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Powell, Morgan

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Interviewer: Brian Purnell

Interviewee: Morgan Powell

Date: September 10, 2004

Brian Purnell (BP): We do a brief introduction. Today is September 10th, 2004. [I am] Brian Purnell. I'm sitting with Morgan Powell, conducting an interview for the Bronx African-American History Project. If we can just begin with you stating and spelling your first -- your --your complete name.

Morgan Powell (MP): Sure, thanks Brian. I want all documentation -- my participation as prior, to read strictly as Morgan Powell, but for strict scholarship, I'll give my full name. Full name is Kristopher Morgan Powell. K-R-I-S- T-O-P-H-E-R. Middle name Morgan, M-O-R-G-A-N. Last name Powell, P-O-W-E-L-L.

BP: All right, and what is your date of birth, Morgan?

MP: Sure. November 25, 1973. [I was] born in Jamaica, West Indies. BP:

Wow. What part of Jamaica were you born in?

MP: I was born in Mandevol.

BP: Where is that?

MP: I'm not sure how to explain it geographically. I can just say that the ---the primary industry in Mandevol at the time I was born was mining, and this was a time before the oil crisis, and it was -it was a boom town. It was -It was one of the places where Jamaicans lived at a higher standard of living including working-class people.

BP: Are both [of] your parents from Jamaica?

MP: Both of my parents are from Jamaica, but it should be noted that I was brought to America before I turned even one- year-old, so I have no conscious memory of Jamaica.

BP: I want to talk in a minute about, maybe, the migration process -- not necessarily your memories of it, but maybe what you heard about it from your family or kind of your family's history of that, but before then, before we talk about that, I just want to ask a little bit about your parents. What were their professions in Jamaica -- Your mother and father -- and what are their names?

MP: Sure. My father's -- well, let's start with my mother. My mother's name is Barbara Monfanway Powell. So [her] middle name is M-Y-F-A-N-W-A-Y. My father's name is Mervin Grant. When my parents got divorced, I took my mother's name.

BP: What were their occupations in Jamaica?

MP: Sure. My father is an engineer. I do not know what kind of engineer because my contact with him has been so minimal in the course of my life, but he's an engineer of some sorts, and my older siblings tell me that he is superb in math. My mother has had all kinds of jobs in the course of her life. In Jamaica, she was a civil servant. I believe she was working for the then-Ministry of Housing. Of, course, around the time of my birth is about the time that Jamaica became independent. I believe it happened sometime within five years of my birth, so they were just transitioning from a British colonial system to their own national system, and she worked in those founding years of Jamaican government.

BP: How many siblings do you have?

MP: I have three sisters. They are all older. Their names are Charlene Grant, Anders Grant - Anders is, by the way, named after a scientist, and Fontaine.

BP: So now you came to -- when you came to the United States, where did you move?

MP: *Sure*. My mother had *established* herself before I got here *in* Harlem, and she was living, I *believe*, on one -- I believe it was about 129th street, or let's say 132nd street. [It] sounds better to me. I think it was 132nd street in Harlem, yes. [It was) Right off Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. Between Malcolm X and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevards.

BP: You said your mother established herself. Did your mother come here before you did?

MP: She did, she did. She was essentially there -- The events of the family moving to America and my mother and my father divorcing were somewhat simultaneous. So my mother, even though I was very young, she came here without me because she essentially trying to reestablish herself in an independent life away from my father, essentially.

BP: Did your sisters come as well with your mother and--

MP: -- They came eventually, but they -- I -- believe I was the first to be brought over, and then, I don't know -- I don't know what the sequence was, but my other three sisters were brought over subsequently.

BP: Yes. Do you know when -- Who took care of you in the interim between when your mother came to the United States and when you came?

MP: My father -- Mind -- Mind you, just for context, I want for the record for people to know -- When I was born in 1973 -- This was before the oil crisis of the mid- and late-seventies, and this is a time where certain commodities -- certain raw minerals in the developed countries were being traded at a fairly high rate, so I -- I believe Mandevol is where they mine bauxite, which becomes some kind of widely useable metal, and so the economy in Jamaica was doing very well. My father was part of that economy, and the

family back in Jamaica was living at a very high level for a developing country. They had a live-in home -- home attendant. I don't know what to call the person. I don't want to say the maid because I think she was more than that. I think she was kind of recreational supervisor for my older sisters and she cooked the food and she cleaned the house, and I have not seen pictures in a long time, but it looked like a very well taken care of, very nice house with a car, and so that is the environment that I was nurtured in before my mother sent for me and I -- I imagine, you know, very early -- In 1974.

BP: I'm going to pause this one quick. Where did you -- Where are your earliest memories, in -- in Harlem or in the Bronx?

MP: It's a good question because it's hard sometimes for me to distinguish the Harlem members from the Bronx members because, since my mother established herself first in Harlem, her -- she had a circle of friends who she kept up with when she moved to the Bronx, so even though we were living in the Bronx in three different apartments between Burke Avenue and Mace Avenue, all within or on Olinville Avenue, a very, very large part of our family network, system of friends, social circle -- were from Harlem.

BP: Were these predominately other people from Jamaica?

MP: It's -- It's interesting that you ask that question because I feel like I -- I grew up literally in the diaspora. Being in a family of people who are from Jamaica, and I want to state for the record I do -- I realize that technically I am a Jamaican-American, but I have always identified [myself] as African-American because the connection to Jamaica was weakened and has really become so diluted for me at a very young age, but having said that, I feel like I grew up in the Diaspora with people from West Africa, all different parts

of the Caribbean, and a very strong and diverse community of people who were from the South.

BP: Now so these are the people who made up the social networks from which your mother established herself. When you say she established herself, what do you mean by that?

MP: I mean that she came to America, she found a home --

BP: What kind of--

MP: I am not - I am honestly not that aware of what all of her earliest jobs were. I know she was doing various kinds of clerical work in her vocational training in Jamaica. She learned how to type, to do other kinds of office work, to receive letters that were dictated by machine or in person I distinctly remember that she knew how to write in shorthand, so she was used to having people talk at their normal rate and record information and do it so accurately, and so I was always impressed by that --

BP: -- Yes-

MP: -- as a young person.

BP: My mother is skilled in the exact same things, and you --you have such a great sense of [a] kind of historical context --

MP: -- Thank you, Brian.

BP: Yes, you really do, and I almost sometimes -- and I wonder, our mothers share the similar, you know, they share the similar entree into New York City's professional economy at that time, and I almost -- you know, I wonder how much that might play into the story of how women from the Caribbean, you know, developed a niche at this -- at this moment in time, you know in the mid-70s, [so] that's -- that's pretty -- I find it

fascinating. How did -- How did she meet this -- I want to talk a little bit more about you -- you know -- feeling that you literally grew up in the Diaspora, so, you know, who were some of the people that characterized this diasporic social network that you remember so vividly?

MP: Sure. Well, I think also for historical context, it should be stated that the time that I first came to America in 1974, this is with -- I mean -- it might be slightly after the period where we might say that the nucleus of, kind of, you know, the Pan-African community changed the center of gravity from Harlem to Bedford-Stuyvesant and other parts of Brooklyn. However, there still was, and still is, a very strong Pan-African presence in Harlem, and even more so when I was growing up, even though the dynamics are a little different today because of the heavy influx of people from Senegal and Ivory Coast and other French-speaking African countries. I distinctly remember that there were many, many, many, many people in our lives, and by "our," I mean the family, who were from Nigeria, and that also plays into a commodity of surprises because of the - the -- the real burst that Nigeria had in revenues from oil mining in the 1970s, and all the programs that Nigeria had in the 1970s to bring their best and brightest to America and Great Britain, and elsewhere, and get them trained theoretically so that they would come back and help rebuild Nigeria. Of course, it didn't work that way, but that was the thinking, and that's how money was flowing, and that's how populations were moving, so I enjoyed the opportunity to grow up with adults -- black men and women who were super-smart, educated people, ambitious people -- people with a sense of history, a sense of culture, and people dealing with very deep and rich questions of how do you incorporate

and benefit from Western technology, institutions, and society, while also maintaining a very distinct African identity.

BP: Were these people that your mother met through a particular organization, or a church, or just in the com -- just in, you know, the neighborhoods in Harlem where -- where you lived or she settled?

MP: Sure, I would have to admit ignorance on that point because I do not honestly know exactly how my mother formed her circle of friends. I had never thought of that, so thanks for asking because I had just always taken it for granted that these people were just in her life, but she must have met them somewhere.

BP: Right [laughs] --

MP: I would tend to think that she may have met them in a number of ways. They could, in some cases, have been co-workers from various jobs that she held. I know that was the case for a lot of the African-Americans who were in her circle, and there seem -- it seems that the place that she lived in Harlem was a kind of rooming house that was owned by a -- black family -- a very simple black family, a very honest black family who -- I don't think there were any children in this family. It was a husband and wife who were from the South. They maintained a church in the lower level where the man of the house was the primary religious figure. The wife kept the church clean, and you know, they were all predictably in the same place every Sunday, and some of the people who lived in this rooming house were from Africa. Yes, so I presumed that she met at least some of them there.

BP: Wow. When did you -- when did your family move to the Bronx?

MP: My family must have moved to the Bronx sometime around -- sometime between 1975 and 19 -- I would say just about 1975, and the reason I'm thinking of it that way is because I distinctly remember being in New York at the time of the blackout in the seventies, so I forget when that was, but I imagine that it was sometime between 1976 and '79, and I -- I distinctly remember it happening, so we were in the Bronx by then. BP: Okay. Yes, I think the blackout you're talking about was in July of '77.

MP: Thanks.

BP: Yes.

MP: Thank you.

BP: And you were in the Bronx at that time -MP: -- and I was conscious of what was going on. BP: What -- what -- what do you remember-MP: [Laughs]

BP: -- happening?

MP: You can imagine. I was so young. I mean, I -- I would have been about three years old, but I was very conscious of the furniture in the apartment. I was very conscious of the lights going out --

BP: But the --but the new furniture?

MP: No, the furniture we had in our home --

BP: Okay [laughs]. Well, yes because the blackout was also associated with-MP: -- Oh, the people looting.

BP: -- With the -- yes [laughs] --

MP: -- Of course, of course. In our case, it's funny. It's funny because that's an aspect of it I -- I don't remember. I remember the -- my older sister's communicating with neighbors through our windows. This was a time -- and it's very important to note, you know, this is the African - American History Project for people who are reading this in the future -- It was common for working -class people, not just black people, really all working-class people, it would have been true in Irish-American communities, certainly Italian-American communities. I can't speak for Jews because they have their own social you know, norms and all that, but it was still common for a lot of working-class people to communicate -- There were no cell phones --

BP: Right--

MP: -- by yelling at a few close windows, and people were absolutely yelling out windows and communicating back-and-forth, and it was a totally normal, common thing that was done by people independent of ethnicity, to communicate by talking out of windows.

BP: Right.

MP: And so I -- I do remember that people just kind of giving updates of what they saw and what was going on. If there was any looting, I would have been too short to have even looked out the window --

BP: [laughs]

MP: Really, to have seen what was going on on the streets, so I do not have any memory of that, but I do have memory of a kind of rich dialogue throughout the evening. Us, you know, lighting our way through our home environment with candles, and being very creative in what we ate. [Laughs]

BP: Like what?

MP: For example, being very modest people, I distinctly remember preparing a sandwich for myself out of *lello* crystals and bread. Now that's ghetto

BP: Yes. [laughs]

MP: And that's what I did. Yes. lello crystals and bread-BP

[laughs]

MP: I remember like it was yesterday. Oh, yes. [laughs]

BP: [laughs] That's funny.

MP: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

BP: I want to go back, you know, a little bit to -- you mentioned living in three different apartments while in the Bronx., but they were all along the same avenue.

MP: Exactly, Olinville Avenue.

BP: What is it?

MP: Olinville. O-L-I-N-V-I-L-L-E. It's a street that runs from about 214th street. This is not exact. I have to look at a map, but about 219th street south to Pelham Parkway.

BP: What --What neighborhood of the Bronx is that considered? Is it Pelham?

MP: It traverses Pelham Parkway in the south and further north it goes through Olinville, Bronxdale, depending on which way you look at [it].

BP: So, I want to talk a little bit about, you know, moving into your childhood and experiences in -- in these particular Bronx neighborhoods, in these environments, but I'm intrigued by, you know, the movement back and forth between the Bronx and Manhattan. How, you know, you said how in some ways, they kind of went together.

MP: I should call and find out.

BP: Yes.

MP: They go together in my memory. Once we moved to the Bronx, we stayed. It's just that, because of this extensive network of relationships with people who lived in Harlem or from Harlem, heard about Harlem, or associated with Harlem institutions like various churches, because my mother was a church hopper, and she --

BP: Your mother was a church--

MP: A church hopper. She would take me with her.

BP: What is that word?

MP: A church hopper. H-O-P-P-E-R--

BP: Hopper! [laughs] Okay--

MP: She would perhaps be a member of, you know, just one or two churches formally, but she was totally comfortable -- and did -- go to many different churches on different Sundays, but I said that to clarify the point of going back to work between Harlem, so even though we lived continuously in the Bronx --

BP: Right--

MP: From 1975 --

BP: Right--

MP: We would visit Harlem almost every weekend until I was about twelve.

BP: What -- was it a Christian church?

MP: Yes, we are "Christian" [laughs].

BP: Was it a particular denomination or churches that you would attend? Was it -- was it Anglican or --

MP: I would say that, in addition to being part of the African Diaspora I really feel that I'm part of the Christian Diaspora as well --

BP: Yes--

MP: -- Because we -- I experienced in these various churches my mother would visit the whole range of interpretations in Christianity and what it is expressing oneself as a Christian, so everything from very evangelical, emotional experiences in churches that were very much about call-and-response and all different kinds of other Africanisms in speech and interpretation to very WASPY, clinical, analytical interpretations of Christ, Christianity and the religion that I experienced for the Unitarian church and event the First Church of Religious Science, which was so clinical, analytical, and, for lack of a better word, occidental [laughs] that the First Church of Religious Science was originally named "The *Institute* of Religious Science." So that's -- that's the range of Christian experience that I grew up in.

BP: On this note, I'm intrigued by Barbara Monfanway Powell. Can we talk about her for a minute?

MP: Okay, I was wondering about her, and for the record, she would want anyone to refer to her as *Ms.* Powell.

BP: Ms. Powell--

MP: -- She's a *very* formal person, very old-school, and I don't even know that anyone even calls her fully Barbara. Even her best friends call her B. Now, whether that's an endearment,

the way she prefers to have, you know, to be announced, I don't know, but she's an *incredibly* private person, and a very --

BP: So we definitely can't get an interview with her.

MP: I doubt it could happen.

[laughter]

MP: That was a laughing point.

BP: [laughs]

MP: Yes--

BP: Oh, no, continue, so she's very -- For somebody who is very private it sounds like she is very gregarious and social.

MP: Yes so--

BP: -- as well as very, you know, ecumenical in her spirituality, curious it even seems -she explored a lot, it seems. Could you speak a little bit about her personality in so far as what types of activities - You know, you mentioned church and social networks, but, you know, what types of things did she engage in that you feel most impacted, you know, you and your world view?

MP: Wow. I would say that one of the things that I benefited from growing up withgrowing up that my mother can take credit for is that -- and again, such an historical context, she grew up in Jamaica at a time when it was still a rich colony. She experienced independence. She came from a very formal world, and even though it was a kind of political cauldron people with of the whole African Diaspora thinking about what independence could mean, or in some cases, Ghana and other countries what it already meant, how to make it work, she came

out of a world that was very formal and very dependent on central authority, a world where there was a curious paradox between an enormous amount of trust - trust in Great Britain. I mean, she remembers her test that she would take in the equivalent of her elementary and junior high school being sent to

Great Britain to be tested. I mean, that's -- that's the extent of motherhood and its control over her subjects, and she was a subject of that social construction so -- what I think I benefited from in her was a sense that there -- that the world works by certain principles whether man-made or natural. I think something that's very distinct for me about me from probably my prototypical, African-American counterpart, who has only grown up in America and only grown up with American presuppositions about life is that I don't have the nihilism that a lot of home-grown blacks have. A lot of young black men growing up in America, and it does not matter where you're from -- Kentucky, Wisconsin, California, North Carolina, Pennsylvania - they are growing up, it seems to me, in a different kind of void. They are growing up in an environment in which an enormous amount of -- an enormous amount of unrealized rhetoric is being defended by the powers that be. What am I saying. What I'm saying is a lot of young, black people are growing up in an environment where they are told that by the powers that be that, you know, the only thing standing in your way is, you know, how you access the system. So we -- we -- people want to believe because we have legislation on the books about access to education and housing and other opportunities that -- that the only thing that could be in people's way is how much energy you're willing to put into overcoming whatever barriers may still exist socially.

BP: You are right.

MP: And -- and obviously that's an incredibly intellectual thing. If you're acting yourself and average so you are a black person, they would not frame it that way, but what you would hear is, first of all, if you're an educated person, you'd be very disappointed that somebody growing up in the richest country in the world would not be able to articulate

themselves as well as they would be: I am astonished at the limited range intellectually and emotionally, that the average young black man is able to communicate at, and I want to focus on the emotional range, because a *lot of times*, we focus on what we think is empirical, what people are, you know, able to articulate intellectually, but the emotional range, I think, is the critical piece, and that's what I'm talking about when I say this void, and connecting that with the powers that be is wanting to defend what they would say are the victories of the civil rights movement and -- So what I am saying is that I think that young people are growing up in confusion because the establishment -- by the establishment -- I mean everybody -- community-based organizations, whether they are churches or non-profits. I mean everything going up to formal organizations like, you know, federal departments of education and science and the justice department and all that. I'm saying that subtly and not so subtly, the message from officialdom, whether its coming from Washington or coming from the neighborhood is, "You know what, kid? Structures have been put in place so that you can do whatever you want to do."

BP: Right--

MP: -- but the reality is after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and all the programs that were set up by the business class, not to really solve problems but just to

prevent people from continuing to riot, and they didn't want people to be angry, and there was an earlier period of do not raise questions. Shut up and buy products because consumerism is what drives the economy. In that, you lose half of your humanity. So you have the science and math equation of how things work on an empirical level, but you do not have the humanities element of the -- the histories such as science. Philosophical underpinnings of how society works. So for example, you know, that is a very intellectual

thing to say. How does that translate to the average kid growing up in the Parkside Projects two blocks from the Bronx River? The way it translates is that kids are growing up in school systems that are increasingly focused on producing results and the results that they are interested in is how well can kids do on examinations, and examinations in this very linear way to get people to first understand information and to represent that they have understood the information only takes into account half of your humanity.

BP: Right. That is - that is a profound analysis. Thank you for sharing it. You know, it is a lot of work that you put into that - developing an analysis -- a lot of life lessons. You said some things that I'm curious -- So how does you not having a nihilistic world view relate to, you know, your mother's imparting of a structured, formalized structured system. How are those two related?

MP: Sure. That's very direct. What I'm saying is that mama believed that cause- and effect-relationships were present in the world. One of the things that I encounter dealing with my prototypical African-American counterparts is very often they have grown up in households where difficult discussions and issues about relationships are not discussed. So if we were to step out here and head to Gun Hill Projects right now and talk to the average black young

woman or black man, and we got them to think deeply and talk deeply about their lives, and I say I propose that potential exercise referencing my own experiences have not done that because I grew up near Parkside and Gun Hill projects and I did have these conversation with people. I think you would find that very often in these people's lives, things were just not discussed. There is an attitude within families and within organizations -- It could be the various community organizations, it could be the various community centers that are associated with these housing projects. It could

be the administrators at the high schools or elementary schools that people go to. There is this enormous element of presumption.

BP: Yes

MP: People, whether it is within families or within institutions of a society -- It seems to me that most young people are not growing up with adults who feel they have to explain themselves. The presumption is -- not that anyone says it in these words, but they're essentially saying you know what, kid? It is too painful to digest what is going on with this family, or what is going on with this school or what is going on with this, you know, this social group. So, I do not want to go with you through you know, the pain and the joy and the intellectual enterprise of exploring what is happening in this family, in this doctor's office, in this preschool center. Instead what I am going to do is I am the adult. I am going to tell you what we are going to do, and that is a very different way to grow up. It produces a different understanding of the world, and it suggests a very different relationship between people and ideas than what I grew up with. What I grew up with was --

BP: Give an example of the kind of, you know -- Could you give an example, an anecdotal example of a cause-and-effect --

MP: Yes. Sure--

BP: --lesson that your mother imparted on you--

MP: sure--

BP: --and your siblings.

MP: So -- To be, you know, totally accurate about my family's structure and how it worked -- Even though we were talking about my mother, it should be said that my mother, having raised myself and three daughters without, you know, another primary breadwinner, it has to be said. She worked her ass off.

BP: [Laughs]

MP: My mother has had three jobs most of the time that she has been here in America. So I actually did not see my mother a whole lot except for Sundays when we would be church-hopping together or visiting friends in Harlem. In terms of cause- and- effect relationships that would be established, I would say that that came out in the very rich political dialogue in the family. Current events were discussed. Granted, most of the current events I heard discussed were between my older sisters and myself, so maybe a better example is not so much a direct, "Son, this is how things work." My mother did not sit me down a whole lot and have conversations like that with me. She does these days, now that I am older. I think what really did come out was a sense of decorum, so that my mother, when she was not, you know, working so hard and waking up early -sometimes so early that she would be, you know, gone from work by the time I woke up for school, it would definitely come up for

Sunday breakfast. I remember it being a standing tradition for our family to have breakfast together on Sundays. Sunday breakfast was *very* formal. We knew how we were expected to sit, how we were expected to eat., what chores different members of the household had to prepare the breakfast; what the table should look like, what music should be played. There was a sense of decorum, and I think that is the kind of old-world training that if I were talking to anybody in this room, Western Europe would identify with. If they did not have it, they knew scores of other people who grew up that way, and that is what my mother, I think, got from the colonial experience, one of the better things that has come from the

colonial experience, and that is what is transferred to me. There was a sense that also not just that we were doing it because it was cute, but because there was a sense, even though it was not particularly direct that this is way people have been doing this for a long time. It was useful for us as a family to do this, and that translated to a lot of other things, but I think that Sunday breakfast was the best example.

BP: What were your chores at the Sunday breakfast?

MP: Oh, yes, yes, yes. Well, being as young as I was, it was mostly to help set the table. BP: Okay.

MP: So knowing where knives and forks went and why. Which way teacups, the teacup handles, should be pointed, and folding napkins. [laughs]

BP: That is fascinating. Are you good to keep going, or--

MP: -- I'm fine, I'm fine.

BP: So back to Olinville Avenue --

MP: Olinville, that is how we pronounce it ---

BP: Olinville, Olinville. Why did you --okay, so the first question is, are you aware of how, you know, how your mother got these apartments? Was her--

[crosstalk]

MP: Yes, it's fascinating, the question, "How did my mother get these various apartments

BP: And then why -- why did you move so, you know, three different times on the same - in the same vicinity?

MP: Yes. It seemed that we were moving into larger and larger apartments. So when we first came to the Bronx, we lived essentially in a one-bedroom apartment, which is totally

illegal to have that many people in one bedroom, and it should be said that the first place that we moved was right by Burke Avenue, so Burke Avenue, even in the mid-70s, was *becoming a home* for more *people* of African-descent.

BP: Yes-

MP: Where our -- our last apartment on Olinville Avenue, where I still live -- At the time that we moved there, we were only, as far as I know, the second dark-skinned, African, you know, people of African-descent to live there, and I say that because I am struggling on how to represent Latinos, as far as I'm concerned, I include Latinos in the African Diaspora , but in terms of people who are dark, like me -- we were only the second family *ever* in the history [of Olinville] going to move in, so -- and most of the people in the neighborhood at the time that we moved in were still Italian, Jewish, a few Irish, but the neighborhood was very deeply Italian, even in the mid and late seventies, so it is a real -I'm sure my mother can

expand on this greatly, That's how it should begin. It was a struggle -- She -- My understanding is that she had friends who made arrangements for her to get certain apartments. It is doubtful that she, with four kids, could have gotten us into the last apartment we got into at the time that we got in.

BP: Right. What were -- what are your memories of these neighborhoods, of the buildings, of the street life, in terms of the people that were there and your personal interaction with them and even your family's interaction with them?

MP: Well, the community was, as I said, heavily Italian-American. Lots of Jews. It became more Jewish the further south you went, so we are talking about Allerton Avenue further south. As you get closer to Pelham Parkway, it became more and more Jewish. The community -- all these communities were mixes of four- to five- story apartment

buildings and lots of private houses for the ___ train station, which would be the number 2 line at the Burke or Allerton Avenue train station, so the street life was diverse with the games kids would play, and that is an important thing bringing things up to the present day -- that I remember a much richer street life.

BP: What types of games did you play?

MP: God. I think it was called Skellies where we would-BP

: Oh, yes, yes --

MP: Yes. [We would] Use bottle tops and lots of kids played marbles. Lots of card games. Chinese checkers, which I do not see anybody playing these days, but that was very, very popular. It was not unusual to see kids bring their -- I forget what they are called, but games that are set on boards -- outside board games of all kinds outside but it was a much

more dynamic play ness --Bringing things up to the present-day, 2004, what I find so disturbing as a young person, I am only 30- years- old, for God sake --

BP: [laughs]

MP: -- is the range of play has collapsed enormously. If you had come to where I live now, which is Olinville Avenue and Mace, or Olinville Avenue between Mace and Allerton Avenue, you would have seen kids flying paper airplanes, kids flying kites, all these kind of board games, different kinds of checkers. You may have seen some adults playing chess, not a lot, chess was never big on my block, but it would have not have been totally odd. You did see dominoes a lot, you would see dominoes with more Latinos moving in, but the range of play has been vastly wider. It has been collapsed into, and I hate to sound apocalyptic, but almost into, into this minimalist experience. Kids are out on the street today by themselves with nothing in their hands. Very weird.

BP: What was the -- what was the adult presence like in your community as a child, and I guess now we are talking about the early 1980s.

MP: Yes, now we are talking eighties. It is funny because I want everybody who ever hears or reads this interview to realize that, if I was born in 1973, came to the Bronx, well, came to New York City in 1974, was in the Bronx by 1976, that means that my entire life was spent after most of America had written the Bronx off as, you know, as forget it. It's never coming back, it's dead. Don't even look back, and, because it's very easy for someone to come read this interview or hear this interview and hear a somewhat educated person talking about this racial experience, and totally forget that all

this happened in the context of a community that the larger society had, like, forgotten about and was -- was willing to throwaway. So please remember that as you are listening to all of this. Having said that, my neighborhood in 1980 was *still* a place where it was common for the senior citizens in the community to sit in beach chairs [laughs] on the sidewalk in summer in densities that were so close that, had they wanted to, they could have all held hands [laughs] almost continuously from one end of the block to another. This was that neighborhood, and so there still were, what Jane Jacobs talked about -- "Eyes on the street." In the eighties, this is after the seventies, mind you, so that is the environment I grew up in. To be fair, it should be said that I am not from the South Bronx, I am from the North Bronx. I am from north of the Cross Bronx Expressway.

BP: Right.

MP: I am from north of the Bronx Zoo. So to be -- to be fair, yes, my community is not one of the ones that people were thinking about when they thought about the Bronx.

BP: Right.

MP: But still, it was the Bronx.

BP: What was the -- what were the relationships like between people of different racial, ethnic backgrounds?

MP: I think that I was, as a child, I think that I was both naive of the racial and socioeconomic tensions and simultaneously shielded from them.

BP: Okay.

MP: So that I --I have to believe that there was a lot more going on in terms of the tensions between groups based on class and ethnicity than I was conscious of. However-

BP: --Yes, how did you express your naivete, like how did it manifest itself --

MP: -- Oh, just in that I do not remember there being a lot of conflict, but it is difficult to imagine that there was not.

BP: Yes. That is a pretty profound statement saying at the time you did not know anything about it, but it is hard to imagine that there was not, so --

MP: -- Sure. There must have been substantial conflict between people as they identified along socioeconomic and ethnic lines, because to compare demographics between 1980 and 2000, my community has become a lot more densely Latino, African-American, Southeast Asian, and the populations of the ethnic whites who had moved in recently were not there, or if they were there, I was not hip to them being there, or at least not at my part of the Bronx, at that time.

BP: Albanians --

MP: -- Exactly. Albanians, Yugoslavians -- toward the end of the so-called Cold War, they became a larger and larger presence in our Pelham Parkway, Olinville, Bronxdale communities.

BP: Well, so let us say, you know, from your -- your --the years that you attended school through I guess we can say 1979 to, you know --

MP: -- I graduated from high school in 1992.

BP: 1992. So from '79 to '92, did you have friends who were Italian?

MP: I did, and that is the funny part about it because -- One of the things -- I am kind of reassessing my childhood because of the things I took for granted that may be suggested tension. For example, even though I had Italian friends, I was never invited to their homes to do homework or to play. Now, is it that something that they just did no do, or because

they were told, "Do not invite black friends home." I tend to think that, directly or indirectly, they were told or it was suggested, "You know what? Do not invite your black friends home."

BP: Right.

MP: I do not believe that all of my Italian friends, most of whom, it seemed to me, lived in private homes or lived in local co-ops -- that they did not have a home life with other children. I just do not believe that.

BP: So was most of your socialization with African-American children, or--

MP: -- Well that's the whole thing. At school, I had a feeling that we were equal, but it is very clear that in the after-school experience, it was a very segregated one.

BP: That's fascinating.

MP: Yes--

BP: -- In this, what we call "post-Civil Rights Era," public life is pretty, for lack of a better word, integrated, but private life is still very, for lack of a better word, segregated.

MP: Yes. It did seem that way, and the polarity -- it was not great enough, to make it evident to my naive mind, so that I did have a view of Italian, later people from the Balkan peninsula -- Yugoslavian and Albanian friends -- who I would see [at] afterschool hours, but not anywhere near as many as I would while I was at school.

BP: What -- What was your high school like? I heard -- Where did you go to high school?

MP: Sure. I went to Christopher Columbus High School. Just think of the whole lineage of

someone who looks at this in the long term, go look at a map and see where all these schools are -- demographics for that, but in succession, I went to P.S. 89, P.S. 96, Junior High School 135, and then Christopher Columbus High School, so all those schools are within, I would say, 14 blocks of each other, to the very north that would be Mace Avenue to the south, that would be Bronx -- I am sorry, to the west -- Bronx Park East-to the south, that would be Astor Avenue, and to the east -- that would be Williamsbridge Avenue, I believe.

BP: Yes. I am trying to get a sense again, continuing with a multi-cultural or multi -- you know, racial social scene in your residential area. Did it also translate into school? Were there -- you know, people of different races and ethnicities at school with you there?

MP: The answer is yes, but that changed over time.

BP: Right--

MP: -- So the first two schools I went to, P.S. 89 and P.S. 96, which by the way, when I attended them, were outstanding, were at that time mostly ethnic white kids. It was mostly Jewish and Italian, and the teachers seemed very dedicated. The level of teaching

-- It seemed to me even at the time, It seemed to be very high. I was challenged. I was not bored. I began to get bored with school in junior high school.

BP: Why is that?

MP: Well I mean, people who have degrees in education and child psychology may have -- may have, you know, other perspectives of the picture than I have --

BP: [laughs]

MP: -- because it could be that things were happening to me, you know, physically and psychologically that contributed to my boredom --

BP: Right.

MP: -- but it did seem to me that we were not expected to excel quite in the same way that we were expected to excel in elementary school. And the -- the social life of the students became, it seemed to me, progressively narrower, and the demographic mixed as expressed by ethnicity and socioeconomic factors, became less diverse. So, as I went to junior high school and high school, the schools became more and more Latino and African-American, and simultaneously, the exchanges that I had with other students became narrower and narrower, and I realize there may be factors that have to do with just how male and female students relate to each other, developmental changes, all that, but it still seems to me that, quite frankly, the more students who were in Christopher Columbus High School came from housing projects. That meant that they were -because of everything they were, you know, coming out of from -- because they did not go to P.S. 89 or 96. They went to other--

BP: Right—

MP: -- junior high schools where expectations and resources were lower, and they were bringing that baggage to First Junior High School 135 and then Christopher Columbus High School, and they were sharing that with me and the other students.

BP: Right--

MP --and that brought a level of learning and --

BP: Right--

MP: -- the dialogue within class and the opportunity to network with other students to do group projects to a lower level. Unfortunately, I wish that were not the case, but that is the way it seemed to be.

BP: Right. What were teachers and their relationships like with you in these later years of your education?

MP: Well, the first thing I want to say is that I was fortunate in that I went to junior high school before someone changed -- and the formulas may have gone back and forth over time, but when I went to junior high school, it went up to -- I am losing track of it as I get older --

BP: Right--

MP: -- like eighth or ninth grade --

BP: Right.

MP: -- So we got to mature somewhat in junior high school. Surely after I left junior high school 135 they changed the formula so that it -- they took a year off so that meant that somewhat less mature young people were thrown into the high school mix.

MP: With horrible consequences. Within two years of making that policy, they found that teenage pregnancy was through the roof, because you now have young girls at school

with older boys. You know, they got involved in relationships, children resulted. It really did not work. It was a dumb policy. It never should have happened. I did not experience that because, you know, so I got to mature a little bit more in junior high school, and I came to

high school as a more mature person.

BP: Really.

MP: I did not experience the same kind of predation [laughs] by older young people, and was able to integrate myself fairly well with the high school environment.

BP: Yes, was there much encouragement for you to go on to higher education after high school.

What path in your educational career followed after high school?

MP: Well, here, I want to state for the record I really believe the way that I was tracked may have been different from the way other students were tracked. So that even though I was always encouraged to pursue post-secondary education, I am not necessarily saying that I think that my generation or my similar others, young black males, were also encouraged to go to college.

BP: Did you develop many friendships with African-American guys as you, you know-It seems like demographics are shifting, not only in your residential life, --

MP: Yes--

BP: -- but also again -- and that is a reflection in your school life, so what was - what was your peer cohort like in terms of their - in their class background or even, you know, how they might have looked at similar issues that you have this -- had a foundation with your family in terms of politics or just seeing the world. I guess I am curious about, you know, you spoke about having conversations, right, with African-Americans from a

different, either a different region of the Bronx or a different class background than you

came from.

MP: So you are asking me specifically what my relationships with other young, black males?

BP: Or women

-MP: Okay--

BP: Just other people in your cohort. Friends, peers growing up -- kind of seeing the same things you are seeing.

MP: That is right --

BP: You know how they maybe looked at things differently.

MP: Sure, I would say that --

BP: Well, what were some of the things that you ~ like what were some of the salient issues that kind of defined your, you know, your dialogues, at that time?

MP: Well, junior high school and high school, our dialogues were defined by what was on TV.

BP: Right [laughs].

MP: I watched an *enormous* [laughs] amount of television --

BP: Really?

MP: Which I do not do now. I think contemporary television is mind drog for the most part.

BP: [laughs]

MP: And I think that anybody who cares about the future of American civilization has to be involved in the debate over -- over where we go from where we are in terms of mass

communication. We have to address that in a much more serious way. We need to appreciate that other civilizations have a -- other societies have addressed the situation differently. There are other countries in the Western Hemisphere where there are legal restraints on what the content of material that is aimed at child audiences can be, and they do not leave it up to the free market to determine what young people are going to watch. We need to -- If we care about the future of American civilization, we really need to revisit that. Having said that, my dialogues with my peers, independent of race or class, in junior high school and high school, were dominated by what was on TV. What we watched in junior high school would have been much more -- kind of comic-book type interpretations that were put on TV, and in high school, it would have been more of the kind of precursor of reality TV shows. Lots of talk shows: Mantell Williams, Oprah Winfrey, at that time, Donahue, et cetera, et cetera.

BP: [chuckles]

MP: Yes.

BP: Do you have any memories of -- of when the Rodney King incident occurred? Did that occur during your time in high school? Was that something that --

MP: Yes!

BP: Yes, it did.

MP: When the Rodney King beating and media blitz happened, I was in, I was a senior in Christopher Columbus high school. That would have been nineteen-ninety -- that would have been spring 1992.

BP: Right. How did that affect kind of the -- the pulse of --

MP: Sorry, I wasn't listening. Leg cramp.

BP: Oh--

Yes. -- Oh, god. I distinctly remember - First of all, my peers in high school were shocked to discover that I was unaware that the Rodney King beating had happened until maybe two or three days after it happened because it -- it became kind of immediate or it seemed, in retrospect, to become kind of immediate news, but I was informed by classmates, not by the media, that it had happened. I heard about it in social studies class -- People were saying, "Can you believe what is happening in Los Angeles?" And I was like, " Oh, that is what is happening in Los Angeles?" But anyway, I do not remember it stimulating extended dialogue, but I do remember us having maybe one or two conversations about it, but what people thought about it specifically, I do not remember. What did come to mind, though, that I want to say is, and this goes not to the content of the dialogue, but more the structure of the dialogue. I do distinctly remember that in one of these conversations we had in history class or social studies class, I expressed dismay at a Latino student, a female Latina, because she did not feel comfortable expressing her views in regards to race or police conduct or anything like that, and I remember sharing with her in confidence, one-an-one. I remember sharing for her because I really cared about this young woman .that I thought that in high school was an ideal and fleeting opportunity, it seemed to me, to be able to discuss anything you want to discuss somewhat openly without serious consideration for how it might affect other things in your life. What I was saying. It occurred to me even in high school that we were privileged to say almost anything we wanted to say without it having the same kind of affect on, for example, your professional options or whatever. I mean, it occurred to me even in high school that professional people oftentimes will censor a wide range of what

they say because they are afraid of how it might affect them, and it seemed to me that I was disturbed that she was missing the opportunity --

BP: Right.

MP: --and I wondered what her missing that opportunity suggested about us as a peer group.

BP: Right.

MP: It really concerned me that this young woman was like, foregoing what I thought was like a golden opportunity to exchange ideas. I was like, "If you do not feel comfortable talking now, are you ever --

BP: Right--

MP: -- as a human being going to feel comfortable expressing yourself. And I wondered what her hesitancy said about us.

BP: Yes.

MP: -- and that we had perhaps not made a place for her to express herself openly and comfortably with us. I remember that disturbing me a lot.

BP: How have you -- That's a -- I mean, that is a powerful question about, you know, the responsibility of communities fostering people's, you know, fostering people's comfort zones of expression. There's a lot there. What -- You stayed in the Bronx. Why?

MP: Oh my God, that is such a good question, and this is something that I want people to read this interview five years from now and ten years from now to remember. People need to understand that Brian Purnell asked an incredibly good question, because what I am dealing with, twelve years after high school, is that, as far as I know, only one exception, every --I did not say most, every person I went to Christopher Columbus High

School with, who I have I either stayed in touch with or have been able to track in some way through dialogue with other peers, who has received any post-secondary education, has left. Other than one other person that I know of, every other person that I went to Christopher Columbus High School with, almost all of whom spent all their childhoods in the Bronx, except those of who were somewhat recently immigrants, and there were a lot of those people from Guyana, Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, including, we didn't mention, Eastern European Jews, and Russian Jews specifically, because there was a huge population of Russian Jews that came in to the Bronx in the eighties. Those people are gone. And it really is a huge question, both why they left and why I stayed and why care about the Bronx [and] identify with the Bronx, because one of the things that people who are looking to this and reading this interview should never take for granted is it is significant that I am available for this interview because most of my similar others, as defined by people of my generation who grew up in the Bronx to have post-secondary education, most of us are gone. We are not in the Bronx today. You would have to make a serious effort even to find us, and even if you find us, it would be a different interview because you would be talking about somebody who chose to leave where they were from, and that is a different story. I am someone who actually identifies with the Bronx, has come from the Bronx, and is an educated person who wishes to stay in the Bronx. That is a rare commodity, and it is unfortunate for the future of the Bronx that that is rare, and the Bronx, if it is serious about being viable, needs to reinvent that story, because that is not sustainable.

BP: So why did you stay?

MP: Multiple factors. It is hard to answer that question without focusing on a purely individualistic dialogue. Meaning, as I am doing this interview, I really want the interview to be *useful* for people who are studying macro sociological change and history, but so much of why I stayed is extremely personal, and may not be necessarily representative of my generation or my ethnicity or my social class or whatever. So -- so even as I have been asked the question, I struggle with how to answer it. I -- I think -- So I will give an example of it, of one thing that I think is very personal, and one thing that I think is a kind of macro thing. The very personal thing is that my mother, even though she had done it for my sisters, decided, in my case, that hell no, she was not going to sign any financial aid papers., and she was so strict about that --

BP: Financial aid papers for post-secondary education.

MP: Exactly.

BP: Okay.

MP: So, she was not just saying that no, she would not co-sign for a loan. She was saying that even if I qualified for a full-scholarship or if I qualified for various grants that did not have to be repaid, she would not sign paperwork for that either. That is a very deep thing. That means that I had to do this whole intricate dance with the -- with the public and private educational finances then figure out how I was going to college after high school. So that complicated my life enormously, as you can imagine, and I was too young -- graduated from high school at age 17 -- to find my own financial papers, and I was not able to establish independence because I wasn't independent. So that set up a whole series of events and circumstances that I -- you know -- that the whole rest of my life is going to be a consequence of because that is a huge thing.

BP: Right.

MP: The laws were such -- I do not know what they are now, but the laws were such, at that time that you had to be something like -- 21 and in some cases 24 to fill out your own paperwork so I was years ahead of -- well, years away from being able to think of how I was going to independently pursue post-secondary education. Just because of the question of how do you finance it and what is the paperwork required to do that. So not being able to get on that educational escalator that so many people use to "make it" and pull yourself by your own bootstraps and, you know, go to where those professional people are, which was the myth of my generation. There was not a story that was promulgated widely within the Bronx community or within the society at large of, "You know what? Wherever you're from is a better place to be from and think about how you are going to be part of that community and contribute to it and give back all the good things you may have gotten from it." That was not the dominant story when I grew up. The dominant story was that -- and again, these stories are often communicated in very subtle and indirect ways, but the story is -- I would say the story was and I would say the story still is, that -- that the ideal life is to be white and middle-class, and if you are not white and middle-class, that you were somehow -- that you're operating at a disadvantage, and the message conveyed in very unsympathetic ways, so its not that you regret that -you know, ipso facto de facto, you're operating at a disadvantage. It is no, something's wrong with you, and that is a very different message to send out. So if you grew up with that message that is communicated to you -- you know -- through every conceivable way, you do not want to say where you are from. You want to get out. What I am saying is that I am not surprised that my similar others do not live in the Bronx anymore.

Why

would you when you have spent 17 years of your life hearing that, you know, you are from a Godforsaken place and why the hell would you even want to stay there?

BP: Right.

MP: So I am -- the reason why I am still in the Bronx, perhaps care about the Bronx is maybe I was forced into empathy with the Bronx. Maybe, because I used to think about this more deeply. Maybe it is because I could not get on that educational escalator, so that I could reach my own educational potential, and the, you know, someone who now has that masters degree in whatever I would have pursued. It probably would have been the same in business management -- and gotten, you know, those various jobs out of college and moved out to Westchester or elsewhere as so many of my similar others have. Maybe that is why I am still in the Bronx. I think that's an enormous part of it that I probably had not thought about it consciously. Thanks, Brian.

BP: That is the beauty of the process. Is there anything you'd like to add for now? I mean, again -- I just consider this part one of many possible further conversations. So, is there anything that you would like to talk about that you feel I did not get to with my questions or--

MP: Yes. I want to read into the record of the letter that I am going to send today, and I think the letter will foreshadow my future as a citizen of the Bronx, New York City, America, and the world.

BP: Excellent.

MP: I am going to read who the letter is addressed to and what the letter is. Here we go. Michael Hollisek, Bronx District 3N6, Address 1 Bronx River Parkway in the Bronx, 10467, and David Cane, Crotona Park Administrator, 1 Bronx River Parkway, the Bronx

NY 10462 regarding failure to respond to community residents request for a Crotona Park master plan. Dear gentlemen, this letter is written to remind both of you that neither of you has responded to my request for a master plan at Crotona Park, which was created by a team, lead by a landscape architect, and probably paid for by Partnerships for Parks sometime in the last six years. Your non-response is made especially disappointing since the park, Crotona, over which you have responsibility, is in dire need of positive community stewardship, and it is your responsibility to cultivate productive relationships with any community members to take an active interest in it. Since this participation is as yet remarkably small, it is difficult to emphasize with why I am still waiting for a copy of this document several months after having request it -- requested it. Second paragraph. Please see my contact information above which reads Post Office box 490 the Bronx, NY 10451-0490 home telephone number 718-65-1821. E-mail address [powellkm @hotmail.com](mailto:powellkm@hotmail.com). If the documents [or] documents I am requesting are housed at Partnerships for Parks, i.e. a non-profit, I am happy to send whatever copying fee there may be given the correct contact there. I am very fond of that organization. It would seem very strange, however, if either one of you did not have a copy or a master plan and! or subsequent documents that are ready to be mailed to the public you are being paid to serve. Please be sure I either have been mailed this [or] these documents or that I had been contacted with information on how I should at your earliest convenience. Your friend of mid-Bronx parks and critic of failed bureaucracy, Morgan Powell. So I think that this letter that I read into the record is going to prefigure, foreshadow my future as a resident of the Bronx and a citizen, and mind you, this letter is a

carbon copy to a -- a younger African American female, Ebony Washington, who actually -- her family moved

to one of those new private homes built just outside of Crotona Park. In what's been built as the comeback of the South Bronx.

BP: Right.

MP: -- shortly after they were built. She has got her own story. Ebony Washington. BP:

Ebony Washington.

MP: And it is also a carbon copy to the District Manager John Dudley of Community Board Three. So I -- **I** -- **What** I hope this interview will do is be useful for people who a. are interested in my generation and b. are interested in environments of justice because the idea that, mind you, these two Caucasian males, who are being paid good money by the City of New York to administer [to] a park that was grand when it was built and has undergone decades of neglect and only in the recent past has begun to come back -- You can imagine that these two Caucasian males, in every public meeting they have, are presenting themselves as, you know, administering the comeback of a park and yet, look at what we're doing, here, ignoring one of the few requests truthfully received by a committed and qualified community resident who wants to do something for the park, and that is why the letter is a lot less diplomatic than most of my letters are because I feel like, you know what, you are not fulfilling your office, and I am sure that you present -both of you present yourselves as people who, you know, are kind of in this battle to restore the spark and look at what you are actually doing, it is not matching up. I have got to hold you accountable. So, in that, it should be identified that by profession, I am a professional gardener. I have well

over 1500 hours of horticultural training. I am rare in the field. There are not a lot of young, African-American people in professional horticulture, even nationally. Very few of us, and I have something to contribute to this

society, and I want, for the record, to state that contrary to the, you know, all of the public relations being put out by the various institutions that are supposed to be involved in this fight - the New York Botanical Gardens, the Parks Department, which at the time of this interview is in a class action lawsuit for racial discrimination. And the various other horticulture institutions -- they really are clueless about how to move ahead, and you would not think they were clueless if you read their PR because they have all been posed a very direct question in some cases by lawsuits and other cases by foundations or public administrators who have raised questions about the non-participation of people of color in positions of responsibility, but I want the record to say that there is not a good match up between PR and reality. That a young person like me who has a hell of a lot to contribute is finding it very difficult to make a contribution.