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Nobile, Joe and Hewitt, Kim

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Transcriber: Mary Maxwell

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Welcome. This is the 153rd interview of the Bronx African American History Project. We are here with two principals, Joe Nobile and Kim Hewitt. Joe grew up in the Bronx and Kim grew up in Brooklyn. So we'll start with you Kim. Tell us a little bit about your family, where they came from, and how they came to New York City?

Kim Hewitt (KH): My parent were raised in Brooklyn and my grandparents came from Richmond, Virginia.

MN: Where did they first move when they came to Brooklyn?

KH: Bedford Stuyvesant

MN: And when you were growing up, what was your address in Bedford Stuyvesant?

KH: I grew up in the projects and my address was 135 King's First Walk. It was a New York City Development, and it was 7 walks, and I lived in the 1st walk.

MN: Now a lot of people today talk about the projects as being dangerous. What were the projects like when you were growing up?

KH: That's a very interesting question because as a child growing up in the projects it is a very loving and nurturing community. We were a family. We felt safe, we had block parties and each walk celebrated a day and decorated the whole place, building was clean, the elevators always worked. People did not loiter outside in front of the projects or in the hallways. So my experience growing up in a New York City Housing Development is very, very positive.

MN: What kind of music were you listening to when you were growing up?

KH: I am actually the first generation of rap. So I grew up on R&B but I remember rap. And I remember that's a prevalent music today, however when I was into rap, there was no cursing, there were no videos and it was very positive and enlightening. It was different type of rap than today, but I'm first generation rap.

MN: Now did you hear this in actual outdoor parties in your area?

KH: Absolutely. Actually rap began in the Bronx, I don't know if any of you have heard of Bambaataa?

MN: Afrika Bambaataa.

KH: Yes, Afrika Bambaataa and in Bronx River Housing Projects here in the Bronx. So the Bronx is really the home of hip-hop, rap, and we played music in the parks. People would come out with all their equipment and we didn't have CDs. It was actually albums and there were two turntables and they would spin and cut and we would dance. And my favorite dance was the Hustle; I'm very good at the Hustling.

[Laughter]

MN: Can you give us a demonstration?

KH: I need a partner.

MN: You know, one thing that very few people know is, the two first recorded pieces of rap music, one of them was Rapper's Delight. Sugar Hill Gang. I'm about to give a little shout out to Brooklyn. One month before Rapper's Delight was recorded, the Phat Back Band from Brooklyn recorded, King Tim the 3rd and I didn't bring it with me but there was a--. The Phat Back Band was a funk group from Brooklyn so we have someone who grew up in the early days of hip-hop. Mr. Nobile--.

Joe Nobile (JN): Nobile.

MN: Nobile. Tell us a little bit about your family and how you ended up in the Bronx.

JN: My grandparents came from the earth. They came from Italy. So I'm considered 3rd generation. My grandparents the first, my parents second. And we settled in the Northeast Bronx. Not too far from here. We were in West Farm area.

MN: What street?

JN: Pearsall Avenue. 2943 Pearsall Avenue. And when I grew up the farm that was adjacent to my house, the next block, was taken away and they built the housing projects. This was the Eastchester House. So I heard Ms. Hewitt talking about her experience in the housing projects, all of my friends, because that was whole new village, so to speak, that grew up next to me. So all of my friends that I went to school with, P.S. 121, actually that's District 11. That school, I was the houses around the project. All of my friends were children that lived in the projects, community center, and I was listening to Ms. Hewitt, we used to play in the hallways, we used to ride the elevators. And the experience that I just want to share with everybody-- Me and my friend Lenny Abramowitz took a whole shoebox of baseball cards, now this was in the 1960s, and they were maybe like a penny a pack, we used to get so many of them, we used to put them in the spokes of the bicycle, we went on a roof 6 floors up and we threw them off the roof, because it was just such a nice view of it. And I think back now how much those Tommy Koufax and Mickey Mantles are worth. We used to play in the housing project because that was our playground.

MN: Let me ask you something because I grew up in Brooklyn, I'm much older than these folks, but did you ever try to roof spaldines in the housing project or the school?

JN: Yes. When I got into the 6th grade, I think I made that grade. We used to play shoot ball, these different games that we used to play off the point. And if and when you had stairways and you would take the ball and try and hit it and if it went a certain distance you would get 10 points or 15 points. And we had to make up our own games, because in those days, balls, Spaulding, I don't know if you've ever heard of that? They used to cost a nickel and that was kind of expensive for us. I mean, stickball bats we used to use broomsticks and you used to take Luxtra tape to wrap around where the handle was. Because a lot of my childhood was spent in the street, [inaudible], playing sports. So that's—and the streets do that in those days. There weren't as many cars, but when the sun came up 'til at night we'd always have a game in the street. But then again, [inaudible], and then we were playing basketball and handball and those things.

MN: Okay, Kim what kind of street games did you play? Did you Double Dutch and things like that? Tell us--.

KH: Yes. I played Double Dutch, shoot ball, Cocoa Leveo, tag, basketball, softball, handball and a little game people play as I got a little older called. Run, catch, and kiss.

MN: Run, catch, and kiss?

[Laughter]

KH: Spin the bottle.

MN: Now, let's go over to school. Joe what was your elementary school experience like?

JN: Another thing is I had an older sister, 4 years older than me, so she was my, my mom and my dad weren't there. So we went to school together and I always remember her taking me to school which was about 4 blocks away from my house, typical elementary school. And I went to kindergarten, and then in the 5th grade, which was interesting, they needed someone to play the trumpet. They started a musical group because in those days the elementary school had what they called, orchestral music and they also had choir. So they needed someone to play the trumpet because there was no one there so they, they gave me a trumpet to take home, and then

eventually my parents were able to rent a trumpet, and that got me into a junior high school that specialized in music and then also went to a high school. So the highlight I think of my elementary career was being introduced to music by learning an instrument.

MN: Now you were given an instrument in school and allowed to take it home? Yes, I have a question.

Unidentified Child (UC): How long have you played the trumpet?

JN: I played the trumpet since I was 10 years old. I stopped when I was 30 years old.

MN: So you don't have it in school?

JN: I don't have it, I have it at home but it takes a lot of practice and I played, I got invited to a high school music and art which was in Manhattan and I passed the test and went to a specialized high school for music, and after I graduated high school I went to a college, not for music but music helped me get through college because I played in various bands in order to make money to pay for college. And I played for about 5 years afterwards.

MN: You have your hand up?

UC: What happened when you got in trouble in school?

JN: [inaudible] When I got in trouble in school my mom was called. And that is, my mom was there, and both my parents did work, I had two working parents. My father worked for sales and my mother worked what they call piecework. Where she would, at a certain job, make key chains and do some alphabetizing and if she had to stop and come to school it was very very bad for me. So if I did something wrong the teachers call up immediately and I would have to be disciplined by my mom and taken home. I wish to tell another story about discipline. I'll never forget this one, report card, I was coming home from school one time, I lost the report card, I legitimately lost the report card. I got home, I said mom, my mother said where's your report card Joe? I says I lost it, I lost it, I lost it. You didn't lose it and I got a whooping because she did not believe I lost that report card. That report card was very very important to her. She wanted to show, my dad and her wanted to look at it. And we all went to school the next and got another report card. But that was very important to them to see how I was doing. And you know basically answering questions, if I was in trouble, I didn't mess with the teacher my parents would call and they would say that happened to all the children.

MN: Kim, your school experience?

KH: My school experience, it's interesting because the school was right across the street, so I could walk across the street to school. I could leave school and go home for lunch, so I could leave and go home for lunch and come back. I went to my elementary school went to the 6th grade. My middle school, or I.S. School was only 2 years, 7th and 8th grade and then high school I went to an all girls' high school in Brooklyn. I had to travel pretty far for that. But when I was in elementary school, I don't know how legal it is, but there was a lady there who would hit us. So if you misbehaved she had a very thick ruler, it was called Charlie, I still remember she had tape around it, and if you were--.

MN: This was in a public school?

KH: It was in public school. And she would whack you right on the leg. And I remember once I did something, maybe I was in an assembly and I did something and she whacked on my leg and I said oh you gonna get in trouble. I'm going to tell my mother and I did, and I went home and I told my mother and my mother, the lady must've done something wrong, and then she whacked me. So our parent back then worked very closely with the schools. We were a team, if you misbehaved in school, you got in trouble in school and then you went home, there was a strong possibility of getting trouble, because we worked very closely.

MN: Was there music in your school?

KH: Yes, they had music in my school. We had the quarters and xylophones and I remember we had IPCs, some of the coaches may remember and those were gifted classes. And if you were not in the IPC class you did not have the opportunity to be in the music class. I was not in the IPC I was in the 1 class. So I didn't have that much experience playing instruments in the school. Thank goodness we've changed that and we provide opportunity for all students.

JN: I just want to say something about school. When I went to school, when you went to junior high school, I went K-6 and then I went 7, 8, 9 school. And when you were in 6th grade, there was an opportunity to skip one of the grades. It was called an SP class, so you could either go through 7 to 9th grade and skip over the 8th grade. That was something that I was not in an SP class I was in a STP class, which meant you did not skip, but you were in a high level class. But they had different opportunities. And I just wanted to say my middle school I had to walk 19 blocks to get from my house to the school. If I would've went 1 block further, 20 blocks, I would've been given a bus pass. But because I did not live a mile away and they counted the blocks in those days, I did 19 blocks, me and my friend. And it was the greatest experience, because sometimes you [inaudible] when you walk like that.

[Laughter]

UC: What school did you go to?

KH: Me? My elementary school P.S. 335, my middle school was I.S. 35, and I went to Bayridge High School.

MN: Which was all girls at that time.

KH: Yes, Bayridge was all girls.

UC: Were you afraid going to school?

JN: I was so scared, yes, I was afraid. My sister had to drag me to school and I used to hold on to her skirt. So I had a fear of school, I was shy. Believe it or not I was shy. With some people. Once I was in there, I was a, you know, a very good student, I loved it. And I used to stay for school 'til 5 o'clock because as I mentioned before, my parents were both working, and we had an afternoon sector, which was recreational and music. But we'd play out in the playground at 121 where they have the field and we would play all organized different sports from softball to football to basketball. And there were handball courts and when I was younger they had the sliding rides and swings.

UC: Back when you were having those games, like, was it, how long ago was this; were they regular games like they are today? Like did they have the same rules and things like that?

JN: It was games like the after school center would set up. And you'd be on a team and they'd divide you up and you chose, one fingers, two fingers, or you'd get the bat and you'd go like this and whoever made it at the top would be on one team. So different ways to make up teams, basically either chose up teams with your friends or they'd have organized teams that they would set up. Okay, and there were usually awards and certificates and possibly trophies at the end of the season.

UC: Can I ask you a question? When you were school, same question as him, but a little bit, okay when you were in school did you like play games after school at all? Like did you have after school activities? When you were in school?

KH: Yes, there were after school activities, but in the projects we had what was called community center and I lived right in the building that had the community center, on the same stoop, what we called it. So I spent a lot of time in the projects, in the after school center. We had arts and crafts, recreation, homework help and as I got older in high school, they'd play music

and we would just dance. And it'd stay open 'til about 9 o'clock.

JN: Some board game we'd play, and knock hockey and ping-pong. So a lot games I see you guys still play that were out there.

MN: Do they still play knock hockey?

UC: Yes.

UC: Okay, did any of you hate a certain subject, that you were really bad at?

JN: Okay, the question was did any of us hate a certain subject that we were really bad at? I hated math, but I wasn't bad at it. It just took a lot of my time up, and I eventually majored in mathematics. So I can't say I hated it, I really, I'll be honest I disliked certain teachers. Okay, so if I knew I was going to a certain teacher, that would be a little bit problem. I remember in junior high school my physical education teacher used to give me a lot of challenges that maybe I couldn't do, but I do remember one challenge I won, I had to stand on one foot, and he had the whole class on their spots and he asked them to stand on one foot and that was the only challenge I ever won. The last person standing won. And anyway, I really eventually liked all my subjects, but [inaudible], the one I really excelled in the most.

KH: I did not feel that I was very artistically inclined, so art was challenging for me, but I appreciate art to this day.

MN: Yes? Stand up.

UC: Did you ever [inaudible]?

[Laughter]

KH: Not in elementary school, not in middle school, in high school. And it was such a horrible feeling that I promised myself that it would never happen again. And I've been in college many times and I've never failed another class. So yes, one failure, and that was it.

JN: I had one foreign language in junior high school, where we used to have a [inaudible] test we had to take. I got into the class believe passing off a 75, but I got between a 55 and a 65, so it was considered not getting credit towards, but I was able to move on. And it was you know very discouraging and it was just something hard for me to grasp at the time, I was in 9th grade.

MN: Let me just ask them a slightly embarrassing question. Did either of you ever get less than a S in conduct on that part of your report card?

JN: No.

KH: No.

MN: Okay. I can't say the same thing.

UC: How many sports did you play?

JN: Any sport that was there I played. I mean like, whatever was in the community, they started playing soccer. I mean a lot of the children I grew up, we didn't have TVs, we didn't have video games. I couldn't afford to go to movies. So we really spent a lot of time outdoors in what we called the lots. I don't know if you guys call them the lots. But that's where houses weren't built and they would eventually take our lots away, and we would play in lots, we're on bikes, not on dirt bikes, but riding there and just you know just make believe that we were Christopher Columbus discovering areas. And this was all done right around here, we used to right around Pelham Bay, and you know go to the park and we would just walk around, different lots. My cousins--.

KH: I played handball a lot, I really wasn't good in basketball and so forth, I mean I tried it but I wasn't good. So I played handball a lot and I rode my bike a lot. And I had television, I'm a little younger than Mr. Nobile, I had television.

[Laughter]

MN: Okay, yes?

UC: What kind of clothes did you guys wear?

KH: Oh, clothes. You know when I was growing up, my mother dressed me until I was in middle school so, I had to wear a skirt and a blouse, I always had to look--. We had what was called school clothes, so you had to look a certain way to go to school and as soon as you came home you had to take them off and put on play clothes. But I wore skirts and blouses and then in high school I began to wear jeans, designer jeans, Jordache and Festoon--.

[Laughter]

KH: Calvin Klein, then I added the Nikes, so, I like fashion.

MN: Do you have any pictures that you can bring in from back in the day, as documents?

KH: I certainly do, I'll bring some pictures in.

JN: And just on that, I did not like wear shorts. And my family was poor so when the springtime came, my long pants were cut, so that those were my shorts. And the same thing with my shirts. My shirts, my long sleeve shirts were trimmed to short sleeve shirts. And my grandmother would sew the sleeves and sew [inaudible] on those articles, so we could blend in the time and wear those clothes. I remember that doesn't happen with kids now because--.

MN: Now I wanna get that side of the room. Yes? Stand up!

UC: How does it [inaudible]?

[Laughter]

KH: Repeat that, I didn't hear you. How was the food in the cafeteria? Very similar to the way the food is now.

MN: Um, I wanna add on that question, because what kind of food did you eat at home? Did you eat like, what you would call ethnic food or standard American like, you know, TV dinners etcetera.

KH: I ate ethnic food; my grandparents were from the south so we had grits, on Sunday morning, that was a big thing. We had hominy grits and bacon, eggs, and homemade biscuits, peas and rice, macaroni and cheese and collard greens. So yes, we had a lot of ethnic food.

MN: Did your family ever cook chitlens?

KH: Yes, and believe it or not I used to enjoy them but as an adult, I don't touch them anymore.

JN: I grew up on pasta. Pasta with peas, pasta with lentils, you name it, the past had something in it. And once in a while chicken, very rarely beef and for breakfast it was, I remember Kellogg's Corn Flakes. Not exotic types of breakfasts, pancakes, but everything was from scratch. People would cook, pancakes were made with flour and eggs and however they made them, but it wasn't really from a box. And even the pasta, I remember my grandparents you know rolling out the dough--.

MN: Oh they made it themselves?

JN: Made it themselves in strips. And I would love getting that little round thing and help them make raviolis and different things like that. And the meat was not as plentiful, even the meatballs, I used to call them bread balls, because my mom used to take the chock meat and it was all bread in there with chock meat, stretched out. But you know a lot of eggplant and veal cutlet parmigian, things like that.

MN: Yes?

UC: What did you watch on TV?

KH: Saturday morning was a big cartoon day. When I was growing up there weren't that many African-American TV shows so we watched Good Times that was a big one. Good Times, and also Sampson and Son and just sitcoms.

JN: I remember the first color TV show was Bonanza. [inaudible] We didn't have color TV and we also watched a lot of news, I remember very vividly when President Kennedy was shot. Seeing that and a historical point when the assassin Jack Ruby shot this fellow Lee Harvey Oswald, that was the first time it was set live. It was a live video of some of the shot on TV. So basically I saw a lot of news shows with my father and sitcoms they didn't have but like I said, the show Bonanza and [inaudible] I remember that, The Lone Ranger and other things like that.

MN: Yes? Stand up.

UC: What kind of subjects did you like in class?

KH: My favorite subject has always been social studies, language arts. I like writing, I like reading and I like learning about history.

JN: I enjoyed music arts and physical education and then when I got into junior high school, I really liked learning math.

MN : Back there, yes? Stand up.

UC: [Inaudible]

KH: Absolutely not. Never

JN: I wasn't suspended from school but I was put in the corner at home. I wasn't allowed to go outside, that was my punishment.

MN: Because there are so many people I'm only going to call on people I haven't called before.

UC: [inaudible] that you always liked to eat?

KH: Yes, I liked Now and Laters, I don't know if they still have those. Now and Laters? That was a popular candy. Skittles, Starbursts.

JN: I guess I liked the bubblegum in the baseball cards and again soda pop. Also going to the candy store they used to have, they used to make the soda pop. Call it Cherry Bind Rickey, they used some sweets in seltzer and put some ice cream on the top. We used to go to the soda shop.

MN: This gentleman yes? Stand up yes, him.

UC: What was your most embarrassing moment in school?

JN: I guess it was the senior dance. When I had to dance with this girl Joan Brown who was in my class, so I guess that was the most embarrassing. I would say dealing with her, I think sometimes there's a lot of pressure for the children, and that was one of them. But I think that I may be fortunate--. The children that I were with were very friendly, we went from year to year and I was afraid to get on stage .

KH: As I said earlier my mother dressed me until I was like in middle school and she did my hair and I remember once it was picture day, and my mother spent so much time and she made my hair look so beautiful. But the other children they were doing a little more grown up hairstyles so it was very embarrassing when I went to school and saw some hairstyles that were a little more grown up and I had like a baby hairstyle. So I thought was very embarrassing.

MN: I'm gonna ask a question now before I go. What was the historical event, when you were growing up, that made the biggest impression on you? That you know of things that happened, that you know were a child or an adolescent? Any one thing.

JN: I mentioned before the assassination of John F. Kennedy and there was also a incident, the Cuban Missile Crisis because that was when I was going to school. I remember getting released early that day because of the very national spirit of Cuba and they had missiles and we were released from school early, I remember walking home with my friends. And they would plan when we were going to go into the army and what was gonna happen. You talked about all the things that you hear on the radio and how they affect you. So I think those were the two most historical, other than sporting event where the Jets, you know beat the--.

KH: I was young, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and the upheaval and I grew up at a time where the Black Panthers were developing and that was a very interesting time in my life.

MN: Yes?

UC: What were your sources of transportation?

MN: Sources of transportation.

KH: I mean we had buses and trains. I remember when the token was 35 cents though. I think it's what, 2 dollars and 50 cents now? 2 dollars on Metrocard and we had tokens and they were 35 cents. But you know buses and trains.

JN: Likewise, I went to school, when I went to school my school was in Manhattan and you had to take the bus up Fordham Road, the 12 bus and take the Grand Concourse and that's 135th Street. But I personally used bicycles and you also entered a go-kart, what do you call it a soapbox derby, where I made my own soapbox out of the shopping carts. You take the wheels of the shopping carts and my uncle helped me build the frame and during Cub Scouts they had a competition. I remember competing in that and coming down the hill.

MN: Back there yes? First him then you. Okay go ahead. No, her.

UC: [inaudible]

KH: I made it out of the projects, out of high school and I never had a fight.

JN: I used to argue with, you know a friend. I can't recall having a physical fight in front of public but there was disagreements as there is when you're competing on certain sports and things like that. But nothing that was carried on past you know that moment. And we usually tried to settle things but by doing it through sports.

MN: I'll ask a question. Did your parents let you go out on dates and how old were you when that started?

KH: I'm the youngest of 4. So you know around 16 or 17, but we had to go as a group in a gang. Growing up in the projects, we were all friends so we would all go to the movies or to dinner or to skate. That was very popular in Brooklyn.

MN: Where would you go to skate?

KH: Empire.

MN: Empire Roller Skating?

KH: I think it's still there. Yes, and Utica's. So yes, my parents did allow me to go out but again I had older siblings and we were a family so there were many young men and young women together.

JN: Likewise, on my own when I was in high school but before that was with my family. My sister, my mom, or my dad would go to the movies that were 25 cents. And when we went to movies we didn't have multiplexes. The Whitestone here was a drive-in. So you could drive your car there and see a movie on a big screen and also on this avenue called Boston Post Road there's about 5 different movie theaters, Post Road off the A and also on Fordham Road. So those would be our nights out and getting ice from the [inaudible]. And things like that.

MN: Yes, stand up.

UC: Did you do your homework?

KH: I always did my homework.

JN: Same here. I remember my sister always would check everything.

MN: Let's see who I haven't gotten yet. Yes?

UC: Have you ever been in a band?

JN: Yes, I was in many bands. The school band and a popular band in the '70s called the Shades of Grey. But I didn't have the recording. It was something I wanted to play for the students.

MN: I have to ask a question? Did you ever dress like a hippie?

JN: I had hair like a hippie, you know--. Yes, I had psychedelic clothes many times. I'm from a disco era so--.

MN: Do you have any pictures of you in a band with long hair?

JN: Yes.

MN: Kim, when you started going to hip-hop jams, how were you dressed?

KH: Very urban. I mean we would wear jeans and whatever sneaker was popular at the time. So yes, we were dressed in jeans and sneakers.

JN: Sneakers, sneakers, I didn't have the collection. There were two types of sneakers when I was growing up. Converse, Chuck Taylor, and PF Flyers, and they were both 10 dollars or 12 dollars. I used to get them [inaudible].

MN: Yes? Okay.

UC: Before you became a principal, were you a teacher? Before you became a principal, were you guys teachers?

KH: Yes.

JN: Oh yes, teacher, assistant principal, then principal.

MN: Now I'm gonna add on that question. When you were in elementary school and junior high school, did you ever dream that you would be a principal? Was this something you thought of as a career?

KH: No. No, my life just took a different direction.

JN: Same here, no I hadn't had plans to teach. In fact I worked for a year as not being a teacher, in the business world.

UC: What did you do on Halloween night?

KH: I was never into Halloween. I really don't like dressing up and so I really didn't go trick-or-treating.

JN: I used to trick-or-treating and get my bag filled. And come home. And I used to dress like a hobo, it was the easiest thing to get dressed as. Put a straw hat on and I remember being a hobo most of the time.

MN: Yes, red shirt?

UC: Did you ever have to pay for food?

KH: Where in school?

UC: Yes.

KH: Yes. We had lunch forms and depending on your parents' income. We had some students that had to pay, but I remember I would leave the building and go home. So I had the privilege of going home to eat lunch.

JN: I used to bring a bag lunch, they had a snack bar.

MN: Okay, 2 more questions. Young lady?

UC: Back then did you have a favorite dance?

KH: Yes, I would love to but I need a partner. I would Hustle, that was the dance that I really grew up on and I would watch my friends. My husband was an excellent break-dancer. Yes, again he grew up across the street from Bronx River so--.

MN: Okay, this gentleman, last question? Stand up.

UC: What job would you have instead of teaching?

KH: What jobs would we have instead of--. What job did we have instead of teaching? When I graduated from college, I had a degree in business so I worked in business for a while and then I became a teacher.

JN: I graduated with a finance degree and I worked in business but it wasn't for me. There weren't enough people around and that's why I got into teaching.

MN: Okay, well listen, thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]