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Pastore, Vera Simpkins

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Fordham University

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Mark Naison (MN): January 30, 2005 at Fordham University. This is the 102nd interview of the Bronx African-American History Project. Today, we're interviewing Vera Simpkins-Pastore, the retired psychology professor—

Vera Simpkins-Pastore (VSP): Prfoessor Emeritus.

MN: Emeritus, OK, of City University and with a long history in the mental health field, who grew up in the Morrisania community. Also participating in the interview is Harriet McPheeters. To begin with, I'd like to ask you, what year did your family move to the Bronx?

VSP: Let's see. Let me figure that one out. Because I was 12 when we moved. The 1930s? It was in the '30s. Late '30s.

MN: Now, where had you family been living before?

VSP: We had been living in Mount Vernon.

MN: In Mount Vernon. And what led your family to relocate from Mount Vernon to the Bronx. Most families—

VSP: Run from Manhattan to the Bronx.

MN: Yes. The normal path was from Harlem to Morrisania.

VSP: Well, the landlord sold the house that we were living in. It was a three-family house. And we had to buy another place to live. And my parents were not getting long at all. And my mother sort of saw this as an opportunity to escape marriage. So she found, actually it was one room in the Bronx, and I and my sister moved there.

MN: And what street was this on?

VSP: It was on Prospect Avenue and, let's see if I can remember that house. Anyway, near Boston Road.

MN: Now, how did your mother find the Bronx? Was this through advertisements or word of mouth.

VSP: I have no idea. But she was an extremely enterprising person. And she found the room, I lived in that room, I was in the seventh grade. [Unclear]

MN: So you went to Junior High School 40?

VSP: Yep. That's where I entered. And then she found an apartment and furnished it [unclear], and that was 1217 Union Avenue.

MN: Union between where and where?

VSP: 168th and 169th

MN: And how long did you stay in that one room before getting the apartment?

VSP: We stayed there...it was less than a year.

MN: Now, was your mother working?

VSP: Yes, Mom was working.

MN: And what kind of work did she—

VSP: Domestic Work.

MN: Now, how did she locate? Did she have one family she worked for or did she—

VSP: No, well she had one family, but then not, then it was several families.

Harriet McPheeters (HP): Was she one of the people who found here employment at what we used to call slave markets?

VSP: No, no, no.

MN: So she—

VSP: She always had people and she would be very involved with these families and so forth.

MN: Now, was your mother of Southern origin or Caribbean origin?

VSP: Caribbean.

MN: Caribbean. From what—

VSP: Jamaica.

MN: Jamaica. And did she remain active in Jamaican social networks?

VSP: Absolutely, absolutely not. She completely cut off any identification with Jamaica. Until her dying days, she was...In fact, we went there. I took her back on a roots trip and she wanted to return. And all of her frustration with the problems that she had in Jamaica came out. She was...so now, I never had any sense of a Jamaican root, except I knew that's where she was from.

MN: Now, had your father been—

VSP: My father was from down in the South, and that was a dominant influence for his family.

MN: Did you remain in touch with your father and his family?

VSP: Oh yes. He used to pay weekly visits and always was a major influence.

MN: What sort of work did he do?

VSP: He was a, he was one of these very bright, talented men who lived before his time as a black man. And he always, I was raised with no shit [unclear], you know how black men were not accorded the respect they were due. So he was one of those people who did many things. He painted, he wrote poetry—in fact, he's published four books of verse. As a little kid, I remember going to dramatic readings that he presented. And I never really found out what he did for a living, but then I found out that he was a tailor, and so he worked as a tailor.

MN: Now, when you moved to the Bronx and you—how old was your sister?

VSP: Seven.

MN: So you were 12 and she was 7. And had academics been stressed in your home?

VSP: No, no, no, it wasn't stressed in my home, but I was put in the rather advanced classes, and—

MN: Now, did that happen at Junior High School 40? They put you in the one class?

VSP: In the rapid-advance class.

MN: Oh, they had rapid-advance? They had a—

VSP: Yes. [Unclear]

HM: Were any of them teachers? Were any of them—

VSP: I remember, Miss, she was the one I had when I went there, I remember Ms. Flynn. I remember, I was so distressed, I cried when we moved to the Bronx. The unruly children...I never saw anything like it.

MN: So this was at Junior High School 40?

VSP: Yeah.

MN: What was the difference between the Bronx and Mount Vernon in terms of—

VSP: Oh, well Mount Vernon everybody was good. No comparison.

MN: So you had a sense the Bronx was—

VSP: No comparison. Horrible thing they used to tell you. “Be in New York?” And that was like stepping down. Stepping down? That was a terrible place to be. “New York Schools,” the teachers used to say that. There was one girl who came to the school, I remember, who came to class [unclear] and she came from New York. Where she came from, I have no idea. And she used to stand up to talk. We never did that. And the teacher would berate her. You know, New York. So I was completely brainwashed. My first day of school, they put me in this class, and kids were yelling and screaming and not listening to the teacher, and the teacher was yelling. It was like, “Oh my God.”

MN: Now, did this last or you acclimated?

VSP: This class.

MN: Oh, so this was not the rapid-advancement class? They just put you in a regular class—

VSP: They just put me in a class, that’s right. And then, later, they let me get into the rapid advance class.

HM: Same term?

VSP: When the commotion [?]

MN: Now, was the school multiracial when you got there, Junior High School 40?

VSP: Yeah.

MN: So, what percentage—

VSP: The minority were black kids.

MN: Did you perceive racial tension or division when you came to the school?

VSP: No, because, in Mount Vernon, everybody was white. There was like one or two black kids, and most of us, too, in white classes?

HM: And in 40, how many were in your class? I mean, were there a few or none?

VSP: I mean, not quite a few.

HM: Because when I went, I was the only one in my class.

VSP: Might have been, might have been.

MN: What extracurricular activities did you get involved in at Junior High School 40.

VSP: None.

MN: You just went to school?

VSP: I just went to school, came back. I didn't even know if they had extracurricular activities.

HM: You didn't go to the pool or the P.A.L.E [?]?

VSP: No, no.

HM: Your mother just said, "Come home after school?"

VSP: No, I just came home. My mother was working.

MN: Now, did you make friends with other kids in your neighborhood?

VSP: Yeah, yeah. One girl, who lived next door, she was the first friend that I made in the Bronx.

MN: Now this was next door on Prospect?

VSP: [Unclear] on Union Avenue. Union Springs.

MN: This was on Union Avenue?

VSP: And all my friends when I was little—

MN: Were on Boston Road and Prospect?

VSP: Yeah.

MN: So when you came home, did you end up playing more in the street or did you go to your house?

VSP: She used to go to the store across the park, Crotona Park, and Washington Avenue. I think her mother had a charge account or something there. So she would call and say, "Do you want to come to the store with me?" And I'd go with her. Those were the days where you would walk each other.

MN: Washington Avenue and 172nd Street?

VSP: Yeah, 174th. Across the park. We used to go the store, and she used to get what she had to get. And we walked back. So, she was my friend.

HM: Did you go down to 3rd Avenue and 149th Street to shop?

VSP: No, not until much later.

MN: Now when you were living in Mount Vernon, did your family go to Church? Did they attend Church?

VSP: They sent me to Church.

MN: And which Church was that?

VSP: St. Clement's Episcopal Church.

MN: Episcopal Church. And did—

VSP: We went to Church. And my grandmother was living with us. She went to a Baptist Church. So we went with her on occasion.

MN: Now, when you moved to Union Avenue, did you start attending a Church?

VSP: Not due to any initiative on my parents' part. First of all, my father didn't believe in religion, and my mother, she amazed me because she remembered all of the stuff that I learned later from her youth, which I don't remember. She, as I said, didn't go to Church. But somehow, with another friend, Yvonne

HM: Roach?

VSP: No Yvonne, she lived at 819, around the corner on Union Avenue, a big house on the corner. Anyway, she, I met her through my sister. Her, my sister, made a friend, Eileen, and she said she has a sister who's my age. So we met finally, and we turned out to be a bosom friend, a best friend.

HM: They went to St. Augustine?

VSP: No, no. But we were walking around there. We decided to go to St. Augustine's just to go. And it seemed interesting, so we went. And [unclear].

MN: Now, this was in the early '40s, that you began to go to St. Augustine? And Ezra Hawkins was the pastor at that time?

VSP: He was.

MN: And he was unmarried at that time?

VSP: Unmarried.

MN: And living with his mother?

VSP: Yeah.

MN: On 165th Street?

VSP: Yeah, they had a house next to the Church.

MN: And what are your earliest memories of St. Augustine's Church when you began going there?

VSP: Well, they had a Young People's Group, they had a verse-speaking choir, which we were in.

MN: Now, you said a "verse-speaking?" What exactly is—

VSP: We had to learn poems, and it was a chorus, a verse-speaking choir. And—

HM: So you recited?

VSP: We recited.

HM: Like do you remember one of the poems?

VSP: Well, they were by black poets and they was one I remember, "Work / Thank God for the might of it / The ardor—the urge, the delight of it".

MN: Ah, OK. So there was an emphasis on African-American culture and history in the Church?

VSP: Oh yeah. And he was, as I say, a great influence. He took us on a tour of, in Manhattan, the Union Theological Seminary, up in the Corillion of where is that? [Unclear] the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. It was very fascinating. I had never seen those places, so we said it opened up light to us. But my mother was unusual insofar as we went to the ballet and plays and such.

HM: So your mother was constantly trying to expose you to culture?

VSP: I don't think she thought of it as exposing us. I think of it as exposing my grandchildren and my son, but she didn't. She liked these things and we went. The

three of us went. We used to go to Radio City Music Hall. We loved Radio City Music Hall. So we went, we went to the Christmas show there and we [unclear]. The Museum of Science [Unclear].

HM: Natural History?

VSP: No, not natural history. There was a Museum of Science and Industry in the Theater District. We used to go there, and yes, the Museum of Natural History. So we used to go around. She was interested.

Interviewer (Indistinguishable between MN and HM): Now, was there a political consciousness in your family? Did you grow up with a sense of history?

VSP: My father talking about [unclear] he came from Savannah. And my mother, she joined the Communist party. I remember her marching around. "We want work! We want work!"

MN: Oh, OK.

VSP: So a woman would come and proselytize us. A black woman, you know.

MN: Now, was she in the Communist Party when she was in the Bronx?

VSP: Yes. There was an active group of black, at least that I know of, a couple of black women who were in the Communist Party lived in our house on 166th Street.

HM: Do you remember their names by any chance?

MN: Was there somebody named Dickerson? Does that name ring a bell?

VSP: Angie Dickerson.

MN: Angie Dickerson! Was she one of the women?

VSP: Yes, she was.

MN: Because she was a major leader in the Communist Party.

VSP: Exactly, she was. And she and her husband bought a house and there was a young communist league.

MN: Now, did Angie Dickerson buy a house in—

VSP: No, the Communist Party bought her some property. I think near St. Bonaventure Hospital [?]. But communism didn't seem like a bad thing to us. It wasn't a bad thing. And when the McCarthy hearings came out, the newspapers

were talking about the Communists. Me, I couldn't understand what was terrible [unclear]. But the Communist era was when, with my mother, we moved up to Crotona Park.

HM: So did you go to Walton High School?

VSP: We went to our school, Hunter.

HM: You went to Hunter?

VSP: Yeah.

HM: I told you she was a smart kid.

MN: Now did you become politically active in Junior High or...so the Church group was your first organizational experience, and you mentioned that you were in this verse-speaking choir. Did you ever go to the summer camp that they created?

VSP: I was at Camp Minisink.

MN: You went to Camp Minisink?

VSP: Revered Hawkins went there, too.

HM: I heard there was a fundraiser for that.

VSP: Yeah.

MN: Now, when were at...did you start at Minisink when you were in Mount Vernon?

VSP: No, no, no.

MN: It was in the Bronx?

VSP: Yeah.

MN: And for how long—

VSP: [Unclear]

MN: And for how long, how old were you when you—

VSP: When I was a camper?

MN: [Indicates acknowledgment]

VSP: How old was I?

[Unclear]: Were you in junior high?

VSP: I think I was in junior high when I came to the Bronx, so it was probably about 4th grade.

HM: And were you a part of the Tapawingo—

VSP: No.

HM: Or the youth group too?

VSP: They had—

[Unclear]: St. Augustine's, St. Augustine's.

MN: And what was that group, the Tapawingo?

HM: Well, that was an elitist cabin where the [unclear] people were [unclear]. But when we came along, it was before Tapawingo.

VSP: No, they had a Tapawingo, but I wasn't old enough to get into...When I started getting into, I was in high school then, and then I had to work summers.

MN: Now, when you were living on Union Avenue, was it your sense that this was a troubled community or did you look at it as a safe—

VSP: Well, there was no, it was a nice neighborhood [unclear]. There

MN: And felt safe?

VSP: Oh yeah. That doesn't mean that there were not gangs operating, but they were acting as at a distance. Bad boys were often in gangs, but there was no sense of predatory assault, just ordinary people.

MN: Now who were some...were there people in the neighborhood who made an impression on you other than Reverend Hawkins as mentors or leaders when you were a junior high or high school student.

VSP: Not necessarily adults. There was a group of us that used to play, yeah, you know, play, jump rope and things and so forth, girls. One of them knew a guy and we got to meet some boys and so he brought some friends over. They lived in [unclear] too, across from your house. And you know, very innocent, as I look back on it. And so we played records and they'd brought song sheets and sing the songs. In those

days, they had song sheets [unclear] and they had all the words to the songs. And we had the records and we knew the songs and we'd sing them a little bit.

MN: Now, what songs were these? What genre of music were you singing usually?

VSP: We played black performers [unclear].

HM: Did you know [unclear]

VSP: Yeah, he was in the Church. He lived across the street on Prospect Avenue. I was not in that group [?], but I knew him.

HM: And Tom Matthews?

VSP: Thomas Matthews, yeah.

MN: Now, did you go to any, did you and your friends ever go to any live music venues or concerts?

VSP: We used to go to dances.

MN: Now, where would the dances be held?

VSP: Well, we used to go down to Savoy and the Renaissance and [unclear]. And there was a place on 159th Street, all the way by the river, right over a dance hall [unclear].

[Unclear]: I don't think that's there any more. [Unclear].

HM: Hunt's Point? The Embassy? The Embassy Ballroom?

VSP: That's west.

MN: That would be west.

HM: Near the post office?

VSP: Yeah, yeah, yeah. [Unclear]

MN: Now did you dance to Latin Music or mainly to [unclear].

[Unclear]: Or mainly to Lindy Hoffinger.

MN: So this was before Latin music became popular? Did you ever go to Club 845? Was that part of—

VSP: Oh yeah, I went to Club 845. Did I ever [unclear].

MN: Now what was Hunter College like when you were there?

HM: She went to the high school.

MN: Hunter High School. Right.

VSP: [Unclear]. You had to be really smart to get in. You had to take an entry exam. They were very, very selective.

MN: Which is still true, by the way. So how many people from Junior High School 40 went to Hunter High School?

VSP: A nine-year old, Rosemary Walker. Did you know Rosemary Walker?

HM: Yes. Rosemary.

[Unclear]

Unidentifiable Speaker: And then Aclin? Did she go to high school?

MN: So you went to Hunter. Did you go to Hunter in 10th grade or 9th grade.

VSP: After 9th grade.

MN: So you spent three years there. What was that experience like there?

VSP: It was academically challenging, but you know, whatever they told me to do, I did. I wasn't challenged by anything I was supposed to do.

MN: Did you find that there were teachers who inspired, excited you?

VSP: Oh yeah [Unclear]

MN: Did you have any sense at this point that you were going to become a teacher and a scholar?

VSP: I never wanted to be a teacher. I knew what I wanted to be. I wanted to be an artist, because I used to draw everything and [unclear, although some reference can be ascertained as to being an editor at a yearbook] and so forth. But I didn't have thoughts about [unclear]. I was one of those people who were very naïve, just [unclear] and that was it.

MN: How long did your mother live on Union Avenue?

VSP: We moved from there, let's see, after I was born [unclear] running to the street station. So it was after [unclear] and I think it was after [unclear].

MN: And where did your mother move to after that, what street?

VSP: Then we moved to Prospect Avenue, that was, was that 1421? 1421 Prospect Avenue. Right across the street from Crotona Park.

HM: Did you go to Hunter College after that?

VSP: Yeah.

MN: So your mother remained very politically active in that period?

VSP: I wouldn't say politically active, but she went to the meetings, and she, I also remember her going to lectures, nutritionists, organic nutritionists.

MN: Now do you have recollections of the Henry Wallace campaign?

VSP: Oh yeah.

MN: [Unclear]. He actually went to go speak in the Bronx. What are your recollections of that?

VSP: I remember it being important. I never went to any of his lectures, but in those days, there used to be a lot of readings and [unclear].

MN: What were some of the issues that you were dealing with at the meetings?

VSP: [Unclear]

MN: Was this more how to work out discrimination in the Bronx?

VSP: I think it was more about the [unclear] general condition of liberty.

MN: Do you remember where some of these meetings were held?

VSP: They were held downtown, in Pelham. I can't say where.

MN: Did Reverend Hawkins have a lot of meetings at his Church?

VSP: I don't know what we'd call it. He had kind of a...but he was active. He ran for City Council or what offices?

MN: Now was he nominated [unclear]

Unidentified Speaker: Yes he was.

MN: So he ran for office.

VSP: [Unclear]. Yeah, he was politically aware. Did you talk to him?

MN: Did he get a lot of individual attention? Did people come up to him in his Church?

VSP: Well, he ran [unclear]. You had to be a member. You met with him weekly [Unclear]. Young people serving, and he did Sunday School [Unclear]. I tried Sunday School and [Unclear]. And he was very good, because when I said, "I don't believe in all of this, he talked to me and instead of saying, [Unclear], "I don't believe all of it sometimes. And that made it possible for me to continue. [Unclear].

HM: He was young. I can't remember.. I thought he was a young minister. In Minisink, during the [unclear]. Any way she was an adult, and one of the adult visitors said how old is she, and she said 20. "That's old." She seemed so old at 20 [Unclear].

MN: Now, you went on from High School to Hunter College? In Manhattan.

[Unclear]

MN: And did you major in psychology while you were there?

VSP: [Unclear] I did not major when I went in. For the first two years I was an art major, and when I had to choose, I remember thinking, "I don't think I can make a living being an artist. And I remember there was a friend [unclear] and we went to get a—

[Tape Ends Abruptly. May be one part of a larger recording].