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## Davis, Gloria

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Interviewee: Gloria Davis

Interviewer: Brian Purnell and Peter Derrick

Transcriber: Ariana Allensworth

March 8, 2008

Brian Purnell (BP): Today is March 8<sup>th</sup> 2008, we're in the home of Ms. Gloria Davis.

Brian Purnell with Peter Derrick and Ms. Davis if would just start with you saying and spelling your first and last name

Gloria Davis (GD): I'm Gloria Davis. G-L-O-R-I-A D-A-V-I-S.

BP: And what is your date of birth?

GD: 2-9-38.

BP: You had started to say, one of the first questions.

GD: I was born in Bronx County, Morrisania Hospital. Partially raised in Florida, and partially raised in New York. My mom – Stop Stop [Talking to a dog]. My mom took me to Florida at the age of four, came back to New York when I was about 12. So, I've been here ever since. I was 70 years old February the 9<sup>th</sup> the mother of six, lost a daughter at age of 12 in 1972, have 13 grand, 6 great grand. Ran for district leader in 1972, the same year I lost my daughter, on my oldest son's birthday, I think that's what kept my sanity, was to run for office.

Peter Derrick (PD): After the death of your daughter?

GD: After the death of my daughter. At the time the primaries were in June, they had early primaries. And I was a district leader from then until 1978. I ran for public office in '78, State Assembly, lost. Continued to be a community activist, and ran in 1980, and won.

BP: If we could go back a bit to your childhood. Part of the interview is to talk about your family, and you know, your parents and their history a bit, and also your memories of the neighborhood of Morrisania. I'm just curious, the years that you spent in Florida,

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from ages four to twelve, so that was in the 40s into the 50s. Were there any memories that you have of living in Florida that have – what part of Florida?

GD: Gainesville, Florida.

BP: Does anything stick out in your mind as being influential during that time? Or who did you live with as well?

GD: My grandmother.

BP: Was there a large African-American community in Gainesville, Florida?

GD: Of course, there was the railroad tracks. You lived on one side, and the whites lived on the other. A kid my age if she was a different color, meaning white, I had to get off the sidewalk and stand in the water or whatever, until she passed. It was a race route down there, my grandmother was glad I was back in New York, she said for some reason I did not respond the way the children there, her children, they were like my sisters and brothers, I was the only child, so I was raised with my uncles and aunts, not as their sister but as their niece, she said she was glad I was back in New York because I probably would have been dead because as a little thing I could hardly talk but if the insurance man came into the yard and said. We were jumping rope and we would stop, and he would try to demand that we would continue, and said well I'm going to have to beat you, my grandmother didn't [gets up to show some photographs] See this is my grandmother, and this is my great grandmother. My grandmother was more Indian. I was glad that I had the southern background and up coming, because it taught me both sides of – in the South, in Florida, you knew where you stood, in the North it's steeper under the rocks, so you have to be able to identify how racism is still alive, and always

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will be, and because it's taught from the table, it's not taught at the classroom, nine times out of ten it's taught at the table.

PD: We're having a big debate with Professor Roy Alten who claims that when the Bronx Borough was starting, claims that when African Americans moved to the Bronx, they were actually welcomed, that's something that's not in my sort of – I don't think that really happened. So we've been asking people, I mean you just contrasted the South to the Bronx but I mean what was the –

GD: When I moved to the – I used to live on Willis Avenue and it was Irish.

BP: Willis Avenue and where?

GD: Willis Avenue and 136<sup>th</sup> and 138<sup>th</sup>. And it was a lot of Irish. Hispanics were moving in. The projects, Willis Avenue Projects, didn't exist at that time. It was a lot of railroad flats. I can remember Tom O'Brian, you may, Irishman –

PD: No I'm not Irish.

GD: Well no, I'm just saying, being in the Bronx, you know. He said to me –

BP: What was his name?

GD: Tom O'Brian. He said to me one day, we were – all the district leaders and all of us were having a meeting. And he said to me that look what we left ya'll. What did you leave us? Railroad flats, that you hadn't built. It wasn't good for nothing, and you continued to milk them until the city just got embarrassed and knocked them down and built the projects. I can honestly say racism where I was concerned, I didn't get it like some because I've always had a mouth, and stood my ground and because of an understanding and identifying it in such a way that you just – sometimes when somebody says something I'll respond in such a way. Sometimes you respond back and sometimes

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it's not even worth it because you pity that person, okay. Especially when that person thinks and carries themselves as if they are superior. So you get caught up with ugliness even more so and you become them. So I never wanted to become them, I wanted to be me. My grandmother always taught us that you do unto others as you wish them to do unto you. So when I moved to the Bronx, it was a lot of whites and blacks were coming from Harlem into the Bronx, Boston Road was like the Grand Concourse, although we couldn't go on the concourse.

BP: So was this in 1950, when you came back?

GD: This was from 50 until they built Co-Op City, and when they built Co-Op City and the blacks and the Jews fled to Co-Op City, okay, and left the Concourse, but they left it more so for the Latinos rather than the blacks who was here first. So, when they realized that government dollars had built Co-Op City, and the law of the states is that you have to bring your percentage of poor people, so that's when they rushed and built section five, so then the whites were pissed off because they had given up those beautiful apartments on the Concourse and fled, and they still had us. So some of them left and went to Long Island, some went to Connecticut and so forth, it's about 2,500 or more, it don't think its thousand, are Jews up in Co-Op City.

PD: There's an article, by the way, in a recent issue of the Journal by Judith Perez about African-Americans moving into Co-Op City that might be of interest.

GD: Okay. Then we became the supers, in some of these building. And we became small mom and pop stores.

BP: So it's 1950 –

GD: Up until, form 1950 well I can only say from 1952, 53, as I began to grasp things.

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BP: If we could go back, your grandmother that you lived with, what was her name?

GD: Nettie. N-E-T-T-I-E.

BP: And her last name was?

GD: Jones.

BP: Jones.

GD: My grandfather worked in the coal mine, and so he died before I was born. Okay so I never knew my grandpa.

BP: And your grandmother?

GD: My grandmother lived to be 86 years old.

BP: What type of work did she do?

GD: She worked at Florida University, as a domestic worker.

BP: So, I mean it's important, we'd like to discuss it a little bit, to get the full tapestry.

What was her day like, would she leave and then come back at night? Or would she stay at the university and then come home on the weekend?

GD: No, she got on the bus, it wasn't that far from the house and she would go and clean the dormitories and then come home. She would get to work like at 8 o'clock in morning and then at one she would leave and come home. This was everyday.

BP: Did your mother?

GD: My mother was up here.

BP: Stayed up here? What was her name?

GD: Mayola.

BP: Mayola?

GD: Jones, until she got married and then it was Jaws.

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BP: Were there any other memories from living in Gainesville that stick out in your mind as being influential, aside from the stepping off the side of the road, was there anything else that you remember that kind of shaped your childhood in a meaningful way?

GD: My grandmother shaped all of us. My grandmother raised me and my cousin besides her seven sons and four daughters, including my mom. And she was a very strict, strong woman. She didn't allow us to – I couldn't wear shorts out of the yard, and if I did it was to the corner store and back home. Church was our thing. We went to Sunday school, we was in church all day, bible studies, one night of the week, choir practice and so forth. And she, she would show you her gun. She would show me and she would show the white man. If the cops came to her yard and they'd say Nettie, she'd say what you want? Your daughter, not me, her daughter, had a fight and the parent called, and she said and I talked to my daughter, she came home and told me. She said you're not taking her, don't put your foot in my yard. She had a gun and they knew it.

BP: So she kept a firearm in the house?

GD: Oh yes. Yes. And they knew it. They would not come into that yard. Then, I forgot his name, what's his name? He was up on the highway, he was the judge and everything else, and my grandmother did business with him so he knew my grandmother and he knew what she stood for, so he would always tell, if she says don't come in her yard, don't come in her yard. If she caught any of us in a lie, we paid for it, because she had put herself out there. So we knew not to, we could not lie to her. You lied to her, you got a beating with the ironing chord. Or she showed you her gun. She'd say, you're going to do this that or the other, or else you're going to leave out of here, not the way

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you came into the bedroom. And she meant that. So we lived that way. We respected her, and when we look back sometimes, I have three uncles living and one aunt, and my aunt is two years older than me, her birthday was March the 3<sup>rd</sup>, and when I go home, because I call that home also, I bring it up. I talk about the gun, and they say you don't forget nothing, because I'm up here, but ya'll see each other everyday, so you hang onto history. And we talk to it, she showed her baby daughter and one of her other daughters the gun, I had left before she had the opportunity to show me it. [Laughter] Best type of upbringing.

BP: Why did you go to live in Gainesville?

GD: My mother took me to her mother and she said she couldn't maintain me and raise me and take care of me.

BP: It was just your mother on her own?

GD: Yes. And so she took me to her mother. And I was there until my mother felt she was able to take me.

BP: So that's why you came back? There wasn't an incident? Because I know you had mentioned before?

GD: No, no, no. I told you I left there before she was able to.

BP: What denomination of what church of Christianity?

GD: I was brought up in the Pentecostal. And when I got married I became a Catholic, but I didn't get married in the Catholic Church because the priest was telling me about this family that offered him all this money if he was to leave the priesthood, so I felt he was doing stuff. I should have never become a Catholic, but I became a Catholic because of my husband and I agreed that my children would become Catholic, but I didn't marry



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in a Catholic way. And my children, when they got of age, they left the Catholic church, they don't go to Catholic church, they don't like what had done to them in Catholic schools. I don't believe it now. Through religious instructions I said to Father Sudrue, that God didn't intend for man to live alone, I don't think that you could pray for me as quick as I can pray for myself, because you may wait until you get a slew of people, and then by that time and god is ready to punish me so let me go straight to him. He told me to shut up at religious instructions, so I knew that they didn't want me.

PD: Did your children go to Saint Augustine's?

GD: Yes.

PD: And the church that you went to was?

GD: Yes. You know, I go to different churches now.

BP: If we could get back to Peter's question about when you come back and you're living on Willis Avenue and the 130s and it's the early 1950s. So you're coming to be a teenager soon, you know 13, 14. Do you have any memories that relate to Peter's question about how African-Americans and predominately, it was Irish you said, who were the different people in that neighborhood and how did they get along with one another?

GD: Well, we got along. The building that my mom and I lived in, was—

BP: Do you remember the address?

GD: Yes, the first one was 414 East 136<sup>th</sup> Street and the other one was 426 East 138<sup>th</sup> Street. Or 39<sup>th</sup> Street. Because 38<sup>th</sup> is the big street. And it was no problem. Like I said, the whites was moving out. The Latinos were coming in, the blacks were moving in and we lived together peacefully, no ugliness.

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BP: How about your experiences in school, who were your peers?

GD: Morris High School?

BP: Did you start high school, or were in middle school at all?

GD: High school.

BP: What was Morris High School like in the—

GD: Mixed. Colin Powell and everybody was there.

PD: Colin Powell says the same thing about growing up that everybody just got along with each other, and there was really no hostility in –

GD: The separation of the Bronx came about through politics.

PD: Can you explain that a little more? That's interesting.

GD: You had on Boston Road, because I used to live 1061 Boston Road, so I been in all my life. Down by these steps between 165<sup>th</sup> and 164<sup>th</sup> Street, it was all lower houses and it was owned by a person, I'm not ready to give you names, because I may do a book on what happened to me. But these particular people were moved in other. [Noise in the background] That's one of my sons Mike. They milked the buildings. You understand the word milk? They milked the buildings because two was going on the bench, to become judges.

BP: Two of the owners of the buildings?

GD: Yes. And then you had –

BP: I'm sorry to interrupt. I understand what you mean to milk buildings but –

GD: Meaning that they demanded rent but did not deal with the up keep of the building.

That's milking the buildings.

BP: What types of up keep would they let slide?

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GD: Everything. Everything. Okay.

BP: Heating? Electric?

GD: Everything. And then they paid black and brown kids to burn not theirs, but people who owned real estate in the Bronx. When that book, *The Bronx is Burning*, that's real, that's real. And government turned their eyes, their face, their bodies, they because by that time, most of the whites had moved out. Jackson Democratic Club, which is up here, almost the biggest club in the Bronx County, right there at McGinley Square, you had Old Man Cooke, Mrs. McCaffery, Mrs. McCaffery taught me politics, she was a good district leader. As the whites moved out, the Bronx began to burn and it burned in such a way that when they got ready to built they built outward, they didn't built in. This area, when I took off as of 1980, we didn't have a super market, we didn't have no drug stores and barely had housing.

PD: And the landlords were doing this, just to confirm that this is what you're saying, because they were milking the buildings, to take out as much money out as they could, and then walk away once they profited.

GD: Just walk away.

PD: And there's a big thing about the landlords, they could get insurance money if a building burned. Do you think that was part of it?

GD: Of course. That's what killed – it's very, very few people who can get private insurance for their apartments today. That's a hidden race card, that you can't get insurance to protect where you live at, knowing that the Bronx burned once.

BP: I think we should talk more about the fires and all that later. But the 50s, I wanted to talk more about the 50s and your high schools years, and kind of build up to that. But

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you mentioned earlier that African-Americans couldn't go to the Grand Concourse unless they were going there to clean houses. On the one hand, people got along, there were no problems, but on the other hand there were certain places that African-Americans could and could not go. So could you talk a little bit more about that, what was the kind of the – when you talk about the South, if a white person was coming down the street you had to step off, now you didn't have to do that in Bronx, but it was clear that you couldn't go certain places.

GD: You couldn't go and walk freely on the concourse, and look at the Concourse today. Because everybody turned closed eyes, it's no way you were supposed to take an apartment on the first floor and make it a health, super market or whatever. The zoning, they relaxed on the zoning to allow these things to happen, but it was a plan. I saw a book that they were going to rebuild the Bronx, Morris High School was going to be redone, but it wouldn't be for us. And the company who did it was Shoe Marker, it was a store that manufactured bedspreads and stuff for rich people, they were the ones who did it. Because a friend of mine worked for them, and he bought the book for me to see.

BP: What would happen if African-Americans went to the Concourse?

GD: The cops would ask what are you doing on the Concourse? I'm going to wherever, I'm a domestic worker. See a lot of people don't want to talk about it. And if nobody that you interviewed talked about it then –

PD: Lots of people talk about it.

GD: Okay.

BP: But the more people that talk about it, you know.

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GD: It was when, when Herman Badillo ran for congress it was a guy – they used to walk around with throw rugs on their arm to sell, and this particular day I was coming from Forest, dropping my kids off at Forest –

BP: Forest?

GD: Forest Daycare. And he was walking and I chased him, I screamed and yelled and the doors open and they said what it wrong with you? I said, because he is on *my* block I can't go on his, he's got no business walking up and selling rugs on my block, they said that woman is crazy, but I did it, so he could see how it felt, okay. You should have seen him moving faster, like running, because he didn't know what was going to happen. So, imagine you, me going on the Concourse and the cops stops me and ask me where I'm going. So, that was a railroad track.

BP: What that something you had direct experience with or was it just things that people knew? Like you just knew.

GD: You knew.

BP: What kind of work did your mother do?

GD: My mother did domestic work, and she eventually became a registered nurse.

BP: So, when you came back from Gainesville as a young teenage she was working as a nurse? But before that she was domestic?

GD: Yes.

BP: Where did she work do you know?

GD: Downtown, all over, wherever all the rich people would have domestic workers.

PD: Two African-American women, one from NYU and one from Rutgers, have come in and used our oral histories over the last two months, and they've been interested in what

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they call the black slave market. Did you hear that term, and where was it concentrated?

They think it was in Morrisania, I was told by other people it was by 161<sup>st</sup> Street on the Concourse.

RD: The Concourse. See when I was of age to pay attention to things, it was us in here in Morrisania, they had all moved, some had moved up to Oakmand Place, that was before twin arks were built, so they had moved up, you know. And a lot of them you only saw them on Monday nights and Thursday nights, because they would come down to Jackson Democratic Club. They wanted their membership to stay, but they moved out.

BP: So by the time you were a young teenage, Morrisania was predominantly African-American?

RD: Yes, it was some Latinos but it was all black. When my kids got of age, it was two Latino families on Boston Road, the kids always called the elevator building, because it was only elevator on the block and that was 1051 Boston Road, and the other one was 165<sup>th</sup> street on that side, on the right hand side. I can't remember his name, but he is now paralyzed, he went into the service and it's amazing that I became the assembly woman, and I serviced him in the office, and this kid grew up with my kids, and when they talked he'd say, I'm black like you, because he was. Okay. And to see him in a wheelchair, and he did live in the Forest Projects, I don't know where he's at now, and that was all the way up Boston Road. And then came the politics, the ugly ugly politics in the Bronx County. You had the Batman, Raymond Velence, they'd call him the Batman, he became the city counsel, because I ran Milton Williams at that time, and went on to be the district leader in the 70s.

PD: Could we build up to this. Morris High School?

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RD: Morris High school, it was whites at Morris with me. It was, like I said, peaceful, it was a peaceful community.

BP: Did you have encouraging teachers at Morris? Did you enjoy school?

RD: I enjoyed school.

BP: Did they encourage you to go into public life, or college, or be a lawyer or a business woman? What was the encouragement or your relationship you had with your academic advisors and teachers?

RD: It was cordial, I didn't run into any problems. I didn't know that I wanted to be a politician.

BP: Did you teachers, so I guess you graduated high school in 1946, 47?

RD: No.

BP: I'm sorry 56.

RD: I was born in '38 [Laughs]

BP: I'm doing the math wrong.

RD: Well I dropped out. Later on, got married, had kids, then went on and got an associates degree.

BP: So you dropped out of high school?

RD: Yes.

BP: What was the first type of work you had?

RD: I had never worked, I'd never worked until I walked out of my house with my five kids. And then I had to go to work.

BP: What was your first job?

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RD: Working for the census 1970 census. At that time it was at Prospect Avenue. I can't think of it. The ballroom. I think it was the ballroom. I did that in the day, and at night I worked in the post office and then I got a telegram that I got to give up one, because they both were public jobs. So I gave up the post office and stayed with the census until it was over. And then from there I went to work for A Beam in the patrollers office.

BP: That was down in Manhattan?

RD: Yes.

BP: So, your first work experience was 1970 you run for district leader in '72, what made you make that decision?

RD: When I – I had two Godmothers, one was a democrat and one was a republic. The republic was around the corner, and Jackson was right there and they told me they didn't care what club, but just get into a club because I had four boys and I did.

BP: So your Godmothers encouraged you to get into it. But why, what role did the political club play? What did the political clubs do?

At that time the political clubs, the district leaders had power, they could pick up the phone and call any city agents and say I got a person coming in that needs a job and what destroyed that was the people going to get the jobs, it wasn't the district leaders at that time. It was if – like I went to the county leader, Pat Cunningham, he put me in those spots, but it was Ms. Gladwin, I used to see how she would get people jobs.

BP: Ms?

RD: Gladwin, yes that's Judge Gladwin, it was a judge by the name of Gladwin, he was a Supreme Court judge, it was him and Ms. McCaffery. It was McCaffery first, and then it Ms Gladwin.



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PD: Was Ms. Gladwin related to Judge Gladwin?

RD: That was husband and wife. Pearl Gladwin. And as I stated it was the people who was seeking the jobs they made it difficult so the system had to cut their act, which was the district leaders could be strong and say that they kept them. That's what made the political arena so rich because they took care of their people.

BP: So your Godmothers encouraged you to get into political clubs, they knew that you could have access to people?

RD: Right.

PD: So when you say that the people destroyed it, you mean the people who went for the jobs?

RD: They would not come, or they would say this. They didn't want to be responsible.

BP: It sounds like Ms. McCaffery was really influential to you.

RD: She was a good district leader, she taught me.

BP: Can speak a little bit about her, and her history, or how you came to meet her?

RD: Through Jackson Democratic Club, she was the district leader at the time, when I was just a voter.

BP: What was her first name?

RD: I can't think of her first name.

BP: It's not that important.

RD: Now, Mr. Cook was the mayor district leader, Mr. [can't make our name]

BP: Were they both African-American?

RD: No, no ,no.

PD: This was the last of the old crowd.

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RD: This was the last of their power.

BP: So these were the folks that had moved out, but still came to Jackson on Mondays and Thursday.

RD: Now when Ms. McCaffery stayed there longer than Mr. Cook. Okay. Now before I got there they told me Mr. Cook, if a black walked up those steps he was a white guy standing at the top of the steps and would ask what do you want? I'm here to see Mr. Cook. Who told you? Such and such a person. And then he would let you.

BP: SO they even tried to police the Jackson Democratic Club.

RD: Tried? They did.

BP: Was it like that when you first went?

RD: No, no. That's what his day, but I know it's true. When I got there Ms. McCaffery was there and she – who was the male district? Who was the male? I think Ivan Water, well he came right after. Ivan –

PD: Who was it?

RD: Ivan Water. Ivan Water. He came right after.

BP: So what are your memories, so you first start going to Jackson Democratic Club, maybe in the late 1960s?

RD: Late 60s.

BP: What was –

RD: Yes late 60s.

BP: What was it like? If you can describe a typical Monday or Thursday night.

RD: It was – it kept me there. I made it my business to go every Monday and Thursday. You had Bert Henson became a judge.

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PD: What was his name?

RD: Bert Henson, he became a judge. He was the secretary. Mrs. Pearl Gladwin was the district leader now Ms. McCaffery is gone, everybody is black, but whites still put their numbers in, to get the judges.

[END OF TAPE ONE SIDE ONE; BEGIN TAPE TWO SIDE TWO]

BP: What was it like? If you can describe a typical Monday or Thursday night.

RD: It was – it kept me there. I made it my business to go every Monday and Thursday. You had Bert Henson who became a judge.

PD: What was his name?

RD: Bert Henson, he became a judge. He was the secretary. Mrs. Pearl Gladwin was the district leader now Ms. McCaffery is gone, everybody is black, but whites still put their numbers in, to get the judges. You can count the judges that were black that came out of Jackson.

BP: We interviewed Judge Hanson.

RD: I did judge Hanson and Judge Williams. I didn't do Bert, Bert left, but he still needed Jackson to get it and I supported him. But Morton Williams and Judge Hanson McGee, Judge Hanson McGee was an attorney for IBM.

BP: What was a meeting like?

RD: You'd walk in and you'd talk about issues. Issues whether it was the garbage, whether it was – whatever ails the community, that was discussed.

PD: You'd say they effectively dealt with the programs also?

RD: Yes.

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BP: How, you know, before you're a district leader, when you're just a voter and a member when you're just a voter and a member, what was the process for this organization to deal with constituents issues?

RD: Well whatever the issue was the district leader and the Senator. Which was Ivan Waters, the male district leader, and the Senator, would take all of the information and when Ivan came from Albany on Thursday night, it would be on an eight by five card, and the person would be called in to the room and that person would then talk confidentially to district leader who was district leader and senator. Vicks was the assembly person and district leader, so when she came down it was the same thing. The women had their leaders and the men had theirs. Okay. When I became district leader, I didn't separate, I pulled everybody together, it was no such thing as the men division and the women division, we all sat in the same room.

BP: How long were you district leader?

RD: From 1972 through 1978. And I ran for the assembly, and lost.

BP: And then you ran again?

RD: Ran again in 80 and ran.

BP: Peter do you want to – I mean because you know the politics of that period more specifically than I do.

PD: Well I want to talk about this responsibility, there was a conference that was held up at the court house in 2000, and Bob Abrams actually came to the conference. Because well people were saying well Abrams hadn't done anything in the 70s when the Bronx was burning.

RD: He didn't.

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PD: Well he claimed he did as much as he could. I mean so, I'd like to get your take on what was going on there with the politicians, and why they weren't able to address the problems.

BP: I'm just going to change the file on this if you'll give me one second.