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Everich, William

Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewee: William Everich
Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Date: May 8, 2008

Transcriber: Mary Maxwell

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Hello, today is May 8th, 2008 and we're here at the Bronx apartment of William Everich, a long time Bronx activist, community organizer, and musician. And this is the Bronx African American History Project. Mr. Everich could you spell your name and tell us your date of birth?

William Everich (WE): I was born 11/23, 1949 and the spelling is E-V-E-R-I-C-H.

MN: Okay, now we'll start this like we always start our interviews, could you tell us a little bit about your family and how they came to the Bronx?

WE: From what I can figure, my great-grand..., well my grandparents rather came from the Ukraine, somewhere between 1905 and 1907 and the reason I deduced that is because the czar, under pressure from the peasantry, so called peasantry, opened the borders for two years and allowed people to leave. And I believe that's time when my grandparents left. My mother and father were both born here. My father, my father's straight Ukrainian, mother and father Ukrainian, my mother has a Finnish father. And a Ukrainian mother. So I'm three quarters Ukrainian, one quarter Finnish.

MN: Now the main Ukrainian community, I'm familiar with is in the Lower East Side. How did your family end up in the Bronx?

WE: You know, my family was pretty tight lipped about our history. In fact, there was a time when my father, just to get rid of me and my questions, because I was always an inquisitive child, told me we were Swedish. You know, and I had no idea, you know why he did that. I guess it was just to like, you know, squelch any further questioning, you know, of him he didn't want to be bothered. But there was a Ukrainian community between, Willis and Alexander on 136th and [1]35th Street. And it's—I remember, I've been going to Orchard Beach, which they

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call the Bronx Riviera now, but I been going to Orchard Beach since I was born. I mean must've been two weeks old the first time I went to the beach. And in Section 9 there's a grassy knoll back behind Section 9 and the Ukrainian community would gather there. And that's where I first heard the Babka and other Ukrainian folk instruments and heard the folk songs and saw the folk dancing.

MN: Wow, and it was folk—Ukrainian folk dancing in Orchard Beach?

WE: Orchard Beach. Yes, we're talking '52, '53, '54.

MN: Now were there any Ukrainian social clubs in the South Bronx?

WE: Not that I recall.

MN: Were there any Ukrainian restaurants?

WE: No. No, it was all home cooking. You had to go down to the south, like on 1st and 2nd Avenue to get that stuff. You could get pierogis though; you know I mean if you knew where to go. The same way you can get pastoles now. Not that I can recall, the community wasn't that well entrenched, where they had like their own economic structure.

MN: Now what sort of work did your father do?

WE: My father, see my father, he was a radar guy in WWII. In fact he was second wave at Omaha Beach. This guy, you know, I mean he spent 6 years in the service, he was a radar guy for Patton's Third Army, you know, where they did, they did Patton's air cover. And when he came home he wasn't able to get a job in that field. And he wound up working in the Bronx Terminal Market, fruit and vegetable wholesale. And I think the fact that he--.

MN: That was over by Yankee Stadium?

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WE: Yes, well actually it started at 149th Street and went down almost to Yankee Stadium. And I think that that really hurt him psychologically that he was reduced to that. To that manual labor after having achieved some sort of recognition in the service.

MN: Was he a high school graduate?

WE: No, my father left school when he was 8th grade. My mother also.

MN: Did your mother work?

WE: No, my mother was a housewife. We had, the nuclear family consisted of myself, my father and mother, my brother George who's 2 years younger than me, and my brother Paul who's 10 years younger than me. So it's 3 sons.

MN: Tell us a little bit about your building and your apartment?

WE: Okay, the building I lived in was between Saint Mary's Street and 141st Street.

[Interruption]

WE: Okay, so I lived in a tenement building---. These buildings had been built to house the workers that worked in the factories that was Mott Haven. Mott Haven, you know, all the factories on the coastline of the South Bronx, were there to service, you know, the upper middle class in Manhattan. You know, to provide them with products and services and all that stuff. In fact four buildings in a row, same architect, all looked the same. Dilapidated. Very dilapidated.

MN: How many rooms did you guys live in?

WE: We had 4 rooms. But those 4 rooms could fit in this living and my kitchen. It's funny you should say that because I was in the neighborhood one day, and this is, maybe 15 years after I left the building and the building was abandoned. It had the wood up on the front, H.P.D. had drawn their cross on it, you know, for demolition. And I went and I kicked the wood out of the front door and climbed up to my old apartment. And I was flabbergasted by how small that

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apartment had been for the 5 of us. You know, I mean when you're living there as a child, that's your world, so you know you make the best of it. But after having seen, you know, alternatives, in terms of lifestyle and going back to that and seeing that I realized, you know, how really cramped up we were. I mean the building was cold in the winter, blazing hot in the summer. We called the roof tar beach. That was the name of the roof because, you know, you'd spread your blanket out on the rooftop and catch some rays. No air conditioner to speak of my father, I don't even think he knew what that was. So we had the windows open all the time. You know, but when you got hot air comin' in it doesn't do much good. I slept on the fire escape a lot.

MN: Now what was--. What're your earliest memories of the street? You know, on your block?

WE: My earliest memories of the street are playing wiffle ball? You remember wiffle ball?

MN: Oh, hell yeah, my son played it even.

WE: Right, so they came out with this way of playing baseball that didn't shatter windows. Because it was this light plastic and a light plastic bat. And we would go down and—we had a substantial maze of yards, behind our buildings. I mean that was like a world unto itself. And we turned one yard into a baseball field. And, so that's like one of my earliest memories. By that time, quite a few people from different cultures had started to move into my building.

MN: So by the time you were playing wiffle ball, there were some like Puerto Rican or Spanish kids in the building.

WE: Right, right. I'm gonna tell you a story, it's very, very interesting. Across the hall from me, there were 5 apartments on each floor. Directly across the hall from me was a Puerto Rican family named the Arroyos. Now you know how kids get together--. We lived on the 5th floor so there was a landing that went up to the rooftop. And we played Parcheesi and you know all those games. And you know how kids get around to eventually asking, well what does your father do?

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And it's, really not about what does your father do, it's about putting somebody down. You know what I'm saying, these are the kind, how cruel kids can be. So this kid Harold, who's the youngest of the two, it was Harold and Luis were the 2 sons of this lady. And we thought she was single mom. I mean she really was a single mom because there was no husband or parent. He says my father pitches for the New York Yankees. So of course, every kid, oh you know, we just fell down the stairs laughing. What the hell are you doing living here if your father pitches for the Yankees? He got, he started crying, he ran inside his apartment, his brother Luis turned around and started cursing us out, he said my father does pitch for the Yankees and the mother came out and dressed us all down. But after they left we continued to laugh, we said give me a break. Two weeks later, this distinguished looking gentleman, Puerto Rican, this beautiful grey suit, comes walking up the stairs and Harold and Luis are going Papi, Papi, Papi! Luis Arroyo, relief pitcher for the Yankees. Got a fistful of tickets and says, you thought my son was lying, I want you all to come to the game tonight.

MN: Oh my God.

WE: And we all went to the game and I'll never forget, he pitched against Detroit, he pitched the last 2 innings of hitless ball, won the game, and after that Luis was like on our shoulders, marching him around the block saying don't mess with Luis, Luis is my son. True story. True story. So those are some really funny experiences that took place in that building. There was a Jamaican gentleman who I became very very close with named Val. Very first girl I kissed, lived right next door her name was Edwards. African-American. You know what my take on that whole thing is. Children are gonna experiment, okay, it doesn't matter what color the person is. You know, like the human condition rises above that stuff, racism is something that you're taught and you learn. It's not something that's instinctual. Because here's my father, my father

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tried to turn me into a racist, day in and day out. I was barraged with the N-word and the S-word constantly. I just resisted it, in fact, I was embarrassed by it. I couldn't stand it because when he got drunk, which was often, he would say it in a way that, was audible, you know to everybody in the building.

MN: In your apartment?

WE: In my apartment but it was very audible.

MN: He wouldn't do it on the street?

WE: No, no. But these walls are like paper thin. And you know what's so funny is that the black gentleman who lived next door who had like 6 kids, okay was doing so much better than we were financially. Every year he had brand new car, we're still driving a '49, you know some piece of junk and this is like in the early '60s. And he's got a car of the year, his kids are always dressed to the nines, you know what I'm saying? And I think that just burned my father's ass even more because he's like saying how can this guy do this? You know, what that did was make him feel even worse about his own failure. You know, and I would have to go out and face these guys afterwards, I knew that they heard this. And they never really burned me about it. They said well let's go play some ball. I think that they actually, empathized and felt sorry for me. They sympathized with me, you know?

MN: Now did you go to a public school or a Catholic School?

WE: I went to a public school, I went to P.S. 65, which was on 141st and Cypress Avenue. And then like I said I was in the I.G.C. There was no S.P. classes in that immediate vicinity, so they bussed me up to Jordan L. Mott which was on 167th and Morris Avenue.

MN: Now in your elementary school, was it a very diverse school or were you like the only white kid?

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WE: No, no it was very--. In fact, there was a huge Jewish population in that school at that time.

MN: On what street was this?

WE: This is on 141st Street and Cypress Avenue.

MN: There was a very large Jewish population?

WE: Large Jewish population. In fact when I went to junior high school it was even more pronounced. Okay, but there was, like my best friend, when I went to school at that time was a guy named Richie Rosenberg, I'll never forget him.

MN: This is from junior high?

WE: No, no from public school, you know? And, I mean people began to move, but--. My teacher's name was Mrs. Dawn, but was also of Jewish persuasion and I had her for 3 years because she's the one that taught the I.G.C.s.

Unidentified Person (UP): What's I.G.C.?

WE: Intellectually Gifted Youth. Yes, I don't know what they were talking about.

MN: They called it S.P.

WE: Well the S.P.s were junior high school level, you know. And you could either go to a 3 year or a 2 year S.P.

MN: So you were in I.G.C. in elementary school?

WE: Right.

MN: They had that there?

WE: Right.

MN: So it was tracked?

WE: I was tracked. I was tracked and then sent up to, in fact when I went to Jordan L. Mott. At one point I was the only non-Jew in the class. Of 30 people, 29 were of Jewish persuasion and I

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was the only one that wasn't Jewish. And that was the first time I was ever invited to go to a synagogue. You know the Bronx Museum of the Arts? That was a synagogue.

MN: 165th and Concourse.

WE: And many of the students who, Jordan L. Mott, that was their congregation. And so they would have movies for the youth in the evening and I started being invited. You know, to go and participate with them. First, time I had Seder, all that stuff. I got introduced to all of that in junior high school.

UP: What'd your father think of that?

WE: Oh, my father was abject anti-Semite. My father, you know the building that we lived in was owned by Jewish people. The person, he worked for was Jewish, so he, I mean, he ran with that one. You know, they were the bane of his existence right? So, I remember one time, a Puerto Rican family moved into the next building, it's like my first official girlfriend. You know I was hanging out with her brother, her brother's name was Beldito. And Beldito invited me to my first Puerto Rican Christmas. Arrojo con gandules and neil, dulce de coco. Because I had been raised on meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and carrots and peas. And I mean after I had that food, I was ruined for life. I mean I remember my mother, and I mean, I used to love that food before I— that's good hearty American fair. And I'm eating it and I'm kind of like playing with it and she said what's the matter, you sick? I said no I'm going Beldito's. I'll see you later. But anyway, he had a sister named Maria, very, very, very pretty girl and we hit it off. And you know, we started seeing each other, and this was a whole, talk about a West Side Story prodigy. Her parents, except for, her mother was like Anita. She was half with it and half not. Pops wanted to kill me and my father, he actually---. One day, they had given Maria a lot of shit. And she came

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out and said Willy I gotta talk to you, I gotta talk to you and I'm looking out the window saying I'll be right down, you know, we're going to school.

MN: And this is junior high or--?

WE: Yes, junior high. And her father, I mean my father, is looking out the other window and he sees me talking to her. So I go downstairs and next thing I know, I hear my father chasing me, you Spic loving son of a bitch, chasing us through Saint Mary's Park screaming at the top of his lungs, that phrase over and over.

MN: Spic loving son of a bitch--.

WE: My father, so if I'm not damaged goods, nobody is. You know what I'm saying?

MN: Welcome to the club.

UP: You overcame.

WE: Yes, sometimes I wonder how much I overcame, you know. But yeah--.

MN: Yeah, I know. Less flamboyant but the same stuff.

WE: So that kind of stuff. I just wanna get to something else. This is something I think that kids--. I love the new technology, don't misunderstand me; I think it's great okay? The amount of information can ascertain in 10 minutes, you know, makes what we can ascertain in 10 minutes pale by comparison. However, we did some things that the kids nowadays really need to do. And that is we had ring a leveo, we had Johnny on the Pony, we had Skellys we had marbles. I mean we had all these games.

MN: You used every inch of the territory for games.

WE: Everything, we used every inch of material.

MN: We played boxball, box baseball, stoopball.

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WE: You know that episode of the young rascals where this rich kid moves and has like this car and then what they do is they steal the wheels off the strollers and build their own little car, we did that. I mean we did that. We made scooters out of milk boxes. 2 by 4 with the skate, you take the skate apart and you had part in the front with the handles. So number one it was a socialize, it was a way to socialize and get and learn how to deal with other people. And number 2 your imagination was working overtime.

MN: You were constantly creating things.

WE: Constantly creating, that's all been done for you now. Is it gets done for you, you know what I'm saying? So you have to work within the matrix, you know that's provided for you. And I'm not so sure that that's—I don't know I mean the jury's out in my mind on it, you know?

MN: Now, was your father and mother always in addition to like, your father making negative comments about--?

WE: My mother was different, my mother--.

MN: Talk about your mother.

WE: My mother wasn't like that at all. In fact, my mother was also embarrassed by my father's stance. In fact, what happened to my mom is that my moms didn't drink. And after a while she began to drink heavily just to deal with my father's madness. And I'm not saying that that's the way you should do it, but that's what happened.

MN: Who's to judge?

WE: Who's to judge, exactly.

MN: Was your father physically abusive to you guys?

WE: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MN: To the point of broken bones or just smacking around?

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WE: No, no I mean one time he hit me with a baseball bat because see this is what happened though. I became big quickly--.

MN: How tall was he by the way?

WE: He was like 5'7". I'm 6'1".

MN: I had a similar situation I was 6 inches bigger than my father when I was 14.

WE: Yes, there you go. By the time I was 15 my father was looking at me straight in the eye. By the time I was 16 I was looking down at him. And I think I began to pose a physical threat to him. You know, and it got to the point, I said look you're not hitting me anymore. Those days are over.

MN: I mean this is like, I have exactly parallel situation. You know, maybe one year younger because I grew early. And it was you know, that was intense moment. You can't hit me anymore.

WE: Right. He attacked my mother one time, and I attacked him and I opened up a can of whoop ass on him. And then he said, oh shit, you know I mean he like--. I said you're not doing that no more. And you keep your hands off my moms. My mother died pretty early on though, she died at the age of 45 from lung cancer. You know this whole thing about second hand smoke? I wonder about that. I'm gonna tell you why I wonder about it. My mother and father smoked 3 packs of cigarettes a day every day. Okay? Non-filtered. She smoked non-filtered always, and he smoked Lucky Strikes. Do you ever hear the expression coffin nails; these are coffin nails, the only thing worse than these 2 cigarettes are Pal-Malls. And I was raised in that atmosphere, in a cloud of gas. So was my brothers, and none of us ever got any lung ailments. So I don't know if that's, that's a genetic thing, because she died from lung cancer and Lord knows I was subjected to just as much, you know smoke, as anybody else was, so I don't know about that.

UP: Maybe the lymph thing might be--.

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WE: No, if it did it manifested 40 years later. It's 45 years later.

MN: Now did you have the sense growing up that your neighborhood was like considered a tough neighborhood? Or you didn't think of it that way?

WE: Oh, no, no, no, you knew it was. There were gangs--. By the early 60s, gangs had permeated the neighborhood.

MN: Now what were some of the names of the gangs from that neighborhood?

WE: Well on 140th Street between St. Anne's and Cypress were the Spanish Devils. 144th Street to 145th between Brook and Willis were the Suicides.

MN: I heard about them from the Paterson people.

WE: Yes. I used to play ball in Paterson. And I used to play ball in Mott Haven, in the schoolyard all the time.

MN: Well you may know some of the--.

WE: You know Tito LaSalle? Tito and Louis LaSalle?

MN: People I know were Nathan, Bubba Dukes, who was a star from Paterson. A person I'm working with on book, Allen Jones, whose,--they all went to Clark junior high. And then--.

WE: Funny Kid, remember Funny Kid?

MN: Yes. Because the Paterson people said when they went to Saint Mary's Park they had to deal with the Suicides.

WE: Right. You had to walk right through their territory to get there.

MN: They're mostly a Spanish gang right?

WE: Yes. And then on 137th Street between Ground Place and Willis were the Purple Knights. And then the Little People were up on Cypress, there was quite a few, there was quite a few. I remember—see my strategy for all of that was to know a few heavy hitters in every gang. And to

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make sure that I kept them on my good side. So if I ever got caught in a ruckus, someone would step up and say, no I know him he's okay.

MN: Now, you knew them mainly from playing ball?

WE: Mainly through playing ball.

MN: Because this is totally familiar. We got a lot of your stories are repeated over and over again. Now so you felt comfortable going to Paterson to play ball?

WE: Yes, there's only one night that I didn't feel comfortable going to Paterson. I had a very very good friend named Tony Sanchez, Sonny for short. Now Sonny was a ball player too. And they had assassinated Martin Luther King--.

MN: In '68, yes so no--.

WE: So I went by the schoolyard with him, P.S. 18, and he said Willy, he went over and he was talking to people, he said Willy go home. He said your friendship ain't gonna help you in this situation. He said people are really, really angry and I'm worried about you. So I went and laid low for a while, few days.

MN: This is when you were 19 years old though?

WE: Well '68 I was, yes, about 19.

MN: Now what was your first exposure to music? In your house and in the street?

WE: Oh, no in my house--.

[Interruption]

WE: See sometimes I wanna bang my head against the wall because my mother and father, at one point in their life must've been avid dancers. Because they had a collection of Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington on 78s and of course that wasn't our music. Me and my brother hated that music. You know what I'm saying, so me and my brother invented the Frisbee. And

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we would, like the back yard where I lived, I was at the apex of the yard, so the yard was like going out this way, so we used to fling them, to see who could fling the 78s the furthest. I probably literally threw 10,000 dollars out the window. At least.

MN: And did your father know what you were doing?

WE: No, he was too drunk most of the time to even realize it.

MN: Damn, oh Jesus.

UP: You don't remember them going out dancing?

WE: No, I remember them dancing in the house though. By the time I'm cognizant of them as a couple, they had given all that stuff up. I mean their relationship had really soured by then. And I caught the worst part of their relationship. When they probably had fallen out of love with each other and were only together because they had children. You know what I'm saying, that's what you did, you know?

MN: Now, I wanna ask you about one other thing. Was there an organized crime presence in the neighborhood? As opposed to gangs?

WE: There was an Irish organized crime presence.

MN: Really?

WE: Well Dutch Schultz used to run Brook Avenue.

MN: I mean, you know, so tell us a little bit about that, because most people in New York are more experienced with, other than the people who live in the West Side where the Italians were. So tell us a little bit about how that--.

WE: Well I mean, I wasn't privy to what was going on. You knew that you didn't mess with this guy and you didn't mess with that guy. And there were certain bars, because it was all bar

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connected--. You know the Pizza Connection, the heroin, they had the bar thing set up. And it was probably mainly prostitution, gambling, you know, the so-called victimless crimes.

MN: Now what about, you think they were connected in construction jobs and stuff like that--?

WE: They had better connections, they were in the police department.

[Laughter]

WE: They had the best connections.

MN: Now in your neighborhood were police notoriously on the take? Was that something that you as a kid would be aware of?

WE: Oh, yeah.

MN: How did that manifest itself?

WE: Free sandwiches, you know I mean, you know. Some people would get parking tickets, other people wouldn't. You know those sorts of things. You know it wasn't overt, I mean it wasn't, you know, but see I don't know to what extent it was. I found out how corrupt the police department was once I got involved with drugs. Once I got involved with drugs, it became frightening to me the extent of the corruption that existed.

UP: When do you remember drugs coming in the Bronx? In your area?

WE: Heroin had been there since the 50s.

MN: Early 50s or mid-50s?

WE: No, early 50s.

MN: So as a kid growing up you were used to seeing people strung out?

WE: No. No, no, it was very, very, very hush hush. Very, very hush, hush. The only reason I knew about it was that by 1964, '63, '64, I got involved. I started sniffing heroin and rapidly graduated to mainlining it.

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MN: And this was while you were at Mott or while you're at Clinton?

WE: What happened was that I got thrown out of Clinton. Got thrown out at 16.

UP: Even though you were in that S.P. and everything?

WE: Oh, yeah. By the time I went to Clinton, I was ruined. After I left junior high school and went into Dewitt Clinton, all the guys from my neighborhood were at Clinton. And that, that was it. I mean I went down a whole different path.

MN: And when you say--. Now when you say you went down a whole different path, did this, was this something, that like there was an economic component to? Or was it more like, just acting out.

WE: Oh, it was acting out, it was acting out. I don't know if you're familiar with, People's Park. People's Park became like an icon, a symbol for political activity in the South Bronx. When I was a kid it was called The Little Park.

MN: Where is that?

WE: On 141st between Brook. Right down the block from Berger. Between Saint Anne's and Brook Avenue on 141st Street. And the Young Lords, the [inaudible] Proletariat section of the Young Lords took the park over. And that's the very first time I drank any wine was in that park. The first time I smoked a joint was in that park. The first time I took a sniff of heroin was in that park. So that park in many ways represents--.

MN: It was like a liberated zone for the underground economy and kids who were in rebellion.

WE: Well this is pretty interesting though, I mean I've always found, you know once we did our analysis, afterwards we started analyzing what had taken place. There was a time when you could buy a three dollar bag of marijuana. It'd have about 8 or 9 healthy joints in it, in the neighborhood. And of course, it was your five dollar bag that had more. All of a sudden, there

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were no bags to be had. Marijuana, like, what they called a panic back in those days. There was no marijuana, and it was replaced by the two dollar bag of heroin.

MN: Holy shit. Do you have this nailed down in terms of years?

WE: Oh, yeah, yeah. This is '64, '65. In fact I remember the first family that started selling the two dollar bags, it was the Brown family and they had a corner on the market. And I mean, and it was good, it was plentiful, it was cheap. They would sell you 15 two dollar bags for eighteen dollars. So you could buy a bundle, it was called a bundle, you could buy a bundle, sell them for 2,3 dollars a bag, make your money back and have enough to get high on. And it would just you know, that's how people maintained their habits.

MN: Wow. I want to go back to the music thing. So your parents were you know, into the Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington. When did you first start to du-wop and rock n roll and that sort of stuff?

WE: People's Park was also the place that introduced me to du-wop. And then I joined several groups. No one that ever became famous, but I sang first tenor for several different groups. Du-wop, and, but then after that Motown hit with a boom and I got caught up—everybody got caught up in the whole Motown thing. And that's when my love of music and you know my involvement in music became deeper and deeper and deeper, was during that period.

MN: Now, at this time, okay we're talking about any time between 9 and 15 years old. What was your experience of race in a changing neighborhood and how did it play itself out in your world?

WE: There was an extreme amount of racial tension. When I was growing up. Among certain groups. There were always these groups that no matter what logic you could present to them, were gonna dislike each other based on skin color alone. And that was reinforced by their parents

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and by society in general. Then there was the fringe group, which I've always been a member of.

I don't want to use the avant-garde that's a bit pretentious, you know what I'm saying but, I always, I was always a member of that fringe group. Look, racism has got to be singularly one of the most ignorant philosophies that human beings have ever concocted. When you think about it. When I think of what would've happened to me had I listened to my father. I shudder to think what would have happened to me. I would've never had rice and beans, you know, I probably wouldn't of even had pierogis because he was anti himself, you know what I'm saying. He hated himself. You know, so I was saved. Whatever it was that intervened on my behalf, I'm happy.

MN: Now, so, but you somehow, so there's all this shit going on around you and somehow you could walk through it and manage to stay on your feet. Now was that your personality, you think, or--? Was it--?

WE: I think it's many factors. I think it's hard to, you know, put your finger on one. I'm gonna tell you though, and this is for sure, this I know, that there were people of color, and there were people from different backgrounds, and different cultures that accepted me with open arms. They didn't give me a hard time, in fact, they were honored by the fact that I considered their culture important enough to devote some of my time to learning it. Okay, and I, you know, in turn they wanted to know about mine. You know, but my culture, unfortunately was cheeseburgers, and you know I didn't really have that much to contribute, unfortunately, I wish I had had more. But they got this saying, Puerto Rico Por Friccion, I was made Puerto Rican by friction.

MN: Let me ask you because some of the people--. If you weren't big, and weren't a good ball player, would you have been able to pull off that?

WE: I think that my size helped me a lot. You know who I got mistaken for quite a bit? And wound up using it in my drug days later on. I got mistaken for being a cop.

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MN: Well, welcome. I'm always--. I have a free pass everywhere in any inner city neighborhood, I'm a cop.

WE: Now that has a positive and negative side to it right? Let me tell you a story. It's an anecdote. Andrew Rodriguez from the Point, calls me one day and says Willy, I got a gig tonight but something came up, I can't make it, I need you to cover for me. I said Angel, Angel, it's three hours before the gig. No, no, you gotta do it for me, okay. The Point, I mean the gallery where he wants me to play is on 151st Street and Broadway, okay, I have never been there before. So here I go, I get dressed and I go, he said Willy the congas are downstairs, there's like a--. When you walk in there's a door, you go down a flight of stairs to the basement and there's a closet right there, that's where the drums are. I said okay great. So I walk in the bar, I like to be on time, I walk in and I'm the first musician there. So now everybody turns around and looks at me. Who the hell is this guy? And me like a dodo, you know I'm thinking that they're expecting me, that Angel has laid the groundwork for me. Which I would've done for him. But he hadn't. So I walk in and I start going down the stairs and when I turn around there's two guys walking behind me like this--. And I said oh, shit. When I get to the bottom of the staircase, there's three guys sitting at a table with a pile of money like this, with adding machines, adding the money. This is like when they did, so all the numbers in the smaller spots, this is where they brought the money to count it. It was a very famous [inaudible], what do you call them guys? Named Spanish William that owned the club. Okay, you never seen somebody go in the closet and pull out a drum so quick in your life. I said, no, no I'm the conguetto. I started playing the drum and they said ahhh, and they all started laughing, slapped me on my back, took me upstairs, bought me about 5 drinks. You ever seen that Richard Pryor, I went through that with them.

[Laughter]

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MN: Now did you feel like, you had carved a place for yourself in that neighborhood, by the time you were 13, 14?

WE: Oh, yeah, yeah. I was Willy Russian.

MN: Your nickname was Willy Russian?

WE: Willy Russian. And I'm gonna tell you why, because when you said yo Willy in my neighborhood, 12 people turned around. Willy who? Which Willy?

MN: So some of the ball players, knew you as Willy Russian from basketball?

WE: Right some even would drop the Willy and say Russian. See now that pissed me off. Because they don't understand that we can't stand each other. But you know, it just took too much time and effort to try to change that. And for reason they felt, it was easier for them to say Russian than Ukrainian. When I said Ukrainian most people looked at, what Ukrainian what? They never even heard of the place. You know, but everybody heard of Russia, it's the Cold War.

MN: On your block, were there any Latin drums that you could hear when you were growing up?

WE: No, I heard the music emanating from some of the apartments. But there used to be a fruit and vegetable market on 137 between Brooke and Saint Anne's. And my mother would send me there to pick up vegetables because they were the cheapest there and they're the highest quality. And I don't remember what year it was, but a Puerto Rican record shop opened up on Saint Anne's right across the street from Saint Anne's church, between 140th and 139th Street. In fact Willie Colon lived right up the block on 139th Street. And I walked by and I heard this music and I said, wow what is that? And I'll never forget it was Johnny Pacheco, I didn't know who it was right then and there. The way that the Puerto Rican record shops used to advertise new releases

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in those days, is to have a speaker outside and they would play the music for the neighborhood and it was the cheapest way--. You know they could advertise. And I hear [singing inaudible], and I said what is that? I mean it was really, really nice. And I sat on that stoop and listened to the whole album. And of course I caught it from my mother where the hell were you? But I was listening to this album? And that sent me on a journey. That sent me on a journey.

MN: Now how old were you then?

WE: Maybe 13, 12.

MN: So your first musical influences were the du-wop stuff?

WE: First things, it was du-wop, followed by The Temptations. I got some of the Paragon [inaudible] and all that stuff here. I still got a little bit of a collection because you know I just love that stuff. Then The Temptations. And I've always kept my soul music collection. I mean when I first heard Stacks I went nuts. You know, I mean, Sam and Dave, and you know that whole, that was great music. Staple Singers, all of that. I got a pretty eclectic base--.

MN: Now you have this whole like street experience, you're a basketball player, you're at People's Park, you're experimenting with drugs. Were you also aware of what was going on politically in the country, the Civil Rights stuff? Were you somebody who kept, you know, on top of current events and--?

WE: No, no they were thrust in my face. I think probably the Vietnam War and the early protests, you know, what was, the gate to that whole world. I remember, and I was strung out, I mean I was, at this point I was a stone cold dope fiend. And we went down to a demonstration, Young Lords, were having a demonstration, where they had been denied access to the Puerto Rican Day Parade. Remember that?

MN: This is like what '69 or something?

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WE: Yes, like around '68, '69. And they had determined that they were gonna like bum rush the parade. They were gonna like you know take over the front of the parade. And it broke out into like a full scale, mini-riot, you know? And that was like my first--. And I remember; Que viva Che Guevara, que viva Che Guevara! And I started saying, you know, what is this? What's going on here, there's something going on here that I don't know about and me being curious and not like--.

MN: At this point you had dropped out of high school?

WE: Oh, yes, yes. I was a criminal at this point. I was a criminal.

MN: Now when you say a criminal, were you working any legal jobs?

WE: The only time I went to get a legal job was at Bloomingdale's because I had a court case coming up and my attorney said it'd be better if you had a legal job.

MN: Okay, so were these hustles or more B&E?

WE: I was selling heroin. Bagging it and selling it and carrying--.

[END OF SIDE ONE]

[BEGIN SIDE TWO]

WE: --a pistol, you know. You ever see the basketball diaries? Something very similar to that. But there was a time when I was like, lower to mid-level management and then things got--.

MN: This is all in your neighborhood?

WE: This is all in my neighborhood. Then things got very, very, very crazy. And that's why I say the cops got involved. The police grabbed me with a substantial amount of heroin and money and took two bags out of one of the bundles and arrested me for the two bags and kept the money and kept the dope. That was my first indication. And I wasn't gonna complain. That was the difference between 30 days and 5 years.

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MN: And how old were you at this time? 17, older?

WE: 16, 16. I wound up at the Brooklyn House of Detention.

MN: I was there. What year? So this is like '68?

WE: No, no '66, '67.

MN: And this was in Brooklyn?

WE: No, no that's where they kept everybody under the age of 18, went to the Brooklyn House of Detention.

MN: Now, was heroin in your neighborhood like organized hierarchally, so you know, so people who were, you know in charge of it would pick out people and promote them, recruit them.

WE: Oh, yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

MN: It wasn't like a crack thing?

WE: No, no. Although crack, you know, after a while crack became extremely organized in certain neighborhoods as well. You know, depending on where you were. I mean Fat Cat Nickels, had Jamaica sewed up. They wouldn't book anybody, any mavericks working that neighborhood. But it was a guy named Calderon who ran my neighborhood. Had it pretty much under control.

MN: This is the heroin?

WE: Heroin. And you had an influx of Dominican immigrants who came from extreme poverty, I mean island of Santo Domingo, and because of that extreme poverty were determined not to go back to that. And were willing to do anything that they could to take over the trade and a lot of people died. Calderon himself was assassinated right in front of the criminal court building on 161st Street.

MN: This is in the heroin days?

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WE: This is the heroin days?

MN: Wow.

WE: I'm talking about between '65 and 1970. That 5 year period.

MN: So you're deeply involved in all this stuff. And you're still living at home with your parents?

WE: No, no, see, my mother had died and my father, in his grief lost it. It's real painful shit, to talk about this, but he tried to commit suicide on several occasions because now he was at the point where he couldn't say I'm sorry to his wife. To my mother, she was gone. And what happened--.

UP: How old were the children?

WE: My brother was 2 years younger than me so he was like 14 and the other one was 10 years younger than me, so he was a baby. In fact, my father, we got--. See this is what pisses me off, I was giving him the money for the rent and he was drinking it up. So I come to the apartment one day and all our stuff is on the street. And back in those days when they evicted you they put your stuff on the street. You saw that right? So, I'm like what? So I went looking for my father, with all the intentions of like really hurting him. And then I ran into him and he was crying and you know, then you know the family thing kicks in so what're we gonna do. We were one of the first families to wind up in a homeless hotel in the history of the whole homeless thing in New York City. They put him in a hotel in midtown Manhattan and I refused to go because I was already making money doing my thing and I had my own room already. But him, my two brothers wound up in this room. The social worker found him an apartment gave him a check, he cashed the check and abandoned my two brothers and cut out.

MN: What?

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WE: Left them in the hotel and cut out? So my brother hasn't had food in 2 days, finally get a hold of me, I go and take them--. In fact, Willy Worsley, there's a place on Woodycrest, that was an orphanage. And Willy Worsley was one of the camp directors there. And they wound up being there for a while, then they got sent to Hawthorne Cedar Knolls, I don't know if you're familiar with that place. Yes, so they wound up going to Hawthorne Cedar Knolls and I ran into my father several years after that. And he had like real, I mean, I'm talking about derelict, dirty clothes, beard, long hair, you know, really bad. And I took him, my first inclination was to leave him right there, you know, badly hurt, and of course what I wound up doing was hugging him, took him to my house, cleaned him up. And I told him we can't stay together. But what he did was, from that experience he maintained his sobriety. He got himself together. My father was, before he did this fruit and vegetable thing, he also drove an 18 wheeler, bringing apples back and forth from the market to Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow, up around there. He went back into the truck, you know, working as an assistant, as a driver. And he was in a jack-knifing accident at the age of 51, this is 1970, he was tossed out of the cab of the 18-wheeler and died. Like 2 days later from a broken back.

MN: Now did your brothers come out okay?

WE: Well brother who's 2 years younger than me passed away in '97 from an aneurism. My other brother moved to Philadelphia and to quite frank we don't get along that well.

MN: Alright, it's rough stuff. So you know, during this stuff with the drugs, you're not keeping up with what's going on in the news or--?

WE: Oh, yes but only as a peripheral thing, not as like, I mean I didn't see myself as being involved in it.

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MN: You didn't have like a secret intellectual life at that time where you know--?

WE: No. I've always been an avid reader though. In fact, when I was very, very young there was a library on 140th Street between---. Right across the street from the Paterson projects. And I spent a lot of time at the library. That's why I could take an encyclopedia and just go through an encyclopedia as if it were a novel. And just go from subject to subject to subject. So, you know, but I didn't get involved politically until 1970. The particular program, the rehab that I went into. What happened was, the bottom fell out of the whole drug thing. I had two warrants out for my arrest, I had people looking for me, to hurt me, and I said I gotta do something I have to like really change the course of my life if I'm gonna live any longer. So what I did was, I went into the program called Logos and Logos was on 137th Street. Now Logos was an amazing place for this reason. The upper echelon staff were all from, what the hell is the name of that real famous program in California? The one that Chuck Beatrix died in. Well there are several of them up there. So you had staff from there who had a very strong philosophy about life. Then the middle level were from Daytop which was also very philosophical and the lower level from Phoenix House. So I got hit with all kinds of information, in fact, Don Gomarch and Mike Smith gave me a copy of Capitalism Plus Dope Equals Genocide.

MN: We printed that in the Cross Bronx Express.

WE: That was a devastating analysis.

MN: I remember that, that was the middle section of our paper.

WE: Right. So what happened was we began to have meetings which were really frowned upon. Because we were supposed to be dealing with our own demons. You know quote, unquote, and not really delving into these kinds of subject matter. So but that's where my journey began. Political journey. Then when Carmen Rodriguez died, we was talking about before, when

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Carmen Rodriguez passed away and she was the first legal abortion death in New York City and the Young Lords made an issue of it, we became even more politicized.

MN: So you didn't go to any of these anti-Vietnam War rallies before this, before you went into Logos?

WE: No, no.

MN: Now did you have any ideas about this? Like about, did you look at, like what did you think of anti-war protestors?

WE: Well, part of my father's philosophy kind of affected me. You know, I loved John Wayne; you know everybody wanted to be John Wayne right? But I began to realize that there was too many contradictions with what was being said. Okay? And you know what had a profound effect on me too? Was Muhammad Ali. When Muhammad Ali said no Vietnamese ever called me a nigger, so why should I fight them. If anything I'll fight you. And I realized that, see here's the problem with most white folks, in my estimation. They identify on skin color and not on economics. And I'm talking to the choir and I'm preaching the obvious here. But that's what my father did. My father, felt like he had more in common with the ruling class just because they were white skinned than he did with the people who lived next door to him, who were in the same economic boat. And to me that was like pretty, pretty ridiculous when you thought about it.

MN: Right, so you had this sort of intuitive anti-racism, that you know, didn't come from politics, it came from how you were living and--?

WE: Yes, I mean, because I didn't view people of color in that manner. In fact, if anything, Maria's mother was better to me than my father was. So what're we talking about here? You know, I mean, actions speak louder than words, right? And that's like an axiom that you know, that will always stand. So if my father's going to abuse me and tell me I need to be a racist and

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Maria's mother is gonna feed me and tell me you know, you're welcome here anytime. It's kind of like you know--.

MN: Now, now, in terms of, did you ever feel like, oh man, I need to get into a white neighborhood?

WE: Oh no, the white guys in my neighborhood, and I don't want, I don't want to single people out, but I'm talking about my personal experience now. The Italian community, for some reason, seems to really have a problem with white people that hang out with people of color. And I have incident, after incident, after incident to point to, to prove that, you know to give that some credence.

MN: Right.

WE: And 187th Street is a perfect example. When we were in Dewitt Clinton, the girls were in Dodge--.

MN: Right, I know exactly where Dodge is.

WE: Right, so and the girls loved the Clinton guys, it was a whole mystique. You wore your Clinton jacket, they would throw their names and numbers out the window, you know where the hooky parties were gonna be.

MN: Right, that's out of Allen Jones book, The Rat that Got Away, yes.

WE: Every time we went through that neighborhood, we had a fistfight. You could not-. I mean we wouldn't be doing a damn thing except walking through the neighborhood. And every time we had to fight our way into the neighborhood, and sometimes fight our way out of the neighborhood.

MN: Well they had to re-route a bus that was taking kids to the South Bronx outta Arthur Avenue because people were pulling people off it.

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WE: Off the bus. A Bronx Tale really resonates, that's a great movie. You know what I'm saying because it really, really, does show you what was going on. Those kids that hung out in that little social club, I mean they died in a horrible way, you know, but that was the attitude. That was spot on. Because I ran into guys like that all the time.

MN: Now what about that little Italian neighborhood near the Melrose Houses, was it the same thing there?

WE: At Dewitt Clinton, quite a few of them went to Clinton. They wrote in huge letters on Paul Avenue and Mosholu Parkway, no spics and niggers allowed, 151st Street Italians. In red paint on the street. So of course the guys who I hung out with came the next day and in big write, you know, fuck you and the big horse you rode in on right? That kind of stuff. So it set off, you know, a whole, there was a big fight about that as well. And there's another block that was just as bad, which was Villa Avenue.

MN: Oh, the famous Villa Avenue. Up by Clinton, oh yes, I know--. That was a block we had to keep off, with the Bronx Coalition.

WE: Right, I mean, I bet you did.

MN: We didn't go to Villa, we didn't go into Arthur Avenue, we were told we couldn't sell our papers there.

WE: I imagine that you weren't allowed to do that. I wasn't allowed to walk through there in the company of a black person. If I was with a black person and walked through that neighborhood I would get jumped. And I'd be you know, what're you doing with him? What's your problem? So I went through that a lot, you know, a lot, a lot, a lot.

MN: Now if you were with a black girl, or Spanish girl--?

WE: I caught it from everybody.

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MN: Everybody.

WE: Everybody. You know, sometimes I think I'm nuts.

[Laughter]

WE: I went to Puerto Rico, my old—. By the way I have 4 children. From 3 different women. My oldest son's mother who passed away, may she rest in peace, her name is Anne. We have a son named Sean. But the very, very first thing we did together, was she took me to Puerto Rico. And I had never been on a plane at that point; you know what I'm saying? I was like woah. So we go, and there's a place in Puerto Rico called Trujillo, Trujillo Alto, then there's a beach called Luquillo. Which is not that far from Trujillo, but far enough. So they had these carro publicos, remember the carro publicos? So we're in the carro publico, which is public car, taxis, but they have like a flat rate. And, so we get in the car and I tell the guy Luquillo and for some reason he hears Trujillo. Now Anne is very, very dark skinned, very dark complexed. And here she is with this white guy in the back of the car. We pull into the plaza in Trujillo, and when we got outta the car, the entire pueblo stopped and stared at us. And then I said oh shit, and what it looked like is some white guy from New York, you know went and got himself a prostitute, or whatever. He's messing with our woman, you know, one of our women, and he has the nerve to come over here and show her off like he's you know, like he's some big shit. Forget about it. Forget about it. People started converging on the car. And I told the driver, what the hell's a matter, what's going on? He says you think--? We jumped back in the car and I said Luquillo you fool, Luquillo, not Trujillo. Crazy man, crazy.

MN: Now what about on the streets of the Bronx?

WE: I would get into fights all the time. People would always make comments. The white guys would make comments, and the black guys would make comments. No one liked it.

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MN: What about the Spanish? Less?

WE: A little less. But that's because Spanish people run the gamut in terms of, you know, skin tone. They run the gamut, so you know, they check you out, they really don't know. You know what I'm saying, they got this group of people from Puerto Rico called lo cagua de Puerto Rico, they're all red head, got blue eyes, got freckles, you know what I'm saying, so they, you know, they're taken aback. They want to make sure that, and then once I start talking Spanish, it's like ahh. It's alright, you know. But it's the black and white thing, the African-American and the white ethnic, you know. Being caught in the middle of that.

MN: So that's been your whole life?

WE: It's been my whole life. But I'll tell you the last 15-20 years, it's subsided substantially. It really has. I walk through this neighborhood with my wife all the time. You know, me and my wife don't hang out here so we run into people who don't know who we are all the time. And they don't even give us a second--. In fact there are quite a few bi-racial couples in this neighborhood.

UP: What's your current wife?

WE: African-American.

UP: And the kids, it's a little easier for them now?

WE: Yes, I mean, in some ways, they got the best of both worlds. You know what I'm saying?

MN: I mean look at Barack Obama--.

WE: It gets even deeper than that, because on a genetic level, in terms of, illnesses that are particular to a certain group of people, you don't have the other gene. Yes, so it really is. I mean so, I've done a lot of studying about it, you know, it's very interesting. It's very interesting.

MN: Now, you know, when do you get involved with the Lincoln Hospital struggle?

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WE: 1970.

MN: Okay, and was that--? So the first political struggle was around the Logos--?

WE: Well it was around Carmen Rodriguez, right, and you know, Lincoln, Lincoln was the funneling, the funding source was funneled through Lincoln. Marvin Weinstein was gonna protect that at any cost. And a big, whoie, blew up over that. And we still didn't know what we were doing. But we just knew that it was wrong. It was instinctually, we knew that it was wrong. So we left, we left as a group and we took up about, we called them collectives back then--.

MN: Now this is, see this is amazing to me because for me, I was in the movement a long time before we went into you know, you know, affinity groups, collectives, you're going straight from the street.

WE: No actually we were in a collective.

MN: You were in a--? Wait a minute.

WE: Logos was a collective.

MN: Was a collective--. So Logos was a collect--. So you happened to end up in a drug program which was a political collective.

WE: Well it wasn't a political collective, it was a rehabilitation collective. Logos was a rehab program but we had the foundation and the basis for being able to live together because we had been doing it for several years already.

MN: Now explain, so there wasn't--. Are there a political philosophy is Logos?

WE: No, no. It's totally self-help. It's a whole self-help, Tony Robbins thing. You know what I'm saying?

MN: And so, you know, from that to Maoism?

WE: From that to Maoism.

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MN: Jesus.

WE: The great leap forward.

MN: That's kind of mind--. So--?

WE: You've gotta understand it was a process. I mean there was a process involved. Like I said we were introduced--. To give you an example, we would read books like, "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed."

MN: Right, okay, and that was in Logos?

WE: This is in Logos, and then discuss it. We would read Man's Search for Meaning, Frankl. We would read stuff like, there wasn't you know, it wasn't Hegelian or Marxist, but it bordered on it. You know, it was an introduction to it.

MN: But you weren't reading The Wretched of the Earth? Or Soul on Ice?

WE: No, no.

MN: No, okay.

WE: But that came later, you know, Seize The Time, and all that stuff. Once we left Logos and formed the Spirit of Logos. You guys know Panama?

UP: Of course I know Panama! My godsister--.

MN: So Panama was actively was actively involved with us.

UP: Right.

MN: And Panama was the one that fought for that position, the leaderships needed to be separated. Okay, so me and him debated each other, it was like the Lincoln, Douglas debate. But you know, it was good stuff, I was learning.

MN: Now, in all of this, was this leaving the drug stuff behind?

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WE: Oh yes, oh yes definitely. Definitely, I mean, unfortunately, years later, once I became a musician, you know, and there was times when I was a musician full time. The cocaine came back into the scene. And you remember that. I mean cocaine became, talk about a plague. In fact in many ways it was even worse than the heroin.

UP: Really, you think?

WE: Oh, absolutely. I'll tell you why, because it didn't have the same stigma as heroin. It was like seen as like you know the party drug and you know that whole thing. In fact it was even seen as the rich man's drug. Even a poor person taking cocaine--.

MN: Now, now when you were in Logos, were you going back to school and getting your GED and stuff like that?

WE: No, no unfortunately they didn't provide an educational component in that program. I didn't do that 'til much, much, much, much later. What I always did was just tell people that I had it. I used to tell people that I had a B.A. and just fake it. Until I got a job offer where I had to provide documentation. Then I had to go get one.

MN: So how old were you when you went back to school?

WE: I took my GED about 15 years after I left Logos.

MN: Holy shit. And then went to college?

WE: And I went to college at the age of 40 in 1993.

MN: Jesus, I'm trying to process all of this.

UP: That was the first time they asked right?

WE: What?

UP: That was the first time anybody asked you to prove you had a college degree?

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WE: Well my boss told me, she said look Willy, I had like 25 years experience at the job I was doing. She said if you go get your college degree, I can give you 20,000 dollars more a year. I said; What? She said at least. I said no. She said, yes. So next thing I knew, I was going to school.

UP: You were in the CUNY B.A. program?

WE: I was in CWE, Center for Work Education.

MN: Was Steve Lebistein there?

WE: Steve Lebistein.

MN: Was Julie Hilkey there?

WE: Hilkey--.

MN: These are all my buddies from Addicose Gardens.

WE: John Caligione, Warren Orange, that's where Debbie Edwards is from. Debbie knows you.

MN: I'm sure I know her from Addicose [inaudible] and stuff. So this Lincoln detox, what was that like? Because that was a huge--.

WE: That was a mad house. You gotta understand something in the background. There were at one point in the South Bronx, you see, people talk about the South Bronx, and don't know what they're talking about. The South Bronx has become this catch-all for any area in the Bronx that exhibited; I mean that had, some poverty associated with it. It's not true. The real South Bronx is what they call Mott Haven. 149th Street dissects the Bronx from Long Island Sound to the Harlem River. Everything south of that is the South Bronx. Now where you're talking about geographical areas, that's not that big of an area. Okay? And at one point there were 20,000 active addicts living in that community. With no services to speak of. To get detoxed you had to go down to this hospital on 16th Street, which I'm trying to remember the name right now.

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UP: Lower Manhattan?

WE: In Manhattan.

UP: Beth Israel.

WE: Beth Israel.

UP: I bet they were lined up around the block.

WE: Beth Israel. And they're the first ones that introduced methadone.

MN: There were 20,000 addicts south of 149th Street?

WE: Chemical fascism okay?

UP: Nicewander that was her name.

WE: What?

UP: Dr. Nicewander, she was the one who brought methadone.

WE: And there was this other guy, you it was so funny, you know what his name was?

Houseconnect. How apro pro is that?

[Laughter]

WE: This guy his whole future was written on his birth certificate. But so the Young Lords, and the Panthers, Doc Dawkins, Umuntu. That whole crew, Mickey Melendez.

MN: He's still around.

WE: Yes, I talk to Mickey all the time. He has a radio show on Sundays. They started this, they were involved with this thing called, Atrum, Health Revolutionary Unity Movement. And they had the Pediatrics Collective. I mean a lot of organizing went on at Lincoln Hospital at that time.

In fact, they sent me on a journey with a group of people to--. In fact we went all over Ohio because the Libby Corporation which manufactures 90% methadone consumed in this country

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has all their factories across Ohio. So I went to all these colleges in Cleveland, in fact we went to Antioch. You know up there--.

MN: Now this is like 1970?

WE: No this is, '71, '72 yes.

MN: That's still a crazy time.

WE: Yes, it was a crazy time.

MN: Just post Kent State in Ohio.

WE: Dave Karz was a white South African, apartheid S.O.B., you know, and he was like the worst possible person you could have running the detox, the mental health unit. You know in the South Bronx. I never understood that. But be it as it may, he was there, so we got rid of him. And a few other people. And the Lincoln detox, still exists to this day. They moved to an old health center on 140th Street between Alexander and Willis Avenue. Like this cul-de-sac that's dead end block, and some of the original members of the Lincoln detox, like Maria Mendoza, Hector Flaco Hernandez, that's where he works. They're still working there.

MN: Now what did you make of the Panthers and the Young Lords?

WE: Oh, we adored them. We adored--. The ten point, our program and platforms--.

MN: Here you are like a tough white working class kid, did you identify with the Panthers and the Lords and the way they presented themselves?

WE: Absolutely, absolutely.

UP: Did you?

MN: I mean that was, you know, the Bronx Coalition, I mean I never was—I never felt comfortable in the give peace a chance kind of thing. You know, I wasn't, you know, when I first getting involved with SDS really, in '69, when you started having a working, you know a

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working class orientation, and it became a fighting movement, you know. And so the leather jackets and that, that thing, that spoke to me about, you know, well fine, let's fight. Did that sound--?

WE: Yes, yes, oh, no, no, we were up in Poe Park and we had our share of fights. You know, but we, I mean the thing was we were in a very, very awkward position because we were given the task of organizing the least sympathetic element of the working class. You understand what I'm saying--?

MN: I know, I know, we tried to do that up in the Bronx Coalition, I still remember going with a couple of my friends to Saint James Park, and we thought we'd organize by playing basketball, and we'd play these tough Irish kids in basketball and they hated us. We came in, a bunch of hippies, and we beat them, and they were just pissed off.

WE: We did Saint James Park we did Poe Park. Saint Andrews which is down there by University and Fordham Road.

MN: Right across from Tolentine.

WE: Right across from Tolentine. We organized in all of those parks. And we didn't get that far. I think that for all the effort, and I hate to say this, but for the time and effort that we expended it was a failure.

MN: Well I, absolutely--.

UP: Would you say that?

WE: Oh yes, absolutely.

MN: To try to organize the white, the turn to the working class in SDS and the other movements, you know, there was Rising Up Angry in Chicago--.

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WE: We had an association with Rise Up Angry. I went to Chicago three times and you know was part of their cadre and took their P.E. classes. I got you know, with Mike James and all those guys. I got, you know, Tappis, I got pretty close to a lot of those guys.

MN: But that's a little bit different.

WE: It was very different.

MN: It was very different because those, those were not labor aristocracy mentality of the Irish and Italian kids in the Bronx, who knew that their parents had a leg up on Black and Puerto Rican kids because of construction jobs, and you know, that's not something they were gonna give up.

WE: No absolutely not.

MN: They saw themselves as competing and they had an edge and they weren't giving up their edge.

WE: Exactly.

MN: I mean it was a concrete material edge. It wasn't just attitude, it was, you know--.

WE: It was white skin privilege.

MN: It was money.

WE: Money.

MN: It was money and jobs. You know? You know, so you might get a, you know an individual defecting from that because they're like a little odd. But not any, you know, group conversion. You know, I mean, one of the people from there though is now head of the New York—City Labor Council. Eddie Ott, he was you know, one of our Bronx Coalition people, gave an--. He was a Sergeant in the National Guard, gave an anti-war speech. He was an Irish kid from the

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neighborhood, who identified with what we were doing. We had him, but we didn't get the group.

WE: Yes, well we had an association with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War after a while too. We, we you know, linked up with all of those groups. What were they called? The Chinese one?

MN: I know what you're talking about.

WE: Hay Core Quan or something like that? All of them. Remember the, the Young, what the hell were their names, they were from 85th Street, the Upper East Side, the, they were the other white--?

MN: Young Patriots?

WE: Young Patriots.

MN: They tried to do that.

WE: And then R.U. and Capathion, that whole crew.

UP: How long were you engrossed? Until you--?

WE: Five years.

UP: Oh, five?

WE: Almost 6.

UP: And then you worked in drug rehab?

WE: Yes, after that I began to work in drug rehabs, yes as a counselor. That's the way it was done back then.

UP: That's how it was done. Don't you think that was very effective?

WE: Yes, and no. Yes, and no.

UP: Or do you think it was effective?

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WE: Here's the problem. Only 17-18 percent of the people who came through those programs stayed clean. That's it. So if you want to judge it on that basis, it wasn't very effective. Okay, unfortunately.

UP: But what about percentage of people on methadone, staying clean?

WE: Well, they're not clean. That's my position.

MN: They're not clean, it's a--.

WE: I mean they've substituted another drug. You know, I mean--. I worked in a methadone clinic on 110th Street and Madison Avenue and got fired when my boss found I was getting people to Lincoln Detox to get the acupuncture treatment. I was taking her clients out, and slowly but surely getting them out of there. She got pissed and fired me.

MN: So after you moved into the, you know the drug programs, you were making your legal money as sort of a social worker, counselor?

WE: Well I wasn't making any money at that time. You know? I didn't start making money 'til, 'til much later. Maybe 3 years later before I had like a paying job.

MN: So how're you supporting yourself?

WE: Went on welfare. You know welfare, food stamps. Which you know, we had all been, because we were in the drug rehab.

MN: Right, now were you doing anything with music during these years?

WE: No, not at all. This is what happened. I woke up one morning and Vietnam was poised on the Cambodian border and was threatening to invade Cambodia. Then the Chinese had several divisions and said they were gonna invade Vietnam if they invade Cambodia. Then the Russians assembled 55 armored divisions on the Chinese border and said if we, if you invade Vietnam, we're gonna invade you. And that's when I said, what the hell am I doing. What am I doing?

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You know, these are the countries I was pointing to as alternatives to what we were going through and they're all outta their minds. They're all outta their minds, so I said, but what happened was, remember the old saying, 8 days a week, 25 hours a day, you know you were politically motivated, you know that whole bit. That's what I had been up to that point.

MN: So you were a completely devoted communist? Or whatever you were?

WE: Yes, whatever I – I was a Marxist-Leninist. I considered myself to be a Marxist-Leninist and my goal was to overthrow the government of the United States. That was our stated goal.

MN: You're not surprising me. I mean this is--.

WE: That was the mentality.

MN: 1970, '71, '72, that's what people were after--.

WE: That was the mentality, and we actually believed that, okay? So a big whole was left in my life. I mean I lost my place of stay, because it was in one of the collective, because I had to leave. I lost my significant other, I think that, that's what we called them back in those days. Okay, my girlfriend. Okay, and I was, that was it. I just had my job. And I said--.

MN: And the job was at?

WE: Was at a rehab center. Yes. I said this is, this is madness. And it was weird because I ran into a guy who I knew from high school who was half Italian, half Cuban named John Travesano, who was the only guy I knew that played congas. At all on the street. That I personally knew, who actually played. And I ran into him, he had just come back from the service, he was in Germany. And he was still playing, so I hooked up with him and what I did was I started playing drums every day. 4, 5 hours a day. I immersed myself in that.

MN: Now where were you living at the time?

WE: I was living around Walton Avenue.

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MN: Between where and where?

WE: Close to McClellan Street.

MN: Is that the 160s?

WE: Yes, 160s.

[Interruption]

MN: Maybe we should cut this now and then come back and do all the music thing.

WE: You know what, that'd be great.

MN: Okay, shut this off Maxine. Anything more than that--.

[END OF SIDE TWO]

[END OF INTERVIEW]