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Ford, Bernadette

Bronx African American History Project
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Transcriber: Scarleen Gabriel

Natasha Lightfoot (NL): Fordham University this is an interview with the Bronx African American History Project on July 28, 2006. This is Bernadette Ford who's a long time educator and resident in the Bronx in the Valley section and we are also here with Dr. Mark Naison and myself, Natasha Lightfoot.

NL: So I guess just to get started I wanted to ask you about your family's roots. If you could elaborate on both sides of your family where your mother and father's roots are and how they ended up in New York.

Bernadette Ford (BF): Okay my mother's family is from Albany, Georgia, my father's family is from Bessemer, Alabama and they both grew up in Birmingham, Alabama and they were childhood sweethearts married right out of high school and my dad was stationed here in New York. And he told my mother, you have to come see this city.

Mark Naison (MN): In what branch of the service?

BF: The Army

NL: I was wondering when did he end up leaving Alabama, do you know approximately what year?

BF: They were married in 1954 so he left in 1954.

NL: And when did your mother come to join him?

BF: Probably about 1955, somewhere around 1955.

NL: I was going to ask if they had any experience with the Civil Rights Movement that was merging at the time if they had been maybe a part of the [inaudible] NAACP or something like that.

BF: No, they weren't part of that, but in talking to them, even though Birmingham was very segregated, they did not feel the sting, it's kind of weird coming out of Birmingham, but they really didn't feel the sting of segregation. And when everything started happening, they were already here in New York. They were already here. One thing, the one biggest thing, was that my father was shot on Halloween. He was walking with his best friend Rudolph walking his girlfriend home, Rudolph's girlfriend home, and he asked my dad if he would walk with them and they were some guys on an ice truck who shot into a crowd.

MN: And this is in Birmingham?

BF: This is in Birmingham. They went to trial but of course nothing back than ever came about. That's the most that they've been in.

MN: Did either your mother or father have relatives in New York when they moved to New York?

BF: My Dad did, he had some cousins that were living here. My mom didn't have... well my mom had a sister here, she had a sister here. But, my dad had more family here.

MN: Now when, they moved to Harlem at first?

BF: They moved to Harlem--

MN: Did they move to Harlem because they knew people in Harlem?

BF: Well, that's where my cousins were living. So they moved to Harlem and they stayed. They stayed.

NL: And do you know where in Harlem they moved to?

BF: They moved two blocks over from where we were going to church the building is...I think the building...I should've have brought you the picture of my mom standing

up under the building. Like Second Avenue I wanna say, there were some tenement buildings there and they lived there.

NL: Somewhere in the 120s on second avenue.

MN: Your mother and father were both high school graduates?

BF: Yes

MN: And were there any people that went on to college in your...either side of the family?

BF: My mom did. Well on my mom's side, my grandmother was a college graduate, she was a teacher. But they lived in Albany; my mom didn't grow up with her, her paternal mother and father. But there are a lot of educators that come out of that side of the family. My mom did, my mom is actually, my mother's a twin also. So when her sister went to Albany to go to Albany State my mother stayed in Birmingham and was going to a business college there and then my dad sent for her and he said you gotta come see the city. So she stopped and didn't return back until the 80s. So now she's finished

MN: Now in [inaudible] I know there was a large steel and mining industry there, was your father's family involved in the mines or the steel mills?

BF: No, there were involved in farming.

MN: Oh, in Farming.

NL: So were they share croppers?

BF: They were not share croppers.

MN: They were land owners?

BF: Right. My father's grandfather was. Yes. But as they got old they didn't take care of the land.

NL: So what year were you born and what order might you been in when you were in the siblings?

BF: I'm the first.

NL: You're the first. Ok

BF: [laughs]

NL: What year were you born in?

BF: I was born in 1958.

NL: And how many other siblings did you have?

BF: I have a brother and a sister.

NL: And how far apart are they from you?

BF: They're nine and seven years apart from me.

NL: Oh. Okay.

MN: So you had a long time to be the only child.

BF: Yes I did. Yes I did. He's the only boy and she's the baby girl and she's the baby grand on both sides.

NL: So now what would you describe, first of all, what your neighborhood was like, where in the Bronx did you grow up and what would you describe your neighborhood as during your childhood?

BF: Okay, I grew up on Gunther Avenue between [inaudible] and that whole area from about Eastchester or maybe you wanna say include Gunhill road to the New England thru-way would be affectionately known as the Valley. Some would say it was the black

middle class area, some would say it was a black working class neighborhood. It would depend on who you were talking to.

MN: Now you had told us a fascinating story before that, the developers or contractors actually came to certain churches in Harlem?

BF: From what I was told by my dad, my mom and dad that some would come to the churches or I guess maybe other civic organizations and talk about what they had to offer.

NL: And you also mentioned that people would also get help financially?

BF: Yes, from what I understand some of my neighbors weren't able to come up with the full down payment so the contractors would spot them the money and so they would have to pay them back before I guess they got equity in the house.

MN: Right. Now what sort of work were your parents doing when they brought house?

BF: My mother worked in a millenary shop and my father worked for Chock Full of Nuts and he was a supervisor and he moved up before he retired and moved on to work with Kentucky Fried Chicken where he became District Area Manager. My mom, after my brother was born became a housewife not just a house wife, a stay at home mom and she stayed home from quite some time and she didn't return back to the work force until I was practically in high school. She just wanted to make sure that the kids were well on their way and she went back into the field of education, she was a [inaudible].

MN: Before you went to elementary school, what was your recollection of your block on Gunther Avenue or do have there the memories of that?

BF: Our street was not paved, it was gravel, there were potholes, and I remember falling once I learned how to ride my bike, which was like an ordeal falling into a pothole.

[laughter] The street was quiet, I remember on Saturdays and Sundays the men of the

block getting out washing their cars in the back and those whose driveways faced our house washing their cars in the front, clipping the hedges, mowing the lawns. I just remembered it being quiet and being safe.

NL: And was it a kind of a block where neighbors knew each other and socialized?

BF: Definitely. Definitely I had some good friends growing up and my parents had good neighbors.

MN: Now were there still goats and chickens or farms anywhere near your--?

BF: Yes—one of my neighbors who lived across the street from us kept ducks in their house kept ducks in their yard. They were either... I don't know I think they were a Spanish or an Italian couple they lived across the street from us, directly across the street from us and then they moved like a couple of blocks away a few years later. There was a farmer that lived on Bruner Avenue and this house was down in a ditch and my friend Shelly and I would get off the school bus and say "Hey farmer Dill we gonna kill your chickens" I know it wasn't nice. [laughter] I know it wasn't nice.

MN: He had chickens?

BF: He had chickens back there and it was very overgrown you had to really like—

MN: So it was a little like Appalachian kind of thing.

BF: Yeah he was way back

MN: In the bushes.

BF: In the bushes.

NL: And this was a black man?

BF: No, he was white.

NL: I was going to ask in that period in the early 60s what was the racial make-up of the area would you say?

BF: The Valley was predominately black once you got up the hill to Eastchester, Mickle, maybe a few on Tiemann, no Kingsland there were still white families there and the further over you went towards Barcharl there were still more white families there.

MN: Now what was on the other side of the expressway? Was the expressway there when you were growing up like 95'?

BF: Yes. The other side was Freedomland Amusement Park, which I just vaguely remember. And I wanna say... I wanna remember... Marshland?

MN: Did you ever go down to the Marshland? Some people we interviewed mentioned horseshoe crabs in the Marshlands.

BF: I didn't know.

MN: You weren't a Marsh person?

BF: No, I wasn't a Marsh person I barely played with mud and stuff. No. [laughter]

NL: So what was your-- would you describe your home as a very strict home or would you—

BF: Yes, and so would all my friends. Yes. Yes.

NL: Were you religious, church going people?

BF: I won't say religious, but yes we did go to church up until I was about thirteen and then I did the whole rebellion thing I didn't wanna go and with my brother and sister being a lot younger my mother said that sometimes it was just easier to stay, maybe occasionally get up and do some of the other churches in the neighborhood where we had

some friends who came out of our home church and maybe make it down just for the holidays.

MN: Now the home church in Harlem was what?

BF: Metropolitan United Methodist.

MN: Right. And the home church in the Bronx?

BF: There was no home church in the Bronx.

MN: So in other words, you went down to Harlem to go to church?

BF: We went down to Harlem.

MN: Until you were how old?

BF: About thirteen.

MN: Wow.

BF: Sang in the children's choir, we did the plays—

MN: You went by car?

BF: We went by car.

MN: Did your father park the car on the street or was there a parking space?

BF: On the street

NL: Did you guys feel safe coming from the Bronx going into Harlem?

BF: I don't remember ever feeling nervous or anything like that but I do remember we stopped going when it got kinda bad. As a kid I don't think I felt afraid. My god sister lived down there. Church was...we just went there maybe left church went across the street to the candy store came back. If I went with my mom, before she learned how to drive and I was really young then, we would take the train. Occasionally my father had to

work on a Sunday or something. But I don't, I think it was more of my parents probably, the fear.

MN: Now in terms of being the first child and being a girl was it clear that your parents had high expectations for you in terms of academics, career?

BF: Of course. The pressure was put on, I was not, and I'm kinda glad that Jared did not come with me; I was not a good student. A lot of my friends were shocked—

NL: Jared is your son?

BF: Jared or Tyler. Well Tyler is at work right now. I was not the best student, I read anything and everything, my math stunk, and I just really was not impressed with school, if I could sit all day long and read whatever, read any book... I was fine, but I really wasn't great student. But yes, it was clearly laid out that I was supposed to be doing x, y, and z.

MN: And go to college?

BF: And go to college, that was—

NL: That was stressed in your home?

BF: That was stressed in my home.

NL: Did you do any supplemental educational stuff or was it just school?

BF: Oh—well—I was involved in dance and I danced and that was what I was supposed to excel in that was where I was supposed to be making my mark. In college was where I changed and decided that I was going to become an ed. Major. I went in as a Dance Major, so I danced –

NL: And where did you go to Dance School?

BF: At a neighborhood dance school Ms. Dorothy's Dance School.

MN: Ms. Dorothy's Dance School, was it a home or in a store front?

BF: It was in a store front.

MN: On what street?

BF: By White Plains Road and 222nd then it was burned down 222nd 221st and then she moved down to 227th and there were children of all races.

MN: So was this like a neighborhood institution, a lot of kid went through this or--?

BF: I believe her name is Rosanne, I know that she was there; her sisters were there, yeah—

MN: It was Dorothy's Dance School.

BF: It was Dorothy's Dance School.

NL: Was Ms. Dorothy, white, black?

BF: Ms. Dorothy was white.

NL: Ms Dorothy was white.

BF: Ms. Dorothy Jacobs.

NL: Dorothy Jacobs... and she taught... what kind of classes did you take with her?

BF: I took ballet, I took tap, I took modern jazz.

MN&NL: Wow!!

BF: And when I got to college that's when I got my first taste of African dance, I didn't have it before.

NL: Interesting. Before we go into the college stuff, we gotta back track to earlier. So where did you attend elementary school?

BF: I started out at P.S. 76 –

NL: Which was on where?

BF: That was on Allerton and I don't remember the cross street--.

MN: Was it within walking distance?

BF: Its called Bimington School now I believe.

MN: Did you have to drive there?

BF: Oh no, we were bussed.

MN: You were bussed? In kindergarten?

BF: In kindergarten we were bussed. We were bussed when we switched to 97 we were bussed also. I didn't walk to school until junior high.

MN: Really?

BF: There were no—new junior highs

MN: So there were no schools within walking distance of your house.

BF: No.

MN: So you had to be bussed?

BF: You had to be bussed regardless.

MN: That's interesting, so when they developed the Valley they didn't put a school there.

BF: That wasn't the thought, no.

NL: Do you feel that that was deliberate or do you wonder about—cause I'd wonder about the development of that neighborhood the fact that they encourage a certain type of black person to go and move there?

BF: I don't know if they ever though about that. I don't know what was in the contractor's mind, I'm sure this was about money, about money and the available space. I don't know if it was thought about, where that was concerned. But I do know that they had to fight to get us to 97, that wasn't easy.

NL: And where was 97 located?

BF: 97 was located on Mase between Seymour and Fish.

NL: And so why did they have to fight to get you to go to 97 you and the other neighborhood kids?

BF: My understanding is that they need black students in the school. They wanted to limit, that was their neighborhood, I can't put that on.

NL: There was no association you knew of?

MN: It wasn't a formal thing?

BF: It wasn't a formal thing.

MN: Were you aware of this sort of upscale black community on Fish Avenue?

BF: Yes I knew...I had a friend...oh my God...did she live on Fish?

MN: Right across from the Hillside Houses there was group—even in the thirties, of African American homeowners who lived up there?

BF: Was it Fish that I knew about? I can't remember. But I do know that I knew, I have a person who actually came to work with later on at CS6 named June Gay, and her mother from what I understand was one of the Cotton Club dancers and---Did you know of that?

MN: No, but when I interviewed some people from Fish Avenue they mentioned someone was like a Cotton Club dancer.

BF: Yes, Yes,

MN: That was Jack and Jill territory.

NL: Right. <laughter> why did you roll your eyes--

BF: Because—

NL: When we said Jack and Jill?

BF: Because the houses, clearly they were different then ours. Ours were two family row houses, these houses---that you're talking about were either semi-attached or unattached, but I'm just thinking about how quickly you can just walk there from where I lived, that I don't know if I'd call that Jack and Jill. When I think of Jack and Jill territory, I think of—

NL: Westchester?

BF: Glencove, Westchester.

NL: Yeah.

MN: I think it was very early?

BF: Early, yeah I'm sure. And I don't know if my friends knew of that whole upper thing.

MN: Did you ever experience any over hostility in elementary school?

BF: Of course.

NL: What was that like?

BF: Once, well, the first day of going into 97, I don't know how long it lasted cuz I think I kinda blacked it out of mind.

MN: And what grade was this?

BF: This was first grade. It was like Ruby Bridges' experience, there were out there with the picket signs, they were rolling "no niggers", "niggers go home". And my mom coming out of Birmingham and really not experiencing this going to good elementary and junior high schools, never thought that she would have to walk kid through a--

MN: So there were actual picket signs shouting racial epithets?

BF: Yeah.

MN: And this is P.S.97?

BF: P.S.97.

NL: And this about 64' 65'?

BF: Yes

NL: Wow

MN: Did anybody take pictures of that?

BF: That I don't know, I've been trying to get—this was first grade and this was when it happened 65' (showing pictures)

MN: Hmm. Wow

BF: This was 64', 65' here. We must have taken that picture in the spring.

MN: How far was this school from the White Castle on Allerton Avenue and Boston Road.?

BF: This school ...76, was a few blocks away. This school –

MN: Was further north.

BF: Yes, that school was closer—

MN: To where you lived.

BF: To me

NL: Were you aware of the White Castle riots that happened at—

MN: In 1963, there were really some ugly incidents when they were quarreling picketing White Castle to get jobs for African Americans.

BF: I don't know I wasn't aware of that. My parents probably were and I do know that, we had a friend that moved when I was in the third grade, entering third grade. They moved to California. And I remember, their parents coming back to visit and my parents

talking in hush tones, very late at night about what was going on. But I wasn't aware of that.

MN: So you were walking through these picket lines, and was it something that echoed in the classroom with the attitudes of the other kids?

BF: Ms. Grossman, I don't remember ever being mean or anything like that. The kids, yeah. Sometimes some kids would say things. I don't remember it so much in first grade; I do remember it after I got a little older. Second grade I don't have a class picture, I had the measles or the chicken pox when it was taken. But, Mrs. Gerald, that was my second grade teacher, very nice. I had a teacher Ms. Davis or Davison, I don't remember the exact last name, that was the class picture that I showed when you came to the school and I think I must have left at the job. So, I am hoping when I get back there its still there. That was the person that kinda let us know, in not so subtle ways, that she really didn't physically care for us.

MN: This was what grade?

BF: This was the third grade.

MN: Your third grade teacher.

BF: And I have to say, between that and division, I started hating the school. <laughing> Because that's when you learn division, in the third grade. Around that time school was just not it for me. I didn't like school. I was probably just dealing with things that kids deal with anyway, not to put it all on her.

NL: Did you find it hard to make friends with white students or--?

BF: No, I had, I wish I had that other pictures so I could show you some of my friends that I was particularly close with. But I do have a friend here, Diane Salutary, her parents

moved when we were going into the eighth grade <showing pictures> I haven't seen her, God knows when. Kathy Buscabus, she was funny, she had an older sister, she kinda knew a little bit more. Loraine Levente, actually lived in a apartment building right up the hill from the school and at one point there was a school bus strike, so we had to take the city bus. So when she would leave to walk, we walk up the hill with her. The boys were meaner than the girls.

NL: So you think that younger black boys had more difficulty making friends with the white boys?

BF: Maybe some did, maybe a little bit more than the girls. I just found that, at that time, growing up, boys and girls didn't really play together, and they separated these school yards. There was a boy's yard and a girl's yard. My brother tells me of things that were happening. Now he's seven years younger than me. Now he tells me the things happening on the playground, when he went to 97. My sister, didn't talk about it as my—and she's such a friendly person, she was very outgoing. Me, I was a lot more quiet.

MN: Now what sort of games did the girl play in the school yard?

BF: Jump rope and going to Kentucky.

NL: Oh yeah, I remember that. <Singing Kentucky song with BF> <laughing>

BF: Now it's inpolitically correct to say "shake it like a milk shake, shake if you can" we can't say that, we can't say that anymore. I haven't said that since I thought nursery school. But, we played those kinds of games: tag, you brought your dolls to school, and you combed your dolls hair.

NL: Did you have black dolls when you were growing up or did you have white dolls?

BF: I had both.

NL: You had both.

BF: I have one, I don't know if my mother has it or I have it, I had a beautiful black doll that her aunt had sent me with porcelain body but rubber face.

MN: Now what sort of music were you growing up with in those years?

BF: R&B. r&b all the way. My dad loves blues and he loves—

MN: When you say blues, do you mean like southern blues, like Muddy Waters, Bessie Smith, Robert Johnson?

BF: Yes. And he would say, "Listen to this, this is your heritage" <laughter> and he would say "I don't know anybody who sings like that." But now I definitely have an appreciation for it.

MN: You liked the popular stuff of the time?

BF: Oh definitely.

NL: Who was your favorite artist?

BF: At the time, The Temptations. The Quartets, The Supremes, Junior Walker and the All Stars, anything that my parents were listening to at the cook outs, I was listening to. The Jackson Five. My wall was plastered with any Right On books. My mother used to take me to the Apollo.

NL: So who did you see at the Apollo where you were there?

BF: Al Green.

MN: You saw Al Green at the Apollo?

NL: Wow!! That must have been great.

BF: Al Green, I saw Eddie Kendricks,—By the time I saw Eddie Kendricks I was going on little dates from high school. But—my first concert was a James Brown Concert at

Yankee Stadium. My dad didn't want to go, my mom had the tickets and she said "would you like to go?" And I went.

NL: Wow!! James Brown at Yankee Stadium that must have been outstanding.

BF: It was, it was. I just remember all the lights and the chairs and the music.

NL: Did you know anything about the performance venues that were in the Bronx on Boston Road, anything like that? Did you have much interaction with the South Bronx at all?

BF: No. I didn't learn anything about the South Bronx until I started teaching there, to be perfectly honest.

MN: I'm not the slightest bit surprised because there were a lot of people living there, who were like refugees from the South Bronx, in the Valley, families who moved out. – Did you learn to play a musical instrument?

BF: My parents brought me an organ and I never learned to play it.

MN: An organ like—

BF: An organ

MN: Did anybody learn it, did your brothers?

BF: No. It was like something to have.

NL: You would just sit around on it and let it to collect dust.

BF: I probably told them I wanted it and I guess they got it and I –

MN: Now you had mentioned cook outs. Were these cook out in parks or behind the house?

BF: Behind the house.

MN: Who would they invite to the cook outs?

BF: My aunts, my uncles, my neighbors.

MN: How many people could fit in the backyard cook out in your house?

BF: Well, we had a community drive.

MN: Oh there was a drive—

BF: Like a big driveway. So, spillover from the basement to the garage right out to the community drive but you had to respect your neighbors on each side so your family could only –

NL: Take up the space that your house spaced.

BF: Right.

MN: Did they have a brick barbeque or did they have---

BF: My dad had a brick barbeque. I wish I had those pictures. It was a brick barbeque.

MN: So what were some of the things he'd make on the barbeque?

BF: Barbeque chicken, barbeque ribs, hamburgers, franks.

NL: Did you have a lot of southern cooking in your home growing up?

BF: Actually, no. My mom was not really big on big southern cooking. As we got older she cooked more of those type of delicacies but now while I was younger. I had some aunts that moved, well I had one younger aunt that moved up to the south and my mother told us the story about my aunt wanting to make some black eyed peas and that was probably the first time that I ever had them and I must've been about five or six and I said I'm not eating no peas with eyes in them, because I didn't know.

MN: <laughter> Peas with eyes in them.

BF: I didn't know. But I can't get enough of them now. But no, my mom cooked sweet potatoes, macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, but not—were weren't a pig feet family or anything like that.

MN: Now what grade did your elementary school go up to?

BF: Fifth grade.

MN: So you went to junior high.

BF: I went to Junior High, Michelangelo, which is also known as I.S.144.

NL: And where is that?

BF: That's on Gunther Avenue in the Bronx and it borders Allerton.

NL: So you still had to be bussed there too?

BF: No, we could walk there. It was like four blocks away.

MN: And what was that junior high experience compared to the elementary school experience?

BF: Oh my goodness <sigh>. Well elementary, you just went to school with the same kids that you've known since first grade to kindergarten and then you got to the junior high then you're exposed to other children who are coming from other neighborhoods and its different, you start noticing boys and things that you didn't notice before. And there was more of this whole thing about fitting in, what shoes you're wearing, what outfit are you wearing. You didn't really pay attention to that, I don't think in elementary school. There were more male teachers and they were cute. And there were more black female teachers. We only had one in elementary school and that was Mrs. Nicks. And Mrs. Nicks used to live on my block too, until she moved. They were hip, cuz ---

MN: This is like the late 60's early 70's?

BF: Yes.

MN: So you're starting to see the afros and the long hair and--?

BF: Yes. More of that once I got to 144, because in 97, I mean you could see from the pictures here, the black guys that are in this picture, their hair is cut closed, maybe Anthony Cooper I think is the only one who had a little bit more volume. Here, this is a junior high school picture, ---

NL: Yeah there are a lot of afros over here.

BF: Very different.

MN: And some of the--, there's a Latino kid with long hair down his—or Italian kid---

BF: This guy right here? That's Gus Papadopoulos.

MN: OH.

BF: He's Greek.

MN: Greek. He looks like a pretty cool guy.

BF: He was. Gus was nice, very quiet.

MN: Yeah I could see that, look at these styles, and you see different colors. Wow. Look at these, afro puffs.

BF: Diana Dicosta, and do you know who Diana Dicosta is? Diana Dicosta is like a world famous hair dresser right now. She's the hair dresser of the stars.

MN&NL: Really?!

BF: I haven't seen her since then, but I see her name all the time.

NL: Really?! Wow! Look at that. So you were saying that kids came from other neighborhoods, where were the kids coming from that went to 144 with you?

BF: They came from Edenwald, some came from Edenwald, and that was kind of weird because Sousa [John Philip Sousa Elementary] was right there, but some came from Edenwald, some came from Eastchester Gardens, some came from—

MN: Tremont?

BF: Tremont, the Tremont section of the Bronx. So we had --

MN: Was this considered a very desirable school so--?

BF: Oh yes.

MN: So in other words you'd have kids coming from neighborhoods where the schools were the schools were worst, who wanted, their parents wanted their kids to go—

NL: To a new school.

BF: To a new school.

NL: Right, right. Cause you were saying that the school was just built—

BF: It was just built.

NL: When you were starting?

BF: Brand new. My class was the first class to graduate all three, all three<inaudible>

MN: By this time were you very much involved in dance?

BF: Yes.

MN: And was there a dance program at the junior high school?

BF: There wasn't a dance program but there was a talent show. My friend Sherri and I auditioned for the talent show but we weren't shaking it enough so we didn't--<laughter>

NL: So they were into "shaking it" at that point.

BF: They were into “shaking it” at the time. And I kept telling her, cause we were dancing to Shaft, and I said Sherri you know in my class we do like this and then she said no Burn but the girls—she said ok I’m a do what you say and we got up there but we didn’t get it. Gale Mustell and Angela Love they—

NL: They were the girls that were “shaking it”

BF: They brought the house down. Yeah. They brought the house down. <laughter>
There were cheers from everywhere, yeah. And they did good.

NL: So were there any fights or anything like that in your school?

BF: Oh yes.

NL: So where do you think those originated from, what kind of conflict were happening, who was fighting?

BF: Who thought, if you thought that you were better then someone else. If you thought that you were a better dresser. If you could snap better then somebody else, playing the dozens and if it got out of hand—

MN: Now this was girls as well as boys?

BF: This is girls; I’m not even talking about the boys. I’m talking about—

MN: This is girls fighting?

BF: I’m talking about—

MN: Is this the first time you saw any knock down, drag out, girl fights?

BF: Yes, yes, and I was like riveted to my understanding---

MN: Now, what did girls do when they fought?

BF: Well first they would do the push. I push you, you push me back. I push you, you push me back and then all of a sudden they just start with the cat fights, with the nails—

MN: With the nails and pulling hair?

BF: Pulling hair, taking off shoes—

MN: And smacking you with the shoe.

BF: And smacking you with the shoe.

MN: Uh uh.

BF: Uh Uh. Right in the intersection if you can imagine of Gun Hill and Gunther.

MN: So this was all outside. It was in the streets?

BF: This was outside--<crosstalk> I mean inside the school of course there were some squirmishes but they would break those up quickly. You would never see the kind of stuff you would see happening on the streets inside the school. I can't imagine that.

NL: And were the boys involved in fights too?

BF: Yes, but I think the girls fought more than the boys.

NL: Wow!

BF: I don't really remember, the boys—

MN: What about language? Today kids using all these terms, were kids terms less colorful or vulgar in those days?

BF: Oh yes of course they were less vulgar. They wouldn't say half the things that they're saying now. I remember slang more from high school than I do in junior high.

MN: Did you get involved in any extra curricular activities at 144?

BF: I was in the future teacher's club that's really funny <Laughter>

MN :<laughter> I thought you said that you didn't like school?

BF: I really didn't. I don't know why I did it. Probably because one of my friends joined.

NL: It was like you were flirting with your destiny all along.

BF: All along and I didn't even know it.

NL :<laughing>

BF: But yeah, I think I did that for like one term. That was it. I did, I had a friend, my friend Sherri, her father was the assembly man for our district at one point, and so when the kids, they had picked children from the student government to go to Albany and I remember being able to go because of him.

MN: What was her father's name?

BF: His name was Irving Adams.

NL: And was he like a real political activist in the area?

BF: Not really.

NL: Not really?

BF: He moved away after awhile.

NL: Did you have a very political household at all?

BF: Yes. My father watched Face Damnation and everything else on a Sunday morning.

NL: And there was a lot of political conversation in the home?

BF: Yes. Yes. Always, always initiated by my dad. He was very political.

NL: And what kinds of view points do you think you might have learned from your dad, what kind of things was he talking about?

BF: Just the inequality, the basic inequality and just knowing that you better get out there and put your foot to the pedal. He spoke about working so hard and hoping that we didn't have too work as hard as he did. That was it basically, just getting out there having a good work ethic and knowing that that's important. It's important how you present yourself not to be a slouch. Those were things that were very important to him and my

mother and just trying to put your best foot forward. And not being afraid, my dad is very big on it. Don't be afraid. I was always the one who would be like<inaudible> DON'T BE AFRAID just go do it. When I started cheering, I think they were like, what did she eat this morning because---

MN: Right. So that was like a big break for you from your normal persona to be a cheerleader?

BF: Definitely, that was when I really started liking school.

MN: And now when you were, you went to, this was from sixth to eighth grade?

BF: 144 yes.

MN: Now when you were thinking about high school was it a done deal that you went to Evander or were you considering other schools?

BF: I did consider other schools, for some reason I wanted to go to Grace Dodge. I think that they had something to do with fashion there or something—

MN: That's right down Fordham Road.

BF: My mother was like uh uh you're not going over there. She didn't want me to leave the neighborhood. They knew my grades weren't that great so it wasn't like I was going to go to some academically really rich high school but they didn't want me to leave the neighborhood and go someplace where I might be<inaudible> or something in the streets. They were like you're going there.

NL: Speaking of neighborhoods, did you have any experiences with other neighborhoods, you mentioned in our earlier conversation about going to Roosevelt and those kind of areas. Did you have family there or--?

BF: We had family there, they were a lot older than I was and you just went and sat on the couch and you listened--<crosstalk> I didn't really, one time I ventured around this neighborhood and it reminded me of the Valley in the sense that you saw a lot of black families but the houses were not attached, they were unattached and they had larger yards and that kind of thing.

MN: Now when you went, did your family go to the beach at all?

BF: We went to Orchard a few times, my mother is not a beach person, and she doesn't like the beach. I love the beach. She probably<inaudible> <laughter> my dad, I have pictures of us on the beach. We went up to Rye a lot.

MN: Rye Playland?

BF: We went to Rye Playland a lot. Actually that's where I took my family for the family reunion.

MN: Oh ok.

BF: We got rained on but---

MN: That was a big treat?

BF: It was a big treat to go to Rye Playland.

NL: What was Rye Playland like for you as a kid was it a place where a lot of black families went to for recreation?

BF: We'd see some. I don't think I ever paid attention to it like that.

MN: Did you go by Ferry or did you go by car?

BF: By car. My parents both had cars. And I don't drive.

MN: So your first day in Evander what were your emotions as you're thinking I'm going to high school?

BF: I thought I was going to get the crap beat out of me I don't know if I looked at somebody the wrong way and it wasn't nothing farther from the truth a lot of my older neighbors there and their brothers and sisters and stuff and they would play the games with you if you asked which way the classroom was because the room numbers ran kind of funny they'd send you to another—

NL: Oh yeah, they did that in Spellman too.

BF: To another way and then I had a teacher, English teacher, Mr. Crow, who actually did a diagram for us and said you'll never get lost if you follow this.

NL: And what kind of reputation did Evander have?

BF: A bad ass reputation.

NL: Yeah I was gonna say when I was a kid it had a bad reputation.

MN: So your mother didn't know about that, or she thought the other alternatives were worse?

BF: She thought the other alternatives were worse. And she was right. She was right.

Evander at that time, as far as I'm concerned was what you made it.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A, BEGINNING OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

NL: You can start talking.

BF: It was '72 when I entered and it was what you made it. We had a nursing program, home- ec, there was the Co-op Club, the kids who wanted to work and go to school, there was a good athletic program and I think when I think back , we had a good academic program it was just whatever you decided---

MN: Were there any teachers who made a particular impression on you?

BF: We had Mr. Henderson was our grade advisor, not grade advisor, student advisor for the different clubs you had to have a grade advisor. And he always talked to us about doing our best. He lived right down the block from me. He raised three boys and very, very nice wife. And he just spoke to us about just getting out there and putting our best foot forward always. And my homeroom teacher from ninth grade Mr. Growl he was just a sweet heart, really nice, he was the automotive teacher.

NL: So they taught trade in Evander as well--

BF: Yes they did.

NL: the Liberal Arts type of education.

BF: Yes.

NL: Did you feel as though students were tracked at that time in your—

BF: You know something, I never, I don't remember thinking about it then, but I think back now and I have to say no. I was in college bound, they did put me in college bound and I'm going to say no, I have friends who were honors students, who hung out just as much as I did, but they were just really, really smart, received scholarships.

NL: But it wasn't like they were in different classes from say the students who weren't honor students?

BF: Well, I mean if you... alright, lets take my math for example, my math was horrible, I did business math to get out of high school. You can't do that now. That's like—

MN: You have to take the regents.

BF: You have to take the regents. I was in school at the right time <laughing> as far as math is concerned. I mean if you couldn't do it you didn't go, why would you go into Calculus if you know that you couldn't do it but it was definitely open---

NL: To who ever wanted to take it

BF: Who ever needed to take it.

MN: What was the social dating scene like in high school?

BF: Elaborate, I mean—

MN: I mean did people go out on individual dates where boys would come to your house and meet your parents and you know that formal kind of thing.

BF: Oh yes. Yes, yes.

NL: Were you allowed to go out on dates?

BF: I was allowed to go out. I didn't do a lot of dating, but I was allowed to go out, I had a couple of boyfriends and yes they had to come to the house and meet my parents. My parents were very strict about that. But when I started cheering we used to go out in groups, and my mom felt a lot more comfortable about that, I mean if you did pair off later, you paired off later but we basically went out in groups.

NL: Did people date outside of their race or was that for the most part not done?

BF: I saw the beginnings of that with my former co-captain on the booth there's Neddy whose black and her husband who she married, I think his name was Anthony, he was Puerto Rican and he went into the service, I remember that. They dated, and I can't remember which family, but I think one of the families wasn't really cool with it but they married, and as far as I know they're still married. But no, the most I think maybe people dealt with when I was growing up was if you were Caribbean and black that kind of mix. But the whole interracial thing, no because we weren't really running, we weren't running in the same circles at that time.

NL: I had a question about the Caribbean presence in your neighborhood because it's fairly strong now and it seems to me that it wasn't when your family first moved there?

BF: When the family first moved there, there were basically seven blacks---

NL: And so when did you start to notice the change?

BF: Fifth grade.

NL: Fifth grade?

BF: Fifth grade, I had a good friend named Sheryl Brian who came from Jamaica, being that it used to crack me up Sherri didn't like her because they were, they both wanted to be my friends, and Sherri didn't really particularly care for her, but, I remember Sheryl always saying is that troubling Sherri, and I thought that was the weirdest thing---

NL: Troubling? <laughing>

BF: And I understood that till it stopped bothering me. My sister has more friends that are of Caribbean background then I did growing up. Now I do because everybody is just all over, but growing up Angela probably had more friends---

NL: Did you notice any tensions in the neighborhood kind of when Caribbean started to create an influx; was there kind of a feeling of intrusion on the part of the southern blacks?

BF: Sometimes, sometimes. Because, not to say anything bad about them, but that's when---and I know that I am going to sound that I am talking crazy right now because I am trying to get my thoughts together, I know that there are other influxes of the drugs into the neighborhoods that were coming from other places but we do know the whole Reefer thing in the park. That was a result of the Caribbeans because it wasn't there before---

MN: This is-- you're talking about Haffen Park?

BF: Haffen Park, it wasn't there before. It wasn't there when I was in sixth and the seventh grade and maybe by the time I got to high school is when I started to notice it, or maybe it was there but, I just didn't know.

MN: Now in high school that's the disco era. Were there places where people went to dance?

BF: Yes, can I just back track for one minute?

MN: Yes.

BF: And as for the Caribbeans in high school, mainly always the--- is it the Forens Avenue side? What is the side that is closest to---is that Magenta? They would congregate on the Magenta corner. I don't know if they still do but that was there corner. They kind of positioned themselves away from the American blacks and was that around the time that Haile Selassie died?

MN: The 70's

BF: And that was when I started noticing more of the Rastafarians in high school. But that's it. But disco era, we partied in each others basements, you know there is always talk of the blue light with the velvet posters in somebody's basement, we partied there. We went to--- what was that club called on Boston road? The Stardust.

MN: The Stardust ball room with inflated manifestation in Boston Road. Did you go to the Tea Connection at all?

BF: I went to the Tea Connection, I used to love the Tea Connection because the Tea Connection had a stage and if you were really good you got up on that stage and I could hustle my but off.

MN: Oh, so the hustle---

BF: I was hustling all the way.

MN :< laughing>

BF: And my friends that we used to go out with in groups, most of the fellows could hustle and so being so little, they loved to tug me around.

NL: <laughing>

MN: Wow, you don't have any of that on video?

BF: No I don't. And we would go to Haffen Park and I have a friend, he was the DJ at my wedding, and his name is Johnny and he goes by the name of Johnny G, I don't know if you've ever heard any his DJ music from that era—

MN: Johnny G? Does he still spin?

BF: I don't know what Johnny does or not, but Johnny would spin and there was another friend of his named Timmy Hall. And I believe Timmy is now a DJ somewhere in Texas or something like that, and they would spin in the park and they would make big circles and if you were really good you got in the middle of that circle and you would dance.

MN: And this is—

BF: This is Haffen Park

MN: You had DJs in the park?

BF: Yes.

NL: Park Jams

MN: Park Jams up there. Now was any of this beginnings of Hip-Hop where you had MCs getting up and---

BF: Yeah, because they would get on and they would---

NL: They would do a little something over the mic to the disco track.

MN: Oh ok so that was going up there also?

NL: Did you see early break dancing too?

BF: Yes

NL: Did you try it yourself or were there any girls who did it?

BF: They were girls that did it, I couldn't, I was always afraid that I was going to hurt myself. I would never do anything like that plus my mother would probably say that was very unlady like. Do you remember when we presented at the District Office and one of the parents got up and she kind of, we would do that little step like this and instead of going down like dropping down we would just do it abbreviated. We did the ladylike drop.

MN: Did you know any girls that MC or rapped because---

BF: No. That would come after me. My brother would probably know. That came a little later. By the time I got to college that was when you really started hearing them.

MN: Where did you end up going to college?

BF: Old Westbury in Long Island.

MN: When did you start becoming very aware of college and start thinking about where you were going to go?

BF: Probably eleventh grade.

NL: And was it encouraged in Evander that you had options?

BF: I don't remember, I do remember a big assembly and I was a student rep for my class at that time, and I remember a big assembly and them herding all the eleventh graders and just being spoken to, I think they were representatives from view different colleges and I remember them asking us to raise our hands when asking questions such as how many of you plan on going to a CUNY college?, How many of you plan on going to State University?, etc. I had been in the college office, actually that's where I used to cut class sometimes, just pouring over the books, trying to figure out where I wanted to go but I don't remember a guidance counselor or anyone like that saying this is what you should do.

MN: It sounds like you became kind of a leader or came out of your shell in Evander.

BF: Yeah I did.

MN: Because you were a student rep as well captain of the Roosters.

BF: I did, I did. I guess it's my dad saying don't be afraid, try. Like how they say now, don't be scared. I don't think anyone else wanted the student thing and I said I'll do it.

MN: Did going to Old Westbury meant you lived on campus?

BF: Yes.

MN: And how was that?

BF: That was fun.

NL: You had a lot of parties out there?

BF: Lot of parties.

MN: That school had that kind of reputation.

NL: Yeah. That's what I remembered.

MN: Even the faculty under there were party animals.

BF: They were party animals but I remember my dad learning about the partying after all the paper work had been done. <Laughter>

NL: After the papers had been signed.

BF: One of his co-workers had a nephew, that I met later on, he's a big DT now, his name is Carl. I remember her telling my dad, you know Sam you better watch your daughter out there because they do a lot of partying out there. I remember him coming home saying to me you better not partying out there.

MN: Let me see if you know the two professors I knew out there, both were pretty wild. A guy named John McDermott and Roz Baxandall.

BF: No, no I don't.

MN: Those were the two people I know.

BF: What departments were they in?

MN: Sociology, History people.

BF: My husband would probably know them.

NL: So that's where you met your husband.

BF: Mmmhmm.

NL: So how did you decide on an education major at Westbury?

BF: My youngest child his godmother we met, it was so crazy. We went out there for the placement exam; it was going to be hours before it was time for us to go back. She was sitting there looking around, I was sitting there looking around and I just said to her do you want to go, I didn't know this woman, I said do you want to go looking around on campus because I want to go look around and she said yeah I was dying to do that and

there were three of us sitting there and we got up and we started to look around the campus and when I came back in September she knew, Belinda knew that she wanted to be an ed major and she just kept bugging me saying just take a class, just take a class, and I needed an elective and I said ok. And I took it and I was like I don't know----

MN: That's amazing. But the Dean of students at SUNY Old Westbury lives on Gunther. I forget what his name is, I'll get it for you, he's friend of Bubba [Nathan "Bubba" Dukes], African American guy. Big guy with a son who's a basketball player, Wayne something. I'll get the name for you.

BF: Get me the name.

MN: But he lives on Gunther.

BF: Does he live in the same Gunther that Bubba lives on?

MN: He lives, I think maybe block south from you. Not on Bubba's block

BF: Get the heck out of here.

MN: And he's the Dean of Students at SUNY Westbury.

BF: Oh, that's nice to know.

MN: When you met your husband there did get married while you were still in college?

BF: No, no---

NL: Was he from the Bronx too?

BF: No he's from Manhattan, he's from Manhattan. And he used to laugh at me, because, still today, but I mean I am doing better now but I don't know how to travel on the trains that well. He was like, how do you grow up in the Bronx or in New York and not know how to—and I would say well my parents had a car and I'd just get in the car and go. I

didn't have to worry about the trains. But I met him there and we didn't--- I graduated in 82' and we didn't marry until 85.

MN: Did you go right into teaching?

BF: Immediately.

NL: You knew you were coming back to the Bronx, because I was wondering did you know that you wanted to come back here and teach versus going somewhere else.

BF: I did think about being in Long Island a little bit, I had a really nice experience when I did my student teaching and I thought about it but that's where I met a lot of people from the Bronx, from Harlem, and just in talking I just felt that I needed to come back and give back to the city.

NL: Right. And what has your experience been like as an educator in the public education system. Do you feel like kids now have an even different experience---?

BF: Oh they definitely have a different experience than what I was having. It's been rewarding for the most part otherwise I don't think I would've lasted as long as I've had. I love the kids and I think that they keep kind of up. And it has been disheartening when you have to deal with parents who are in denial, who don't want to understand that maybe Johnny needs a test, doesn't mean that---, and I use my son all the time, I have a child that's visually impaired, my husband is visually impaired and they lead very boring lives and you would never know it when you meet them or see them, you really can't--- especially with Jared the signs aren't as bad as my husband's it's congenital. But I tell them all the time, my son receives services through special ed but he is not labeled and just take a chance, take the test and see what happens. And they don't want to do it and then here it is two years later the kid is still not moving and you want to blame all the

teachers but you can't blame all the teachers when somebody told you what to do, but you were just too big headed, stubborn, scared, whatever to do it.

NL: So what school in the Bronx have you taught at over the past twenty or so years?

BF: CS 6.

NL: You've been there since you came---

MN: So Paul Cannon was at CS 6?

BF: He was at CS 6---I was saying when I took sabbatical, when I came back, I taught the lower grades, I taught first and second, and when I came back Mr. Martin told me I want you upstairs with the fifth graders, and I was like I don't want to go up there. And then he was my AP.

MN: So he worked under Mr. Martin?

BF: Yes.

NL: So you've been the entire time since you've been out of college.

BF: Well, no. Not since I've been out of college---for the most part, well I did a <inaudible> in Forest Hills at a nursery, Forest Hills Cooperative, then I did a <inaudible> in Harlem for year at two different daycares and then I got in engaged and I said, we need a little more money than the daycare will provide and then I went to the board.

NL: What's the biggest change you've seen in CS 6 since, from the 80's to now?

BF: The drug culture, what it did to the students and to the families.

MN: Particularly crack?

BF: Crack.

MN: That neighborhood was---

NL: Ravaged by crack.

MN: I mean I knew Ed students from that area there to up to 182nd Street, Oh my God.

BF: Like I said, I didn't know that neighborhood before I started teaching there. That's when I first go there in 84', maybe you were dealing with some alcoholism, maybe some parents were smoking some weed or something, you could kind of tell. But 90's when you started getting the first graders or the kindergartners, who were school age, eligible, and their parents had been smoking that stuff all through the 80's. Lets say 90, 91, 92, that's when you---

MN: You're getting the kids, who were products of that.

NL: They were crack babies.

BF: They were crack babies.

NL: You could tell the difference----

MN: Developed mentally impaired, I mean whatever---

BF: Bad, bad, bad. And I had a kid, and I tell this story all the time, her name was Shana. And Shana's mother dated a guy who lived in my neighborhood. And Ronald is gone now, and we think it's probably due to AIDS. Nice guy, nice family, but he met the mom and dated her and knew of this child. This child was born before he was dating her. And I got on the train one day, he was laughing at me, he said hey it's September. And I said shut up. You know that was a little joke because I'm teaching and summer is over and back to work. And he said that I dated this girl that used to go that school. And I said to him, you know I'm sure she is too old to be there, and he said well maybe her daughter. And I said what's the daughter name. And he said Shana. And I did my head like the

exorcism and I was like what??!! She's in my class. That little girl drove me crazy. She tried to stab me with a pair of scissors, and I was expecting with the youngest one then.

NL: Wow.

BF: And they had to remove her from the room, but before they---and then when they removed her they gave me somebody else equally as bad. But I remember when I came back off of maternity leave; they took her out of the other class and gave her back to me. Like I am the only one that could control her. And I remember she kicked this teacher square in his behind. She was wearing some Timberlands and went bam bam in his butt. And he said Mrs. Ford could you help me please. Big guy like you. I was on my prep trying to clean out my desk, get things back in order and I said yeah I'll take her. And I walked her downstairs and I said Shana why did you kick him in his back side? She said I didn't get any sleep last night. I said Shana I have a baby at home you think I'm getting a lot sleep. She said I told my grandmother to shut up last night and she made me stand in the corner. That was one day. Then the next day she comes in and said Mrs. Ford how is your baby? And I said he's fine Shana, thanks for asking. Then the next day she asks Mrs. Ford how is your lovely baby? I knew it was coming then. I said he's fine Shana, you might want to cut this off, I don't know. I said he's fine Shana thanks for asking. She said you stupid bitch you should've stayed home with your lovely baby. I said you know you're right. <Laughter> I was like, Oh my God. That's how she spoke. No matter what I wrote or had on my anecdotal it didn't matter. The day they took her out of my classroom, when she tried to stab me, she was walking around with the dean and the dean stopped to talk to another teacher, and she sat, and they were in the cafeteria, she sat on a bench and you know its got the seat attached to it, she jumped down on it <thump sound>

and she jumped right onto that teacher's toe. But the teacher was so stupid she stood there and she climbed right back up on and jumped down on the toe again. She fractured the teacher's toe. They did not suspend that kid. They didn't remove her or anything. Alright. Ok. But, after I come back after the baby and everything and she says all the things that she says to me, she didn't want to go home one afternoon. And so I came upstairs from dismissal and I said look she doesn't want to go home, its three, I'm out, I gotta go, the assistant principal brought her upstairs sat her on one of the couches in the office and she spit in his face, she hockey spit in his face and she was gone two days later.

NL: Wow.

BF: Ok. You do something to an administrator and you're gone. You just keep on dumping on us and it's ok.

MN: Wow.

NL: And that was what the theme was like at that time. The teachers were fighting against a lot in the classroom.

BF: It was bad. It was really, really bad.

MN :< cross talk> 15 year old prostitutes up and down the streets, it was unbelievable.

BF: I have seen it just when I take the train in the morning. You know I have to take the five and get off and take the two. And it makes that curve going around where I think Lindbergh houses are, you can see right there, some warehouses back there; you could see them down there. You could just look down sometimes and see them. I mean they've cleaned it up somewhat, you don't see them like you used to. But...

MN: But in the late 80's and the early 90's it was unbelievable...

BF: It was horrible.

MN: Up and down Jerome Avenue, Southern Boulevard, and the thing is, some of those kids are now parents. And that's...

NL: And do you feel like you are dealing with the affects of that in the school at all, the effects of teen pregnancies?

BF: Yeah. I was, I think it's kind of leveling itself back off now and some of them are maybe a little closer to my age. But at one point, when I started teaching there and this was before the crack, but when I started teaching there, I was older then some of the parents, which for me was like a first.

NL: So what made you stay in the Bronx all this time? Because I know you were talking about the neighborhood itself, where you lived and how it's changing.

BF: Because for the most part my neighborhood still is stable, for the most part, it's still pretty stable. My parents only moved, lets see its been nine years now, but they were a motivating plus for me to stay there because I lived right across the street. So if I needed a babysitter or whatever....

MN: And how old are your two kids now?

BF: Nineteen and eleven.

MN: Right.

BF: And so the schools for the most part had been ok. Although, with the oldest one, Tyler, I did not let him go to 97 because I had such...

NL: Bad memories.

BF: Feelings, memories. But Jared and Jared was the valedictorian.

MN: Now where did Tyler go to high school?

BF: He went to Xavier, which was not that great.

MN: Xavier Lutheran?

BF: Yes. It's a horrible school.

MN: Really?

BF: It's not good. You have to look. I mean not that everything has to be so black and white but sometimes you have to look and you have to say if the people in that neighborhood are not sending their children to this school, what the hell is wrong with it? They were being bussed over there, but St.Clair's and all these other schools are right in the neighborhood and you see all of those children that live in that neighborhood walking to those schools. What's wrong with...and I know maybe it's because it's Lutheran and they're Catholic, I mean I don't know, but you are going to walk right past the school and go to other schools? Something must not be right here.

NL: And so where do you think...would you want to send your younger son to a private school for high school or a public school?

BF: A public school. I have to trust that my counterparts or my co-workers are gonna do a good job. My son, Tyler was lucky enough to make into Talent Unlimited so he went to a small performing arts school. And that's probably what Jared is gonna do also. Tyler wants to be an actor; Jared said he's gonna be the director so he could tell the older brother what to do.

MN: Wow. Great.

BF: So he'll wind up in a smaller high school, I would never send to Evander or anything like that, that's out the question. But...

MN: There are some interesting small schools around.

NL: I was wondering what your thoughts were about that, about the break up of all these high schools into smaller schools<cross talk>

BF: I think it's a shame.

NL: Why do you think it's a shame?

BF: I think it's a shame because of tradition. Just because of tradition, that's all. I'm just big on tradition I guess. I just think it's a shame that a school can't run, you have to break it down into such smaller pieces. Because, really you have administrators overlapping, how many administrators do you need to run one damn building?

NL: We had another teacher in here recently saying the same thing.

BF: C'mon. And then your set of floors do one thing, your set of floors do something else, and your set of floors do something else.

NL: And nobody is talking to each other. Right, right.

BF: Then the other side of that is that, if there's a child who is in performing arts, or who is good in journalism, or something, and that school is in their neighborhood and it's run well, and the parent feels comfortable about sending them, then I guess why not. You know it's a double edge.

NL: Right, right.

MN: You've had a wonderful experience in the Bronx. Anything else you would like to say in conclusion. We've covered a lot of ground. Thing you haven't said that you'd like to say.

BF: [pause] I just see the Bronx balancing back and I do remember that when I would come home from school, you know when go away that's like a freeing experience, and even if you're not that far away, I wasn't that far away, but I'd stay out there for weeks

on end and decide that I need to come and see my family or see some friends. And I would come in on the train and I would say God I thought a building... what happened to that building? I was like what's happening to the Bronx, I mean you're insulated from it and you come back in and then you notice the next time you come in, not only is one building gone but the whole damn block is missing. And you're like Whoa, what the heck is going on here. And I started to see my neighborhood deteriorate then. I started to see graffiti up the hill of the train station, that we would never see. I started to notice that the streets were dirty, when I used to see the shop cleaners cleaning all the time. Well now the shops are changing hands. Yeah, it just was really, really, different. I am glad to see that then neighborhood that I am working in is bouncing back.

MN: Yeah new housing going on.

BF: New housing. Because I know what it was like when I first started there. When I first started there I was still living home, I wasn't married then, she would say don't stay over there so late. I would say "Ma they know me in the neighborhood." They say "hi, hi teacher, hi." I said, "Ma, I feel safe, I feel fine."

NL: She was worried for your safety.

BF: She was worried. She was worried.

NL: Now you definitely feel like the concerns you had...

BF: I walk down the street and my students that I had back in '80 something would come up to me and hug me.

MN: Wow that must be a wonderful feeling.

BF: I had a student, Albert. Albert was so funny. Albert picked me up one day, and said Mrs. Ford remember when I was so little, now I could pick you up. I said Albert put me

down.<laughter> It's a good feeling when people talk about what the youth don't do and I know what they can do and I see what they do and that makes me feel good. It makes me feel good when the mothers and fathers can tell me that my kid is going to such and such college or this one is doing well and even when I see the little babies and I am like Jesus Christ, don't be like your mother, I am saying that in my head, not to them, but it's funny. It's nice.

MN: Wow, that's great.

NL: You had a great experience. You should definitely bring in your siblings too; we'd love their experiences as well.

BF: I'd love to, I'd love to.

NL: Are they both in the Bronx too?

BF: Jonathan is in Mount Vernon, Angela is in Virginia but she is coming up here in a couple of weeks to do some school shopping for her kids. And maybe we could set something up. John would definitely probably tell you from the male perspective what it was like. Because he tells me things....

NL: That were kind of different to your...

BF: That were different...

MN: It's definitely a different experience.

BF: Like being chased...

MN: I mean if you're a guy, there is no anonymity; you have to defend yourself, to gotta answer to yourself. Even when I was growing up it was that way.

BF: The only sad thing I could remember, is when the white kids would say sometimes you're nice, I don't know why parents don't like black kids. And then you're like huh? I

wasn't thought to think like that, I guess it's because they weren't really living on my block. I mean there were some, there was Mr. Gustafero who stayed on the block until he died, him and his wife, and they sold that land, he had nice piece of land, and now there are two houses that sit on that block. But the children, except for Diane Salutory who lived up the hill, the kids that I went dance school, we didn't have those issues or those problems, it was the other kids that lived in the neighborhood where the school was, and there's house on the corner of Allerton and Seymour where this white family lived and if you walked past that house you were going to get called all kinds of whatevers on your way back to your side of the neighborhood. Allerton was like the dividing line over that way. Overall I think I've had a pretty good experience here in the Bronx and I don't think I'd change anything.

NL: Good to know. I think we have a little people who come in and said much the same thing.

BF: I don't think I'd change anything. I think I was lucky to meet the people that I've met and to have the experiences, I mean I didn't go to a school like the school I'm teaching in. I went to a school where when you heard the principal you moved out the way. You didn't hear the cursing and the running around and disrespect but it's a different time too.

MN: Very different time.

BF: It was a different time.

MN: Ok. Thank you so much!

NL: It was great!

BF: Thank You

[END OF TAPE]