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## Pita, Dorothy

Pita, Dorothy. Interview: Bronx African American History Project  
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Dr. Dorothy Pita Interview

Naison: This is the thirty-first interview for the Bronx African American history Project. We are interviewing Dr. Dorothy Pita who for many years was a teacher in the South Bronx, starting at Sp9 and then moving to Ps 18 and this is an excellent chance to get the view point of an educator who worked in the schools of the South Bronx.

Naison: Dr. Pita when did you first start teaching in the South Bronx?

Dr. Pita: In 1950.

Naison: And was it Ps 39?

Dr. Pita: Yes

Naison: Now what was the ethnic and racial composition of that particular elementary school?

Dr. Pita: Well there was a sprinkling of Jewish children, and there was I would say half Latinos and half African Americans.

Naison: And how would you describe the general atmosphere of the community surrounding the school? In terms of safety, the parenting, the general feeling you got going into the school.

Dr. Pita: Well I felt perfectly safe. There was not problem I either came by bus or I came by ...

Naison: Where were you living at that time?

Dr. Pita: I was living off the Grand Concourse.

Naison: Ok so you were living in the Bronx.

Dr. Pita: Yes. I was born and brought up in the Bronx.

Naison: So you came to school by public transportation ...

Dr. Pita: By bus. Yes absolutely and there wasn't any guards anywhere it was very open.

Naison: And you came to school by bus and you went back by bus.

Dr. Pita: Right.

Naison: Now was it your impression that the children here came from very poor families or was this not something very different from what you had grown up among?

Dr. Pita: Well I think that in a way I was kind of stupid, because I really didn't know what was going on. They came to school everyday *well* dressed, I don't think there was a breakfast program but I think there was lunch. And even maybe we were collecting money for lunch. Everybody seemed to I mean I never thought that there would be a one parent family, to tell you why; I had an older kindergarten teacher next-door who used to say around thanksgiving time we started preparing the children to make presents for their parents so they even made a calendar or they made something out of a oats box, you know the ... for their father, and it never dawned on me that maybe they didn't have a father. So we made forty-five things, fourth-five, and ninety things for the children to take home at Christmas time.

Naison: Now what grade did you teach?

Dr. Pita: Kindergarten

Naison: You were teaching Kindergarten.

Dr. Pita: Yes and making these presents was part of being a Kindergarten teacher.

Naison: Now how involved were the parents in the school?

Dr. Pita: Zero. I don't remember anybody being ... but I did have parent teacher conferences and I have one story I would like to relate. In the morning there was a African, well I should say a black boy who was like a trouble maker, and in the afternoon it was a different class right morning class forty-five and afternoon class forth-five, was also a trouble maker.

Naison: So this was half-day kindergarten at that time.

Dr. Pita: Right half-day. So when I brought he parents in, yes I was going to give them a what for. I said to the first mother who was African American, "you know this boy is urn you know he's really disruptive in class." And she says 'well look, ■ work and he spends all day running around outside.' So I had this new feeling that the reason he was like this was because he had nobody controlling him, he came to school and this is the way he acted. In the afternoon it was a Latino mother, and I said you know "your boy is very disruptive in class." And she said 'well I don't let him out everyday, you know he stays in the house all day I only bring him to school then I take him home.' So here I have two boys acting exactly alike for two completely different reasons. (Laughing) That was a lesson I never forgot. I was going to tell them how to behave right and it turned out that I needed a lot of learning.

Naison: Right now as a Kindergarten teacher did you find this experience comparable ... did you do student teaching before you went?

Dr. Pita: Yes.

Naison: Did you find this situation comparable to your student teaching?

Dr. Pita: Not at all.

Naison: In what ways did it differ?

Dr. Pita: Well first I student taught at Bank St.

Naison: Right ok

Dr. Pita: Then a school in Queens that was very, I think it was what it was all white

Naison: But other than the racially or ethnic difference, what difference was there in the atmosphere or the cognitive level, and how would you describe those differences?

Dr. Pita: Well I think, I can't remember any, I didn't think when it came to the school I'd be saying "oh my god these children are so far behind!" No. There was a lot of good things we were doing, a lot of singing, a lot of dancing, a lot of working with materials. *You* can shut off the machine for a minute.

Naison: Again I am very interested in the atmosphere, it sounds like it was a very positive you know enthusiastic atmosphere and these kids seemed like they were loved.

Dr. Pita: Yes oh course they were. I would say so. And they were funny and they were talented; one little girl sat down one day little African American she started playing skip~ to-my-oo. I said "where did you learn to play that?" She says 'from you.' She heard me playing, she liked it she had it. She played it; you know that's a experience I could never forget.

Naison: So this was something that was very enjoyable to you.

Dr. Pita: Absolutely. I have another, several stories. Here is another one, a little boy and I remember his name now I remember anybody's name Nevel Pottenger, Ifhe somewhere in the world have him call me up. He was very shy and he didn't do very much, you know I guess he played a little bit. But when we would get together to sing or you know we would just sit quietly. So around Christmas time, all the other children were singing and dancing he came up to me and he said he'd like to sing a song. I said it must have knocked me over. Such a shy boy standing right in front of me and sang Jingle Bells. I don't know why I never forgot it even now I feel like crying because he did it. That atmosphere in that class made him bold enough to do something so incredible. Nevel Pottenger if you're out there call me. (Laughing)

Naison: Right, so this was Long Wood Ave. and the neighborhood would you call it Hunts Point at this point?

Dr. Pita: No.

Naison: What was it called that particular area?

Dr. Pita: Well I guess the East Bronx because on one corner was Southern Blvd. on the other, the main street was Prospect. That's it. And in between were these streets called Kelly St.

Naison: That's the area where Colen Powel grew up. He was born on Kelly St.

Dr. Pita: Ok that's where my mother and father first moved to before I was born, they lived there. So I guess it was first a Jewish neighborhood and then it became a black neighborhood and then it became a Latino neighborhood.

Naison: So even in 1950 half of the families the kids in your class in that school were Latino?

Dr. Pita: Yes.

Naison: Now how many years did you stay at Ps39?

Dr. Pita: I stayed, I think about three years.

Naison: three years. And then that's when, did you teach Kindergarten all three of those years?

Dr. Pita: Yes.

Naison: And then you moved to Ps18?

Dr. Pita: Yes because it was a brand new school.

Naison: And this was something you chose to do?

Dr. Pita: Absolutely, Yes Sir.

Naison: What was the appeal of making the move?

Dr. Pita: Well first of all it was nearer to where I lived, and second-of-all it was a brandnew school, so it was very pretty, it was very nice. It had a back yard with a sand box and two (laughing) hops in the water, frogs.

Naison: Oh those big frogs.

Dr. Pita: Yeah are they still there? No I don't think *so*.

Naison: no they don't have a sandbox it is all concrete now, but this was right near the Patterson houses which was a newly build.

Dr. Pita: Yes.

Naison: Now what are you're, as a Bronx resident, what was your feeling about public housing when it was built? Did you see this as a very positive thing for the community?

Dr. Pita: Yes.

Naison: So it didn't have the stigma of the projects that people have today.

Dr. Pita: No and it was very mixed. I remember that when I left because I was pregnant this other teacher, a German lady in these projects, knit two sweater for me like over night (laughing).

Naison: And what grade did you come in to teach at Ps18?

Dr. Pita: Kindergarten.

Naison: So were you in Kindergarten all the way through?

Dr. Pita: No no when I came back, during that strike I guess I was after this ....

Naison: Ok but you taught from let's say from about 1953 to 56 at the Ps18?

Dr. Pita: Yes.

Naison: And that was all Kindergarten in those years?

Dr. Pita: yes.

Naison: ok Now at Ps18 were the parents more involved than they were at Ps39?

Dr. Pita: I would say, maybe it is my stupidity, but there was very little parents involved.

Naison: PTA's were not a big force in the school at that time?

Dr. Pita: Right. I guess the parents must have been satisfied with what was going on at school. And there was some very fine teacher in the school.

Naison: So you had the sense that this was a school with a very highly motivated staff, and a very good atmosphere?

Dr. Pita: yes I would say that was the way it was.

Naison: And you just loved going to work?

Dr. Pita: well some days I would come home and say you jerk what did you do, your such a stupid teacher. And other days I said ok fabulous depending on how things went. I guess sometimes maybe I thought maybe I wasn't such a hot teacher.

Naison: Now this is again all half-day Kindergartens?

Dr. Pita: Yes.

Naison: Ok and who picked up the children was it largely their mothers?

Dr. Pita: That's interesting, because since they many of them lived in the Patterson houses they could go home by themselves.

Naison: So a lot of the kids walked home?

Dr. Pita: Right.

Naison: And what was the neighborhood like of the privately owned housing outside.

Dr. Pita: Well I think it was mostly Italian owned right. Right across the street there was a store that made sandwiches like you've never tasted.

Naison: Joey's sandwich shop, was that the name of it?

Dr. Pita: I don't remember all I know it was on Maurice Ave.

Naison: Yes they took me there; I ate in there, the best combination sandwiches.

Dr. Pita: Forget it, not that.

Naison: Its not that it was a different one?

Dr. Pita: it was Italian woman and she made sandwiches made out of scrambled eggs and some ham, then she put it into a hero but it was like you've never tasted. Never tasted, the egg was exactly right and it was perfect. So everyday, for a long time a teacher and I went out and got those sandwiches for lunch that was our lunch. And they were great.

Naison: Now you sense is you know, did you ever feel when you were teaching in this school you were in a quote depressed area or a poverty area? Was that something that

you know you thought of as a teacher or was that not something that was on your radar screen at that time?

Dr. Pita: It wasn't but I remember something except that made me think I a different direction like, is somebody out here wanting to come in? Yeah somebody's knocking.

\* \* tape shut off\*\*

Naison: We were saying about.

Dr. Pita: Oh well I don't remember what year it was when I went, I didn't go into the Patterson houses very much but once went up an elevator and I was shocked to find that there was urine smell in the elevator. It had never dawned on me that anybody would do that in an elevator. You see how far, this is history right. (Laughing)

Naison: But as a teacher did you see kids coming in malnourished or having huge attention problems beyond what you would have normally expected in a kindergarten child?

Dr. Pita: No

Naison: These were kids who seemed like they were cared for and well fed and nurtured.

Dr. Pita: And I'll tell you something else that was nice, but I'm not sure it involved the Kindergarten children. They had a after school program and a lot of the older children would come and they would play Ping-Pong and games and go into the school. It seemed like such a normal thing to be doing. To have that open and have these children have a place to go.

Naison: Yeah everybody I spoke to who grew up in the Patterson houses talked about the after school and night center as just an absolutely wonderful part of their life. Now did teachers work in that after school center?

Dr. Pita: Yes but not the teachers from our school. They came form other schools.

Naison: Did you ever work in an after school center?

Dr. Pita: No but I saw it and I heard people say that it was just a wonderful, sometimes at about three o'clock when I was dismissing my classes I would see people coming in and I know that it was a positive thing.

Naison: Now in those days did teachers stay much after three to work or that was not a pattern?

Dr. Pita: No it was not a pattern, but I don't think they had what they had later on when they gave a teacher forty-five minutes every day to put things together, but you know



when you have two teachers in a room one is the main teacher in the morning and the other one is her assistant, and in the afternoon they reverse that. So you have a lot of time to fix papers and hang up pictures ...

Naison: So there were always two teachers in a kindergarten class at that time and there were forty-five kids in a class?

Dr. Pita: Right.

Naison: Was that true of other classes?

Dr. Pita: No

Naison: Kindergarten was more. So the system was two teachers and forty-five students. And do you recall what the class size was of like first, second, or third grade.

Dr. Pita: No but you can see from the pictures.

Naison: Right

Dr. Pita: it got to be a big bunch, but not forty-five. I'd say thirty-five.

Naison: Now did you ever feel that there was racial tension in the school or the community when you were at Ps18?

Dr. Pita: No

Naison: Did you feel that at any point in the Bronx in that period?

Dr. Pita: You know I must have been asleep because I didn't. But let me tell you about some of the things I wrote down.

Naison: Ok sure. Yeah absolutely.

Dr. Pita: Ok umm let's see, when I started teaching in the first grade the principal brought in a troublesome child into my class and my troublesome boy said to him very loudly 'this is a very important class and we don't allow any ...

Naison: Now this is in the fifties or this is later?

Dr. Pita: No this is the sixties.

Naison: Because I want to get

Dr. Pita: Oh sorry.

Naison: Yeah I want to sort of do get through the fifties and then jump back because kind of setting the stage for what because again the part of my reason for doing this is many people who grew up in this neighborhood said things had changed by the sixties. And I wanted to sort of bounce that off you. So your basically the impression was that this was an environment where people of different backgrounds got along very well.

Dr. Pita: Well I cant say that, but there was no fights in the school.

Naison: And you didn't see fights outside?

Dr. Pita: None.

Naison: Going back and forth, how long did it take you to get to Psl8 from where you lived at that time?

Dr. Pita: Well I took the bus all the way down to Grand Concourse and then I walked two blocks.

Naison: Now how far up in the Grand Concourse did you live?

Dr. Pita: 181<sup>st</sup> street.

Naison: Now people who lived in you area tell you you should be afraid to go down t that area?

Dr. Pita: No but there were people who were saying that Crescent Ave, Crescent Ave is where I lived, Crescent is one block off. Further south they were letting Latinos and Black people into the houses that were always white. So that people were nervous, we weren't but other people were thinking lets get out of here.

Naison; Now did people ever talk about gangs in the south Bronx when you were teaching there as something to worry about?

Dr. Pita: No but doesn't that make me seen like I must have had a deaf ear?

Naison: Not necessarily. Not necessarily because ...

Dr. Pita: No it didn't seem to be that way.

Naison: What about the family structure, did most of these kids who you were working with seem to come from two parent families as far as you could gather? Who would come in during Open School Week? Did you see a significant component of fathers?

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Dr. Pita: See I draw a blank. I don't really remember, yet I can't remember, thinking back on it now what did I think? Even when I was at Ps39 I never thought that some children were being brought up in a one parent family? No it never crossed my mind. I

remember one parent who said that she goes to Riverside Church when they have sales and she brings home material and she makes dresses and you know. So I had a feeling that there is a lot of very clever women in those houses. They did a lot of interesting things.

Naison: Yeah, any other things about that 1950' s experience that you would want to share or we did touch on this far?

Dr. Pita: No

Naison: Ok umm so you got married and then you became pregnant and left the school system for how many years?

Dr. Pita: I think I came back, what year was the strike?

Naison: The strike was 1968.

Dr. Pita: That's when I came back.

Naison: So you returned to Ps18 in 1968, and where were you living at that time? Were you still living in the Bronx?

Dr. Pita: No I was living in Brooklyn. I was living, oh it terrible when I'm thinking it and talking it I can't remember, Right where the Promenade is.

Naison: Ok Brooklyn Heights.

Dr. Pita: Brooklyn Heights.

Naison: Ok and were you still going by public transportation?

Dr. Pita: Yeah

Naison: You were, now ...

Dr. Pita: It was kind of easy because you get on that train and you get off at like 49<sup>th</sup> street.

Naison: Now did the school and the neighborhood seem very different in 1968?

Dr. Pita: Nope.

Naison: It still seemed like a kind of safe nurturing place?

Dr. Pita: Yes absolutely. But the Italians were gone and more Latinos were there.

Naison: Now in the fifties it was there were very few Latinos in was mostly black and Italian.

Dr. Pita: Right

Naison: And by the late sixties it was black and Latino and the Italians were gone.

Dr. Pita: Right.

Naison: What grade were you teaching in 1968'1

Dr. Pita: Well I had several; I started out in Kindergarten then I went on to become a first grade teacher and then a second grade teacher, and then at one point I cant really tell you what year it was, my principal asked me to become the Black Studies Coordinator.  
(Laughing)

Naison: There you go.

Dr. Pita: Have you heard about this?

Naison: Not about this in particular, but I've, do you know, another person who I interviewed named Joan Fortune was also asked to be a Black Studies Coordinator in a school in the South Bronx.

Dr. Pita: So then I went yes I wasn't I didn't have my own classroom, but I went from room to room and the forty-five the teacher was allowed to go out do things on their own. And so they gave me a lot of books, they gave me an office full of books, wonderful wonderful wonderful books I might add. So I started.

Naison: Now in the 1950's how many African American teachers were there at Ps18?

Dr. Pita: two.

Naison: And one of them was your co-teacher.

Dr. Pita: Right.

Naison: And what was her name?

Dr. Pita: her name was Virginia Boozer. (Spells out) B O O Z E R

Naison: And was she a Bronx resident?

Dr. Pita: No she carne from New Rochelle.

Naison: And who was the other teacher?

Dr. Pita: Pat Saxton.

Naison: And what grade was she in?

Dr. Pita: She was a Kindergarten teacher; she went on and did other things.

Naison: And when you returned in 1968, were there more black teachers on the staff?

Dr. Pita: Same two.

Naison: Same two. So when you returned was it like you hadn't skipped a beat and the atmosphere was pretty much the same, or were there some differences?

Dr. Pita: I think I thought it was more or less the same. You know it was different because times had gone on and I'm different, but same children same stuff. (chuckles) I wouldn't say there was a major difference.

Naison: And you didn't feel that kids were harder to reach or were more disruptive or that there was some change in ...

Dr. Pita: Well there was because you know they would, I had this feeling that when African American Children were in my class they thought they were normal and regular: By the time they got to the third grade it had hit them that they were black, and some how different.

Naison: And it's interesting and that was something you noticed very clearly in the late sixties but not in the fifties?

Dr. Pita: I think so.

Naison: That a kind of black consciousness had emerged which affected the way kids saw themselves.

Dr. Pita: I think so.

Naison: Now that's very interesting. In what way did that consciousness affect their behavior and self image?

Dr. Pita: Well it was a very negative twist and turn because there was problems in the lunch room, not terrible problems people didn't eat very much, they threw it all out. That food was disgusting, and the teachers were complaining about some of these students.

Naison: In other words you're saying that their emerging black consciousness created conflicts with authority figures in the school who were not black or else created behavioral expectations which conflicted with the schools...

Dr. Pita: Well don't know whether black students were disruptive because of, I really wouldn't want to say that. I would want to say that, I don't know what I would want to say. (Chuckling)

Naison: No well this is something we're all grappling with, this idea that something changed at this time. And trying to figure out what it is.

Dr. Pita: No the movement black is beautiful and all that didn't that affect these students?

Naison: Well that's another question I would ask you. These are elementary school students and presumably you know the black the movement the Civil Right movement but what your suggesting is that the way it was translated down was not helpful in terms of their behavior.

Dr. Pita: Right.

Naison: Because in one way could say it is black is beautiful could make somebody more confident, more academically motivated, more disciplined. That would certainly be the way lets say Malcolm X would have wanted it. But your saying suggesting that it became something that didn't turn into more confidence in a positive sense for a school environment.

Dr. Pita: I would agree. Yes.

Naison: And that's something that you noticed; as the kids got older there was something, there was tension, more behavior. ..

Dr. Pita: Well let me tell you some of the things that I wrote down.

Naison: Ok Sure

Dr. Pita: Alright, So I became the Black Studies Coordinator, now even before that I found some greeting cards around Christmas time that had a black Santa. I said oh how appropriate. So I bought the whole pack, and I gave them out to myself I had it and it came to one teacher and said "look isn't this nice to put on ..." She says 'well Santa was white.'

Naison: (Snickers) Right

Dr. Pita: Yes my job as a person going around to the classes was to talk about black studies, black history that rated at zero. These black children could not be less interested in this whole business that had to do with something they didn't understand. They didn't grab it as Yeah that's awesome! No failed. So I went because I had to spend forty-five minutes each day with each one of these classes was something really stuffy. So I took

out this or I had this book on Nancy Stories. Well I started reading to them, these are sixth graders. Let me tell you what their reaction was silence, absolute silence. All of these tough children, you know those who was always acting out were sitting and listening. Now what does that mean? What does that convey? That they heard it and they saw it and they responded to it as if it was something that really belonged to them, like that was part of their I don't know their psyche. It was interesting because all these other things fell by the wayside

Naison: And that worked; those Nancy stories.

Dr. Pita: Right yeah. And then I, you know because I am very talented with music, I began to bring in folk songs black folk songs right, spirituals. They responded, that was a way to get to them instead of talking about, I don't know what it is they wanted me to talk about.

(Laughing)

Naison: Yeah now were you very aware of the music that was popular at the time in the late sixties?

Dr. Pita: You're looking at a zero.

Naison: You weren't on top ...

Loud wind in background

Dr. Pita: This is the wind

Naison: That's the wind ... of African American popular music or the era, James Brown and Curtis Mayfield and that sort of music of the late sixties.

Dr. Pita: But then I moved to **T Neck**, New Jersey, where around the corner from me lived Roland Hanna and next door lived the man who wrote In the Mood. So I began knowing music in a different way.

Naison: So you played spiritual flak songs things that came from the historical legacy.

Dr. Pita: Right and when you talk about it I say gee I really want in that department really stupid but. .. Now I want to tell you one other thing. I decided I would bring to class, these classes these black studies classes, people who had been drug addicts and who were now trying to recuperate. So I got in touch with these people and some young people would come in and talk to these sixth grade classes about how horrible it was to get on drugs. And the classes listened and afterward they wrote letters of thanks because it was opening up a world they were kept secret.



Naison: Now this is very interesting because a number a people I have spoken to who grew up in the Patterson houses remember in the sixties a serious heroine problem emerging. Did you recall drug issues in the fifties?

Dr. Pita: No

Naison: So this was not, this was something that was there as an issue when you were returning that want there when you were there before.

Dr. Pita: Yeah I would say so. That's the only reason I could explain why I had these people coming in giving these talks.

Naison: And what made you aware that there was a drug problem and that these kids needed addressing? Was this from things you read?

Dr. Pita: I think yes. I think read. I didn't see any drugs addicts. Thee were not drug addicts hanging around that I know of in the Patterson houses, but I guess it was in the newspaper and it was an issue that people were talking about, drugs and heroine and all of that stuff. So these students, I thought I'd catch them before they did anything wrong.

Naison: Did people look different? Were there more afro hairstyles? Or was that something that hadn't hit there? Did you see people wearing like the Sheiks or African you know garb or did kids look different than they looked in the fifties?

Dr. Pita: The kids didn't, but I think the parents started doing those kinds of things. Yeah the children that came to school were just dressed the way children dress.

Naison: Now was there a different atmosphere on the streets outside the Patterson housing in the late sixties than there was in the fifties? In terms of more people standing around or anything that you can remember as a different. Were there guys who liked like they were Vietnam Veterans standing around and like fatigues or anything like that?

Dr. Pita: No as a matter of fact I was the only teacher who took my class out to the playground in the Patterson houses, and I always felt totally safe and totally fine, the children were running around you know but there was nobody standing around. No.

Naison: Ok now but you did notice some behavioral changes with the kids in the older grades. Now do you think that the teacher were different? That the teacher, is it possible that the kids might have been reading signals from the teacher who were hostile or defensive than they were in the fifties? Were the white teachers different?

Dr. Pita: Well in some cased I think they were very happy to be working because the option was either go to war. Right. They were able to get a deferment to be there. So there was a couple of teacher that were really gifted and some that were terrible, and they just sloughed along and that was that hopefully.

Naison: You have a sense that this was a pretty good school?

Dr. Pita: Yes.

Naison: In terms of the staff, the motivation ...

Dr. Pita: And I'll tell you what pulled it all together, we had a very nice principal. Have people talked about that principal?

Naison: No

Dr. Pita: No. I don't know there was just a good guy principal, you could come to him with your problems and he was just always there.

Naison: What was his name?

Dr. Pita: Sydney Young

Naison: Sydney Young and was he there I the fifties as well?

Dr. Pita: No there was another one there in the fifties, I remember his name was Wyckoff, and he was a little bit more distant, you didn't come into his office.

Naison: But the person there in the sixties was Sydney Young?

Dr. Pita: And he was a good guy.

Naison: And he was a good guy. How many year did you teach at ps18 in the second round?

Dr. Pita: That's a very good question. I don't really remember, lets say its ten years, but the reason I left there was because Sydney Young retired. And in came a terrible man, black, a Junior High School teacher, and no experience at all working as a principal and they pushed him in. He really didn't want to go, but when he got in he was. And the first thing he said to me was 'we have to be very strict in these classes like in parochial schools, pull everybody up to snuff.' So already I hate him.

Naison: What was his name? Do you remember?

Dr. Pita: No but after I leave you I'll, in the middle of the night remember his name and I'll give you a call and tell you. He was not a good man.

Naison: In those ten years did the racial composition of the teaching staff change a great deal?

Dr. Pita: No it didn't, but I'll tell you what came, Power professionals; and every room had a Power Professional. And most Power Professional were either a Latino or a African American, and that brought a whole new sensibility to everybody. Yes positive because if a child was misbehaving they could talk to them in their language so that the) would get the message.

Naison: But was there any sense of racial tension in the school between the parents and the teachers in the late sixties and seventies?

Dr. Pita: I never found it to be the case, but I can't say for sure that there was nothing. never had that problem, these parents whenever they came if they ever held a school night, it was all very friendly and nice and open. Either that or I was stupid because maybe there was and I didn't get it. But I had some pretty fine Power Professionals. Oh you know what there was another teacher, yes, white teacher, Fields, Berness Fields. And she was wonderful, she was there too. So there was another teacher.

Naison: Other than being a Black Studies Coordinator, what other extra curricular activities did get involved with? I saw a picture of you with cheerleaders?

Dr. Pita: Yeah well they asked me and I said oh course.

Naison: Now the cheerleaders were they cheering for a team in the school or they were just cheerleaders in a competition?

Dr. Pita: No I think there were school teams; basketball probably.

Naison: What grade did PsI8 go to?

Dr. Pita: Sixth.

Naison: It was a one through six.

Dr. Pita: Kindergarten.

Naison: K through six. Ok Was there much in the way of a music program in the school?

Dr. Pita: That is a very good question. I don't believe so, I believe that I was teaching music a lot in the Kindergarten and the first grade a lot, but I don't remember anybody else doing that.

\* \* Strong Wind\*\*

Naison: Yeah it sounds like a hurricane! Did kids have access to musical instruments at school? Is that something that mainly came in Junior High School?

Dr. Pita: I think your right in Junior High. I don't remember seeing any musical instruments.

Naison: Were there any big in pedagogies in.

Dr. Pita: Well they started bringing in reading programs into the Kindergartens, by that time I wasn't teaching Kindergarten anymore. When they would get the letter A, they would hand it up on a string across the room; some new methods. And I saw Kindergarten teachers pushing reading that far back and it was just making me turn my stomach. Because there is so much a child needs especially these children, that isn't going to be helped by that.

Naison: Right, so that was not in the older grades the pedagogy was not being changed that much.

Dr. Pita: I don't think so, although; if it was I wasn't attuned to it. Well look bringing in the Black Studies was a way to change things.

Naison: Right, Now were you aware in the mid seventies of like this what the arson that was going on in some Bronx neighborhoods?

Dr. Pita: Oh course! Yes. The whole Bronx went up in flames.

Naison: So was any of that happening near Ps18?

Dr. Pita: No

Naison: So it was a different area.

Dr. Pita: Completely.

Naison: So that was not something first hand it was something you were reading about. And what did teachers talk about in Ps18? Did they talk about the kids? Did they talk about their families?

Dr. Pita: Well I think this is going to be my final experience here. There was one child in my class her name was Nielder and she couldn't read, this is the first grade; and when I'd talk with her about it she told me that her mother couldn't read. So how can you read if your mother can't read? So I had an idea, because I'm very creative, we made a little book. She drew a picture, I put down mother, father, sister, and you know a whole book. Then she read it. Read it or remembered it and she looked at me and she said 'I can read!' Yes. So I went into the teacher's lunchroom at lunch time and I said "something wonderful has happened!" This is what they said 'we don't talk about that at lunch, we are talking today about the grapefruit diet.' I never forgot that.

Naison: This was in the first round or second round?

Dr. Pita: Second round

Naison: Right the sixties. We're talking about the grapefruit diet; you don't talk shop in here.

Dr. Pita: So at that point I decided I'm never going to have lunch in that lunchroom again. And I stayed in my own room.

Naison: Wow, so interesting. By the time you retired did you feel that there was a level of cynicism setting into the teacher?

Dr. Pita: Apparently to have a response like that indicated to me that they just worked those hours and when they are out in the lunch room they don't give a damn about anything.

Naison: And you wouldn't have picked that up in the early period?

Dr. Pita: No I don't think so. I think that a lot of enjoyed teaching and talking about it. The attitude was changing.

Naison: So the attitude of the teachers was changing in the seventies?

Dr. Pita: Yes, yeah but I'll tell you something terrible that happened in the sixties. A lot of these teachers were thrown out; you know they were kicked out because there was cutbacks. Without anything even, I don't know, maybe someone was tenure. So you had to find another job.

Naison: so this was in the sixties or the seventies?

Dr. Pita: This was sixties, like sixty~eight.

Naison: Really. So there was already a budget crunch and teachers were being, good teachers were being excesses.

Dr. Pita: Yeah

Naison: So you lost some good people.

Dr. Pita: Very

Naison: Umm this is probably way off, were you umm. Hip Hop was starting in the Bronx in the mid seventies, and you left in what seventy-nine or something?

Dr. Pita: I really don't know when I left.

Naison: Ok were you aware of that kind of music?

Dr. Pita: Of that kind of music.

Naison: Were kids coming in brake dancing or doing beats or anything like that?

Dr. Pita: You're looking at a completely jackass.

Naison: (Laughing)

Dr. Pita: Thank you very much. And I like it now. You know when I go to England and I see the people the students the people there doing brake dancing and I thinking oh it came from the Bronx, my borough.

Naison: But it wasn't

Dr. Pita: It wasn't me no no wasn't me (Laughing)

Naison: Ok is there anything else that you have written down that you'd want to, experiences with parents that stood out or umm.

Dr. Pita: I don't think so. I think that the parents come on open school nights, sometimes they stayed after school. But the talking between us was really at a minimal.

Naison: Now what about when they created the community school boards? Did that have an effect on the atmosphere of the school? You know like it must have been in the seventies when they created the centralization at local school boards. Did that have an intrusive effect on how schools functioned?

Dr. Pita: It might have, but in my small little world it didn't.

Naison: Ok well thank you very much.