned out from the top and you see the sky through the building. Is that a change that just happened, or just gradually happened, or what? And so one day you wake up and you find, you know, half the houses around your neighborhood.

MN: Yes.

JD: I can't name a specific time when, you say, things began. Education-wise I do know, because I am so intensely involved in education. As the neighborhood changed, so did the school system.

MN: Now, do you think the school system, let's say, of the '70s was much worse than the school system of the '30s and '40s, in terms of what its atmosphere and what opportunities it gave to young people?

JD: I don't have any doubt of it to prove or disprove, but I - -

MN: Your feeling?

JD: I feel very strongly about it that as schools changed racially, I don't believe the teachers were, many of the teachers not all of them, because there are some pretty good teachers out there. But I think that teachers were either not able to deal with a new cultural, you know, the way they were cultivated. Coming into the classroom, they were unable to deal with them, or would not deal with them, whichever way it happened to be, they were not getting the same quality education.

MN: Now, you mentioned the culture of the young people coming in. Is there a point at which young people, you know, were brought up very differently than you were brought up in ways that were visible to you?

JD: I don't know how to - -

MN: I mean like, ok some people say that there was a point at which young people, even in a somewhat tough neighborhood, were very respectful towards adults, and they suggest that that isn't there anymore. Do you agree with that or do you think that is exaggerating?

JD: Personally, I think it is exaggerate. I get total respect from them, if I sass them I am going to get myself in trouble.

MN: But you find that people in your - -

JD: I taught my children what my mother and father taught me. I mean, if they have a problem with an adult you don't take up that problem yourself. You come back and get us. I taught my children the same way which they honored that all through their lives. But now, you know, if I, how would I say it? If I sass a child or correct a child, whatever it happens to be, well, criticize a child, "What you do something like that for to me?" And um, they are going to retaliate, they are not going to, forget mommy and daddy there is probably no mommy or daddy at home anyway.

MN: So you can't, now there is a term that people, can you like correct young people on your block who are doing wrong and be respected, or do you have to be careful?

JD: I find ways of doing it. I just moved into the neighborhood over there, they don't know who I am or maybe they do, I don't even know. But we had a problem with the hydrant, it's right across the street from my house, and they turned it up and start shooting water up as high as they can. I find something wrong with that. So I walked over and told them, "You listen y'all are doing a very bad thing now. I am your friend right, but you are doing a very bad thing." It's got the curiosity up now. "What are we doing that we aren't going to like you for telling us?" And I told them about the water, and what the water is doing. "The water is flooding the basement in the house over there, people can't get their garbage out." A little girl sat down with her little young self and said, "I think that's reasonable."

MN: [Laughs]

JD: So they cut, they took the box off the hydrant and said, “Is it alright if we just ran the water?” I said, “Yes, you can run all the water you want, I don’t like that either, but let’s not drag it out.” ‘Cause, you know, you find ways of handling it. But, you know, I do get a certain amount of respect, whether it’s me personally or not, I don’t know. I don’t get the same amount of respect out of the adults I deal with.

MN: Now your neighborhood is one of the areas, very famous in the origins of hip-hop, or rap music. Were you, when this was going on in the ‘70s and ‘80s were you very aware of it, or was it something that, you know, didn’t grab your attention?

JD: It had to grab my attention. I love music, all kinds of music. This is my music [Laughter].

MN: No, this is ok.

JD: No, I have a young man I’m dealing with right now. He has got a little bit of difficulty, and we talk about this thing. And he listens to music, I let him know, first of all, that I am going to respect his love of that music. But when we start talking about music technically; I play the piano, used to play the piano anyway. And I can talk about it technically. Here is a fella who sings, he doesn’t move more than, in frequency or sound, he doesn’t move more than three notes up or down. [Sings] He’s not singing I’m telling you. And my young man says, and he’s an eighteen-year-old, he says, “You know, you’re right.” He’s not singing, but what he’s doing is poetizing. So I say, “I’ll buy that”, because I went back over history with him about what blacks in the streets of uh, southern cities did [Sings] But, you know, listen to music there is a rhythm in the music going on, and he appreciates that now, when he’s hearing it. I have, he has promised to me that he is going to listen now to some old blues records.

MN: Ok, I have lots of blues records. Do you have lots of blues records?

JD: I might come and see you, I've got some somewhere.

MN: Now, I have a lot of CDs I have a lot of blues.

JD: A lot of youngsters should get some kind of lessons in this type, lessons in school.

MN: So you had music education in school?

JD: Well yes, yes.

MN: Did you, were you able to take home musical instruments when you were in the public schools?

JD: Yes, I was a pianist; I could take the piano [Laughter]. I mean, somebody try to take a piano home [Laughs]. But the idea is that we did get a taste of respectfully approaching old European classics and we even had Chinese music of the samplings of it. We knew the comparisons of the types of music. I think in the hip-hop world no, there is a great loss here because the kids are here growing up in music here right now where there is no instrumentation. My protégé finally agreed to that. He says no, there are no horns or anything like that. I said, "Well if you had a horn, would you want to have a brass, would you have a reed?" He has no idea what I'm talking about, so then we get into another discussion on that now. So as I said, I am educating now where the schools - -

MN: Play them some James Brown and listen to the - -

JD: That is a challenge; I mean with James Brown at least had some dance steps out there. This guy walking up the stairs - - but the guy had to have his feet on solid ground and so there is a social symbol to the thing. This guy here who is in the hip-hop world, he's walking back and forth he's flipping the whole crowd out here as far as I am concerned. His whole life is, his whole mannerism is a threat to somebody and that is the way he expresses himself - - his fists are up but there is no music. I am - - but I am having the experience of my life. The idea here is that

as my young man begins to understand what I am talking about he's agreeing to some of the things, and he says he's not going to dislike it. But as I said, that is alright but I mean just don't put it in the category of music. We have a compromise.

MN: Right, now you belong to a Senior Citizen's Center. Do you think there are good facilities for Senior Citizens in a lot of neighborhoods these days?

JD: I think they are wonderful; they're not enough though. I have organized the demonstrations here a few months ago against the Mayor, when the Mayor started talking about intruding and cutting the budget to senior citizens. I said, "The guy got a hell lot of damn nerve!" We put the signs up, I put up one myself. "If you forget us, we will remember you on Election Day, we vote."

MN: How many demonstrations do you think you've gone to in your life? How many picket lines have you marched on?

JD: Whoa, to me that is the essence of American democracy.

MN: Is marching in a picket line?

JD: Picket line, however you do it, or a petition. The African Burial Ground we got a petition campaign going now to support another organization now with the idea here that these are the methods of letting somebody know that we care about this particular issue here. And this is what I, and this is the direction our care is taking.

MN: Do you think young people today are aware enough of the need to constantly replenish the democratic tradition from this sort of action? Or are you disappointed in - -

JD: Yes, I think the kids in school if you don't like a teacher they should have some kind of means of expression. Start learning how to make your voice heard.

MN: Now, you've been obviously somebody who has fought to really change things for the better in your community for a very long time. Are you optimistic about the future? Do you think that there are other people ready to follow in your footsteps and bring this legacy, you know - -

JD: I don't want to handle the question lightly. I think the question is very serious, but I am going to say this: yes, but no.

MN: [Laughs]

JD: I don't have any; I can't come to any kind of opinion. There are a lot of things out here that I personally don't like, but I can get off of it. People I work with, people I talk with. Some people are very optimistic about things, so long as there are good people out there. I appreciate that, I know a lot of good people out here, even know to express themselves that is a momentum of change in itself.

MN: If you look back at, you know, all this activity what are the things that you think your proudest accomplishments as a political activist. The things that if you were going to look back on, you'd say, "Wow, I did that." Tough question?

JD: One thing I'll tell you though, and after I retired from being paid for anything. Uh, one thing I did that I am very very proud of is, called pride or egotistical thing, I spent about seven or eight years in the school system as a volunteer for children. I learned very quickly, I'd go to the teacher and I'd tell her two words that she doesn't like at all, any teacher. I'd say just give me your, what do you want Mr. Davidson? I'd say just give me your baddest child or your dumbest child. And after a while he got to know me, I did most of my time with P.S. 70 in the Bronx on Weeks Avenue.

MN: On Weeks?

JD: Weeks Avenue, yes.

MN: Weeks between where and where?

JD: Oh, 175th Street just south of the Cross Bronx Expressway.

MN: Right, so give me your baddest child.

JD: Or your dumbest, your choice. And to watch a child turn around, little kid not that the background should be that important to me as a child. Well actually, there is a story behind that also, if you've got time.

MN: Sure.

JD: When I, I could not find I said, you know, I've got a lot of education out here and I'm not using any of it I never did use any of it really, as far as I'm concerned. But particularly in the sciences I said, and to this day, I could never understand why is now what y'all call mathematics, arithmetic. In the early grades of growing up, arithmetic, simple arithmetic, the most logical thing in the world, and you've got two you got another two, you got four, stop right there. How come nobody could understand this? So, I go to schools and I don't find any place in the community where I can latch on to it. And so I go back to the Board of Education. Board of education has an office down there recruiting adults, parents, and guardians, to help children out and help the teacher out in the classroom, and I joined. What they wanted me to do was go into high schools. And I went into high schools, Taft High School I was assigned to. I think after three or six months, I realized that those kids are in a different world from me, I don't know who the alien was either I was the alien or they were the aliens.

MN: Well, Taft is some rough place.

JD: It is now, yes. Back over the years, it was sky high. Now, when I went down to Junior High School I began to find out that they are a little bit tougher there because they hadn't reached the

level of social identification that the high schoolers did. But whatever they were doing had nothing to do with anything I understood. I got down to the third, fourth, and fifth grades.

MN: So what was it about the high school students that made it so difficult to communicate with them?

JD: I don't know, but when we talked together about intellectual things, academic things and stuff like that, logical thinking if you were to say in a college science class and they don't know what I'm talking about. They have ideas about something, you know, what's wrong with my idea? The ad that is coming on TV right now, with the woman asking a child, "You want to baby-sit only for money? And, I don't know have you all heard it? It is something where they say a few words in there, mommy says, "It is your own son, your own brother!" And the kid says, "What's your point?" I say, that is an example of me and high schoolers talking together as a group academically, I don't know what they were talking about.

MN: You're just, it was like two ships passing in the night.

JD: Yes.

MN: Wow.

JD: I want to talk about mathematics, they want to talk about mathematics too, but don't want to talk too much about mathematics. What do you want to talk about? I said, "Well, what are you doing in mathematics?" They're like, "We're studying." I said, "Well, studying what?"

[Laughter] The conversation keeps going around the whole circle, it never hits on nothing.

MN: So you ended up having to go down to third grade?

JD: I went down to third, fourth, and fifth grades. I began to realize, I don't know what the psychologists say today, I have no idea, but all I know is that you can identify the trouble right there in the third, fourth, and fifth grades. Those who were going to go through school and drop

out before, they are dropping out in junior high school. So I say we've got a serious problem. I feel like I want to talk to every child in, child among one million children I want to talk to them.

MN: So you think that this is something that you could found children you could reach?

JD: Oh yes.

MN: And that is wonderful. Wow.

JD: When I talked to a child out there who is sulking and sneering and what do I have to say to this. Well, I want to be a basketball player. And a half-an-hour later the teacher looks out the door and out there is two of them rapping and arguing back and forth. And when I tell him how badly he is needed out there, and to give him some examples of where I need him right now. But you've got to learn how to read those young people. You'll get lots of stuff coming at you; you have to walk back in that room with the chest stuck out. And my little Spanish boy, I don't know what he was doing. He said we go out into the hall, we start talking. And he confesses, "I don't know how to count numbers, I carry over." He carries over numbers and then crosses them out. He doesn't know what he's doing, he just writes down numbers. But in three sessions, I can get him to recognize that the numbers do mean something when you add up this column here, put four numbers down and you have a carry over, you write that number down right here. You want to hold it in your head, or write it on a piece of paper? But he began to learn immediately, in four lessons. What my technique was, don't let them sit in your arithmetic class teacher, let me have them. And he takes arithmetic, because he ain't learning anything in your class anyway.

MN: Right.

JD: And I could look at him turn around. He wants more numbers to add now.

MN: Ok, are there any other things before we, you know, we wind this session up that you want to say about the issues that are important to you, that you haven't had a chance to say today?

JD: I would say no not really, I'm sorry.

MN: I guess we covered a lot of ground.

JD: Yes, but I think the idea, the education thing, and I have to laugh about that, because when I say Al Gore and George Bush got in a campaign trail for the presidency of the United States, they had no idea that on everybody's mind, clean across America, the majority of the people were concerned about education at some level or another. And one day on the campaign trail they began to get the message, that education is the most important thing in our lives. Forget about economy, forget about foreign policy, and it was noticeable how in the middle of that campaign, the presidential campaign, that education became a key issue.

MN: Well, Mr. Davidson, thank you so much for this very illuminating session, it certainly gives us a lot of incentive to look for documents to find a written record about all of these remarkable demonstrations. Uh, and we will find a way of doing that, thank you very much.

JD: I hope you find them. [END OF INTERVEIW]

