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## Petersen, Basil and Petersen, Eric and Petersen, Ishma

Bronx African American History Project  
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Transcriber: Katrina Mallebranche

Tape 1, Side A

MN: 147<sup>th</sup> interview of the Bronx African-American History Project. We are here with Basil and Ishma Petersen, and it's February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2006 in the Petersen home at the Castle section -- Castle Hill section of the Bronx. Our interviewer today is Natasha Lightfoot.

NL: Okay. So just to start out, when and where were both of you born?

IP: In the Virgin Islands, Saint Thomas, Virgin Islands. February -- I was born on February 24, 1925.

NL: Okay, and what about you, Mr. Petersen?

BP: Me, I was born in Saint Thomas also. I was born on March 3 -- I mean third of -- March 7, 1924.

NL: Okay. March 7, 1924, so you're a year apart, and --

BP: Not quite -- we're --

NL: A little bit --

IP: [laughs]

BP: Eleven months -- eleven months and three days --

IP: By tomorrow, both of us make the same age. [laughs]

NL: Okay.

BP: Ten more days I'll be gone again.

NL: So what did your parents do in Saint Thomas?

IP: My father was a navigator of the --bringing the ships and the pilot boat.

NL: Okay –

IP: Into the harbor.

NL: I see –

IP: And my mother was – she always sold vegetables and fruits.

NL: I see, okay, and what about you, Mr. Petersen?

BP: Me? Well, my father was a fisherman. He wanted me to be a fisherman –

NL: Yes –

BP: -- but I didn't like that job because his father, his grandfather, was – the whole family

–

IP: Everybody was fishermen.

NL: And you wanted to do something different?

BP: And at the age – at the age of 15, I – that was my first journey on a ship. At the age of 15. We had a ship at the time with a line. The bull line, they called it, that used to run between St. Thomas, Puerto Rico, and St. Croix.

MN: How do you spell the name of the line?

IP: Oh boy.

BP: It's – they called it Valencia Line.

MN: Valencia?

BP: Yes, Valencia Line.

MN: Okay.

NL: Okay.

BP: That was the mail – the mail ship that ran between the three islands.

NL: I see, and you took that voyage regularly from Saint Thomas to Puerto Rico and Saint Croix.

BP: No, if you listen, I will explain how I got on that ship. One Sunday, it rained, and the captain had his car parked in front of the ship, and I always wanted to be a sailor, and he looked down, and I was sweeping the water off the car with my hand, and he said to me, “Youngster, you need a job?” I said, “Yes sir.” And that day, he says, “Come on up!”

And I thought at the time he was going to put me to work on the ship, but what he did – He gave me a towel and a bucket, and he sent me down to wipe his car off –

IP: [Chuckles]

BP: And I wiped the car off, and that was it. Then the ship sailed that afternoon. With its return on Wednesday, on the Wednesday, I was there, and it happened so at the time, the deckboy – he got sick. He became sick, and they had to take him off, and that’s when I – that was my first venture as a sailor. I got hired and that was my first venture.

NL: And so – and so, since that point when you became a sailor, was that when you started to think about migrating elsewhere and leaving Saint Thomas?

BP: Well, I always wanted to travel the world. I always wanted to travel. That was my main thing. As a sailor, I wanted to see the world, everywhere, and when that came, and then – In December, the ship used to come from there to Baltimore to the dry dock, and then we would stay home. I couldn’t come because I was underage, so when the ship returned in 1940, I got the job back, and I used to – they used to call us Island Worker because we used to just take care of the painting and maintenance of the ship, and back and forth. Then in 1941, the war came, and that was another chance for me to leave, but

still, I couldn't go because they couldn't take me because I was too young. In 1942, there were recruiting for the Navy, and when they were recruiting for the Navy in Saint Thomas, it was up – they didn't have any more slots, so I journeyed to Puerto Rico. I went to Puerto Rico to join. What I did when I got there – this is amaz – I hope the – What I did – I went again, and they still said I was too young, but when I went –

NL: Could you speak Spanish at the time?

BP: Huh?

NL: Could you speak Spanish?

BP: No.

NL: Okay.

IP: [slight laugh]

BP: But – Well, it was American-based –

NL: Right. Right. Okay.

BP: So anyway, I decided on a plan that I would go back, and I would doctor my birth print, and I put – I put my paper a year back, and –

IP: Older than you are.

BP: I got on. That's how I got in.

NL: I see. Okay.

BP: And then, from there, I – [they] sent me here to go to school. I don't know if any of any of you gentlemen knows Half-Mine Island. You've heard of Coney Island?

MN: Yes.

BP: But Half-Mine Island is another island just outside the harbor.

MN: Right.

BP: I went there for six – six or eight weeks, I think, of training, and that's when I thought I was put on a Martian's ship as a gunnery assistant, a gunnery loader. We had the – the guy that – the shooter, he would shoot, and you have a guy that loaded –

NL : And you were the guy that loaded –

BP: We would put the magazine on – he shoots, we would put the magazine on.

NL: Wow.

BP: So you had – you always had three men to – to. It was a 20 millimeter at the time. 20 millimeter guns, and I would have a turn loading, and the other guy next to me would have – so it was repeated. It was rapant all the time, because as soon as my magazine got empty, the other guy would put his in, and by the time he got in, just constant going, and the guy that was shooting, he was always shooting.

MN: Now was this merchant ship blacks and whites together, or it was an all black ship?

BP: No, it was mixed.

IP: Mixed, yes.

NL: Wow.

BP: Mixed at the time.

NL: And did you feel like the whites on the ship treated the blacks in a way that we were equals?

BP: At certain times it was difficult because what we did – You went by seniority. If you was there and the ship first, you was entitled to the bottom bunk. If – Whether he is a black guy or a white guy, when he comes aboard, he has suck the top bunk. The guy –

the senior guy, has the bottom bunk. Sometimes, there was always a problem. Well, I –

At one time, I shifted from the bottom to the top bunk for the simple reason that the guys used to go out and get drunk, and what they'll do—You go down there, they'll vomit on you. They'll puke on you. See --

IP: Wow [laughs].

BP: They'll vomit, they'll do – there might even be a grenade if he's so drunk, but that's the way it was. So I switched from the bottom. I went back on the top. That was one out of ten. We had a Bolson at the time. He was from Mississippi. I'll never forget him. He was very, very, I mean, cruel to all the sailors. Very cruel. He would give you all the dirtiest work, especially the blacks, we would get the dirtiest work. Like, for instance, sailing along, he'd give the white guy the nice paint job. With us, he'd give us the grease job, where you have to take your hand and grease and grease or engine or whatever. That was what we had, but when it came to going into the mess room, they were segregated again because the blacks segregated themselves from the whites because it was always a problem. See, we would be sitting, eating, and somebody would flip something over, so it always a problem.

NL: Wow.

BP: So we would segregate ourselves and sit by ourselves. Well, as it went along, after the war was over, and that was changed, I stayed in – I didn't quit. I stayed, so I became a merchant Marine instead of a Corporal, and with that, I stayed for 22 years.

NL: Wow.

BP: For 22 years.

NL: Okay.

BP: If you name a seaport, any – You could almost tell me any seaport, I could almost tell you. I've been there. I've been around the world seven times, now. Still have not seen it all.

IP: [chuckles]

NL: Wow.

BP: And I've seen it all.

NL: Well, that's an extensive travel record. That's very – I mean –

BP: When the cross an equator, okay, from, like day and night. Then when you – when you choke on the metal line, most people will think that it's a line in the see, when the – we go, you know, from east to west, so its just, in navigating terms, you're just cross bum from east to west.

NL : I see.

BP: That's the way to climb, but most – like – we used to have fun with the new guys when they come aboard because we are going to cross another line now, and everybody would run on the deck to see who was crossing this line, but there was never a line.

There's no line there.

MN: What was this line called?

Voice: Prime Meridian?

NL: Can't remember.

BP: Trying to remember –



NL: Well, I wanted to ask Mrs. Peterson her story from St. Thomas to here because I know, as a man, you had opportunities to go into the service and you know, get to the United States that way, but for women, I'm sure it wasn't that easy. How exactly did you find out about the, you know, what led you to think about migrating to the United States, and how did you get here?

IP: Well, my mother and father that I lived with all my life. My mother died first, and then my father died second.

NL: And what years were – when was that?

IP: My mother died in the forties, and my father, he died two years later, and he said to me, “ If I die, I don't want you to stay in Saint Thomas. I want you to come to New York to be with your aunts. Both of my aunts were living here.

NL: Okay. Okay.

IP: They were sisters, so when he died, he had given me a certain amount of money, so I decided to come here with my aunts because they were here.

NL: And where were they living?

IP: 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

NL: Fifth avenue and what street.

IP: 116<sup>th</sup> street.

NL: Okay.

IP: We were living on Fifth Avenue, and both of aunts had come and both of them were there. I lived with one, and the other one was living next door.

IP: My aunt – My one aunt – She was married, and I don't think – She didn't really work.

She was raising kids. She had a lot of kids and she was just raising the kids. Her husband

– He worked. He went to work, but she didn't work, and my other aunt – She worked

like, you know, doing house work, the other aunt, yes. Me, I came here and right away

got a job. I got a job in the country, and then –

NL: And the country – where in the country?

IP: Peekskill.

NL: Was it Peekskill?

IP: I think it was in Peekskill, yes.

NL: And what were you doing in Peekskill?

IP: Cooking. Preparing food like I like to do.

NL: And you were doing it for a family.

IP: A man, his wife, both of them. One was a doctor, one was a lawyer. I was doing

mostly, you know, preparing meals for them and their kids and what have you.

NL: So what was that experience like for you?

IP: I didn't like it too much because it was too, you know, away from the city and there

wasn't anything around there. I was really – I didn't stay there for very long. I left there,

and I came back in the city, and I got a job at the hospital.

NL: You got a job at the hospital. What year was that?

IP: Oh gee, [laughs] let me see if I could remember what year was that I got my job,

because of the walk into – Remember the route on 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue?

BP: Sinclair.

IP: Sinclair's yes. Oooh, so many years, I can't even remember. I think it was 1949, yes.

NL: 1949, and what were you doing at Saint Clare's Hospital. What work did you do?

IP: I was doing a – I was preparing formulas for the babies.

NL: A-ha.

IP: Yes.

NL: And was it easy for black women to get jobs at hospitals at that point?

IP: Yes, I got a job that was a very easy.

NL: Okay. So you were saying that you and Mr. Petersen both met on Saint Thomas –

IP: He went to school. I went to school in Saint Thomas.

NL: In the same school. That's how you knew each other?

IP: No, we went to the same school, but we weren't friendly in the school.

NL: Right, you just –

IP: Pass each other and talk to each other.

NL: Right. When did you decide to meet and get married?

IP: Well, we met after I came here. I was living on Fifth Avenue with my aunts. That's where we met.

NL: Nice –

IP: My aunt was having a birthday party, and I met my husband and his – my husband and his friends, which – one of the friends was my cousin, and they all were together.

They used to hang out in the area.

NL: I see.

IP: So they came – I saw them, and they – we told them we was having a birthday party, so they all came up to the house. All three of them.

NL: Right.

IP: Yes, so that's when I met him, and we became –

Brian Purnell: You said you lived on Fifth Avenue and 116<sup>th</sup> street.

BP: 115<sup>th</sup> not 116<sup>th</sup>.

IP: It was 115<sup>th</sup>? Oh.

Purnell: Was that neighborhood predominately Puerto Rican at the time?

BP: It was mixed.

IP: It was mixed. It was a mixed neighborhood, yes.

Purnell: Of Puerto Rican and Black?

IP: and black, yes.

NL: Puerto Rican and Black.

Purnell: Were the Italians that far East or West.

IP: The Italians were around, yes.

BP: At that time, you didn't have too much Italian far west beyond Park Avenue.

NL: Oh, okay.

BP: Above Park Avenue.

NL: Alright, I see, I see. And you were living in the lower part of Harlem as well? Or were you somewhere else in the city at the time?

BP: At the time, I – Let's see. I think I was a \_\_\_\_\_. I think it was 124<sup>th</sup> street and Lenox Avenue.

NL: Okay, so you weren't that far away.

BP: At that time, I don't know where he put the Salvation Army, or – It had a name for it where a single person –

[crosstalk]

NL: Oh, like a WMCA. A Y or some thing like that. So you rented a room?

BP: At the time.

NL: I see.

Eric Petersen: I knew you were long-winded.

NL: Oh sorry. That was their son Eric. So you were living – renting a room at 124 and Lenox at the time. Okay, so what year did you two get married?

IP: We got married in 1949.

NL: 1949, okay. So, when you got married, where did you first live?

IP: Where did we live when we got married?

BP: [inaudible]

IP: [inaudible]

BP: Yes, but we were –

IP: 50 West 112, no?

BP: Yes, we were living in –

IP: Yes, that's right. 50 West 112 Street.

NL: Right, right.

IP: I think I could remember well.

NL: Okay, but how long did you spend in Harlem before you moved into the Bronx?

IP: I would say not long.

NL: Not long. So, you were only – So the boarding – The room in 50 West 112<sup>th</sup> Street was the only place you lived in Harlem as a married couple.

IP: No, no.

NL: Okay, did you move somewhere else.

BP: We moved – we moved from there and went to 135<sup>th</sup> street. Then we moved aga and we moved to one hundred and twenty something else – Where we used to come down the stairs?

IP: 130<sup>th</sup> street.

BP: 130<sup>th</sup> street.

NL: Wow. So, you spent a lot of time in Harlem.

IP: Oh yes.

NL: What social thing did you do in Harlem? Did you all go to a lot of parties?

IP: We went to a lot of clubs.

NL: A lot of clubs –

IP: Oh yes.

NL: What clubs did you go to?

BP: The Savoy, the Renaissance –

IP: We went to a lot of places.

BP: You had the Park Palace on 110<sup>th</sup> street.

NL: Wow, and so, you went for mostly jazz music?

BP: Well, it didn't matter.

NL: It didn't matter? What kinds of artists did you go see?

BP: It didn't matter to me because I could have danced to any one of them.

NL: You could dance to anything.

BP: I danced to every one of them.

NL: So what live artists did you see playing, you know, at the Savoy or the Renaissance?

Who did you see that you can remember?

IP: Dizzy used to be down there. Dizzy used to be there. Dizzy Gillespie.

BP: A lot of them have passed or whatever.

NL: Anyone you can remember. I would love to hear.

IP: I remember Dizzy Gillespie. Yes, he was. Yes.

MN: Did you listen to Caribbean music as well as –

IP: Oh yes, oh yes. That's – Caribbean music.

NL: And what Caribbean music did you listen to at the time? Did you remember the artists that were big in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

IP: They didn't have a lot of Caribbean players at all.

NL: Really?

IP: No, no.

NL: The music you listened to mostly American music?

IP: Yes, jazz.

NL: So what artists can you think of that were the kind of the popular musicians to listen to?

IP: At the Savoy –

BP: Well let's see – jazz. I love jazz. We used to have Slam Stewart. He was one of the greatest bass players. Slam Stewart. Because they had a jazz club on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. It was called Minton's Playhouse.

MN: Minton's Playhouse.

NL and IP: (in unison) Yes.

IP: Minton's. Yes.

BP: And they used to many – Minton's Playhouse.

MN: Oh.

NL: Wow.

IP: Oh, you remember the name very well.

MN: Now, what made you want to travel around the world? Did you read a lot? Did you hear other sailors talking?

BP: Well, my mother, like her mother, she had a little market. She sold fruits and all that.

NL: I was wondering. Both of your parents – Both your mother and your mother – Both grew their own provisions and sold them.

IP: Oh yes.

NL: I see. Okay.

BP: So what happened. The Navy ships used to come in there because we had – They had the submarine base. We used to come in there to give the sailors liberty, and my mother used to sell – She would roast peanuts. Quite a few things – fruits and stuff, she would take, and she'd take it there to sell, and I always – they come, you know, the sailors, and they came in the hundreds and they'd buy, and I had always been there with



my mother, and one evening, this sailor, after liberty was over, he was so drunk that he couldn't get back to the ship, so because the SP at the time was looking for him. My mother and I handbasketed him and took him to our house. We had a little porch. I'll never forget his name. He called himself 'Ski.' Ski was his name. I was just a youngster. I'll never forget it. He called himself Ski. I'll never forget it. We took him on a little porch, and we put him there to sleep, and so the next day, he had gone back to the ship. Now, naturally, he was punished, but I asked my mother [laughs] if it was funny the child was a youngster. Maybe about 12 years old, ten. I asked her, "Mommy, why can't he stay with us." Well sure, because I wanted to be a sailor. And what he did before he left, he took off his hat, and he gave me his hat.

NL: Wow.

BP: He gave me his hat and then he told me. He said, "I would give you my shoes, but I can't give you my shoes right now.

NL: [laughs]

BP: If I leave my shoes, I will be in more trouble. That's when I – and from then on, my love was for the sea. I wanted to be a sailor.

NL: Wow. Okay.

MN: Were you exposed to any, like, political discussion or movements when you were growing up. Was there much politics in your households?

IP: Nope, not at all.

BP: Not much.

IP: Not at all. Not in mine. On my ship, one time I was a ship's chairman, which we had over, I think, to 112, and I don't know if you're familiar with Farver. You've heard of him. He died a long time ago. He was very tall. He came aboard the ship, and being I was the ship's chairman, like you're doing here, but I was – they would tell me what to ask, and I was the only one to ask him questions, and they'll tell me, and I'll ask him a different question. I had a picture of it from many years ago, but the captain was sitting in one side, then I was right. I questioned him about different things.

Purnell: What was his name?

BP: Senator Kefauver.

MN: Senator Kefauver. Estheus Kefauver

BP: Yes.

IP: Yes.

NL: Wow. Wow.

BP: I met him many years ago.

MN: KEFAUVER

IP: Yes. That's right.

NL: He was the senator from New York?

MN: No, he was from somewhere in the Midwest.

BP: He was in the Midwest, right.

NL: I see.

MN: I think he was Adlai Stevenson's running mate for president.

BP: Yes, yes. You're right.

IP: You're right. He's correct. [laughs]

NL: Wow. Look at that. So, I was wondering, at any point, were you in touch with any, you know, black radical politics that might have been happening either –

IP: In the island?

NL: -- Either on the island, nothing like Garveyism that had touched your family or anything of the kind? I was wondering – another question I had about, you know, what you knew of the United States, because Saint Thomas was an American possession at that point.

IP: It was, yes.

BP: Yup.

NL: So what did you know about the United States while growing up?

IP: Not much, I have to tell you.

NL: You really didn't know anything, you had no idea what it was like –

IP: No. I had no idea.

NL: And you had no – but your aunts had gone before you.

IP: Yes, they were there.

NL: They were there, but you just knew they were in New York. You just had no clue –

IP: No, they just write back and forth.

NL: Right.

IP: You know, correspondence.

NL: And what details did you get from them, if any, on what it was like.

BP: From the first time –

IP: Not too much. Nothing much at all.

BP: The first time I ran into any kind of segregation was when I came to New York first, and I was stunned. I was shocked because in the island, White, Black, all was the same.

IP: Everybody was together.

BP: They were one.

NL: Right. It was a pretty small place, so you didn't feel like –

BP: As you know, being a youngster, we had to go to church every Sunday.

NL: And what churches did you attend as a child?

BP: At that time, I was still Catholic.

NL: You were a Catholic?

IP: I know, same thing, Episcopalian.

NL: Yes, so you were Episcopalian since you were a child.

IP: Yes, I went to alternate churches in Saint Thomas.

NL: Okay.

BP: When I came, I was very – Let me see, I was only months here, only maybe two, three months, and I went to this church, and I'll never forget it. The little red church on 125<sup>th</sup> street.

IP: It's still there.

BP: It's still there. It's a Catholic church. Let me see, after you pass –

NL: Oh, it's on Morningside.

IP: Yes.

NL: 125<sup>th</sup> and Morningside?

BP: It's on –

IP: I think it's on Morningside –

BP: After you pass Eighth Avenue, it –

IP: It is on Morningside.

NL: It's Morningside.

IP: She's right, yes.

I know what church you're talking about. Yes.

IP: The little red church.

NL: Yes, yes.

BP: And I walked into that church because I know I had – I had to go to church. We were programmed to go to church, and I walked into that church, and the minister, the preacher was on the pulpit. He was preaching, and as I walked in the Church, he stopped preaching, and everybody turned.

IP: The church went still.

BP: They turned and looked at me, and I didn't know what was going on, and I sat down.

I sat down on the back seat, and then it took awhile before it started again, and then everybody turned back and didn't say anything to me. Nothing whatsoever, and after the service, I came out and I went home, and the people there that were around me, I said, “ You know I went to church and all of a sudden this happened to me.” So, they were making fun of me because they said, when I say that I am a Catholic, they said, “ There are no black Catholics.” You were a –

IP: A Methodist.

BP: No, no.

IP: Or a Baptist.

BP: A Baptist –

IP: That's what they said.

BP: So they said, “ Are you sure you are not Baptist?” I said no. I said that when I went in there, that the way they looked at me. He said that is one of the reasons why, you didn't see – and there was no other Black families in the Church, so I never thought enough like that because I never went through anything like that. So I just walked away.

MN: In the Virgin Islands, the schools – Everybody went to school together?

IP: Everybody, yes.

MN: Everybody went to church together?

IP: Yes, that's right.

NL: And was there a significantly large white population on the island, or was it small?

BP: We had quite a bit.

IP: We had quite a bit, but not too much.

NL: Not too many --

IP: Not too many,

NL: Okay, okay. So you experienced segregation in Harlem.

IP: Yes.

NL: What year did you end up in the Bronx and, you know?

IP: I say you came to the Bronx –

BP: Was it 1949?

IP: Yes, I think so. I'm not –

BP: No --

IP: No, no, I didn't come in '49. No.

BP: It was '51.

IP: '51, yes.

IP: Yes, '51. Same year as –

NL: '51, and so – and did you go to the Bronx River Houses first?

BP: Yes.

IP: That's why they're first.

NL: Okay, and --

MN: Now, did you apply for public housing? Is that how you got in?

BP: Yes.

IP: Yes, I did.

NL: Ah, right.

IP: Because I was living in one room, and the kids – I had three kids in one room. So I decided, I am going to pull in for housing, and I used to go downtown in the office and sit there everyday until they gave me a place to live.

NL: Wow. Wow.

IP: Yes. I was determined, and I wouldn't leave until they told me to stand up and we'll get a place. Yes.

NL: I didn't realize you had that – So, you had three young kids already between the time you got married –

IP: Yes, yes –

NL: -- And the time you moved into the Bronx?

IP: We have three young kids, and so, we said, “ We can’t live in one room with three young kids, you know?

NL: Sure, sure.

IP: We have to move. You know, my son had got killed, and this one, Eric, and Maxine, yes, and it was three.

NL: Okay, so you had Eric, Maxine, and Frank?

IP: Yes.

NL: Okay, and when you got to the Bronx River Houses, what size apartment did you have?

IP: We had five rooms.

NL: Five rooms?

IP: Three bedrooms.

MN: Wow.

NL: Wow.

NL: Yes.

NL: And was the Bronx River Houses at the time mixed in terms of the –

IP: Yes, very mixed.

NL: Okay, what kinds of families lived in there?

IP: Oh, you know, they had white as much black. We had a lot of different people living there.



NL: And what ethnicities were the white people? Were they Italians? Were they Jewish?

IP: [inaudible]

BP: Some were Jews.

IP: Yes.

BP: Some were Italian.

IP: Yes. Some were –They were mixed.

NL: And how did they respond to the black families who were moving into the Bronx River Housing?

IP: No problem with that.

BP: No problem. No problem. We had no problems.

NL: Wow. And at the time, what schools did you send your kids to? Did you send them to the public schools in the area?

IP: Yes.

NL: Okay, and what schools were those?

IP: [to Eric] What school did you all go to? [I ] can't remember that one.

Eric: P.S. 47.

IP: Yes, 47.

Eric: Junior High School 77, and [inaudible] Junior High School.

IP: Yes.

NL: Okay. Okay. Well, I guess we can get to the question of, you know, high school and you know, that kind of stuff in a little while, because I would love to ask you, Eric, what your experience was like in a public education system.

BP: [laughs]

IP: [laughs]

NL: [laughs] To go back to your experiences in the Bronx River area, did you start going to church in the –

IP: Oh, yes. The church was down the street from my apartment. I went to a Catholic Church, Saint John Vianney.

NL: You went to Saint John Vianney?

BP: No, Saint –

IP: Saint Joan of Ark, Saint Joan of Ark. I'm sorry.

NL: Oh, okay. Saint Joan of Ark, and what was the population like there?

IP: It was very mixed, but it had a lot of whites, yes.

NL: Yes.

IP: At that time.

NL: And you were active in the church, or was it something where you just went in –

IP: I wasn't very active.

NL: Yes.

IP: I just went, you know, because my husband was Catholic, and he was going to the church, and my mother-in-law, it was his mother. She came to stay with me to help with the children.

NL: Oh, okay.

IP: And I would go there because that was the only church she would go to, so I went with them.

NL: I see, and were the other families receptive to you all?

IP: It was nice. Especially the ones who live on the same floor as us. They were very nice, and the ones in the church, they were friendly, you know.

NL: And at the time, you were still living at the hospital on Ninth Avenue?

BP: No.

IP: No.

NL: What work did you take up by the time you came to the Bronx?

IP: Well, I took up food supervision. I was working at Coler Memorial on Roosevelt Island.

NL: And what was the experience like working there. What kinds of –

IP: Oh, very good. I had a lot of problems with some of the girls. Some of the girls I worked with were my same color, but they felt that I was taking – I shouldn't have come from the island to get a job, you know, a city job. I should leave that for them. They are Americans. They should have gotten the job instead of me, but I tried to tell them, "I am American, too." Because the Virgin Islands was Amer – But they couldn't understand that.

NL: Right.

BP: Another thing was the promotion. When she got promoted –

IP: When I got promoted, It was worse.

BP: When she got promoted, it got worse.

NL: Really?

IP: Yes. They gave me a hard time [laughs] when I got promoted. While I went to school, I went to the college in Brooklyn.

BP: Pace College.

IP: You know, but they got mad at me. They didn't want to talk to me anymore, but they talked to me after awhile. After they got used to me being, you know –

NL: A little higher than them –

IP – a supervisor, yes.

NL: Wow.

MN: Were the Bronx River Houses a safe place to live when you moved in there?

IP: Very good. Very good.

BP: It was very strict. Your kids couldn't play in the hallway. Your kids couldn't play on the grass. You'd get fined

IP: No, you'd get a fine.

BP: The fine is small, but at that time, it worked because the first fine you'd get was five dollars, and then it went up, but you –

IP: It was very strict and it was very clean. Yes.

NL: Yes, and how long did you remain in the Bronx River Houses?

IP: Nine and a half years, yes.

NL: Right. And over the course, between '51 and '60, did you see any change in the character of the Bronx River Houses?

BP: Not at that time –

IP: 1960, we moved in –

MN: Really.

IP: We moved in the middle of 1960, yes, April 23<sup>rd</sup> of 1960 we moved in.

MN: You bought this house?

IP: Yes.

NL: I see.

BP: We had to move because –

Eric: Income.

IP: Income, yes.

BP: My income.

Eric: I remember that.

NL: Your income had gotten too high.

BP: [It] had gotten too high.

IP: And mine's yes. The two of us together.

MN: Now, did you move from the Merchant Marines to another job at this point?

BP: No.

MN: It was at – but working at sea, the salaries were going up?

BP: That's right.

NL: So howere you able to get this place. How did you – What was the process? Was it easy to get a house here?

BP: This –

IP: [laughs] It wasn't easy.

MN: Come on, tell your story.

IP: Tell the story.

BP: This is very laughable, but I'll tell you. My wife bought this house for \$50 dollars.

IP: [laughs]

BP: It might sound strange, but this is the story. They were building these houses at the time, and everywhere we went looking for a place, we were rejected for the house because we had too much money. We make –

IP: We have five children, yes.

BP: So no place I could go needed five children and could get –

IP: They wouldn't take us.

BP: So we decided to look for a house, and when she came around here, they were building this house, and she went into the model, and the man was [inaudible]. So she said the man told her, "You like the house." She said yes.

Eric: [She said] What are you doing?

BP: She said, "Well, I'll tell you. If you put \$50 dollars down –

IP: [inaudible] [Laughs]

BP: It's a bind. By the time it's build. By the time we finish, you'll have enough to get the house, so I didn't know that this is what she was doing. She went. She put the \$50 dollars down, and every weekend –

IP: It sounded good to me. [laughs]

BP: Every weekend, when I'm home, she'd pack the kids in the car, and she said, "Let's go." She wanted to go to see the house, not knowing that every weekend, she would go and give the man money. She was giving him a deposit, making a fifty –

IP: To make a deposit.

NL: Oh.

BP: She was always giving him money. When I found out what she was doing, then I stepped in. Then I really got involved, and I started getting money together, and I think when we got this house, it was only 2500 dollars, we used to have.

IP: Yes, we had to put down. You know, that he -- you [my husband] kept saying, "We have five kids. Where are we going to get money from to buy a house?" I said, "I am going to get it together because I am going to save the money as I work." He said, "I don't know how we are going to do that." I said, "I will do it, but I am going to try to do it." And I was determined, yes.

MN: Now, what position did you rise to in the Merchant Marine when you retired?

IP: [inaudible]

BP: Navigation.

IP: Navigation.

BP: Navigation officer.

MN: You were a navigation officer, and did you have to get additional education to do this, or you –

BP: Yes.

IP: Yes.

BP: See, I didn't have to go to school to get mine because I came up with a call through the horse fight. They are calling out. They come up –

IP: [laughs]

BP: Through the deck because I started out as a deck boy, then I became an ordinary seaman, then I became an able-bodied seamen. When you become an able-bodied seaman, that means you know everything about the ship.

MN: Right.

BP: You have to do everything. You have to know every piece of that ship. Then after that, you become – You could sail as a quartermaster. You could sail as the boson. You could sail at any – I think about that rate. Then the next reading from there is when you become an officer, a licensed officer. Now, a licensed officer, like I said, being that I worked at the bridge most of the time, when I went from ordinary sailor to able-bodied sailor, I went in to be a quartermaster. All I did was stay at the ship. That was my job. I brought the ship in and out to port. Many times I went into the Panama Canal up and down.

NL: Wow.

BP: Many days, I have said, many days I wish I had a dollar for each time I crossed the canal. Then, on the last ship I was on, I became the chief quartermaster. It was four of us, so you had one for each watch. Now, my job was to bring the ship in and out of the port. The others is all right, but they always – When it was my turn on watch, I was always called to bring the ship in and out. Take it out of the port, [and] bring it back in the port. That was my job. Then after that, the officer, he says, “Gee.” He used to call me Pete. He said, “Pete, you know so much. Why don’t you try for your license? And that’s how I went in to get my license. I still have my books downstairs that I studied, and I studied and studied the books and everything, then I went – the you go and you sit and you take



it, and then you answer the question. When you become an officer now, you have to know everything. Navigation. You have to know her tonnage. You have to know how to trim the ship when you put cargo and how much cubic feet in one end.

MN: Right.

BP: The way you have to do it because – So, you have to learn all of that, and that was my last –

MN: And you get licensed by the state of New York?

BP: By the Coast Guard.

MN: By the Coast Guard.

BP: That's why I had said.-- I was remarking – I said, “You know one thing? When that ferry accident, that ferry accident – He didn't judge his speed because by the time he put the ship in reverse, it was too late.

MN: Right. The one in Staten Island, you mean?

IP: Yes.

BP: The one in Staten Island. It was too late.

IP: He was done. That's what happened.

BP: That was something that I had done all my life.

MN: Right, now when you were an officer, were you still a member of the union?

BP: Yes.

MN: So officers could still be members of the union?

BP: Yes, well you had the –Now you had the NE, the mates and pilot, see? Instead of – their joined together now, their joined together.

MN: Right.

BP: But at the time, they were separate.

MN: And the mates and pilots is for the officers?

BP: Yes, the MEBA.

MN: And was your medical plan from the union?

BP: Well, I didn't stay long as the officer, but I do have a medical plan from the NMU.

MN: Right, and did that cover your entire family?

BP: No, no. At one time, it did cover a part, but now, since they lost so many ships –

MN: Right.

BP: That's been cut down.

MN: [to IP] And did you get coverage for the children from your job?

IP: Oh yes. I still have coverage, yes.

NL: Wow, and was your job a unionized job as well?

IP: Yes.

NL: At the Colan Memorial?

IP: Yes.

NL: Okay.

IP: DC-37.

MN: So DC-37 and NMU.

IP: Yes.

MN: Two union people.

IP: [laughs]

NL: Right.

MN: Like Natasha.

NL and IP: [laughter]

IP: DC-37, yes.

NL: I had a question about the, you know, other people from Saint Thomas. Were you in touch with people from Saint Thomas in the Bronx who had migrated to New York?

Were there a lot of Saint Thomians in the Bronx?

BP: Oh quite a lot. We would find a lot of people going to different dances. We found a lot of friends.

NL: Was there a Saint Thomian Society that would do the dances?

IP: Yes.

NL: What was it called?

IP: The Virgin Islands Castaways. There were five of them.

NL: The Virgin Island Castaways.

IP: Yes.

NL: And were they established in the Bronx, or in Harlem?

IP: In Bronx.

BP: In the Bronx.

NL: In the Bronx?

MN: The Virgin Island –

NL and MN: (unison) Castaways.

IP: That was our name.

NL: Wow, and where was this organization held?

IP: You know where we held the meetings?

NL: Where?

IP: Everyone held the meeting when it's your turn to your home because everybody had to meet in their home.

NL: And where exactly did most St. Thomians live? Or was it all over?

IP: I think they all live all over because we had some from Queens. We had some from Brooklyn.

NL: Wow. Okay, so it was a city-wide society.

IP: They really are.

NL: The Virgin Island Castaways. Look at that. That's great.

IP: Yes, yes.

MN: I wonder if we could get a copy of this or make a picture?

BP: Sure.

NL: And what kinds of things did you guys do? Was it more of a social thing, or did it have a political aspect?

IP: Well, it was more of a social thing, but we also send money to the Virgin Islands –

NL: Right.

IP: -- to help with the hospitals for the wheelchairs and stuff like that.

NL: I see, and so this organization still regularly meets.

IP: No.

BP: No.

IP: They're not together. Most of them –

BP: Three of four of them died.

IP: A lot of them are deceased now.

NL: I see, so what years were you involved in the Virgin Islands Castaways.

IP: Does it have the year there?

NL: This picture is October '88 --

BP: That is the year we took the picture when we --

IP: We started before.

NL: Yes, you started awhile?

IP: Yes.

BP: We started about five years before that.

IP: Yes.

NL: Oh, okay, so then this was –

BP: We decided –

IP: To take these pictures, yes.

MN: Now –

BP: See –

IP: Yes.

BP: This lady, she's from the Virgin Islands. He's a native of New York. This man, he's from the Virgin Islands. She's from the Virgin Islands. He's from the Virgin Islands.

Virgin Islands, Virgin islands. This is my wife, this is me. Virgin Islands, Virgin Islands.

NL: So there were some people who had married into the Virgin Islands.

IP: Yes, yes. You're right.

NL: So some people were originally Virgin Islanders.

IP: Yes.

BP: This lady was from Jamaica.

IP: Her husband was from here.

BP: Jamaica.

NL: I see.

BP: At one time, we had 24.

IP: Members, yes.

NL: And they were from all over the city, not just the Bronx?

IP: Not the Bronx because that woman, she is living in Queens. She's still living in Queens.

BP: Every month, we would have a meeting at someone's house. Like, we'd go to Queens –

IP: We'd cook a lot of food, and everybody would sit around after the meeting and eat and drink.

NL: What kinds of foods did you cook?

IP: I mostly cooked food from my island, you know?

NL: I know all the food that's from Antigua. I don't know what the food is from Saint Thomas?

IP: No?

NL: No, I don't really know too well, so if you could – And Dr. Naison is very interested in food. If you could tell us the kinds of foods you cook?

IP: Well. I cook callaloo. That's my favorite food.

NL: That's a specialty? Okay.

IP: Yes. Callaloo and souce. I made that –

NL: Souce. Okay, that's from Antigua. Antiguanans do souce as well.

IP: You do too?

NL: They do something called pepper pot, which is kind of –

IP: Similar to callaloo.

NL: Similar, yes.

BP: And don't forget your shrimp.

IP: What?

BP: She knows her shrimp.

NL: I see.

IP: But I like that cooked callaloo. That's my favorite.

BP: Not with me. I'm a breakfast cook. I like to fix breakfast. That's something I do very well. I can tell you.

IP: You know when breakfast is over, people head to the mall and start making breakfast too.

NL: Oh right. My mom used to tell stories like that. About people just not wanting to leave the house.

IP: I'm telling you. We had to make breakfast then –

[ end of Tape 1, side A]

[Tape 1, Side B]

NL: So, I was going to ask a question about your relationship to other West Indians because you mentioned, Mrs. Peterson, in your experience, at the hospital, that African-Americans didn't see you as the same --

IP: No --

NL: Even though you were from an American island. How did the other West Indians see Virgin Islanders? Did you interact in an easier way --

IP: Yes. We interact in a better way. Yes, I have some of my friends that came there, they were from the Virgin Islands, we all worked together, and we had a better relationship, yes.

NL: And other people from other islands too were more a little bit more receptive, yes.

IP: A little more receptive than the ones from here, Americans.

MN: Now, was this something that you ran into, Mr. Peterson? Or was this more with women than with men, the resentment of being from the Caribbean?

BP: Well, I didn't have much of it, I'll tell you the truth, because when I sailed, I had all kinds. They were from everywhere. I had Trinidadians, Jamaicans, you name it, they were them.

IP: From all over.

BP: I had white. I had black.

MN: Now, in the union -- Did the union ever have dances or social events?

BP: The union -- We had social events. Not much dancing, but dinner --



IP: Dinners. Anniversary things, yes.

BP: Social dinners and stuff like that.

MN: Now, when did you move from the Catholic Church to the Episcopal Church?

BP: That was many, many years ago. Before we g t married because I was still young, and like I said, I wasn't treated right. I was like a castle. I would sit down, and the way they would treat you, and then, I come to think of this as wait a minute. The two faiths are the same. The only difference is that the one faith you can get married.

NL: Priests get married.

MN: Right, the priests can get married.

NL: Right.

IP: The Episcopalian Church, yes.

BP: Because the prayers and everything is the same. So I became a communicant.

NL: And this was in Harlem? You went to an Episcopal Church before you –

BP: Yes, because we were married in Harlem at the 114<sup>th</sup> Street – What's the name of the church. All Souls?

IP: All Souls?

BP: All Souls Church on 114<sup>th</sup> Street and Saint Nicholas Avenue.

IP: Yes.

NL: I see.

IP: Where we were married, yes.

BP: We were married there.

NL: Okay, and then when you came to the Bronx, you said you went to Joan of Ark Church.

[crosstalk]

NL: That was when your mother was with you.

BP: She was there.

IP: She was there.

NL: When your mother left, did you continue to go to the Catholic Church, or did you move to an Episcopal Church after that?

BP: After I moved to the Episcopal Church, I never went back to the Catholic Church.

NL: So what year did you start going to the Episcopal Church in the Bronx? Can you remember?

IP: All together?

BP: Oh boy , I'm trying to think.

NL: Since you were living in this house?

IP" Yes.

NL: I see, so it's about 1960.

BP: No, it's not.

IP: Yes.

BP: That's why I'm debating with you.

IP: Later, later on.

BP: That the little church was used –

IP: I'm not talking about – you're talking about the church over there?

BP: Yes, St. Andrews.

IP: We came in '60, so what year are you talking about.

BP: In 1958, we went down to that church in the back. It was a little church.

IP: That was Episcopal church. It was an Episcopal Church there.

BP: St. John's, you don't remember.

IP: I don't remember that church at all, you know?

MN: It was called St. John's Church?

BP: No, It's Saint Andrew's.

NL: Oh wait. So you went to the first Saint Andrew's that was in Shorehaven.

IP: In Shorehaven, you're right.

NL: And that was in the fifties, you're saying?

BP: Yup.

MN: That was when you were still at Bronx River Houses?

IP: Sure, we were still there.

BP: No, yes –

IP: Yes, because we didn't move from over there yes.

BP: Because they had the little wagon – the little wagon that picked you up and brought you to the church.

NL: Okay, and at the Shorehaven Church, what was the congregation like at the Shorehaven Saint Andrew's?

BP: They were white.

NL: They were white?

IP: They were had white than black.

NL: Yes, so there were a few black families already there?

BP: Maybe about three or four.

NL: Three or four. So you were among the first black families to attend Saint Andrews, and what was that like for you?

BP: They didn't bother us at all.

NL: It wasn't the same reaction like the Catholic Church.

IP: They didn't make you feel so –

BP: No, they went out of their way to greet you. Very nice, and then there was building this St. Andrews. They were building Saint Andrews and –

IP: Yes –

BP: What was the other one? St. John's

IP: Saint John's/

BP: The two churches were being built together.

IP: At the same time.

NL: St. John Vianney and Castle Hill?

IP: Yes.

BP: Right.

NL: And now Saint Andrews and Castle Hill.

BP: They were being built together.

IP: At the same time.

BP: They were supposed to be two large churches, but Saint John Vianney, he built a school, and that's why their church stayed the same -- smaller, because they changed at the last minute and stayed smaller.

NL: So then you entered Saint Andrews Castle Hill. The congregation from Shorehaven went to the Castle Hill Church, for the most part, or did some members leave?

BP: Right, because there is a history of that also. One of the ladies was from down at that church. She died, and she willed the land only to Saint Andrew's.

NL: And that's how Saint Andrew's was built on Castle Hill.

IP: Yes.

BP: Right. Castle Hill.

NL: I see. I was going to ask you. What was Castle Hill as a neighborhood like in the sixties? Was it still very white --

IP: Yes, it was.

BP: Yes, yes. A big part of it was prejudiced.

IP: Did you know they told my children that they couldn't go in the park, when I moved in here/

NL: Really?

IP: Yes.

MN: What was this?

IP: Someone said that we shouldn't go over there and play in the park. Now, I had to pay taxes for there, and they are going to tell me that my kids are not going to come over there to play.

B. Purnell: Who told you – who said this?

BP: The people over there.

IP: The people over there.

B. Purnell: And which park?

IP: Right across the street.

BP: You see the park where you cross the street?

IP: We have Castle Hill –

NL: The Castle Hill Houses part.

IP: Yes.

NL: I see –

IP: Little Italy was there.

NL: And your kids couldn't play in it?

IP: They didn't want my kids to come over there to play. My son, the one that, Frankie – So he was determined, he and Tony, they would go over there and play ball, and they [the people] didn't like that, but they [the boys] went.

NL: Really?

IP: Oh yes. They went anyhow. A lot of my neighbors had told me, "Are you crazy."

They were having a bus outing for all of the parents, and they were going all the way out to – out there in Lond Island, a club, so they had another bus. They [the neighbors] said to me, "Are you going on that bus?" I said, "Yes. Why?" "Aren't you scared?" I said, "No, I'm not scared." I am going. I said, "My boys are in it, the league, and I'm going."

They were so upset, most of my neighbors. "Are you going? You shouldn't go."

NL: And were your neighbors mostly black?

IP: Yes, and they said, "You shouldn't go to all the white people. You aren't afraid they'll do something." I said, "I don't know that I'm going." And I went on the bus. I was the only black person on the bus.

NL: And what happened?

IP: I had a good time.

[Laughter]

NL: Right, so for the most part, Castle Hill was segregated at the time. Were the Castle Hill Houses mixed?

IP: Mixed very little. Imagine, you only had six percent black.

MN: In the public housing?

IP: Six percent black in the public housing. Would you believe that? Six percent. That's all.

NL: And they – It was a very deliberate thing.

IP: Yes. I think it was terrible. You see the building in front of us.

NL: Yes. One percent Hispanic --

IP: One percent Hispanic, and yes, the building in front of me was nothing but Jews.

They used to line the sidewalk like they don't want you to pass. Line the sidewalk and sit.

NL: Wow, wow. So when did you notice the neighborhood changing over, because I heard that Castle Hill was neighborhood that wasn't too interested in change.

IP: You know the buildings in Co-op City? That's where all the Jews moved and went.

NL: I see. So what year was Co-op City built?

MN: In the early seventies is when it opened up.

NL: I see. So at least for the first decade that you were here –

IP: Yes –

NL: This was a very white neighborhood.

IP: Oh yes. It was.

MN: And what was it like for your kids? Was there problems in school, or –

IP: Oh, they had a lot of problems. They did. A lot of problems.

NL: Eric, if you want to chime in on what you experience was.

IP: My other son, Tony, he was in Sanford or nonsense when he went to school. Oh my God, yes, and he's younger than him [Eric].

Eric: Now, what was the question?

NL: The question was about the experiences in public schools you had in public schools the first years that you lived over at Castle Hill?

Eric: Yes, when we first went to school, we went to 138, which is on the bottom of Lafayette.

NL: Right, on Lafayette Avenue.

Eric: That was a predominately white school. We had a lady named Cynthia, who was very good friends with my mother, and she kept eyeing us, so to speak, to and any problems – She would alert her, and then she became a parent at the school. You know, part-time, to help out.

NL: Cynthia was a Black woman?

IP: White. Italian.



NL: She was an Italian woman, okay.

Eric: But she was very pro, she was very pro-Black.

NL: I see.

Eric: You would have thought she was a Black woman in White skin.

IP: She was very nice.

Eric: She didn't stand for any nonsense or any crap. She was really a nice lady. The teachers, you know, as long as you were open to learning, you were fine. A lot of the parents, largely the parents who were kid of, "Why are you playing with him? You are not supposed to be playing with him." Thing of that nature would come up, and of course, that's when good old mom would get involved. "Why, they are any better than them? They're not any better than them."

NL: So your mother would come to the school and defend your rights?

IP: Oh yes.

Eric: Many times. I mean, my brother, my younger brother, Tony, was a very wild child person, and he put up with nothing. Absolutely nothing. I would just kind of, you know, I am a kind of slap on the other turn of the cheek person, but not my brother. You hit him once, he'd clobber you. That was it, and she would have to come to school for him quite often. When we got into Junior High School 125 --

IP: Ooh, even worse.

Eric: It got even worse because, at that time, they were shoveling kids over from Bronx River to that school --

NL: So busses -- They were bussing kids --

Eric: Kids were coming over from Bronx river, mixed with the kids from over here.

Now, the parents over here weren't exactly happy with that.

NL: Right. At that time, the Bronx River Houses was firmly Black.

Eric: There was a lot of fighting going on all the time.

B Purnell: What years was this?

Eric: This was – seventies?

NL: Like early seventies.

Eric: When my parents moved here, I had my tenth birthday here. My first birthday was in May, a month after they moved here, my birthday came. May 4<sup>th</sup>. So I was ten years old when I came here. Give it four years. Five years after that.

NL: Okay, so it was mid-sixties.

MN: Mid-sixties.

Eric: Yes.

IP: Yeah.

NL: Not even seventies yet. I see, and –

Eric: And I went so – See, I have always been a serene, quiet person, where I kind of shy away from all of this wild child business, but it's easy to draw you into it. It's easy to get drawn into, but I kind of stayed away from it, while my brother, it seemed like he attracted it, so to speak.

NL: Right.

Eric: He was, "What do you mean, 'I'm Black. I can't go there?' " I'm going, and he went. Him and Frankie, who was my older brother, the two of them, they were like a

force to be reckoned with, so they didn't put us all in the same school. My brother, Frankie, now, when he went to Junior High school, he went to 101, which is over here. It's close to Throggs Neck. Right at the beginning of Throggs Neck. He went over there. They sent him over there.

NL: Wow, how was that?

IP: That wasn't so good either.

Eric: That wasn't so good, either.

NL: It couldn't have been.

Eric: So, between 125 and 101, she was running between the two of them because, "Your son is carrying on" here, oh "Your son is carrying on over here." And I was in the middle, so to speak, where I've always been. I was just quiet. I didn't want, when my father gets mad, I didn't want to be on the receiving end, so I knew how to skirt away from all of that, because she might have handled it at the time, but when he came home, he handled, handled it. So no. The experiences at school – I was basically was trying to learn. I just held a deaf ear.

NL: So you were able to just ignore it to weather the mood.

Eric: I should say weather. You couldn't totally ignore it because at times, she found that I did get into scuffles, but – People pushing you down, and I remember one time, I got pushed down, and Tony, at the time –

IP: My youngest son. Whew, he was a mess.

Eric: That was the biggest thing. We had to go into court over this whole mess because he really hurt the boy.

IP: My son. He's a tough guy. [laughs]

Eric: So, he saw the guy push me down, and he pushed me down to a hole in the street, and I tore my pants, and I was bleeding, and he got very angry. We used to go home together, and he got very angry. He came up behind the guy and he clobbered him, and I'm laying there, and he helped me home, but his parents called the cops, and they came here. The cops wanted to come in here, push her out of the way, come in the house. She said, "You can't do that." The cops were not very –

IP: Nice in this neighborhood, you know. They were terrible.

Eric: I remember one time I was across the street and I was playing across the street, and I was there, you know, you are there to do things. There was this girl, and I hit her. I slapped her, point blank. My friend dared me to do so. I did. I knew it was wrong because you are not supposed to put your hand on somebody else, but they dared me, so I did it. I was always the quiet sort anyway, so it didn't – but the cops came all the way here.

NL: So you slapped the girl on the playground.

Eric: Yes, yes, we were older teenagers, and the cops came over here, and they were going to push their way into this house to drag me out of here. My mother said, "Oh no you're not. No, you're not," because we opened the door –

IP: I told them they are going to have to knock me down. I'm not going anywhere.

EP: They opened the door, but that didn't mean they were permitted to go in the house. They saw me, and they were ready to come in the house.

IP: They told me, they were coming in to drag him out. I said, "Yes. I'll fix you." I came in, grabbed my phone, and called the person, got the captain, and told the captain what was going on. He said, "What." I told him what was going on.

EP: And he called them on the radio –

IP: And he called them on the radio, yes.

NL: Wow.

IP: He goes, "Girl, what I would do to you if you weren't a woman." I said, "Come I've got my bat." Yes, I was very mad.

NL: [Laughs]

EP: At the time, on this side of –

NL: Mr. Peterson was away at sea.

IP: Yes, yes.

EP: At the time, this side, Lacombe and going back, all these houses were multi-racial, and over there was White, so it was weird. Well, you're over there, you can have a house, so therefore, you should stay over here, and you don't belong over here.

NL: So Lacombe was the dividing line between where you could be and where you couldn't be.

EP: Right, because even Saint Andrew's, the houses –

NL: Across from Saint Andrew's?

EP: All levels were dirt. There was nothing there.

NL: No, I remember that. So, even, going to Saint Andrew's then, you are crossing over to the forbidden side, then. How was that?

EP: We walked down regularly –

IP: We went there regularly –

EP: We walked down Castle Hill. We didn't walk through the park. Go to the park here, and you could get beaten up.

NL: Really?

MN: Were there gangs or was it not organized that way?

EP: It wasn't organized that way. It was just a lot of ignorant people.

IP: We had Irish and Italian.

EP: Ignorance was very – Irish, Italian, and Jews, and it seemed like they all meshed together, and keep those dark faces over there. They don't belong over here.

IP: You know, when we came on this neighborhood to buy a house, when I came to this neighborhood to buy a house, I asked him, "You see the house across from Saint Andrew's Church?" You couldn't buy a house there. If your skin wasn't White, you better not even go?

BG> Purnell: Where was this?

NL: That's the corner of Lafayette and Castle Hill.

IP: Yes –

NL: Right across from the park –

IP: You know those houses across the street from the church. You couldn't live there. Those were the Venerly Houses. They said that you could not live there, so we don't handle interracial mortgages. The man told me that. I said, "What?!" That's what he told me.

MN: What?

NL: Handle –

IP: Have a interracial mortgages.

MN: Marriages.

NL: Mortgages.

MN: Oh, mortgages.

NL: Yes.

IP: I was so shocked, I didn't know what to say.

MN: And this was a private development, or a public?

IP: Private.

MN: Private.

IP: And, you know, they built the houses, you know? All them houses everyday were all grey.

NL: I see. Wow.

IP: They wouldn't let you live there. In this area, ooh, very, very prejudiced.

NL: I'm surprised that the church wasn't as, you know, negative as the neighborhood was. Saint Andrew's still tended to be good with race relations at that time.

IP: At that time, we had a minister that was not – He was a little prejudiced.

NL: Oh yes?

IP: Oh yes, he was. He was White.

NL: How did you pick up on the fact that he was prejudiced?

BP: I could tell you why. At that time, we had two ministers, Father McKay and Father Horner. Horner was the best one. Even McKay didn't like Horner because Horner had married to a lady –

IP: Indian.

NL: Ah. So he was in an interracial marriage.

IP: Exactly.

BP: It didn't set too good with – But the two of them were in the church together, but when we ran in with Father McKay. We had something going on, and he got up on the pulpit one morning, and he says he sends his kids to private school. He wouldn't send them to public school. I would not send my kid to public school.

IP: Yes. Imagine.

BP: On the pulpit. Imagine a thing like that.

BP: Father McKay, and then he didn't stay long after that. And after they left, that's when Father Harvey came.

MN: Oh.

NL: Father Harvey used to teach at Fordham.

IP: Yes?

MN: Yes.

NL: Yes. He knows Father Harvey.

BP: That's when Father Harvey –

EP: Everybody knows Father Harvey.

NL: [Laughs]



IP: We were glad when he came because, he changed everything. It was beautiful.

NL: And what was that like when Father Harvey came? What kind of changes did he bring to Saint Andrew's?

IP: What kind of changes? All the White people that were in Saint Andrew's left Saint Andrew's.

NL: Wow.

IP: They all left.

EP: Little by little.

IP: It's only one family that stayed, and the wife is still there.

NL: Withers.

IP: Virginia Withers.

NL: I remember her –

IP: Her husband died, but she's still there.

NL: I remember –

IP: You remember her?

NL: When I was a child, I always used to think, "Why does she come here?" She's so out of place. I didn't realize she was part of the old Saint Andrew's.

IP: Yes, she's the only one who stayed –

NL: Wow.

IP: And she's still there.

NL: Yes, she still goes to –

IP: She comes to eight o'clock mass every Sunday.

NL: All the other White families left as soon as Father Harvey came?

IP: Oh yes, they all left.

BP: It's strange, you know? Her husband and I became close, very close.

NL: Mr. Withers.

IP: Mr. Withers, yes, he used to work in housing, you know?

NL: Oh , he worked in the housing?

IP: Yes, we used to go to the senior citizen center.

NL: Right, right.

BP: That's what he used to do, but he died now.

NL: Right. Now I remember when he died a couple of years ago.

BP: He and I became close friends.

NL: Okay wow. What kind of programs did he bring into the church?

BP: Oh, he was dynamic. He walked and talked to everybody, when you wanted listening to or not. You stood out on your stoop, and he'd talk to you, and the next thing you know, he seemed to, like, draw you into his conversation.

MN: Was the rectory right near the church?

IP: What rectory?

NL: Upstairs, upstairs. In the church, yes. There was an apartment inside the church.

IP: Yes.

BP: Because they are the one person in there, especially the one person is in that house.

IP: That home over there, yes.

BP: Otherwise, he used to live upstairs.

NL: Yes. Saint Andrew's has a house now where they can house the rectory, but before that, there was an apartment in the church.

BP: Yes, he used to sit down on the church steps, and he looked like he brought the whole community together.

NL: So he would do street corner preaching.

IP: Yes, he would go all over the place.

NL: Wow.

IP: And he brought the young people together. He had different things for them to do.

NL: So he would do street corner preaching.

IP: He would go all over the place, yes.

NL: Wow.

IP: And he brought the young people together. He had different things for them to do.

NL: Right, so that is when the youth group first started.

IP: Yes. To bring them together.

NL: It was under Father Harvey. So this is the seventies, now, so what year did Father Harvey come?

IP: Did he come in the seventies?

EP: '78 or '79.

NL: '78?

EP: '78 or '79.

NL: Okay. '78 or '79, so over the course of, so he was there from at least the late seventies through to the early nineties, then, right, because I remember he was there for at

least a good part of my childhood too. So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what kinds of things your family got involved with in Saint Andrew's, because I'm assuming – First, I'll ask the question, were you involved in Saint Andrew's activities before Father Harvey came?

EP: No.

BP: No.

IP: No, I don't think so.

NL: Did you feel like you would be welcomed to join activities?

IP: I don't think so –

EP: No.

IP: I didn't join any activities. No.

EP: No.

IP: I joined after he came.

BP: When Father Harvey came, most of the Whites were gone, but it still had a, like a, dissention among the Blacks that were there.

NL: Really.

BP: It became a money thing, being in a money class. Like, for instance, I have a little more money, I put a little more money in the church. I want more, because I remember Patsy Sloane, she had a big Cadillac, and she would do anything money-wise, and she felt that she should have –

NL: More of a say in what's done.

IP: Ah, the Medlock.

BP: The Medlock.

IP: There was another group.

BP: There was another group. They thought they were the controlling part. Then after Medlock.

BP: Come to Bells. Bell and –

IP: Harris --

BP: The were the ones --

IP: Remember Harris?

BP: Harris and all of them. See, that was like a –

IP: We didn't trust in such a long time [laughs].

NL: Right.

BP: That was like --

NL: That was the clique.

BP: That was a clique among themselves. Your name would go up for a nomination for the [inaudible] –

IP: We weren't good enough?

BP: We didn't get a chance to get into that area.

IP: Terrible the way they carried on.

NL: When did you feel like things changed and opportunities opened up for people of different classes to get into?

IP: [laughs]

BP: Well, Father Harvey changed –

IP: He really changed it.

BP: It started to change. It started to change a lot after – because he changed it a lot. He made sure of it.

IP: He made it so everybody could have joined and be a part of church. Like Father Churchill would say, “Everybody is a woman of Saint Andrew’s as long as you’re a woman of the church.” Everybody could join if they wanted to, but at that time, you know, you didn’t feel comfortable, but now, I mean, he came, he let them know, and everybody – I joined, and the Medlocks, Ms. Medlock and her daughter was the head of it, but I was in it then, at that time.

EP: I think that Father Harvey’s downfall was that he rubbed a few of these money people on the wrong side.

NL: Really?

EP: Because he was all inclusive, and they didn’t want all-inclusive. They wanted their say. They wanted to control, and he was not a person to be controlled.

NL: That’s when you think he decided to leave.

EP: That’s when he looked to get a way out.

IP: Yeah, remember the lawyer?

NL: I see.

EP: They said, “Well, we finally got Black priest.” It’s amazing how Black society seems to be where we want to be, all inclusive. We want this, we want that, but then when they get one of their persons in power, now they want to control the person as opposed to include everybody. You know, they had money. You had a good, what, 12 or so families

that had big bucks, and they figured they could rule the church, and Father Harvey didn't stand for that. He wasn't having that, and so, I believe, a lot of them led to his demise in leaving.

IP: What was the name of the lawyer?

BP: Michael.

NL: Ivan Michael?

IP: Yes, he was another one.

NL: Oh wow. I remember all of these people as a kid, but I didn't know how much church politics was taking place.

EP: Then you had the District Attorney's family. What was his –

MN: Johnson?

NL: Robert Johnson.

EP: Robert Johnson family. So you had these, within our own home, bringing –

NL: Wow. This is a new story for me.

IP: [laughs]

MN: Well, I know some of these people.

IP: Right. We grew up in the church.

NL: I mean, I was born in '78. I was three when I came to Saint Andrew's. I didn't really know this kind of stuff when it was at its height. I was so small that I wasn't really aware of it. My mom wasn't really aware of it when she first started.

IP: She's more involved now.

NL: Now. So, what was it like as a youth in Saint Andrew's? Were you part of the youth group?

EP: There wasn't a youth group.

NL: There wasn't a youth group just yet.

EP: When the youth group formed, I was too young anyway.

NL: I see.

EP: When it finally formed, I was too old for the youth group thing. I remember we used to have a thing called carnivals.

NL: Really? Was it a West Indian-type of carnival?

EP: No, it was Father McKay's time.

NL: Oh.

EP: It wasn't –

NL: It was a regular type of street fair type of thing.

EP: No, it was inside.

IP: Never had it outside.

EP: Never outside. Nothing outside. I think there was a building next door. Think of it not being there.

NL: Oh.

EP: That whole area was empty.

NL: I see.

EP: We had a lot of area, nothing kept outside.

IP: We keep things outside now, but not then.



EP: They basically did it to raise funds, but at time, I was still going to Saint John

Vianney. I wasn't in Saint Andrew's yet.

NL: Oh.

EP: I wasn't in Saint Andrew's yet because my parents wanted me to have a choice. To choose whether we wanted to go here or there. My grandmother was a staunch Roman Catholic. If she was living here today and sitting here, she would tell you, I am a Roman Catholic. Not Catholic. I'm a Roman Catholic. She'd tell you that point blank.

NL: So you went to Saint John Vianney as a child just to explore what Catholicism is about.

EP: No, I went from Saint John's to Saint Joan of Ark.

NL: I see.

EP: My communion was at Saint Joan of Ark. My confirmation was at Saint John's.

NL: And what was Saint John's Vianney's congregation like?

EP: Predominately white.

NL: Were they receptive to you?

EP: We got along over there. It wasn't bad because I joined the Boy Scouts over there, so I was pretty – We used to call Saint Andrew's "the other church" and "the other people."

IP: [laughs]

NL: Wow.

EP: You know, they would snare at each other, so to speak. The kind of kids snaring kind of thing, but when I first went into Saint Andrew's and I realized how together they were

and how unstarched they were. They were not starched, like you've got to get up straight. Don't you move, and there are no nuns just to crack the whip.

NL: Oh, because I went to Saint John Vianney's School, and there were certainly nuns that cracked that whip. [laughs]

IP: [laughs] Yes.

EP: It was just like. Oh no, and we – when I went to Saint Andrew's was the first time that I actually saw the Bible. My grandmother used to carry one, but –

NL: Yes. Catholics don't really use the Bible. Right.

EP: And I remember my dad telling me that my grandmother was put off when she first came to New York. She had a wish and a dream to go to Saint Patrick's Cathedral. My dad can pretty much tell you about that. Her experience going at Saint Patrick's Cathedral, and they asked her where she was going when she went in the door. She was all dressed up with her gloves and her hat. You know, the way – and she was going to service. She asked my father to take her there. He told us about this, and it put a really bad taste in my mouth about the Catholic situation because this is a lady that started the day with prayer in church and ended the day in prayer. I mean, she would start the day in prayer, and then she –

IP: She was in her sixties.

EP: She would go and do her selling in the marketplace, and she would end her day in church, and then come home. So this was a lady that –

NL: That was very devout.

EP: Extremely.

NL: Right.

EP: Extremely devout, so it just kind of rubbed me wrong. Yu know, how could they treat her like that when she was so – You want to talk about committed. There is nothing you could say about the Pope.

NL: Right.

EP: Right in front of her.

NL: Right.

EP: The Pope was her god, so to speak.

NL: I wanted to ask what it was like for you guys once the Castle Hill Houses started to change over in population.

EP: Okay. I could speak on some of that because I am the traveler in the family. I like to travel. I've been all over the states. I've been to California. I've been here. I've been there. I've been all over. I was in California when the change started, and when I came back, I met a lot of this change, but when I came back, I didn't come back to this area. I went to upstate New York.

MN: Now where did you go to high school, and did you go to college?

EP: I went to DeWitt Clinton High School up on Mosholu Parkway, and I went to SUNY Morrisville in Morrisville, New York. And when I came back here, it was so different.

NL: What year was it when you came back?

EP: I graduated in 1969, and there was a – That was even a deception, so to speak. Here I was, ready to graduate, and they said, "Oh, well, you don't have all of your requirements." I actually went to the ceremony – At that time, I was having a lot of

trouble with my parents. Growing pains issues, I should say. I wanted my way, not their way, and I wanted to listen to me. So the last year of high school, I stayed with my aunt, which is her sister, to be defiant, but here I am, not paying attention to all the requirements, and I didn't know that I didn't have all the requirements to finish high school. A. It was a gym requirement anyway, so I went to the gym, I went there and finished, I thought. I got that done with. And as soon as I got that done with that summer, what had happened. I got drafted. The United States saw me and drafted me.

NL: And where did you go?

EP: Of course, I was a little angry at my brother, but we went to Woodstock.

MN: You were at Woodstock? With which brother?

EP: My deceased brother, and we had a ball.

MN: Oh, wow.

EP: He liked to drive all over the place.

NL: Wow.

EP: He said, "Come on. Let's go have a last hurrah." So we went out there and had a great time.

MN: Who did you hear at Woodstock? The most memorable –

EP: Jimi Hendrix.

MN: Where were you relative to the stage when Jimi Hendrix was performing?

EP: Can't tell you.

[laughter]

EP: That's a long time. That's hard to tell you. I was trying to keep tabs on my brother, who was a real ladies' man, and he'd come on over. Meet some more ladies. Every time I would turn around, two or three, and half of them are half naked.

IP: [laughs]

EP: It was an experience that the kids today. You could see movies about it, but it was the experience – Everybody walked around half naked, and of course, my father didn't like the way our hair. Big Afro. He was so happy that when left, it had to go. The hair had to go.

NL: Wow.

IP: What do you mean, going to service?

NL: I was going to ask, speaking of Afros; I wanted to ask you about your thoughts on civil rights and what was happening down South. Was that affecting you down here?

EP: That's where my naiveté came in because, at that time, black history was not taught at school, and I didn't know much about the black experience, the history, even the culture of the Virgin Islands. I didn't know anything about any of that. My dad was away trying to make a living, and my mom was trying to do the same thing. So in school, we were left to learn all these things, but they weren't teaching them.

NL: But you didn't really have a clue about what was happening down South at the time.

EP: I knew about Martin Luther King.

B. Purnell: Can we pause for one second. I want to switch the tape.

MN: Yes. So, Mr. Peterson, you have a Rosa Parks story.

BP: Well, I was coming home. The war was just over because I was out there for 11 months, and I was, the ship –

NL: This was World War Two –

IP :Yes, World War Two.

BP: -- in Texas.

MN: In Texas.

BP: We pulled into Galveston, Texas, and I was coming home, for the first time, to my uncle's house. In those days, you had to change the busses. You change three or four busses before you get to New York. Because the bus, it would go a little while, stop at a little town, we eat. They either change the bus or they change the driver. Well, I believe it was when I go to North Carolina or South Carolina, after riding for one night and all day standing, two duffel bags and a uniform. I had my sailor uniform, and when they started loading the bus, I was told when the bus leaves the station, I was told, when we get to the net station, I was told to get up and give up my seat to a lady that had just got on the bus, and I said to him, "No, I'm not going to do it." I rode all this time, from night to day, and I'm not going to get up, and when the bus driver pulled into the station, he got off the bus. He said, "Nobody may leave." He got off the bus and went in the station, and when he came back, he came back with two police. Military police, and each one of them. One grabbed this arm, the other grabbed the other arm, and I was taken off the bus, and the next thing you know, they took my two duffel bags and threw them off behind me. I went in the station, the bus left. When the next bus came in. it was half full. I was not allowed to go on that bus. The third bus came into the station, and it was half full. They

had seats on that bus, I was still not allowed to go on that bus. When the final bus came, that was crowded. I was allowed to go on the bus again, standing with my two duffel bags, but you see, the difference between her [Rosa Parks] and myself – I was in the service, and there was nothing I could do. I disobeyed an order, and they took me off the bus, but in her case, she was a civilian, and this was long, this was 1945, We had just come home after being out to sea for 11 months.

NL: Wow. Wow.

BP: Many times, I just tell my family the same, exactly the same thing happened to me as happened to her [Rosa Parks].

NL: Wow.

BP: I had no, they just took me off the bus.

NL: So Eric, were you affected by those stories growing up? Thinking about how you related to Castle Hill with the rest of the residents?

EP: My awareness to the whole black experience came at college, and I joined the first Black Student Union.

MN: Now was this after the service? You went into the military and went into college?

EP: I was in the military now, to end that portion of it. I went to my basic training. I went my advanced individual training. Went home for a little bit, and I was in Italy, and the inevitable, my mom was not thrilled. I don't want to have to hear what your orders are. I know where you're going, and she was very upset. My father tried to tell her that everything was going to be okay, and I went to Vietnam. I went to Vietnam. I lost a lot of my boyhood friends when I went to Vietnam. There's numerous of them that came

back in body bags. I told myself that I wasn't coming back in a body bag. I would do what I had to do, and I was coming back. I came back, only hear about all the civil rights things. I lived through it. I heard more about it when I was there, but I was even more entrenched. It was like coming out for the Civil Rights Movement, because after Martin Luther King was killed, it seemed like the civil rights movement seemed to progress. It progressed with all the people who were left behind when he was killed. Now, so I told myself, you know, as a Black person, I need to find out more. Get in touch more with who I am, who I really am and where I come from, so I did, but the Student Union was not. Now remember, SUNY was a state school. They were not happy to have a Black Student Union on campus, and they didn't want any large rift going on, so they allowed it, and it circled the university. It spread to Buffalo, and there is nothing to do about it. It just spread. SUN Morrisville is a two-year school. People transfer, and they would take whatever they learned with them, and it just grew.

MN: Now, in terms of Vietnam, these are your friends from this neighborhood or in high school, who died.

EP: Yes.

NL: So a lot of Bronx people went to Vietnam.

EP: All over the city, the whole city. I mean, a lot of boyhood friends I grew up with from this area. There was a girl that I really liked a lot, her brother, a real tall guy, in fact, he was one of the first young men from Saint Andrew's that got killed in Vietnam. Cynthia's brother.

IP: Yes, I remember.



EP: That devastated that family because he was the main male component of that family, and so when he got killed, it seemed like they just kind of deadened, and eventually, they all moved away. They sold out and moved away. He was kind of like the glue that held him together because her father, he had died early on, but her mother tried to hold the family together with her brother, but then he got drafted. He got drafted before me, and I only met him once on Cameron Bay, and I said, "Well, I'll see you. Just keep your head down." Yes, you meet people in crossing, but I never saw him again, and then when I came back here, I found out that he got killed. He was in the Marines. I was in the Army. Apparently, we're not supposed to mix, like the Navy would come – We'd call them Navy boys. The Air Force, the fly boys. The Air Force was the ultimate, actually, other than the Marines –

IP: The Marines are so different?

EP: The Marines were simplified. The Marines were real gung ho. They were there until the end. The Army – They seemed to come after. The Navy was always the one, the ships and some air, but the Air Force, we called them glorified because you were glad to see a helicopter. You were glad to see one when you were able to get off the ground and get away from something. We were all glad to see each other, but we got into individuals' perspective groups, we were who we were, and they were who they were.

NL: So when did you come back from Vietnam?

EP: Early seventies.

NL: You don't remember what year?

EP: '70, '71.

NL: '71, okay, and then you went to school in Morrisville.

EP: Not right away.

NL: Not right away?

EP: No.

NL So you were in the Bronx for a couple of years. And what was that like, coming back in '71? What was Castle Hill like?

EP: I saw changes happening.

NL: Yes, what kind of changes?

EP: I saw more dark faces.

NL: A lot of the faces that I grew up with, I didn't see anymore. Faces that I grew up with, I didn't see anymore, and I questioned my mother to death. Where is this one, Where is that one? Oh, he moved away. They're gone.

NL: And did you see any drugs in the neighborhood at that time?

EP: No. It wasn't until the mid to late seventies.

NL: The mid-to-late seventies the drugs came in.

EP: Yes. Mid-to late seventies to early eighties. That's when the --

[END of Tape 1, Side B] [BEGINNING, Tape 2, Side A]

Mark Naison (MN): -- Was in the early eighties. Was it crack or heroin?

Eric Petersen (EP): No. You know, it was not crack. Crack didn't come until the late eighties, early nineties.

MN: Right.

EP: What had happened was I was given to remember and told that this development was state-run when it first opened, and so -- and there was a requirement to live over there, and so, at a certain -- at set -- a set money -- You had to make a certain amount of money to live in these buildings. Everything was well -- very well -- very, very well-kept. Like, actually, like Parkchester, extremely, almost, you could mirror the two of them, but what happened was, when the state sold -- gave it to the city, gave control over to the city, the people changed, and they were looking for a way out, and Co-op City was the way out. [If] it wasn't Co-op City, [then] it was Long Island, and they jetted out of here, it was like, constant caravan of bands. I mean, every time you turned around, you saw another moving van, constant caravan, and they moved -- I mean, they moved out of here like flight. They were gone, and the whole makeup changed. The care about the place, it was gone. New York City Housing now had it. It was just -- wasn't what it was. The white faces -- You could actually find them as opposed to before, you blended in to them, where you had maybe a white face here, and a whole bunch of black faces here. I mean, you had white faces and one black face before. Now, you had a real -- now you have -- you had more Black and Hispanic and growing [more] than anything else, and the white faces were diminishing, and they were moving out of here like, like somebody was chasing them. It seemed like -- I remember I had a very good friend [who] lived in the building right across the street -- Michael Allele and his family.

Ishma Petersen (IP): Yes.

EP: They were Irish, but never in your wildest dreams did you'd think they were going to leave here, but out they went, just like everybody else, they carried away. They went to

Co-op City. It was strange for me. It's still strange now. I'm not as happy with this neighborhood as I was when I first came here when I was young. I was ten years old. I am now 55. That's 46, that's 40 -- that's 45 year -- 35 years ago? I got it right? I had it right?

Natasha Lightfoot (NL): 45.

EP: 45. I had it right the first time. That's 45 years ago, and I thought that, you know, my parents were bringing us someplace where we're going to grow up and it was going to be -- it was good. You know, they never deterred us from mixing with the [other ethnicities and races] because they felt that people are people. That's how they were raised. They wanted their children to be raised the same way, but it seemed [like] people had other ideas in the society in which we live, and things just got -- things got -- this -- I'm so distaste -- I have a great distaste right now for this area. I don't like it here anymore as I once did.

NL: When did you stop liking the area?

EP: Was it late eighties, early nineties?

Ishma Petersen (IP): When you moved from here, it was at that time, around that time?

EP: Yes, because she kept saying, "Why don't you get a place over around here?" So like, "No!" Anywhere but here, and then I went to -- I was in Syracuse, I was in Binghamton, Syracuse, Rochester. I touched in Buffalo, but came back to Rochester. When I finally did come back here, I went to Jersey instead of coming here. So, I just wasn't happy with what had happened here.

NL: Right, and what about your other siblings? Did they stay here, or did they move?

IP: No.

EP: They're around.

NL: No, so in the time when you were leaving --

EP: They stayed.

IP: They stayed.

EP: They stayed.

EP: Like I said, I was the traveling person. I wanted to see all of the things.

MN: Yes, now, one thing. Were your musical tastes different from your siblings?

EP: Yes.

MN: In the -- like the late sixties?

EP: Yes.

MN: What was your -- the music that you --

EP: I like rock n' roll. I love Jimi Hendrix. [I] Cried when he died. I did cry.

MN: You're not the only one.

EP: Him -- Who was that big mouth woman who sings? I always forget her name.

MN: Oh, Mama Cass, or no?

EP: No.

MN: Janis Joplin?

EP: Janis.

NL: Janis Joplin.

EP: She was my favorite woman artist at the time, and Jimi Hendrix was my favorite male. All the rest of them came later, and as rock and roll started to -- kind of to erode in my upcoming, I went into disco, and I loved disco dancing. I mean --

NL: Was disco big in the Bronx?

EP: Yes, we had some very big clubs up in here -- up in the Bronx.

NL: What clubs were here that you would go to?

EP: Well, I think the Warehouse is still here?

IP: It is?

EP: If I remember right.

NL: The Warehouse? Is that, like, kind of by the Concourse?

EP: Yes.

NL: And, like, I think it's like, one forty-something?

EP: Yes.

NL: Yes.

EP: It is still here, but it's much different than it is now.

NL: Right, right.

EP: Then it was such a mixture of people. Now, it's predominately gay.

NL: Yes.

EP: But then --

IP: It is?

NL: Yes.

EP: But then, --

IP: Oh.

EP: It was such a mixture -- a cross-section of people, but when the cross-section of people went out, the gays took it over, and with that said, it wasn't -- that wasn't a bad thing, but it's just that it was one of the lee line clubs to go to. It was, I mean --

NL: A big disco spot. What other places did you go to for disco in the Bronx?

EP: Manhattan. I didn't go --

NL: So you spent more time in Manhattan than in the Bronx?

EP: I would say the Village, East Village.

IP: Loves the Village [laughs].

EP: The East Village -- They had this big place on West Third Street, or Fourth Street and Third.

NL: Webster Hall?

EP: East -- no.

NL: Oh.

EP: Webster Hall is later, much later.

NL: Oh.

EP: This was on East, east Third or Fourth. It was over on the East side, right across off of the -- off of Sixth or Seventh Avenue. I think it was Seventh -- Sixth Avenue. It was just *the* place to go. It was like a whole block, and you go upstairs and you had four different floors, and it just -- and it opened up at nine o'clock at night, and you stayed until six in the morning, and you just --

B. Purnell: Paradise Garage?

EP: No. No. That was later. Paradise Garage came later. They --

NL: Yes.

EP: I'm dating myself --

MN: Right. Right.

EP: I don't care because --

IP: [laughs]

EP: Paradise Garage came much later. This -- Paradise Garage -- when this place closed, the Paradise Garage became the place to go.

NL: I have a question, just kind of backtracking kind of a bit, too. I was wondering, as kids growing up to parents from Saint Thomas, what was that like for you? Did you identify with Saint Thomas at all?

EP: I didn't know much about my homeland.

NL: You didn't know much about it. Your parents didn't go back and forth?

You guys didn't go --

EP: They went.

IP: We went out.

EP: And we -- No, we didn't go.

NL: You didn't go. Okay.

EP: The first time I went to Saint Thomas was when Granny died.

IP: Yes.

EP: When my grandmother died, my first time in Saint Thomas. I was what, I was in my twenties then?



NL: So you felt thoroughly -- You guys felt thoroughly American?

EP: Oh yes, yes. We were pretty much Americanized. Yes, I grew up in a basic American [family], but everybody said, "Where are you really from?" I said, "Well, my parents are from Saint Thomas." [They said,] "Well, that's where you're from." I said, "Well --

IP: That's not where you were from, like you weren't born there.

EP: -- but, to argue the point, It was useless. So, yes, alright, I'm a Saint Thomian. I'll leave it at that, because that's where my ancestors are from. That's where they're from. That's where they landed. As far as where they are from prior to that, I'm working on that right now.

IP: [laughs]

EP: Because I really want to know. My -- I have a cousin that's in Saint Croix, and she's Sicilian. My cousin Celine in Saint Croix was helping me to try to do some backtracking because I would like -- I am curious to know where we originally came from. There have been things said about Denmark. There have been things said about this, things said about that. I want to know -- I want to go back a few generations to find out where we really came from because people continue to tell me, "Oh, you know you're African." I said, "How do I know that?"

NL: Oh.

EP: I said, "I need to research to find out."

NL: Right.

EP: And if I don't find --

NL: I don't know how well the Danes kept slave records.

EP: Yes, and if I don't do the research, I won't know, so thus far, you know, I'm working on that. I can't really plug that in to anything, but I'll get there.

NL: So I'm hearing that you all are planning to move to New Jersey?

IP: Yes.

Basil Petersen (BP): Yes, we are.

NL: Yes.

BP: I hate giving up my home, but it comes too much for us. You know, we can't handle it anymore. This is an eight-room house, eight room, garage, can't take care of it.

IP: It's a lot of work.

BP: Lot of work.

IP: Lots of -- It's very expensive.

BP: But we're not going too far. We're just going right over the bridge in Edgewater.

NL: So will you be in an apartment --

BP: They have a nice community over there. A senior --

NL: Like a senior community type. Like an assisted living community --

IP: Yes, an assisted-living community, right, that's right.

NL: Oh, wow. I see.

IP: How many rooms [do] we have, Bas?

BP: We go back, hmm?

IP: Two bedrooms, two living rooms, yes. Two baths, they give us two bathrooms.

[laughs]. Each is our own. That's so funny.

BP: To go back to the family history, this family is very spread out. It's very large.

Mostly, I -- In those days, your parents never told you much. You weren't allowed to ask too many questions. My great-grandmother, I used to see her sitting, but I never knew who the little lady was who would be sitting by the window. This little white-looking old --

IP: -- and he never knew her.

BP: I never knew that was my great-grandmother.

NL: She was a white lady.

BP: Yep.

NL: Was she --

IP: Danish --

NL: Danish, she was Danish.

BP: This side of the -- My side of the family is the dark side, but she can tell you how it comes down, as the marriages keep coming down.

NL: So it was an intermarriage of Danish and Black?

IP: Yes --

NL: That produced your side of the family.

BP: Yep. If you see some of my family, especially in Saint Croix, you see the difference, you'll say gee, all the same. As they can tell you, if they find, if you find someone with the name, with the -SEN on it, that -SEN --

NL: Right. Petersen is Danish.

IP: It's Danish, yes. It is. Right.

BP: Somewhere along the line, Harry came down. Harry came down because I had a cousin. I used to tease him all the time. I used to tell him, light, damn near bright, or something that I used to tell him. You know, we used to call him the “M” word. I’m whiter than you. I said, “Yes, you’re white. Slight and damn near bright, but you still ain’t white.”

IP: [laughs]

EP: [laughs]

BP: You know what I mean. You could tell, but because we were lively young kids at the time.

NL: Right.

BP: But he was one of the lighter ones --

NL: Right, right.

IP: Yes, you know, the islands were Danish before it became --

NL: Right, before it became American.

IP: Yes, yes.

BP: That’s what I said. That’s what I said. They never had any disparity among us.

IP: Yes, Danish was --

MN: So the United States is totally different in terms of the racial atmosphere?

BP: Yes, from now, I really don’t know, but at the time, as a kid, it was different. My two godmothers are white. My two godmothers are white women. They’re white. Same as my godfather.

IP: Danish.

BP: So, you know, we had never, never had to run into that prejudice.

IP: We just happen to have Danish people there, yes.

NL: So you felt like this neighborhood was very prejudiced, but did you have good things to say about this neighborhood?

BP: Oh, yes.

IP: We had [a] nice time here. We haven't really had any problems. Nobody came in our house to rob or anything. Never had that problem.

NL: Even during the point where you felt like the neighborhood was starting to change in character?

IP: Nobody ever bothered us.

MN: Never been mugged? Never been robbed?

IP: No.

BP: No. Nobody has ever threatened this house or threatened --

NL: Did you ever --

BP: It was always out there, you know, because --

MN: That's terrific --

NL: Wow, so you never started to feel unsafe at any point?

BP: No.

IP: No, we never.

BP: Never, never, never.

NL: And, I mean, just to ask, I was wondering about your son that got killed. When did that happen?

IP: Oh boy, I think, 1984.

NL: Yes, he was a police officer?

IP: No.

NL: That wasn't the police officer?

BP: Not that one.

NL: Oh, okay.

IP: The other one, the younger one --

NL: Oh, okay. I see. So, was that -- Do you feel like that was due to the change of character in the area?

IP: I don't know because he did not get killed in this area.

NL: Oh, he didn't? I didn't realize that.

IP: Didn't realize that?

NL: Okay, I didn't know that.

IP: No, he didn't get killed in this area, no. He was a taxi driver. My husband had a taxi -  
-

EP: It was the climate -- It was the climate of the time.

IP: My husband had a taxi.

EP: It was the climate of the time because he and I were very -- were extremely close, like joined at the hip, and it was the climate of the time because, he and my father were closer. I -- At one point in time, in my life, I felt a jealousy between him and I because he was closer to my father than I have ever been, and the two of them were like white on rice. They were [claps hands] minced together, and he finally started driving. It's from

my dad. My dad has always been a go-getter, to describe him, in a sense, and he couldn't go to sea anymore, but he didn't want to work for anybody. So working for himself was the option, so getting that medallion taxi was it. He got it, and then my brother was -- "Oh Dad..." In and out, in and out, so finally, my father said, "Okay," and he brought him in at night to work -- to do the cab, but at the time, when they started killing cab -- They were killing cab --

IP: Cab drivers.

MN: Jesus Christ.

IP: Yes.

NL: Wow.

EP: He was shot and killed for less than fifty dollars.

NL: Oh.

IP: Yes, how do you like that?

NL: Wow.

MN: In what borough?

BP: If that was the worst -- That was the worst --

EP: The other side of the Bronx --

BP: Day of my life.

MN: The other side of Queens?

EP: The other side of the --

IP: Bronx.

NL: What part of the Bronx?

EP: Over by Yankee Stadium.

NL: Ah.

BP: What's the name of the place? Just up by the Deegan as you get --

MN: Highbridge?

IP: Yes, that area --

BP: That Fordham Road area --

NL: Yes --

BP: That's where you get off on --

MN: University Heights, Morris Heights --

BP: Yes.

IP: Yes.

EP: Yes.

BP: My -- What I did, he had -- We had a routine, because she is the one that had really talked me into it, because I tried my best to keep him out of it, because he wanted -- And I knew how dangerous it was no matter what time of the day or night, and he lost his job at the airport. He had lost his job at the airport, and he wanted to be independent. I said, "Well, I'll give you some lessons." He said, "No, Dad, I want to work. I want to be up to it in money." So I finally relented, to let him do -- and he went door-to-door. He knew the city just as much as I do, and many times, when he came in and I saw the trip sheet, I used to ask him. I said, "Frank, why are you in such an area this time of the morning?" Because, with the cab, you have to --

NL: Write down where you are --



BP: You have to put the time when you pick them up --

IP: What areas --

BP: -- for the month, and I looked at the time, and it was a different area. So he says, "Don't worry. Don't [worry]." So anyway, some of the time, we used to get out-of-town trips. You know, like, some -- their plane comes in late, and you can't get to drive, so you take a cab to go to Darien, Connecticut, or nearby or something, and sometimes, he got out of town trips, and -- but he had a habit, seven o'clock, he would come in every morning. The car would be here. Sometimes, I would be sleeping, but the door would be open, and I am laying there, and sometimes I could see him when he comes, and he would look in the door, and I would see him look to see if I was sleeping, and he'd take the keys, he'd take the money, and he'd take the slip, and he would go away. If I'm awake, he'd come in the room, but he'd look in at first and I'm sleeping, he'd just stand there. Well, this morning, seven o'clock came, he didn't come. I had an appointment at a doctor at nine -- nine-thirty. Most of the time, if he'd get an out-of-town trip, he would call me. He would say, "Dad, I'll be late. I'm at an out of town trip." So I figured, "Well maybe he's driving. He didn't have a chance to call." But after I saw seven o'clock come, I pushed up the garage door. The car wasn't in the garage, so I still had hope that he, you know, was somewhere, and then I went to my meeting. I met with the doctor. I came back at about ten-thirty. I went to the garage again. I pushed the door open, and there was no sign. I said, "Oh, my God. Something had to be wrong because he would have contacted me." Anyway, as I was coming back to the house, two policemen pulled up. A police car pulled up, and they asked me if I am the source [of the car]. I said yes.

I was just about to report that -- my son and the cab, whatever. And they, then they start telling me, "You're son was in an accident." So I brought them inside, and she was standing at the head of the stairs and asked me who it is. I said, "Two police officers. Frank was in an accident." Then she, in turn, turned to the officer and asked him, "Well, what hospital -- Where is he?" What hospital is he in, and she started to try to get ready to go. He said, "I'm sorry." He told her to sit down. He said, "Have a seat." She said, "I don't want to sit down. I want to go." He said, "No, you sit down." So he said he [Frank] was in an accident. Then he [the police officer] said, "Your son expired." Oh my God, she went crazy, and I went crazy. My wife calls me lucky -- Frank -- I mean, like Eric says, we were very close, and I don't know. I just ran down the block and I was just screaming, "My son! My son!" She was in the house, couldn't contain herself. Finally, the name of the place just came back to me. Cedar -- Cedar Avenue? It's a little dead-end street.

MN: Yes.

BP: That's where they took --

IP: That's where they found him.

BP: On Cedar Avenue. They found him at eight o'clock in the morning.

MN: It's right off the Grand Concourse.

NL: Yes.

IP: Yes it is.

NL: Did they ever find his killer?

BP: No.

IP: No.

NL: Wow.

IP: I went to court. I went to everything.

BP: No. They just keep saying that, you know," Cold case, cold case." They might find a weapon, that's all they've been saying.

IP: They've been saying that for years. I'm telling you.

NL: Right. I guess that was --

BP: Yep --

NL: Probably the hardest --

IP: Very devastating --

NL: Right.

BP: And my youngest son --

IP: It's still devastating. Oh my God

BP: You know, my younger son took it the hardest. He wouldn't go visit the grave. He wouldn't because he figured, he was partly -- was part of why he [Frank] got killed.

Because my older son [Frank], he used to do mechanical work, and he came to do some mechanics on his brother's car, but he wasn't here, and when he came back, he was late, and the two of them started arguing. He [Frank] wasn't supposed to go to work, so he said, "Well, okay," and he got mad and took the cab, and he went, and he [Frank's brother Tony] felt that if he didn't have the argument with him, he probably would have been alive, and he had to be the one to go in and view the body, and he would not --

IP: Did he hold you off?

EP: He went with us, but I --

IP: Oh --

BP: He would not --

EP: It was I, my brother-in law --

IP: Steve --

EP: And Tony. The three of us, we went -- I went down to the coroner's.

IP: The coroner wouldn't allow us to go.

EP: We signed -- no.

NL: Right.

BP: We would not go back.

EP: When I got -- When they got in touch with me, I flew in from Rochester. I was living in Rochester at the time.

IP: Yes, that's right.

EP: And I took charge of everything when I came, because I saw the devastation here in the house, of the family and everything, what was going on, and the next morning. I told her what we were going to do. I was going to march, basically, and that was that, and the two of them were going to be spared of all of the other unnecessary things. The next morning, my brother-in-law came, and Tony, and we went down. We got -- They took us down the stairs. Once they had everything prepared, we went downstairs. Tony got halfway down the stairs and he said, "I can't go down there." I said, "He's not going to hurt you." So then he came down the -- finally came down the stairs with us, went the

rest of the way with my brother-in-law because I was ahead of them. We got to the door, and then they opened the curtain, and Tony just about almost passed out. Me, I --

IP: You were the one that passed out completely, didn't you?

EP: Hmm?

IP: You were the one to pass out?

EP: Not there?

IP: Oh.

EP: Not there.

NL: So I guess you all had a real sense that the Bronx was changing at that point.

IP: Whew! I wanted to leave completely.

EP: She -- that's all she could talk about was leaving, and then she finally calmed down, but I handled everything as far as that stuff was concerned, the funeral arrangements --

BP: I tell you, I called myself having nerve, because I went back in the area where he was killed, and just to see, in the cab, another cab, in that area, just to see how it felt where he was. My wife wouldn't go near the car. She didn't want to go in the car. She wanted me to get out of the business right away. Hand my scripts away. I -- I --

NL: But you still kept driving --

BP: I came out of the business. I still have it, but I don't drive anymore. I kept it two -- an extra two years.

IP: It's too much.

NL: Yes, understandable. Wow. Well, I don't know if you have other questions for them about, you know -- yes. Well, I'm really glad you shared those stories with us, though, because --

IP: Thank you.

NL: You know, you guys have been through a lot here.

MN: Yes.

IP: Yes.

NL: You've been through a lot. You know, and I guess, I don't know if you feel like you would change anything, or if this was a good experience even with everything that's happened?

IP: No.

NL: Living here?

IP: Living here, I'm going to tell you the truth. If I'm going to leave, [then] I am going to miss the place. I've been here a long time. I will miss it, but I hope it will be a better change when I'm gone. Where I'm going, it seems nice. I mean, I feel like when I'm over there, I feel like I'm in a hotel. The place is so beautiful. Beautiful -- They treat me -- you know, at this stage of my life, I feel like I'm in a hotel. I go in the dining room, sit down, they give me a menu, I say what I want to eat, and we sit down and eat. We had lunch over there on Tuesday, beautiful place.

BP: You know, my son, my son --

IP: The food is beautiful --

BP: My son's death changed my life more spiritually.

IP: You know?

BP: I used to -- because I always used to be working and working, sitting in a cab back and forth, and they -- her and Maxine, used to go back, and he was away --

NL: Your daughter, Maxine --

BP: Yes, and they were always in church, but I was very -- The family was there but I was never there because I was always working on Sunday, but after my son died --

IP: That was it then --

NL: That was when you went to church.

BP: I was drawn more to the church. I got more involved in everything in the church. I started doing everything -- so much in the church.

NL: Wow.

BP: That death really changed my life from the worker, like he said, the workaholic, yes.

IP: Work, work, work.

BP: But that really changed my life. I give my most to the church.

NL: Wow.

MN: Yes, I --

IP: Yes.

MN: I just want to thank you for sharing your home --

BP: Sure.

MN: Your experiences. I think that these are just very important for all of us to be here.

IP: Thank you.

MN: But also for other people, you know, who have been through similar experiences and may think they're the only ones going through these things, and to see people like yourselves with such character and endurance.

NL: It's true.

MN: I think it's inspiring for younger people to --

IP: It is --

MN: To hear these stories because --

IP: They should know about it.

MN: Because they think that, something happens and it's the end, and they can't go on, and people go on and they build lives, you know, inspire other people and that's, I guess, that's how I feel.

EP: He left two daughters behind, and --

NL: Wow --

EP: I'm like they're surrogate father. I'm always looking out for them. I gave both of them away in marriage, both of them. What they do with that, that's up to them, you know --

MN: Right.

EP: But he-- You know, this family, my mother and father have tried their best to do the best they could with what they had. We were so proud of her, just to end -- an endnote. We were so proud of her when she went back to school and learn how to rise in that work. We were so proud of him when we could just see him down there to go further in what he was doing. We used to laugh at him sometimes, "Oh Daddy's over there." Or,



“Yeah, he’s in that book.” Yes, he would be there, and he would finish -- until he finished his lesson, and he was ready for the next one, so, you know, so you yearn for educational learning came from them, and they -- If I had to pick role models for my life, they were the best that I could have ever had --

NL: Yes.

EP: Because they -- and need be, I have a stubborn streak. I am a Taurus.

IP: [laughs]

EP: I have a stubborn streak, so even though they say do this, I am still going to go the other way anyhow, because I -- that’s me, but, you know, all I can say is, I’m thankful you guys came. I’m glad that you got this done.

NL: It was a really powerful story.

MN: Yes.

NL: And, you know, if you’re interested, we have a lot of different, you know, things that we’re doing with these kinds of information. We’re trying to make sure that this information gets out.

MN: Especially to young people.

NL: Right --

IP: The young people need to know, yes.

MN: Our biggest new -- the schools in this community have really been inviting us to do workshops and lectures. Sometimes, we do interviews in the schools with the young people participating.

NL: Yes.

IP: Which is good.

NL: Yes.

MN: So --

NL: If you want to be -- If you're interested in finding out more about what we do, you know, then we will definitely give you our information to keep in touch.

IP: The young people really need to know because they're not aware of different things, and they think everything is so, you know, so simple --

MN: Yes.

IP: This is what happens and that's not it.

MN: No.

NL: Well --

MN: Thank you again.

NL: Thank you. Thank you very much.

MN: Wow.

IP: You're quite welcome.

B. Purnell: Hold up the picture, please.

NL: Oh.

B. Purnell: Is that someone? Anyway, it doesn't --

[END of Interview]

Interview: Mark Naison, Natasha Lightfoot, Brian Purnell

Interviewee: Basil, Ishma & Eric Petersen

Session: 1 of 1

2/23/06

Page 98

Interview: Mark Naison, Natasha Lightfoot, Brian Purnell

Interviewee: Basil, Ishma & Eric Petersen

Session: 1 of 1

2/23/06

Page 99