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Norman, Gene

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Gene Norman interview
Bronx African-American History Project

D-Dr. Naison
G- Gene Norman

D- This is the 32nd interview for the Bronx African-American History Project. We are interviewing Mr. Gene Norman who is an architect, designer, urban planner, and was once head of the landmarks commission in NYC, has designed numerous facilities and buildings and is a long-time Bronx resident.

D- When your family first moved to the Bronx to an apartment on Clairemount Pkwy and Third Ave, what kind of work was your father doing?

G- My father didn't live with us. By that time they had broken up. So we were living with my grandparents and my grandfather was a superintendent of the building that we lived in.

D- Was that a predominantly Jewish area at the time or was it racially mixed?

G- It was not predominantly Jewish, although a lot of Jewish people lived there, but there were also Italians. I say this because I have a recollection of going to the food market on Bathgate Ave and seeing all types of goodies and people and the whole mixture going on in those days.

D- How long had your Grandfather been a superintendent in that area?

G- That was the first time because prior to that we were living on the Lower East Side.

D- He was the one who got the job and your family moved with him?

G- I guess so.

D- You went to PS 2. Was it your recollection that there were many African American children attending the school?

G- PS 2 is a little north of Morris High School, although it's on Third Ave and if you know that part of the Bronx Third Ave and Boston Rd come together. Well it's a little further past there and it's next to a brewery, I think it was called the Rhine Gold Brewery in those days. You could see it from the Third Ave El, the huge copper vats and plumbing and the rest of it. It was a neighborhood that was moving towards being more black than white. And again this was about before WWII. This is the late thirties, 39, 40.

D- So that particular area, the intersection of Boston Rd. and Third Ave, was pretty heavily an African American neighborhood?

G- All along Boston Rd, and I would say as far west as Webster Ave.

D- Did you notice much of a change when you moved to Home St and Union Ave? G- Home St and that surrounding area was predominantly black at that time.

D- What are your recollections of the Catholic Churches you attended as a child?

G- I made my first communion at Our Lady of Victory on Webster Ave. And I must have been about five or six years old. When we moved further east, I began going to St. Anthony of Padua on 166th St and Prospect Ave. That was a parish that was about 50/50 in those days.

D- Your family seems to have moved a great deal as a child. You mentioned something of this before.

G- That's speculation on my part. In talking to older members of the family, it seems as the war started there became a lot of competition between property owners to get tenants. There would be certain inducements like cheaper rent or perhaps a fresh painting of the apartment and whatever to get people to rent houses. In Home St we lived in a private house as it was called, and when we moved to Prospect Ave which was perhaps a year later, we moved into another private house which was very unique. It was a back house, if you know what that means. There was a house on Prospect Ave and there was an alley between that house and its next door neighbor. You walked down that alley and once you got passed the first house there was an open area with grass and trees and two more houses behind there. We lived in one of those.

D- Was your home situation very conducive to education? Did your mother and grandparents stress that?

G- That was an important thing, you had to do well at school.

D- How many siblings did you have?

G- None.

D- So you are an only child?

G- Yes.

D- So all of the attention became focused on you?

G- Well between me and my mother's brothers, my grandmother's sons who were away fighting the war. I think that is a true statement.

D- Did you show artistic talent from an early age?

G- Artistic talent ... Honestly I would say no. That does not mean that I wouldn't try to do things, like draw, but I did not think they were good enough to do anything. I was good with my hands I used to make things. In those days model making was an activity you spent time on.

D- Were any people in your family politically active? Was there political discussion in your household?

G- By the time I came along and was old enough to even hear conversations. You have to remember, coming from a West Indian background, children are to be seen and not heard and spoken with. You didn't inject yourself into conversation as most young people feel comfortable doing today. But there had been a lot of talk about the Marcus Garvey movement during the late 20's early 30's when my grandparents first came to NY. But

during the war there was not much talk about it, there was some talk of communism, and there was a lot of talk about the racial situation in the United States, but I would not say they were actively involved in any organizations.

D- But there was discussion that you were aware of?

G- Oh yeah. If a black man got lynched down south the adults would talk about that as a terrible event and I as a child would have some understanding of the event.

D- Were the other adults who entered your household as guests mostly West Indian? G- I would say almost all, not totally but almost all.

D- Was the cuisine and music in the house distinctly West Indian?

G- I think it was more eclectic than distinctly West Indian. My grandmother would take on cooking jobs for non-West Indians, and through that she learned other dishes. For instance she made a great corn beef and cabbage.

D- Did your mother work?

G- My mother worked.

D- What kind of work did she do?

G- She was a housemaid for a while and later on in life she became a practical nurse.

D- Were you aware of this phenomenon of people called the Bronx slave market? This whole idea that there was this corner where African American women would be picked up by employers?

G- Yeah, I've heard of it. I have never heard it being called the slave market, but there were people and I have to say some degree all women, but men used to be there as well, looking for days work as they used to say. The corner I am talking about is Westchester and Southern Blvd.

D- What were the elementary schools that you attended as a child particularly PS 23 and PS 9?

G- I don't have much memory of PS 23. I don't think I was there more than one grade, maybe a grade and a half. Because of where it was located on Tinton Ave near 16Sth St, most of the kids who went there were black. When I moved from that neighborhood to Kelly St, most of the kids there were not black in my classes.

D- Were these schools tracked by ability level?

G- Oh yes.

D- How did they determine who was in each track? Through standardized testing?

G- As far as I remember it was through testing. I remember taking all sorts of tests periodically through the years. I was always in the so-called 1 class. When I left 39 I was in the so called R class. It wasn't called rapid advance, that came along later. That means I did three years in 2.5 years.

D- Was your recollection that the racial composition of the 1 classes were different from the 6 classes?

G- Yes. The 1 class there were very few minorities in it, blacks and Hispanics. The higher the number the greater the number of blacks and Hispanics.

D- Now was there a significant Puerto Rican presence when you moved to Kelly St.?

G- In P8 39, and I started there in the 3rd Grade, class 3bl, there must have been perhaps thirty kids in the class, this is of boys and girls. Of those thirty children there probably were four or five black and Hispanic boys and a like number of girls. The rest were primarily Jewish, and there were some Italians.

D- What was Kelly St. neighborhood like when you moved there? Was there much of a difference between Kelly St. and Prospect Ave.?

G- In those days I didn't know there were so many different neighborhoods. People tended to talk about the subway stop nearest to them. Kelly S1., the nearest subways stop was Intervale Ave. So if someone said, "Where do you live?" I would say near Intervale, and that could be four or five blocks from the subway station but everyone knew you were in that neighborhood. Did I answer that question?

D- Colin Powell lived on Kelly St.?

G- Not apparently, definitely. Oh yeah, he lived across the street from me and we were very close. He was my best friend I would say.

D- Where you guys good friends?

G- I don't know if you want to stop, I have some pictures I want to show you.

D- The buildings on Kelly St. were four story walk-ups?

G- The block we lived on the longest was between 163rd and Westchester Ave, and I lived for a short time on Banana Kelly which is 163rd and Intervale. And on one side of the block I lived on the longest there were four story attached tenement walkups. On the other side, the side I lived on, there were large apartment houses with a minimum of twenty apartments per building. This is a group picture, and this is the side of the street I lived on, and the previous picture was on the side that Colin lived on.

D- Most of the families were renters or owners?

G- Everybody on that block rented because there were no private houses.

D- This was on Kelly St?

G- 163rd and Westchester Ave.

D- Was the block multi-ethnic when you lived there?

G- Yeah, but there weren't many blacks on the block. I am talking about 44 through 53 when I went into the military. There were not many blacks, though there were some families, in the beginning there were a lot of Jewish families, and after the war they moved away and a lot of Hispanic families moved in.

D- Were most of the black families on Kelly St. West Indian?

G- No, it was a mixture.

D- What was street life like? What street games did you play when you were a kid?

G- We played games on a seasonal basis. And depending on the season, say it was spring we would play marbles in the spring. We would play ball games, box ball, curb ball, off the wall ball, we'd play stickball. In the summertime when we weren't in school or away somewhere we would have to travel a little distance, that's why we didn't do other times of the year, we would play baseball, but that was quite a ways away. IN the fall we would play touch football in the street, or we would go to a park and play tackle football or a vacant lot.

D- Were there vacant lots in the neighborhood?

G- There were a couple, perhaps where buildings had burned down. There was a lot that we used to go to from time to time on Intervale Ave and the story was that there was a building that had burned down, and nobody had built on it.

D- Did you roast marshmallows and potatoes in vacant lots?

G- Absolutely. There was a market block on 16Sth St and just a string of foodstores and we would go there to and beg borrow or steal potatoes things of that nature, and the wooden boxes they came in. In the fall or that time of year, we would make little bonfires in the street. In those days there were not as many cars in the streets, so the streets doubled as a playground. A fairly safe playground if I should add. And we would build these little fires or go to a lot and build fires and roast sweet potatoes.

D- Did you participate in any organized recreational programs in community centers?

G- No I didn't, although there were community centers in Junior High School I think there was one at the Junior High School, but that was a good four or five blocks away

D- Did you go to the movies much?

G- At a drop of a hat.

D- What were the names of the theaters?

G- The closest one to us was called the "Tiffany". We would change bottles, you could get five cents for a cork bottle and three cents for a twelve once bottle, and we would go around to our neighbors and change the bottles in, and go off to the movie on a Saturday. You would see three movies in the Tiffany. It was not a first run movie house, you had to wait maybe two or three weeks after it had played in the other local houses to see the pictures, but you got three movies, cartoons, a chapter, corning attractions and a newsreel for 25 cents or so. We also used to go a few blocks further, to the so called first run movies, first run meaning in the neighborhoods, not downtown (the Times Square Area), to Loews Boulevard, and the Loews Spooner.

D- Where were those located?

G- On Southern Blvd. It was a block of Southern Blvd actually two blocks between Westchester and 163rd. It was our mall I suppose, by today's standards. There was three

movie theaters, one was called the Star and we didn't go to much, but occasionally we would go there. We didn't like to go to the Star because *it* had mean matrons. And matrons were sort of elderly women who were in their forties or more who wore white nurse's uniforms, carried flashlights, and told us rowdy kids to keep quiet all the time. That block had all of the retail outlets besides foodstores, but clothing, shoes, jewelry, gifts, you name it and it was on that block. There were three five and dime stores there, Woolworths, Crestkies, and Grants. So in our moments when we had nothing to do we would walk up to the Blvd as we used to call it and do window shopping and just see what was out there.

D- Did you and your friends ever go to Manhattan?

G- Yeah. As we grew older. I think I can remember riding the subway downtown when I was like 12. And we would go downtown for different things. We would go to museums sometimes, we would go to events in Central Park. Right after the war I remember going to a big exhibition of military things in the Park, and we went down to see the trucks and the tanks and whathaveyou. With our families we would occasionally go to a movie downtown, that was a big deal. Unlike today, you had to get dressed up to go.

D- Do you recall much racial tensions in the neighborhoods and schools you were going to when you were a child?

G- I wouldn't call it tension, but there were incidents from time to time. They were either initiated by some sort of racial comment or because of how we lived. You mentioned earlier how my block was like, well my block was a mixed block others were not. The block between Intervale and Longwood, that's an example where P.S. 39 is, was totally black, Dawson street, which was nearby, was totally black. From time to time there would be arguments which probably didn't start racially but race surely got into it. In those days, as kids became teenagers they formed stickball teams. The different stickball teams would play each other, from block to block. They would usually play what was called a money game. The players and their supporters would put up money to bet on the game and there would be some dispute about where a ball was hit, or who dropped it, or who caught it, and because you might be on someone else's block, you took to heart the idea of let it go, or sometimes it was, what do you think that we are going to take this from you? and there would be some sort of scuffle going on. And invariably words would be passed in a heated situation like that and sometimes people would say things about race to each other. But they were passing incidents. There wasn't an atmosphere of racial problems.

D- What about your mother and grandparents? Did they talk openly about encountering racial situations?

G- Any time it happened. There were object lessons in a way. At an early age, you got to understand that there was a difference and there was a double standard, and that you didn't do some things without a consequence or problem resulting from it.

D- What were some of the issues they raised to you to tell you what the world was like?

G- Well, what comes to mind as you ask the question is that don't let anyone push you around no matter who they are. Don't get involved with white policemen, because they

won't give you a fair shake. Because there had been enough examples of mistreatment. They are so ingrained in me its hard to pull them out.

D- Where you told there were certain areas where you *should* not go to?

G- I don't remember ever being told that about certain areas, I was told that you had to be aware and alert no matter where you go, so just watch it, so to speak.

D- What about the schools? Were the teachers fair to everyone?

G- For the most part, for the most part. P.S. 39 which is a grammar school up the 6th grade, I thought they were pretty fair. In Junior High School which was a much larger grouping of kids, and kids from further away from our neighborhood, in other words there were strange kids.

D- Where is JHS 52 located?

G-Its located on Kelly St. between Ave. St. John and Leggin Ave. Today if I walked it, it would not take long, but as a kid it seemed like a long distance. Because I didn't eat lunch in school, so it meant that I had to walk up to school in the morning, walk back to home for lunch, then walk back to school for the afternoon session and walk home at the end of the day. So you got a lot of good exercise. When it got time to be thinking about high school when we were in JHS, they only let three people take the test for the Bronx High School of Science and I was one of the three, and only one of us passed the examination. The other minority kids were not allowed or recommended to take the exam for Stuyvessant HS, and some how in my mind I thought there was some racial prejudice going on there.

D- Was there any Civil Rights activity in the neighborhood?

G- Not that I knew of.

D- Was there an NAACP chapter?

G- There might have been but I was not aware of it.

D- What about gang activity? Were there gangs in the South Bronx in the 40' s?

G- Yeah they were. They started out as athletic teams, and as time went on, sort of in the fifties, the whole neighborhood changed after WWII. At the end of the war in 45' 46', maybe even late as 47' returning servicemen started coming back home. And some of them were young people and had been away from home, some of them had been in combat situations, certainly the ones I talked about had been in the military, and they tended to group together. So there was this older group of guys and the next step down on the hierarchy would be the teen aged kids in high school and then below that would be below that kids like me who just were starting junior HS. So there would be these three groupings and each one of these groups would have some sports affiliation like team or something. And I think that was the root of so called gang activity. As times went on there were rivalries and problems between these groups.

D- Do you recall a point when you actually became physically fearful of being in the wrong place at the wrong time?

G- Around JHS there would be problems *sometimes*, where for whatever reason people in the school got into a fight, lets say. And that kind of news got around very quickly. And the next day if they came from different neighborhoods or blocks or groups, they'd bring their friends to either witness or participate in a new fight that day. So that would happen. Was I ever fearful about that, No, because I can't remember people I associated with having problems like that. On the other hand, in the early 50's I guess I can remember an incident on my block where somebody's sister had been insulted by somebody and she went home and told her brother who got in touch with some group from Manhattan and from around St. Ann' s Ave and next thing you know that night a moving truck pulls into the block. And about forty or fifty guys came out of the moving truck with pipes and clubs and who knows what maybe knives and guns, and they were going to find this person and if he had any friends they'd find them too, so there was the potential for that to happen, but I don't remember how it exactly ended up but there was not a fight on the block, they went looking for these people but nothing particularly happened.

D- Were there any particularly memorable teachers that stood out?

G- There was a woman who was a librarian and she was a black woman. Our school required us to spend a certain amount of time in the library and she would give a little lecture and talk about things. She took it upon herself to reach out to what she thought were the brighter black kids and offer words of encouragement or advice. I think her name was Mrs. Mitchell or Ms. Mitchell.

D- What was Morris HS like when you went there? Was it pretty positive, or was it mixed?

G- It was mixed. Morris HS, as we talked about it earlier, was in totally a neighborhood that was almost all 100% Black, African American. Yet it was zoned so that kids from the Hunts Point area and places towards east, away from Morris HS had to go to Morris. They would come by bus, public bus, there were no school buses in those days, unless you were handicapped or something. So here was an example of, if we look back on it here, where white kids were bused into a black school, which is the classic reverse of what went on later in this country. But we got along, I don't remember there being any racial animosity or outbursts in high school.

D- What kind of extracurricular activities did you participate in at Morris?

G- When I first went there as a sophomore, having completed the 9th grade in JHS, I was on the Cross Country track team and I did that for a semester and half or two semesters. Morris HS did not have an adequate gym, so it did not have things like a basketball team. Although I loved music, I didn't think that I could play anything, so I never even tried out to be in the music program, but they had a very good music program. There are a couple of other clubs like they had a fledgling photography club that I used to visit from time to time, and that sort of thing.

D- When you entered Morris were you aware that your goal was to go to college?

G- Yes.

D- Was this primarily from your family or your teachers?

G- I was in this so called academic group, so although no one said it, it was expected that anyone in the academic program would go to college. And the classes we were given, and the make up of the students in the class was in tuned that way.

D- What kind of music did you listen to in your youth?

G- I was involved in the point of listening, I would listen. I should back up and say this. There is a special relationship that comes about for Black Americans in this country in the sense that we have to know two cultures at the same time and weave together those two cultures. Sometimes three cultures. I would like to think that I was exposed to three cultures and was able to keep them all in the air and crossover whenever needed. What three cultures am I talking about? I am talking about West Indian based culture with calypso music, and that whole range of things that would seem foreign to "Americans". Then there was the Black American or Negro culture, as it was called in those days, and that was primarily based on southern traditions and music, the blues, and a little bit of jazz. My mother remarried in 1946 and my stepfather was from Virginia even though he lived up in NY a long time, so I was exposed to gospel music when a lot of other West Indians were not knowing anything about gospel music. At the same time I was exposed to the top twenty or top forty, whatever it was called in those days, luck strikes, whatever it was called, so you'd hear the commercial music, and I was also exposed to classical music. You asked what music I listened to, and it was a mixture of all of those.

D- Did you ever listen to live music when you were an adolescent?

G- Yeah, because, and this is from the West Indian side, but not totally, we used to as a family used to get involved and go to some of these fraternal organizations, for parties and dances. A dance would be held by one of these organizations.

D- What were the names of some of these organizations?

G- I can't remember, the benevolent society of "you name it", the son's and daughters of wherever, you name it.

D- What are your recollections of some of the following clubs: Club 845

G- That was a place up by the Prospect subway station where Prospect Ave and Westchester came together, and it opened up after the war as I remember it and it was a bar and sort of an open space for dancing with tables and I don't know if they had a kitchen, but it was a popular place and people would go there and when I got old enough I went a few times.

D- What about the Hunt's Point Palace?

G- I have the best recollection of the Hunt's Point Palace because in the fifties when I was in HS, the Hunts' Point Palace became the Mecca not just for the Bronx, but for the city of Latin and Mambo music as it was called, not salsa. And all the big bands would play there for fairly cheap admission.

D- What the names of some of the bands you remember?

G- Tito Puente, Tito Rodriguez, Nora Morales, Pacheco, a little bit later, those are the names I remember.

D- What about the Hunt's Point Ballroom?

G- Hunt's Point Ballroom, well I never differentiated between the Hunts' Point Palace and the Hunts' Point Ballroom, they did have several rooms in the Hunts' Point Palace building.

D- I mean the Boston Road Ballroom?

G- That was over near Morris HS, and from time to time there would be something interconnected with Morris HS, and some group would be giving a dance or something and we would go there, but the dances that I started talking about were not in Bronx, the West Indian dances anyway, they were in Harlem. You have to know that Harlem functioned as the old country for non-Blacks, where you went there for cultural reasons, fraternal reasons, visits, it was where most people came from, so you went back home.

D- So your family had a close relationship in Harlem?

G- We had friends that lived in Harlem still, and we would go visit. And we would go to dances at the Rockland Palace and the Renaissance Ballroom, Park Palace, any number of different venues.

D- Do you remember Silvia's Blue Morocco?

G- Silvia's Blue Morocco, yeah I do, I just have to place it in my mind where it was. I guess it was in the Bronx.

D- When did you start getting interested in Latin music?

G- When I was about ten or twelve years old. Kelly Sl. and I lived there then, for whatever reason, and I've heard different stories about it, became a magnet for Latin Musicians. There was a band headed by a guy named Noro Morales, and he had a pretty big band, his mother lived on our block. Somehow he would come visit his mother and bring his friends, and Tito Puente and Tito Rodriguez and these guys would hang out on the roof of the four story buildings and play music on a Sunday afternoon and play bongos and drums.

D- So you grew up with the bongos?

G- Yeah but it didn't have the negative connotation that the bongos noises have now, I mean these guys were good. And then there was this nightclub on Westchester Ave. not far from us called the Tropicana Club, and it was named after the Tropicana club in Havana, Cuba. I remember as a kid twelve years old or so, on a summer night, hearing the trumpet riffs of the mambo band floating through the air like a pied piper's tale you know.

D- So this was part of the soundtrack of your life?

G- Well in those days as the neighborhood became more and more Hispanic music took on a greater and a more engulfing place in your life. Music seemed to be everywhere.

D- You also mentioned that in the late 40's you mentioned drugs coming into the community.

G- There was a place down in Lexington, KY where you were sent for I guess drug treatment as you *would* say it today, but to rehabilitate yourself and de-criminalize yourself somehow. We had a couple of people a year or so older than me who had been there, and came back, and they had been sent there because they had been arrested for smoking marijuana. I want to say that again, they were arrested for smoking marijuana. Whereas today, there lives were turned upside down for smoking marijuana. Now, as in most criminalization situations, you start out with something small like smoking marijuana and you get thrown in with people who are bigger offenders, its like the purse snatcher getting thrown in jail with the bank robber and before you know it he knows how to rob banks. These couple of people from our block came back, and there is such a subculture and language and outlook about using drugs, and some people want to belong to an organization or a lifestyle or whatever and were drawn to this, and little by little the marijuana graduated up to heroin which became the major offensive drug; In the fifties when I was in HS, we must have lost a good dozen or so of people that we knew of overdoses of heroin. These were kids who six months before you were playing stickball with or going to the movies with and six months later they are so involved with drugs that they overdose.

D- Did this make the neighborhood frightening?

G- To put it in a total context, after the war, many things happened in the Bronx. One of the things was people started moving away from the Bronx. The Bronx lost [*end aftape*]

D- You are talking about the post war period-?

G- I was running off at the mouth. The surrounding suburbs start getting developed, and Charlie Wilson, he's one of the villains I like to point to, he heads up General Motors, but gets appointed as secretary of defense or something, and promotes the idea of a national defense highway system. So now highways are being built to move people away from the cities into places that were definitely inaccessible in terms of commutation to work, so Long Island as an example although its not the only one, suburb becomes developed, developers build track housing and developers begin to move out of the city into these areas, leaving behind a kind of vacuum.

D- When you went off to the military in 1953, this is an interesting point. You had gotten into Hunter College, what made you decide to go into the Marines at that point?

G- When I graduated HS I was just barely 17 years old. When I started that fall at Hunter I was seventeen and six months or so, I just wasn't prepared emotionally for college. Hunter College, which is now Lehman College, was an idealic tree-lined ivy covered place where possibly there were four female students to every male student. It had just converted to accepting males. And it's like being a rooster in a hen house. I just felt that I need to grow up some more. It was a big decision and I am glad that I made it, plus my grades weren't that good to be totally honest.

D- You had mentioned that you went into the Marines with Howie Evan's brother Herb.

G- He enlisted after I did, and fifty years ago I came down with pneumonia when I was in boot camp because today I found the paperwork that told me the day I was admitted to the hospital, it was November 23, 1953. Anyway when I came out of the hospital, my platoon had graduated in December and I got out of the hospital in February and I was assigned to Herb Evans' platoon.

D- Did you have jobs in JH and HS in the neighborhood?

G- I had a job in a baby carriage and crib store on our block. I used to work there, that's why I stopped running track. I used to work there after school, and all day on Saturday.

D- Was this very common for your friends to have jobs to make extra money?

G- Sometimes. I don't know if it was common. I was one of the few people working and promoting employment.

D- Was there much of an underground economy? Was there much of a numbers culture?

G- Oh yeah. People played numbers all the time.

D- Was this in a particular neighborhood or just Kelly St.?

G- Every neighborhood I lived in, there was a numbers runner and you would talk to him. I always marveled at how they could keep all that numerical information and names of people straight without writing anything down or very little down because if the police ever caught them they didn't want to have slips on them.

D- Was this largely a non-violent enterprise?

G- I would say so, I guess occasionally a numbers runner might get stuck up. It was so local and so immediate that whoever did it would be known in a minute and be severely dealt with.

D- On Kelly St, was there much of a presence of adult men? Was it basically a two parent household neighborhood?

G- A great many of the women in the families did not work and stayed at home.

D- Was there a lot of adults monitoring the behavior of young people?

G- Yeah as time went on it diminished because more and more new people moved into the block because like I said earlier about the middle class people moving out. But in the beginning you were subject to be reprimanded by any adult on the block if you stepped out of line which meant that you would probably get two good smacks: one from the adult who stopped you and that adult would tell your parents and you would get another one.

D- Was your mother very involved in the schools? Was parental involvement stressed?

G- It was more or less an open school night phenomenon. But my mother knew people and I knew people who were more involved and she would be in touch with them.

D- When you returned to Kelly St. was it much different in 1956 than in 1953?

G- Absolutely, there were so many new faces around I felt like a stranger.

D- So there was a lot of turnover?

G- Yes.

D- So where did the families go that left?

G- For instance Colin Powell. His family moved to Queens *in* 1956 and his family was not the only one that chose to move. It not only became an area that looked unsafe and felt unsafe.

D- This is 56' you could see it and feel it?

G- Yes, because what you were used to in the prior years did not exist. And there were a great many newcomers who were Hispanic who spoke little English, who were called hillbillies or "hibaro" by Hispanics who had been there before and spoke English and got along. These people just seemed alien and there was all this drug traffic.

D- Was the drug traffic open now?

G- If you knew where to look for your could see it. It wasn't like it was open 24/7 mind you, but if you knew where to look for it you could see it. You could see someone noddin~ off, lets say, and you would just know.

D- After you come back from the Marines, you began a career in design and architecture. Is that something you found in the Marines or in High School?

G- When I was in HS I had maybe two or three ambitions: I thought about being a pharmacist because I had gotten to know the pharmacist in the drug store on the corner and I thought that was kind of interesting. I thought about in HS about being a science person, exactly what was unclear, and I thought about being a history teacher. I was very much interested in history, and in many ways I still am, I know I am. When I started Hunter I was a science major and I had thoughts of possibly teaching. It wasn't until I was in the Marine Corps that I got to see the greater world. I got to see in different training assignments, we were sent to Puerto Rico to Vieceas of all places and we got to see a whole different type of building and buildings than I had been used to and when I got out I thought that sounds like a good thing to be. When I was in HS I did not know the word architect, I had never been exposed to it. I knew that engineers designed and built things, but never architects.

D- So this was all based on your travels in the military that put this into your head?

G- Yeah and I gotten into the habit of reading and I would go to the base library and read from time to time and look at what was happening in the world.

D- When you started on this career path, did you have any mentors that took a particular interest in you or was it trial and error?

G- In the beginning it was trial and error. When I landed my first job and I started in a large architectural firm as a messenger. In those days that was one of the routes you could get into if you didn't already finish school. In a year or so it was normal for you to be promoted to becoming a junior draftsman which happened in my case. The first boss I had took a liking to me, in a way acted as a mentor and allowed me to gain experience and come along. I was responsible for projects after about 2.5 years, and you have to

know that it was a large firm with over 500 *employees in it*. You have to know that *it* was not a typical architectural firm because it also had engineers in the firm, and most firms hire consulting engineers, someone to do the electrical and someone to do the plumbing and there's a lot of coordination going on. In this firm it was all under one roof. There must have been ten or fifteen black people working there and I was one of the few that was given that sort of responsibility. I remember one time during the sixties, I had been there five years or so, they started doing enough government work that they had to adhere to the government guidelines about non-discrimination. In fact people were called in to talk to a government representative to find out if what the company said was true was so. One of the complaints I had it too, that people had spoke about, was that they had never promoted anyone to the title of project architect, but there were people like myself and one other person who was doing that job but because they were black they weren't getting that title. I also remember my boss taking me into seeing the head draftsman when I was assigned to do a project for the first time. The head draftsman said to me, "Do you think you can tell these old white guys what to do and have them do it on a project, because Eddie is recommending to me that is what you are to do?" And I said sure, I used to be a sergeant in the Marine Corps, and that is not an issue, and if I wasn't an ex-sergeant in the Marine Corps, its about how you deal with people. So he thought that was a pretty good answer and that was the time I got to get a lead on a project.

D- When did you meet the woman that you married? Was this before the Marine Corps? G- Yeah, it was before.

D- Did she live on Kelly St.?

G- She was, she lived across the street from me, but she grew up.

D- Was she of Puerto Rican ancestry? Was it familiar phenomenon?

G- Yes. I don't know how common it was, it happened then, and continues now. Maybe it happens more now depending on the neighborhood.

D- Was this seen as an unusual step for your family?

G- No, being West Indian Caribbean and there is a lot of mixing with peoples, that's one of the traits of the rainbowing of being Carribean.

D- You moved to Simpson S1. when you married. How far is that from Kelly St.? G- Three blocks.

D- Was it a relatively comproble neighborhood?

G- It was a different block. In those days you looked at neighborhoods as blocks, and this particular block was longer than our other block, and it had five six story tenements on it. That's what it was. It seemed darker because you couldn't see the sky as easy as you could on our block. We didn't stay there very long.

D- So your next stop was the Classenpoint Garden Apartment?

G- No, I don't know what its called, it was called the Monroe Houses. I had put in for public housing slot and they had just finished the Monroe Houses in Soundview.

D- Were those South of the Bruckner?
G- South of Bruckner Blvd east of Soundview Ave.

D- How tall were these buildings?
G- We lived in a seven or eight story building, and it was a combination of building heights. Maybe half the buildings were eight stories and the others were high rises.

D- When you moved into public housing, did you consider this a step up?
G- I thought of it as a step up, because all of the apartments were laid out in a way that it was bright and air, and there were new appliances, and there was a screening process that went on at Monroe that they tried to integrate by placing a black family on a floor so there was *not* a whole floor of all blacks or all white. It was multi ethnic by design, by calculation and manipulation. It started to break down the day after it opened.

D- What year did it open?
G- We must have moved there, my son was born in 60, we must have moved there in 61.

D- And that was very shortly after it was opened?

G- It opened in 61 and we were the first tenants.

D- You are saying that it broke the community-?
G- Well as soon as people started to move and it was a brand new community. The streets around us weren't even paved yet. It was all happening, and there was a little hardship there. Something happened in the Housing Authority to not continue to be as careful on the selection process or maybe they didn't have enough applicants or staff, but as people moved out, and people did move out, the replacements for those people were not handled as carefully as the original group. So little by little you would find that there would be a whole floor or a whole building of one type of person. Usually minority.

D- Were the people coming in less scrupulous about caring for the grounds?
G- I thought so.

D- Were your three children born in the Monroe Houses?

G- No. Two were. The younger two.

D- Was that a Mitchell lama development? Was there a distinct change in that environment?

G- Yeah.

D- Did you feel like there was a distinct difference in the atmosphere when you moved into the CoOp?

G- Yeah because in a CoOp people had a more vested interest in what was going on as a cooperative, as we were called. You took more interest in knowing your neighbors, there was a socialization going on, kids got to know each other. It was more like a big extended family.

D- So when you left the Monroe Houses did you feel like it was becoming dangerous or that extreme?

G- I didn't think: it was becoming dangerous, I thought the maintenance of it had fallen off dramatically, I thought the amount of kids and the noise they would generate increased considerably, I thought that my neighbors were people that I didn't want to associate with.

D- You mentioned your career took a huge jump in the sixties, how much did the political changes that took place during this period open up opportunities for you that would not have been there before?

G- I think it opened them up dramatically. I recited that tale about the Federal Requirements for equal opportunity and that sort of thing. So, kicking and screaming perhaps employers started dealing with minorities in a different way. This is before affirmative action, it wasn't really affirmative action at all.

D- This is even in the early sixties that you see a change in the way businesses were dealing with public contracts?

G- I can't say because I was not present to understand it enough to say it was across the board, maybe it fits into a greater mosaic.

D- When you came back to the Bronx, were you politically involved?

G- No. It was career, schooling, and family. In that reverse order I should say, family, career, schooling last.

D- When did you begin to notice very dramatic physical deterioration in the neighborhood you grew up in?

G- While I was in the Marine Corps in the mid fifties.

D- Does that mean physically more decayed or abandoned?

G- In any property owning situation, there needs to be maintenance done. Broken windows need to be fixed immediately, things need to be painted periodically. The ownership of those properties were either getting older, or sold them off to others who didn't care. For a while the building we lived in the fellow who owned the building lived in the building. So he always took care, and was concerned of what was going on in the building and that was a twenty family building. It wasn't like a two person house, it was a twenty family house. His name was actually Kelly, Old man Kelly. You could see where the upkeep had slacked off, and when we first moved to Kelly St. and when I went into the Marines there were curtains on the vestibule doors. There were awnings on the building across the street. People shined the brass, that was the superintendents jobs, so that the plates on the door were shined, garbage was collected, sidewalks were swept, sidewalks were repaired, then all of that was not happening at all.

D- Did you reach a point relatively early when you felt a sense of pain and loss with what has happened?

G- Understanding that now I am an adult as opposed to a youngster, understanding that I have seen a little of the world in the military, understanding that I am involved in going

college and being stimulated by new ideas, and getting a better sense of what America should be doing for people. 1960 I had voted a couple of times, and what I wanted to see happen was not happening on Kelly St. Instead, what I saw is that it became a dumping ground for people who were encouraged to come to this country to do menial work and often not finding the menial work to do, putting up with harsh cold winters, getting on relief, having more children than they needed to have, if I can be blunt, and just being a drain. Coupled with were they lived being owned by people who cared less about it, they cared more about whether you paid rent, they didn't care about the buildings, they took no pride in the neighborhoods.

D- You had become involved in the urban development corporation in 1972, and by that time some of these communities had begun to burn?

G- By 1972, the Kelly St. I knew was a wasteland.

D- When did these buildings begin to burn on Kelly St?

G- People started moving out, then in order to buy drugs, characters would come in and rip out plumbing lines. And more people moved out, cause when you see that around you, you want to move out. I am going to guess that somewhere in the late 60's, certainly by the 70's, I used to take my kids by there to see it, the block was still standing, but empty, vacant like so many other neighborhoods like it in the Bronx.

D- The buildings were still there or was it like a ghost town? G- Exactly.

D- Do you have any pictures of that? Or any letters or anything on paper that you describe your feelings on that?

G- No. I would just talk about it, obviously cause I am a run of the mouth type of person.

D- So this was something that was clearly happening in other blocks in that community? G- So much so that these nice buildings in this photograph here are all gone by the mid 70's. The are replaced by some sort of public housing thing that has a street wall with no entrances on it.

D- There is now buildings, but ... Was this done by Banana Kelly? G- No, it was done by somebody else.

D- So all the buildings you grew up in are no longer there?

G- There are two still left on that block. Because Colin Powell has ascended and become a media figure over the past few years he has told people that they should talk to me about his childhood. Those people have talked to me and a dozen television interviews there and they all want to see Kelly St, "Where's the place that Colin Powell grew up?" and when I take them there I take them to a parking lot, because the parking lot is part of the housing development they had put up there.

D- When you saw this, and you are somebody by now who has risen up in his profession and is pretty well politically connected what does it make you feel like to see this happen and to see the political leadership of federal, city, local?

G- Several levels. Immediate first reaction: I am glad I moved out of there. Secondly, gee, its not just this *block*, it's the whole Bronx below the *Cross Bronx Expressway*, which was being built when I was in the Marine Corps in the mid 50's. So in that period say between 55 and 65' that ten year period, the Bronx had been devastated, and no one seemed to care. The resolve to fix it wasn't there. Could people have fixed it, I don't know. These are the same years of the Vietnam War was building up, so its all intertwined in a way, and I have to tell you the Bronx.

D- You were saying about the interconnectedness?

G- It has to be. My understanding of how things work tell me its not an isolated problem its not limited to just the Bronx, it is effected by the whole sphere of the economy and world events and so on. But if you want to step back or get closer to it, and look at it from the Bronx point of view, at the same time this is happening they are building CoOp city. CoOp city, I remember taking my oldest son to Freedomland, which is on the site where CoOp city is, that was going to be modeled after Disneyland which opened up in the mid 50's. So Freedomland went away and CoOp city started in the late sixties, and there had been advanced hoopla about it before that, and people were encouraged to move to CoOp City. The whole west Bronx, probably didn't have too many young people in it, the parents of those young people were occupying fairly large apartments on the Concourse and wherever, and they were encouraged to move to CoOp city and they did. And what happened was that more and more vacancy came about, more and more vandalism, more and more fires so much so, that they showed it on national television during the World Series. I am cynical enough to think that someone was profiting off of this, there was some exchange of property or insurance profits, something was happening here, I am not smart enough to understand the implications of it but something was certainly happening. All we were left with was total devastation. A lot of people started to do things about it by the time the 70's came about and you remember I am sure the famous visit up to Charlotte St. My grandmother owned a building around there, and my wedding reception was held on Boston Rd. and Bristol St right near my grandmother's building.

D- What was the name of the place?

G- It was a catering hall, I don't remember the name of it. I remember who ran it, a little group called the Three Brothers of St. John, they were from St. John in the Virgin Islands.

D- So it was a catering hall owned by West Indian families?

G- Yeah, a West Indian group. They rented it out for parties, and in 1959 when I got married, weddings were much less complicated than they are today. Anyway, you got me rambling about what happened, what happened in that 15 year period where nobody cared and everything slipped downhill and its only a couple of groups that managed to try to do something about it. Fr. Gigante over at St They did some reclamation of older buildings near the church, but that's called self-preservation. The church doesn't have

people around it, then there's no need for the church. We see that happening in Harlem where we see Catholic Churches in a couple of places. A couple of groups hung in there.

D- Did you know any of the people from Banana Kelly?

G- No, I didn't know them growing up, but I met them over the years since then. But they've been troubled by all sorts of things.

D- The group that was most effective, was Mid Bronx Desperados, did you know Jenny Brooks?

G- No, I didn't know them. In those days when they were more active, I was working in Harlem doing this to improve it.

D- You were living in the Bronx, and your work was taking you upstate then Harlem? G- Yeah, first Upstate, when I first started with UDC I was in charge of the group that was handling the housing and community development outside of NYC, Rochester and Buffalo. And we built 15,000 units of housing.

D- When you were doing that, did you feel that your family was insulated from the tragedies falling on the central and south Bronx?

G- Where we lived, it was different from the area we come from. There were certainly problems, I had kids in school and I knew there was the beginnings of drug trafficking in schools. I lived across the street from a JHS and I heard that they had to have a policeman out there.

D- You were able to protect your children in the schools they went to?

G- I was fortunate and lucky. I was fortunate that I had a job that let me do some things. Lucky in that I had some contacts with people and my oldest son went to Horace Mann. It's a funny story. Do you know Irv Chicowski (sp) the weatherman?

D- Yeah.

G- Yeah. They called him Dr. Something. Anyway, he was a teacher at P.S. 131 in the Bronx, and my son was in his class. He felt that there was a need to try to get some grant money to teach kids about meteorology and he did. My son was in his class, and that's how my son got interested in meteorology and that is what he does today. And at the same time, Irv was always looking out for ways to help these kids. My son was in the fourth or fifth grade and he said there was this thing called hilltop schools and that I should fill out the papers and get him to take the test. He did that and he was smart enough and passed the test. Then we negotiated how to pay for this. We paid some, and got a scholarship, and from there he went to Horace Mann and graduated. From there he went to M.I.T. from there to the University of Maryland Graduate school. If you are fortunate and lucky, good things can happen.

D- Going back to your childhood, thinking about the children growing where you grew up in the same physical space, what were they missing that you had?

G- They didn't have, if you look at Kelly St. today there is not a block there. It's the fragments of a block. On one side of the street you have a housing project that does not

even have an opening to the street. So if you walk down the street you are looking at a wall. They don't have a vibrant neighborhood of shops and activities around them anymore. They don't have a mixture of people from different backgrounds to stimulate them, and they clearly don't have the kind of schooling that I had.

D~ You think that you had good teachers who cared and pushed you?

G~ Yep. Now did they push everybody, I don't know, I don't think so. There's this gradation thing you talked about. They probably push the kids that they thought from test results would be the most successful, and if you are not a good taker you ended up in class 7-12 they were just happy to know that you did not stab them or bring knife to school that day or your zip gun.

D- In a lot of ways, you don't see progress?

G- I don't see enough progress. I see some progress, and that's good, but not enough progress.

Bob- The subject of black political power in the areas that we talk about in the Bronx, what role did think has played today?

G~ I didn't know about black political power. I got exposed to the Urban League in HS. One of my teachers encouraged me when I was 15 or so, to stop into the UL office on 137 St off of 7th Ave. This was in Harlem, not the Bronx. Because they had a youth mentor program that he thought I would benefit from. So I went, and it ended up being like a discussion group of kids my age, HS kids who talked about how to get into college, and sort of leaning towards HBC's. I didn't have the desire nor did I see a way to go to college outside of the city, it was a burden on my family I thought. I didn't really care about that, that much. We would talk about the plight of black people in America, and they would give us reading assignments and things like that. But other than that I can't remember being exposed to or being involved in any sort of black political thought.

B- Do you think it would have helped curb the deterioration of the Bronx if it did play a bigger role?

G- I'm sure it would have. Back in the 70's when I was politically involved in Harlem, I got to know some of the turf and whatever and the elected officials in the Bronx were not Black, and Gallagher was the only elected person, and one person can only do so much even if they are good. There just wasn't a critical mass of black people who could come in sufficient numbers to make a difference. Around Morris HS, I guess that's Gloria Davis' district right now, there were some black people. There just wasn't enough to do anything about it.

D- Do you think that to some degree the large Puerto Rican population that included immigrants that were non-English speaking, created a division in the community that politically weakened the community's ability to fight?

G- I don't know if it created a division, but it clearly did not provide enough foot soldiers that could be mobilized. I wouldn't say it created a division. Remember this is the days Herman Devio was voted in as Boro President.

D- Is there anything in conclusion that you would like to say that you haven't had a chance to say reflecting back on this thirty plus year period?

G- I guess starting in HS if there had been a way to make people like me more aware of the political dynamics that were about to happen. I said a lot just then, because you would have to be a crystal ball gazer to know, that there was going to be this kind of seed change. If there was a way to do that it would have been very useful. Through that UL experience I was exposed to the beginnings of that. It was like looking at something through a fog and the wind would blow and it would be like " I see something moving out there", but we are talking about 1950, 51 and not much was going on in those days. Now today, I see the Bronx as being fragmented and I see Blacks as [tape ends]