

2-13-2007

Foster, Gertrude

Foster, Gertrude. Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

Follow this and additional works at: https://fordham.bepress.com/baahp_oralhist

Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Foster, Gertrude. February 13, 2007. Interview with the Bronx African American History Project. BAAHP Digital Archive at Fordham University.

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Bronx African American History Project at DigitalResearch@Fordham. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of DigitalResearch@Fordham. For more information, please contact considine@fordham.edu.

Brian Purnell (BP): I'm going to start. Ok today is February 13,2007, we're in the home of Mrs. Foster. Mrs. Foster if we could please start by you saying your first and last name.

Gertrude Foster (GF): My first name is Gertrude. Many people of my friends know me as Trudy. But my name is Gertrude Foster. F-O-S-T-E-R, Gertrude, G-E-R- T-R-U-D-E.

Natasha Lightfoot (NL): And what was your maiden name?

GF: Seaton. S-E-A-T-O-N. And I was born October 31,1927.

BP: We'd like to just start with a little bit of a discussion of your biography, beginning with your parents. Were your parents from New York City?

GF: Now my biography is a little interesting and a little unique because my grandparents immigrated from Nevis, West Indies. St. Kitts and Nevis. They immigrated here; in fact I was reading I think they were married here. But, and my grandfather's name was Harold J. Seaton. My grandmother's name was Blanche, oh gosh, her maiden name slips me just now, isn't that interesting. And of course her last name was Seaton. She died at a very young age. I think she was 26 and had three children, two boys and one girl. And both her sons died. And the little girl is my mother. And I was--

NL: Wait was she born in Nevis as well?

GF: No, no, no, the children were born, in fact I think that my grandfather married here in the United States, but they came from Nevis. Blanchet was her maiden name.

NL: Blanchet?

GF: Blanchet. Blanchet was her maiden name. And once in a while when I hear about a Blanchet I wonder because it's a rare, it's not a common name. But anyway, Marceau, I can't remember because I was born in Rome, NY. And I was later transferred to, I was born, my grandfather didn't allow my mother to keep me. He wouldn't put me up for adoption; now this goes back in the '27; where you know you just, you know, children were just, not born like that. But he was a very arrogant, God bless you, pompous West Indian with no money [Laughter]. But anyway, I was a foster child, at a very early age, as an infant. And they even there, the foster homes allowed the foster parents to have children until five years old. And if they weren't adopted then you went on to a different foster division; in fact they had the infants and then the older children. And I lived with a very wonderful family up until five, during the depression years. And I was transferred on to, this was Sheltering Arms, I mention that only because as a nurse I saw where

they saw their mistakes, in the foster home division. And then I was transferred to Edwin Gould Foundation at six.

NL: And where were all of these places located? In New York City?

GF: They were in New York City. Sheltering Arms I don't know. I think it might have been in Brooklyn because my early life was in Brooklyn. The Edwin Gould Foundation had, you know where the West Farms train turns and there's a building there; that was their building. And that was where the children were brought in from families, and distributed. That's where their office buildings were.

NL: So Edwin Gould's was in the Bronx, kind of in the-- ?

GF: It was, I don't know what it is now.

BP: But you were born in Rome?

GF: Rome, New York, and then brought back because grandpa lived in New York.

NL: I wanted to ask, did you have regular contact with your birth family?

GF: Not much, because half of them were, a number of them are in St. Kitts or Nevis. The only person that I had contact with was my grandfather. Really, the only person that I had real contact-

NL: And he remained in New York his whole life?

GF: Oh he remained in New York until he died in 1960. Grandpa was the only.

BP: So where did you spend your childhood, in Brooklyn?

GF: Up until five years old; then from six on in the Bronx, and it was very interesting because I had advantages, and I was telling a young lady, I said, you know our race is a product of slavery and racism, being a certain, and that's a picture of me as a little girl having long hair and being, looking a certain way, you had people always liked you when you went around and I was always well liked, and I lived with Mr. and Mrs. Raimes just for a year.

NL: Raimes.

GF: Raimes. R-A-I-M-E-S I believe is their name. They kept me and another little girl for a year, and then Mrs. Raimes was disqualified as a foster parent.

NL: Were these black folks?

GF: Oh they were all black.

[Crosstalk]

GF: No, no, no, with anyone else. Blacks were placed with blacks. They might be of a certain, I know I blended with the people that I lived with, like the Delvalle's were my first foster parents. He was from, Uncle John was from Crenshaw, and really looked like an Italian. I was telling someone recently, and Aunt Mita was from Virginia I believe. But they were black. Mr. Raimes, I don't know that much about him because I was young. I remember we lived on 224th street, that I lived in a beautiful brick home, amongst Italians and Polacks, but their home was beautiful. I had a Collie dog, and we had a car. [Laughs] That was back in, what was it?

BP: 1933?

GF: Something like that, yes, uh-huh. Which was quite an accomplishment for a black family.

BP: What type of work did Mr. Raimes-?

GF: I don't know, see because being young [crosstalk] you're not aware of those things. Then I came to my third foster family, who was Mrs. Laura E. Hall, she was a widow from Canada, from Montreal, and she kept me from the time I was six or seven, six and a half, until I was an adult. And the interesting thing was during the war years, here we go again to racism, when I was sixteen years old, the Edwin Gould Foundation wanted children to find their birth parents and to live with them cutting back on expenses. They did that to our children first and to the other children after. Most of the times you were with people who you knew you were part of their lives, and I resented it, and I went on to work and finish high school and stay with them until I was an adult.

NL: Meaning the -

GF: Mrs. Laura Hall.

NL: So you never went out to try to find your birth parents?

GF: No. Well, grandpa always allowed birth relatives to visit and things like that. So I always knew him. I knew him until the day he died, in fact we buried him, but anyway, no you were with, with Mrs. Laura Hall, who had one daughter at the time, Irene Hall, and they came from Montreal after her husband died, looking for opportunity in New York. And we lived first in the Dunbar apartments. That was years ago where they were private, set up by, was it Metropolitan? They were co-ops. In the early years of the Dunbar.

BP: Where was this?

GF: The Dunbar Apartments were on 100 and it still exists.

NL: Yeah, I've heard of them.

GF: Yeah, 100 lets see, 13 9t\ 140th, it was one large building with entrances and it sort of closed from the rest of the community. From 8th Avenue to 7th Avenue, and it was where many of your people, what shall I say, who had advantaged, or advanced themselves, lived because one of the first judges, Judge Rivers, I can't think of his first name, lived in the Dunbar Apartments. A young man that I went to school with, no played with, Mark Riggers, who's mother was a teacher during that, I was eight years old, we were eight years old, he became, I don't know, he wasn't the first West Point graduate because the first West Point graduate was discredited back, I can't think of his name now. But Mark was one of the first that went to West Point during the time that I lived -

BP: So you grew up, your childhood from about seven years old -

GF: Seven on.

BP: Was in Harlem?

GF: No, part of it was in Harlem because we used to go to St. James Presbyterian Church. Then in 1939 we moved up to Williamsbridge, was it 19--, yes! 220th Street, but all of my life has been in the Bronx. 220th Street, and we moved down when my foster mother had a heart condition and couldn't get an apartment on the first floor.

BP: And you moved from -

GF: From 220th Street down to Tinton Avenue, and the South Bronx.

BP: So, Morrisania?

GF: I guess it would be called Morrisania area at that time.

NL: And what year was that when you moved to Tinton?

GF: Maybe about 1940, or '41.

BP: So you spent a little bit of time in Williamsbridge, what was that neighborhood like?

GF: It was, oh yes, very much so. I remember when we left Harlem, I was apprehensive, we had, I had been exposed to in a way black intellectuals because my sister's best friend was an organist, it's interesting, down at St. George's Episcopal Church, he was black, but she was the organist down at this church, the same church that Harry T. Berlie sang at, and I had another friend was an engineer, they were people of status during that period of time when they, and when I went to Williamsbridge my mother said she wanted me in a better school academically, and the other thing was that the schools in Harlem, I went to P.S. 99, they didn't concentrate on the inner city schools and the people in the Dunbar sent their children up to the Hill to go to school, to the better schools, integrated schools. When I went up to Williamsbridge I went sort of, apprehensive, I put it, there was some apprehension. We were three people on 220th Street out of a block of, there were Italians, Jews, Polish people, we were truly the minority; however, I didn't have any trouble disintegrating, and the other thing - integrating. We always, mama said, when she was in Canada, she sent her daughter to a white school because of the advantages, the French were the disadvantaged up there, but to a black church, so that you met your people. So when I went to Williamsbridge, she looked around for a black church, and I grew up at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Williamsbridge.

NL: 222nd and - [Crosstalk]

GF: Right, right! It's now a big church, but then it was a mission.

NL: It's a beautiful church. The man who married me is the priest of that church.

GF: No kidding, I was in 200-uh huh. And then we moved down to Tinton Avenue, let's see, 41, something like that.

BP: So you only lived in Williamsbridge for about two years?

GF: Two to three years. But went to, a white, Olinville Junior High School, and Evander Childs were white during the time, and I never transferred, I was maybe a junior at Evander when we moved, but I continued to go to Evander.

NL: Even when you was untinted?

GF: It must have been my junior year because I think I had one year left.

NL: And were you, at Evander, you were both you know you felt like you were the only one or one of few?

GF: Maybe, one of few, and I tell you I never had difficulty integrating. There was always I can remember us laughing, Camilla Pagano. We had loved music, and we would walk home together, and I had another little friend, Levi, Deborah Levi, or something, she was a little Jewish girl. In fact, there was a riot in Harlem, and her father said, "They're animals!" And she said, "Pa, that's not so," she said, "You have to find out why

they're - you like Gertrude! She's no animal." And like, Eleanor Roosevelt used to say, you get rid of integration - you get rid of segregation when you integrate, really integrate, and see how the other half lives, and I had, I was telling someone, I said, when I left Harlem, I had a friend, P.S. 99 was a rough school, and we would always, in the first grade, you know like you have your honor grades and all, but after school we grabbed our books and ran home! [Laughs] Because you know, there was a lot of hostility for various reasons and it was interesting because this little friend of mine played the violin. They never bothered her violin. She'd bring it daily, no one ever stole it, but it was always a fight. You call me this or you call - so the two of us, rather than avoid all that, and I had the long hair and the biggest balls in my braids, we'd get, I was like a sprinter, I could run! [Laughter] And then when I went to Evander, no I went to Olinville Junior High School, no fighting, no fighting, there wasn't that hostility for whatever the reasons were. And I mixed with a little Greek, some were Greek, Italians, Irish, not too many Irish, Italians, Greeks, Polish people, and we weren't a threat. I'll put it that way. We weren't a threat to them. We weren't taking their jobs; we weren't taking their housing because they had a quota of how many people could be in the area.

NL: What was your relationship like to the teachers in Junior High and High School?

GF: I had some that admired me. When I was in high school it was a little difficult because as I say, at sixteen I had no source of income because the Edwin Gould Foundation discontinued funds; they gave you a certain amount of time to find your relatives and my grandfather said, well, I'll pay for you to stay where you are, because I said, I don't know, there was a cousin he found, I don't know this woman, you know, sixteen years lived with people, seven to sixteen, and then you're going to tell me this is your relative? And I don't have any long lost desire to find anyone because I was quite happy, you know? But at sixteen I worked on weekends. A girlfriend and I, we both went to Evander together, and she just died two years ago, but we worked, I became self-supporting because grandpa said he was going to do this and do that, grandpa didn't have any money or didn't come through with anything so I told my foster parent, I said I will work and help with the rent, and stay with you.

BP: What type of work did Mrs. Hill do, your foster mother?

GF: Mrs. Hall.

BP: Oh, Mrs. Hall, sorry.

GF: Mrs. Hall, H-A-L-L. She was a piano teacher, she taught music in Harlem, she had students, and she also was a student at, you know the Harlem had W.P.A. programs, and I was exposed to many artists because she went and took Harmony and Theory there, and she always took me with her. Now she was an older woman, even this is unique, because I'm sure she'd never be eligible now as a foster parent, unless she was a foster kin, you know because she must have been maybe 60 or 55 when I came to her, I remember mama being gray haired all her life, but that's what she did, and her daughter lived with her, and

she worked at the Schanberg, which was the public library, on 135th Street. So, and then the income from having me as a foster child.

BP: So when you-- go ahead.

NL: No, you mentioned of the intellectuals that you were in touch with, and I was wondering if you could think of any specific persons that you -

GF: Well as I say, when I left the Dunbar, I knew that we had Judge Rivers, he was a Supreme Court, since deceased. I knew I had a black teacher, Mrs. Rivers; I knew there were people, and we studied Negro history at home, and in St. August-- and in St. James. We had clubs; I went really, with a good image of my people when I went to Williamsbridge. So there were no problems. I went to a black church, I knew about-in fact I laughed because we'd have plays about Conty Cullen, I loved Paul Lawrence Dunbar and his poems and my favorite author, and you know as you get older things slip your mind, oh, I can't think, I'll think of him because I read his autobiography of--

NL: An Ex Colored Man?

BP: James --?

GF: Of who?

NL: Autobiography of an Ex Colored Man, was it?

GF: No, no. Oh my son would say, "Ma, your age is catching up with you." He lived in Harlem, he was also classified as-I'll think of his name. Langston Hughes! Right, right! At St. James, like at St. Augustine's, it was a church that promoted academic excellence. You had to- "Gertrude you better listen to the sermon because you have to know such and such," and not only that your Sunday School, and not only was it teaching religious education but it was also teaching education about your people. So I always got it, so it reinforced your self image. My biggest problem was being a foster child because I always felt a little intimidated by that, and the fact that my mother, foster mother, was so much older, and people would say, "Is that your mother?" "Is that your mother?" and I would say yes, but a very interesting woman because in this little thing I must tell, we were in Olinville, and we were giving, Olinville Junior High School-

BP: How do you spell that?

GF: O-L-I-N-I-V-E-L-L-E, it's been changed now maybe, but it's on 214th Street and Olinville Avenue.

NL: I know Olinville.

GF: Olinville Junior High School. But we were giving, and we were taught all English, and this boy got up and gave his story of, who was an American writer? Huckleberry Finn -

BP: Mark Twain?

GF: Mark Twain! And he went on to talk about the nigger boy, the nigger boy, the nigger boy! And I looked, I said, Oh my God! And everyone laughed, and the teacher was Mrs. Burger, a Jewish teacher. She never made any comment, and I always, I had rapport with my foster mother so I went home and I said, "Do you know what happened today?!" and she said, "What?" and I told her that this boy said "Nigger" in the class, everybody laughed and looked at me, and she said, "And what did the teacher do?" So I said, "She didn't do anything." So she said, oh she never said another word to me, and Mama was, as I said, she was elderly, but very formal, she put on her hat, her dress, her nice shoes, her gloves, because that's the way you went out during that period of time; went up to the school, and she was not young, but she walked from, we were on one side of White Plains Road, Olinville is on the other side, bad roads and all, she went up and the next thing somebody said, "Your mother's in the principal's office!" And I said, oh my God, what did I do? "Oh you're in trouble now! Your mother's in the principal's office!" The next thing I know, they had an assembly of all the children, from whatever grade that was, and the assistant principal gave a lecture on tolerance and he said, there are certain words that we never use, even in our oral recitations, and one is the word "nigger." That is not allowed in our, I mean, they talk about people being you know activists and all, this, Mrs. Laura Hall, went up there in her little dignified way and told them her foster child had been insulted, and that - and when I got home I said, "I didn't know you were going up there." She said, "No, I didn't want you to know." She had taught school up in Canada before she came to, before she got married. She said, "It wasn't your concern." And another incident, we were in the auditorium for, we had visiting lecturers, and this lady put on a picture of a man with an afro. Now you can imagine an afro back there in 1940 or '39, with a Prince Albert. You know what a Prince Albert suit is? It's formal, but with stripes and the tail, almost like a formal. And the kids whooped, and I began to slide down in my seat, she said, "Well it always brings a little laughter in the beginning," she said, "but let me tell you about him. He's with-he was with the League of Nations, he was a linguist, he spoke," and you know and she talked, "and he was a rogue scholar," she said. "And he knew affluently about 5 or 7 foreign languages, along with his dialect." I turned around and looked, I said, "You don't know English very well!" [Laughter] And here this man! You know those kids, I mean, he was a scholar, and he looked regal, those same kids, spontaneously clapped for him, and of course you talk about pride! I had more pride that day and thereafter. They couldn't tell me anything. [Laughter] So those were the experience that I had in Junior High School. Now in High School I took my academic courses because your out of poverty was to get something in your head, to get an academic diploma, to take your regents, and to be able to qualify for going to college.

NL: So you knew as you started High School that you were going to go to college?

GF: We knew from the time that we were in - it didn't start in High School. It started long before that because Mama taught school. See, my friends, the engineer was a college graduate. I can't think of her name, she was an organist, she was a college graduate. She might have been from Julliard. So you see, I knew the names, I knew the rest from St. James. It was always taught to us. So it started at a very early age. We in St. James, our Sunday school teachers went to Hunter, went to City because they too were limited in their scope, their horizons, job opportunities, but they were taught to give back. So I was always exposed to people who were articulate, who had an education, either from home or from the church. So that when I went up to Williamsbridge I didn't have any pangs about inferiority. Mama always said, "The only difference is the color of your skin, and the other difference is what you've got in your brain." In fact, we were taught to compete with them. They brought home B's, so why can't you make an A? That changed a little when I started working.

BP: I was going to ask, when you started working as a teenager, what was your first job?

GF: I started working as a bust girl at Horn and Hardart. And during that time - [Crosstalk] Horn and Hardart Automat. You don't have that anymore. And you carried the trays, it was, and I was little.

BP: Could you speak a little, well, how do you spell Horn and -

GF: Horn, H-O-R-N. Hardart, H-A-R- it's spelled like it sounds.

NL: H-A-R-D-A-R-T.

GF: You're familiar with that?

NL: Mhmm because I've interviewed some people who knew a chef who was - [Laughs]

GF: That's right.

BP: Could you speak a little bit about what an automat was?

GF: An automat was where you had food that was in, on shelves, individually, just like you go to a supermarket and you open the door sideways. This you opened the door for chicken pot pie, and of course, so much; this you open the door - it was a reasonable eating place. And you got your-it was self service, and then you went to a cashier, and paid for your meal. And of course we were entitled to meals free because we worked there.

BP: And where was this automat?

GF: I'm trying to think where the automat was, and isn't that funny, I have forgotten. It was somewhere downtown.

BP: It was in the Bronx? Oh no, it was in Manhattan.

GF: No, I don't think, I think it was in Manhattan. This was a period where, I don't think they had them in the Bronx. No, no, the Bronx wasn't as developed, it was in Manhattan.

BP: Ok, so what was that experience like working there?

GF: Tiring. In fact, and we worked every Saturday, Sunday, and all holidays, and went to school Monday through Friday; took our academic courses, came home, and it was very interesting because coming home from Williamsbridge on the train we could do our homework, we could do our reading, things like that, but what happened there to my mother, is another thing. I went to sleep in an economics class, and I was always Ms. Seaton. And they always called the girls by "Ms." and called the boys by their surname. Mr. Zief said, and I woke up just at the end when he said, "My lecture was very boring. Cause Ms. Seaton went fast asleep." And I woke up and looked in that man's - I was so embarrassed, and the kids just chuckled. When I got ready to leave he said, "Come here Ms. Seaton," he said, "You know, I'm not going to ask you about your business," and you know that's where I have ambivalent feelings with Jews, those who help and those who don't, the slum landlords and all. He said, "You were tired, you're still tired. What are you doing?" So I said, "Well you know Mr. Zief's work." He said, "I'm not going to ask you about your business, but whatever you're doing is too strenuous for you as a young girl." And I went home and again, "Ma, guess what happened!" And that's where you have dialogue with your parents, or your foster parent. I was very - and I had the advantage of having an intelligent foster mother, and then the peer group were that way. And she said, "Well see what other job you can get." She was not indignant, she said, "See what other job because if you're tired, you know, you'll be working for the rest of your life and you're just sixteen years old." And Mercedes and I both went to work at Gimble.

BP: Who is Mercedes?

GF: My dear friend. Yeah, we were raised like sisters. We moved from Williamsbridge together; and her mother was a widow and she was not a well woman, but we both went to Horn and Hardart's together, and then we both went down to Gimble's, which was across the street-

[Crosstalk]

Across the street from Macy's.

NL: I remember Gimbles.

GF: And we could not get a job anyplace but in the stockroom. You know when people wonder, well what's your problem? And this was 1944 I believe. I was sixteen because you couldn't get working papers before you were sixteen. And we worked in the stock department; which was Thursday, Saturday, and holidays. So you were off on Sundays.

BP: What type of work did you do in the stockroom department?

GF: You unpacked - this was in, this was in dishes, and I remember handling crystal, fine crystal. We unpacked - and I don't know whether we put them out for display, or we got them ready for display.

BP: And so, that was the only place that would give you a job?

GF: Yes.

NL: Was that racial motivated, do you think?

GF: The job wasn't racial- the limitations that were put on blacks was racially motivated. You didn't work as a cashier, well I was too young anyway, but you didn't work, you worked in the background; and cashiers, sales ladies that came later. That came in the SO's, 60's.

NL: Did you have a separate entrance?

GF: Oh no, no.

NL: Nothing like that?

GF: New York was not segregated. Their segregation was, what shall I say? Not surface, you didn't have any problems riding the trains or going to any restaurants you wanted to, going to any department stores that you wanted to, trying on clothes, different things. You just didn't have the opportunity to work in those places. And see, later on, I remembered when Jim and I went into Saks Fifth Avenue because he would buy me outfits there. Not the sales lady, but the customers were a little indignant with you being in Saks with them, you know, it's always a subtle thing; a subtle form of discrimination.

BP: Why did your family move to Tinton Avenue?

GF: They moved to Tinton Avenue, Mama, and Irene, and I moved to Tinton Avenue because there were no apartments available in Williamsbridge for people of color. And when we would go, they would have apartments for rent; when we would go to ring the

bell they wouldn't let us in or they would say it's been sold. And there was one black realtor in Williamsbridge who had a cross burned on his property. Now this is in the 30's, and every time I go up to Williamsbridge, you see my smile now [Laughs] we've overtaken the place! [Laughter and Crosstalk] But the place, yeah, it's always like that.

BP: So the only-

GF: And we came down to the lower Bronx because they were then selling apartments to people of color, and they had signs. We moved in 19-oh boy, I have to think back, it's been so many years ago. "Worthy colored people, we accept worthy colored people," something. There were signs on the fire escapes. When I tell people that they don't-I say oh yes there were!

NL: "Worthy colored people"?

GF: "Worthy Colored People," or something. You know, good tenets, they called it good tenets. And I remember one house we went into looking for a place to live. There was dog feases on the floor. And my mother said to the landlord, "Well, you must, not have had worthy white people who lived there [Laughter] because when we leave an apartment we always leave it clean." It was a reflection on us.

BP: I believe the research that we've done, people have pointed to and we've found ads that would say "Select colored families."

GF: Maybe it was "Select," something like that. "Worth" I'm saying worthy but select, same thing. And then we moved into Tinton Avenue because we met a next door neighbor who was very nice, a couple. And they were an older couple, and they said the apartment was available.

NL: What number Tinton? Do you remember?

GF: 1125 Tinton Avenue.

NL: And the cross street?

GF: Which has since - no longer, it's a different area. The cross street was 166t and Home.

BP: Leaving Williamsbridge, was it just that the apartment was too small now?

GF: Mama had a heart attack, and we lived on the 2nd floor. [Crosstalk] She couldn't you know, she was no longer allowed to climb the stairs. My husband later said, "Listen, she was the oldest person with a heart problem." Because she died at something like 90 some odd years, but that was-

NL: Wow, she lived quite some time with that.

GF: She lived quite some time.

BP: So what was the neighborhood in Tinton Avenue like?

GF: Clean, working class, you had different types of buildings. The two corner houses were large, beautiful. They had an entrance and all with maybe a little garden or something. This is going back in 1940,45. I graduated from high school '45, so this is going back say in 1943. The house that we moved into, there were three houses. They weren't as expensive, but still decent. You had a superintendent who cleaned from top to bottom, daily, the halls were clean. You kept the halls clean; you were not allowed to loiter on the front of the building; there were rules and regulations. If the superintendent spoke to you about something, keep quiet, because the next move was he was going to go to your mother. And your mother wasn't going to have any foolishness. So you had, and everyone worked. They had different types of jobs. I didn't learn about public assistance, I think I learned about that in my civics class more or less. This was a fifth floor apartment, you know apartment house, but everyone worked. They were people of color on both sides of the street, and that was when I left the Episcopal Church and went to St. Augustine's because of Reverend Hawkins. My mother said, "You need to go to," she knew him as Edgar because she knew him as a young man. And she said, "He is active, he's intelligent, he preaches to young people," she said, "And you'll have a social life there." And the Episcopal Church that I went to, I forget what his name was, she said, "That's dogmatic, all is just ritual, but there is nothing done in the community."

NL: And you went to that Episcopal Church when you first moved?

GF: When I first moved to Tinton.

NL: Was it St. Margaret?

GF: No, St. Margaret's - it was a church near Morris High School.

BP: St. Luke's?

GF:No.

NL: St. David's?

GF: No, I don't think it was St. David's either.

BP: Trinity?

GF: Trinity! Trinity! Trinity!

NL: That's where I was baptized.

GF: But your priest was black wasn't he?

NL: Yeah, the priest was black when I was baptized there. I was baptized there in the 70's.

GF: Oh yeah, I went briefly to Forest Avenue Congregational Church because that's where mama was able to go, but then at - and especially when I finished nursing school I went straight to St. Augustine's. In fact became a member on reaffirmation of faith into the Presbyterian Church.

BP: So this might be a good time to speak about St. Augustine's. So this is around, 1943-44?

GF: No, it would be 1950. When I came back I had finished high school, I had finished Lincoln School for Nursing, I may have been going to NYU briefly, I have to think back, but it was the 50's when I came into St. Augustine's Presbyterian Church.

BP: Oh ok, before we speak about that then, perhaps if you could tell us a bit about your experience at the Lincoln School of Nurses because this is an important institution, it hasn't come up as much because we haven't been able to speak to alum the way I would like to.

GF: Alumni?

BP: But I'd like to do interviews with past graduates to hear about this institution and what it meant to African American women in the Bronx.

GF: I wanted to go to Bellevue, and there were two young women, Bellevue Nursing School, this was during the period of time, I entered Lincoln School for Nurses in 1945, so -

NL: Right after Evander?

GF: Soon after Evander, I worked for six months with the government, saved my money and I went in January yeah, of 1945, I entered Lincoln School for Nurses. I really wanted to go to, the schools were just integrating. I went up to Fordham, and was interested, and this is also War years, where you had the cadet call, I was hoping to get into that because your education was paid for. The Nurses cadet call; all you had to do was give back two years to wherever the hospital or wherever you belonged to. I went there for an interview with all of the Evander Childs Nurses, prospective nurses. I went there for an interview, I really wanted to go to Bellevue because two young, three young ladies that I met were

down at Bellevue in their nursing school and they wanted me to come there. I went for an interview, I was the only person of color with all of the Caucasians, and the superintendent of nurses, all I can remember is this big, fat white woman saying, "You would do well in the theater." And I wondered who she was talking to, [Laughter] and I'm looking around to see who she's talking to. She's talking to me! You know, she wasn't ready to accept, I don't think, nurses of our, a few, and these students had transferred from Howard University to Bellevue, which was a New York university. So she was able to accept them, and maybe a few more. Well my out of poverty was to get into nursing and I said, whatever school accepts me, I will go to. And Irene, my foster sister, called a friend of hers because she worked, Irene worked at the Department of Health, and she said, "Why don't you put in for Lincoln School for Nurses?" Lincoln School for Nurses was then going through a period of transition because a lot of the candidates were able to get into other schools, but I got into Lincoln. What shall I say? Some of it was a little traumatic because I went in at home I had a little bit of a Canadian accent, I think, or certain words you said, and then you were taught to speak very properly, you know, and always be a lady. And I think some of the things I said, just all of us getting together, annoys some of the other students, and there was a period of time I was a little ostracized.

NL: And this was by other black women?

GF: And I didn't know whether I should mention this or not, but this is the confusion within our race; and I remembered working, it was past articles, I just zeroed in on my books, and I had two friends, and one was Madeleine, and is still a dear friend of mine. She was very fair and tall. And the other was Evelyn, she was also fair. And they said, "Well, they, you know they don't want to mix with us." My reason for mixing with them was because we didn't drink, we didn't smoke, and we came from sort of a Victorian background, all three of us. And that was the time that I found out that students coming from other states, when they got to New York, you know, they let loose, and they felt we were from - Madeleine was from Long Island, I was from the Bronx, Evelyn was from New Jersey. "Well you folks are from New York, you don't have to -"

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE; BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

GF: -- Being a junior. And somebody said, "There's nothing wrong with you Seaton. You're just a little 01' Christian girl," something she said to me, so she said, well and I said, "Why would you think there was something wrong?" She said, "Because, well people said you thought you were good, and you thought you were above - " I said, "Good?" I said, and you know I began - I said, "I am a poor girl. I came in with all my worldly goods in a suitcase." I said, "And I watched all of you come in with your trailer trunks, your clothes, your coats," I said, "I had one pair of shoes, one decent coat, and two nice outfits. And I knew the rest would be time, we would have uniforms on." And I said, "Do you notice that I live, we weren't able to go around - we had uniforms, a dress, collar, cuffs, and an apron that you never wore outside, and our caps." I said, "Didn't you ever notice that I'm always in my dress?" I said, "That's cause I don't have any clothes!" But I'm, some of, and the school closed in '61, but in 1961, that's another

story. But I had to learn, I've always had to learn how in a way to deal with some of my folks. And I said it needs to be told, and I understand why because it was divide and conquer. You know, there was an article, and I've forgotten who the gentleman was, wrote this article about slavery. Oh gosh, my memory's terrible. But he wrote a letter to some plantation owner about how you treat your slaves wrong, you beat them, you shouldn't beat them, they're your valuable property. He said, you keep them divided. You keep the strong ones for the fields; you integrate, you know roll your own slave children to be in the house; the house niggers and the field niggers as he called it. And you separate them through color, any way you can you keep them divided. And I threw that letter away, I can't find it. But he said, you keep them divided, you keep this one - you keep dissention going, but all groups are loyal to the master. And sometimes I say that hasn't changed. Its better, but a lot of it, you know, and the advantages went to those who looked more like the master. They even divided us with hair, color, and this is was a carry back, a carry on, a carry up from that old slave mentality.

BP: What you experience-

GF: What I experienced.

NL: So you, and you felt like the woman there, the women who ostracized you and your peers, they were darker skinned?

GF: Some were, some weren't. Well those, that, I don't really, I know in our group, I have to look, I don't really - they probably were or, they were intimidated not about -- some of them - not by my appearance, but what I had to say. And there again some of that is white indoctrination. You know, you're supposed to speak a certain way, don't pronounce your words, don't slur your words, poor grammar, and all. And that was not so in my household. You had to speak properly you always had to; you never let down your guard. And I, but I think that's all I want to say about that. When I finished, we were all on the same, you know, and then after my husband died, I became an alumni; well I was always an alumni, but I became active in the alumni association because we give scholarships and it was a purpose.

BP: Well if in speaking to any of your fellow alumnae, if you think they might like to participate, we'd be more than willing to speak to them.

GF: Oh, I'd like you to speak with Dr. Janice Grey.

BP: I spoke with her on the phone a few times.

GF: Oh you did?! Tell her.

BP: Yeah, I can, we'll talk about that when-

GF: Yeah because she's a historian. She came from Detroit.

BP: I just have one other question about the Lincoln School experience. Did you live at the school?

GF: Yes, we had a beautiful campus, and sometimes when I - the school was on Concord Avenue - No! The hospital, the old Lincoln Hospital was on Concord Avenue and around 140th Street facing Southern Boulevard. And the nursing home was a beautiful building up on a hill. I should have brought - maybe I'll see if I have a yearbook handy. But it was lovely. [Crosstalk] And then they tore -

NL: Where was that dorm?

GF: The dorms were in the, on the grounds. We had grounds, and you did have some security. And the nursing school was high and then you had an entrance from the school to the hospital. And you got your training at Lincoln Hospital which incidentally had primarily white patients at the time. And that's when I found out how prejudice white people are to other white people. [Laughs] For prejudice -- with the blondes, when I look now the blondes, blue eyes, fair complexion. And if you look, their complexions vary. They're all white, but their complexions vary. And on labor and delivery, oh if a mother had a blonde it'd be Irish. Oh that was, they had reached the pillar of success. Blonde haired blue eyed baby. And a Sicilian could have the prettiest baby, beautiful jet black hair, and but it wasn't and if that mother was next to another mother and she presented - it just was different. And I thought it would be is the baby well? Does he have all his fingers and his toes? That came later. But that's what I learned about, I said each group has their own -

NL: Their own hang ups.

BP: How many years was Lincoln School?

GF: Three.

BP: Three years.

GF: And see, if you went to a graduate program like Bellevue, it was three years of nursing and two years of college. And you got that out with an RN, with a registered nurse and a bachelor's degree.

NL: But at Lincoln you only got an RN?

GF: You got your RN. And I didn't have money for-

NL: For the bachelor's at that time.

BP: So what did you do after graduating from Lincoln School of Nurses? Where was your first job?

GF: At Morrisania Hospital.

BP: Where was that?

GF: And this was on 168th Street by Morrisania Avenue. And that hospital has since been torn down and they have a substitute. You know every time the city gets ready for a kind of, you know to cut the budgets, they cut very necessary programs for working class people. And Morrisania was torn down, Fordham Hospital was torn down, and Fordham was up there by almost by the Botanical Garden. Fordham University took over some of Fordham's Hospital.

BP: The property, yeah.

GF: The property. And they were supposed to build a hospital. See, Morrisania, Lincoln; Lincoln was a private school, but a city hospital. Morrisania, Fordham were city hospitals which had a few private - but that's another story because medicine was completely different.

BP: So you moved back to Tinton Avenue with your mother?

GF: Yes, I moved briefly. Yeah, and I worked at Morrisania Hospital which was integrated. I was a charged nurse. I worked on pediatrics. I always liked children. It always, sometimes when you come from a rob of puritanical background, you seem sort of insulate yourself to work in certain areas. I always liked children so I worked on the children's ward, and I later became a ward instructor when I went on to NYU to study public health nursing.

BP: So at this time you began attending St. Augustine's Presbyterian Church?

GF: I began attending St. Augustine's in 1950. Yes. It was around that same time. I was a young woman and they had a good youth group.

BP: Can you speak a bit about what you found? The community you found at St. Augustine's? And also about Reverend Hawkins. I'm curious, I have in my notes that you knew or you had heard of Reverend Hawkins at one point establishing an employment agency for -

GF: Oh yes, oh yes. That was one of the first things that he did when he came to the Bronx, but when I came, see he came in 1938 as an offspring of St. James Presbyterian Church in Harlem. And he grew up under Dr. William Lloyd Imes.

NL: Spell Imes?

GF: I-M-E-S.

NL:Ok.

GF: Was quite an intellectual. And you know, you heard about our history in those churches, but he was an offspring. And he came to establish a Presbyterian Church in the Bronx which was formally white. See you've got more and more of our people moving in, and he changed, they changed, I guess Presbytery, changed the name to St. Augustine's, and it is very appropriately named. We had St. Augustine's Roman Catholic Church was in a different era, area. But they started as a mission church and the other thing and I happen to, because I was reading my book today, well we started with nine members. However, Reverend Imes who was his mentor, sent three elders, I forget the number, and some people from St. James to help him in establishing his church, his mission, mission church. Mission church means you're still under the, under Presbytery, and they still are supporting you, or giving you money each and every month. But he started with, and I'm sure the elders and the people who came to help were people who knew how to organize and they were also people who had achieved something of themselves, and they have been teachers, etc. So he gave them something to start with and then Reverend Hawkins' hard work, I put down a few things about him; he came with a vision, he was an intellectual person, he had a photographic mind, which I wish I had. Memory! Memory, he could hear something, and remember it. He was quite brilliant, hard worker, and a goal. And that was, and the goal meant not only he was a good - the goal wasn't just to teach the word of God limited to the church sanctuary, but it was to go out into the community and see about the well being of your community. And in a year he was able to build up the church to 180 members because he had that kind of community. You know, people think of the South Bronx - what destroyed the South Bronx in away, was the upward mobility of our folks and also the introduction of drugs. And as Malcolm said, "Destroy us by any means necessary." But when we were going to church, everyone went to church. So you had a community of church going people; either to the Catholic Church, to the Baptist Church, to the Methodist Church, or to the Presbyterian Church.

NL: And how big was St. Augustine's when you joined? About how big was the congregation?

GF: Oh, the congregation was big. And the young people, and see of course people who moved to the Bronx, they moved looking for advantages for their children so you had a large - he had vision, he had the church open seven days a week, he was, he had, he put a lot of emphasis on the youth, but always he knew people. He got his older congregation to help the youth. We had in the church basement before we even had a fellowship house, and where there was no place for youths to go, we had a roller skating rink, we had a bowling, you know he took, it's a large church. We had Sunday school on Sunday morning but you had roller skating, you had basketball, things to bring the young people

in. And when we were criticized, I remember by other people, he said, "Better they are here than," they had a night club, club 75 or something like -

NL: 845?

GF: 845! You know your - on Prospect Avenue. So that when I went there, he had already, we no longer had the roller skating ring; he had bought the fellowship house. And we had activities in fellowship house like - and then he had seminarians that worked with him and all. Now getting back to the employment, I was reading this, I didn't see much, I had read it years ago when it first came out, then you forget half of what you read, and you have to reinforce what you read. But one of the first things he did, I remember, him talking about it in his sermons, or I remember people talking about it. They used to have domestics workers, either it was a 100, I'm not sure how accurate I am, and then getting back to Bronx history, people don't want to remember this negative aspect. But people would stand on the corner, it's either Southern Boulevard or the Grand Concourse, they knew. Women of color would stand there and others would come and employ them.

NL: It was called the Bronx Slave Market.

GF: I was going to say Bronx Slave Market, but I wasn't sure.

NL: Yeah, no you're very accurate. You know what you're talking about. Its something that you know came up, and it was reported on actually, that women of color would get domestic work.

GF: And Reverend Hawkins addressed the issue! You see, I agree in getting education, being articulate. He was a man who could talk on all levels and he let them know this was very demeaning. Why can't you have an employment agency? But I can't remember the year that that came out. [Crosstalk] Because it was - yeah. But that was one of the first things; the other was what he did as far as activities for the young people in the church. Also, telling their parents the value of getting an education. And he loved the arts and he loved culture because this was what he had gotten as a seminary down at Reverend Imes' church. You couldn't go down, well that comes later, but you had so many activities at St. James and he brought it up to St. Augustine's. And you had young people from all, you know who just came to that church. Some of it was to play basketball, and then, since he lived, the manse was near, you know he might be out, "Oh God, there's Reverend Hawkins. He's going to tell us we need to come to church Sunday." And he, you know, "Hey guys! How are you? What are you doing? How's school? When am I going to see you in church?" [Laughter] But he had things, activities in church for them also. And I met my husband at St. Augustine's church.

NL: How did you meet him?

GF: We were in the same youth group. He had just finished Syracuse and came back and Reverend was interested in him becoming a minister, but he was quite, they were very close, but

I don't know. We met at a group called "The Young Adults." We used to have Sunday - we used to have meetings on Sunday and we had activities and if you could come. And another advantage was that you could go out in the evening. You could come home when it was dark because it was safe. So you didn't have robberies. You had the church open. I could even remember when I was going to NYU I took a course from 8 till 10. NYU downtown, I'd come up with my classmate, we'd get off at Prospect Avenue. We'd walk home if the bus wasn't there. And we lived, at that time I lived with, I had a roommate, we walked to Union Avenue and 168th Street. No one bothered you. This was 10; I got home at 11 0' clock, 11 :30.

BP: It was in the 1950's?

GF: This was in the 1950's. The drugs destroyed so much. And I think in a way each war destroys our people because you have the breakdown of the family; young men coming back, some have survived, some haven't you know? They come back - they've seen things they never saw, killing. You know how you tell - and this, in World War I it destroyed more whites than blacks I think. They were - the whites were the heroin. I think that was what was the addiction. But they kept it to adults, not to children. Blacks had such strong backgrounds they came back to their families. But all of those things contributed to the demise of the South Bronx. The streets were clean. I had pictures my daughter was looking -- you know when the children were born we lived on 167th Street. My mother in law lived on Union Avenue. And one time I have a picture of Union Avenue, and Nadine said, "My God rna, it's so clean!" You had, you know the garbage, and then it was community more so than that - not that you knew everyone but they knew you. It was a completely different situation. And Reverend Hawkins kept parents aware of what their responsibilities were to their children. Make sure that they get an education. One of the sermons I remember, very distinctly, was how he spoke about how happy he was to see parents moving, upgrading themselves, buying homes. But he said, "Beware of your surroundings." One family was buying a home, they just closed the library. He said, "Now, children need public libraries. Why would you close a library when you have families moving into the area?" He made you aware of what should be in the area to enhance your children's lifestyle.

NL: So tell me a little bit about your husband? Now did he grow up in the Bronx too?

GF: He grew up; he was a Southern family that moved - James Foster. And that's a picture, that was a picture of him I have it on the door of the fridge; I'll show it to you.

BP: Oh, the newspaper clipping?

GF: Yes, the newspaper clippings. That was James Foster.

NL: Ok and when was he born?

GF: 1924, it's so funny. I'm always thinking back to when he was born. He was a product of a mother and a father who came from a Presbyterian background down South. And like his mother said, during the time they called it seminary, Barbara Scosher Seminary which later became a college. But she said it was Presbyterian; the church were the first ones to bring a college education to people of color. And she said, the Presbyterian women who came down there to teach you came for the sole purpose to teach you. It wasn't so much teaching negro or colored children, it was for the purpose of teaching you. And for the purpose of teaching included your demeanor, stand tall, the way you dressed, the way you spoke, that was included along with your academics. And I have a picture of - where are you? [Searching in Background] Of, oh - and so, this isn't a picture of mama, James's mother in her senior years. That's his mother and that's James's father.

NL: And what state were they from?

GF: They were from, she was from Rockhill, South Carolina, and he was from, I don't know whether it was North Carolina or not. And he was a product of - Charles Foster his name was - a family where his father stressed education, and made sure, and Uncle Larry used to say his father was a Tom, and Uncle Larry's sister in law said, "Don't talk about him like that." Because he was a man who held down jobs was able to get extra things so that he could educate his children. And he stressed education by any means necessary. And what happened, he has married 9 or 10 years and then had 5 or 4 sons, and Jim's father was a doctor. He graduated from Meharry.

NL: Ah, Meharry Medical College.

GF: Medical College. He went to Johnson c. Smith, he graduated from Meharry Medical College and his best friend, and brother in law, was Uncle Bob, Robert Totely. They were in college together, and then Uncle Bob went to World War, and he was in the service. He had a medical exemption because he was in medical school. He graduated and went on to have had 3 children and had a fellowship to study at John Hopkins University.

NL: In Baltimore.

GF: In Baltimore. Now that's in the 30's.

NL: That's something.

GF: To study venereal diseases. He passed everything but the physical and was cause he had a kidney problem. And dies, they gave him 6 months to live, and this was before your antibiotics, before dialysis, or kidney transplants. So he died; he was 36 years old when he died. And Uncle Bob, who had married mama's sister, told mama, "Get yourself together, bring your family where there's room in the heart you know for my brother

Charles, just come and stay with us." And mama immigrated to New York early. And one by one sent for her sons, put her daughter on a private school, boarding school, I think for a short, a brief period of time. But every year Jim, my husband, I always called him Jim, mother called him James, and my brother in law, went back to live with mama, and Aunt Ladi and Uncle Bob in the summer time. They were in school here and then they went back South each summer which helped great deal. But she was looking for a better way of life for them. So that's the story there. He went on and of course you had the draft, so everyone was drafted. His family background, they all went to Johnson C. Smith University, down in Charlotte, North Carolina. And that was where Jim was scheduled to go. And when the G.I. Bill of Rights came along he said, "Listen, we have enough Smith graduates, I'm going to Syracuse." And that's where he went, Syracuse University.

BP: Was James a vet?

GF: Oh yes. That was the only way he could afford to go to college. [Laughs] It was the only way. He could afford to get into Johnson C. Smith, but not go to Syracuse University.

BP: Did he serve in Germany?

GF: He served in the Pacific. I don't think he saw much active duty because their game, we were still 2nd class citizens. So you didn't fight, but you did all the menial tasks, unloading the ships and all like that. So I don't really remember. And then he didn't talk much about his war years.

BP: What year did you and James get married?

GF: 1953. June 27, 1953.

NL: And you were married in St. Augustine's?

GF: St. Augustine's Presbyterian Church. My whole life-

NL: By Reverend Hawkins?

GF: By Reverend Hawkins right. In 1953.

BP: Where was your first home together?

GF: Our first home together, we worked at Leake & Watts Children's Home up in Yonkers for a year and that's when Jim said, "They don't recognize my degree. So I'm going to go back and get-" his third degree was his Master's in Social Work.

NL: After he got a degree from Syracuse he couldn't get work?

GF: He got a Master's from NYU, he had everything from, but his dissertation records that he told me, "I got the points! I got the points!" I said, "Did you write your paper?" "No." "Then you don't have your degree." But even with his degree he couldn't get a job in 1950 as an administrator in New York. Now he could go to the Southwest or someplace else, but in New York. Oh, and I should backtrack, I don't, turn this thing off for a minute because I –

[TAPE TURNED OFF; TURNED BACK ON]

GF: __ So that I always was amongst people when you were speaking of how I adjusted to going to the white popular - I always knew people of means that were you know, in the family. But anyway.

BP: I know that you moved here to Caste Hill in 1961.

GF: No, no, '60. I have to even change that with, on my finance department because they have me down as 1961, it was in 1960. we lived, oh boy, the things you do, because I was telling my daughter in law, "Be patient, you're condo will come through." I said, when I started I lived with my mother in law, we lived in her apartment, one bedroom, living room, kitchen, bathroom. We slept in the living room on a bed, you know an open bed. Then we lived on 16th Street while we were waiting for this to be built. Well I had some major operations during, I'm sure I'm written up in the journals, medical journals, because I had an operation before my first son was born, Mark. I was operated on removal of my appendix, dermoid cyst, a little bit of the ovary back in 1954 - Mark was born in 1958, in January '58. No, no, no, no '56. And he was born in July of '56. And then I had a second operation with my third baby, and that was when the doctor said, listen, because we lived in a 5th floor walk up. Jim said, "I'm going to, I'm not giving anybody my money, to," you know they were upping prices on these tenements houses. He said, "We gotta get our own place." And while I was waiting for the house to be born, Jim's mother had retired and moved back to Rockhill, South Carolina. So I went to live with her and took Mark, Nadine, and Keith, who was a baby. We stayed there for 6 months until this house was built because I lived on, in a fifth floor walk up after all those complicated surgeries. And when I speak -and I used to get my children out daily. My mother in law lived two blocks down, she lived on Union Avenue but kept them out, take them to the park, to Crotona Park, which was a beautiful park during that period of time. And Mark loved the outdoors, you had some freedom. I wouldn't, had them around the block. I would roll the - we had the carriage and the carriage seat, you know you had a coach and you put the seat on top and then you put the baby, the older child on the seat. And then later on we had large strollers. And it was too cute because we lived on 167th Street, and everyone knew Mark, they knew us because we were friendly. And they would hear him crying, I said, "Don't worry, don't worry, he's alright, he doesn't want to come in the house." Because he loved the park, and he knew even as a youngster, he knew when he hit 167th Street. [Laughter]

NL: He knew it was time to go, the fun was over.

GF: Yeah because Jim worked, I was getting, running home to get Jim his supper.

NL: So at the time, once you started having kids you were a stay at home mom?

GF: Yeah because my children were like stairs with all those complications. [Crosstalk]

NL: They were one after the other.

GF: None were over two years old. Mark and Nadine were one thing. My doctor told me after the first baby, "You make sure you don't have any children any time soon. Mark has to be walking before you have a second child." And to tell you the truth I was glad to have another baby because everything centered on Mark. My mother in law, my sister in law; if Mark fell, I would - and Maddie who was down in John's Island, she'd phone up to New York. [Laughter] Mama would for - I mean everything. You talk about a chilled baby sense. Gosh!

NL: So he was the center of attention.

GF: He was, they loved him, but he wasn't spoiled he was a nice little boy who had all his needs met. Who knew people and all like that; and I'll never forget one time because we didn't even have a bed. We had a Castro Convertible. And I was getting ready, I don't know if you know what a Castro Convertible is.

BP: It's a couch bed right?

GF: Right! And he was coming to me and fell as he was coming and split his lip. And oh boy did I have a time. And I'm getting him down all those flights of stairs, going to the doctor, who sent me to the hospital, and then when Jim came, "What were you doing?!" I looked at him and I said, "I pushed him on the couch! What do you think I was doing?!" [Laughter] He was coming to me and it was one of those things, things can happen so quickly, I couldn't catch him, and that's what happened. But he and Nadine are 22 months apart. And then Nadine and the next baby are just 18 months apart.

NL: And what's your next child's name?

GF: There's Nadine then Keith and who was born in December. And then Cameron was born, he was the first baby on this block. He was born in 1961. I said, "Oh my God."

NL: So yeah, between 58 and 61 you had four kids?

GF: Four kids, two major operations, and later came, in fact, I say God has blessed me because in a way after forty, I was stronger than I've ever been since a teenager.

BP: What was this neighborhood like when you first moved here? Were you and James-

GF: Did you want to say any more about Reverend Hawkins before we - because there were dynamic things that he did.

BP: Ok, sure, sure.

GF: After the, we got fellowship house, and we had all sorts of activities.

BP: What was fellowship house?

GF: Fellowship house was like a community center. We didn't have any community centers. I think you had Forest House. I'm trying to think, was Forest House built then? But you didn't have - yeah, we had, one community center, but fellowship house was built, it's a private home next to the manse, that we had rooms.

BP: The manse?

GF: The manse is where the minister and his wife lived at that time. They call it a manse because that's provided.

NL: I think the Delians call it a rectory I guess, or something like that.

GF: No, maybe, yeah. But its living conditions [Crosstalk] for the pastor and his family. But fellowship house was right after the church. The church is on Prospect Avenue. You turn the corner, 165th Street, you had fellowship house then you had the manse. But fellowship house, we had all sorts of activities. That took the activities out of the church except for basketball. But you had things like the Toussaint Louverture Club.

BP: What was that?

GF: Was a, Negro History club. Toussaint, and I may not be pronouncing it right. Toussaint Louverture was the first in Haiti, with the independence of Haiti. So we had the Toussaint Louverture Club. They were an older club, I didn't belong to them. Many of the people who belonged to that club were going to Hunter College or City. And I belonged to the Young Adults. And each club had their social activities and then we did a little fund raising for the church. But many groups met in the Young Adults. And that was when I met Jim. That and then, Reverend Hawkins was a man of vision, so he got the fellowship house, and then he said, "In a city kids need open spaces." See he came up under St. James but also Camp Minisink. Which I hear has since closed, a travesty, but anyway. Camp Minisink, he knew tennis. You know he played tennis, even with his poor vision. He had very bad vision.

NL: Yeah, it seems like he had the thickest glasses.

GF: Yeah, he had the thickest glasses in the world. [Laughs] Yeah. But that didn't keep him from reading or enhancing his mind.

NL: Playing sports apparently.

GF: Playing sports, until he had a detached retina, and then he wasn't able to play sports anymore.

NL: But he brought tennis to the Parrish then?

GF: No, he brought, he brought, he was looking for a home in the Catskills, for anyone like a retreat; a big place where anyone could go just - and he came across this sign for a chicken farm that had, I'm trying to think of how many acres it was. Beautiful section of upper state, up New York state. And he had a vision for a camp for the inner city kids. And we named it Camp Bohattom.

NL: Spell that?

GF: Bo, B-O-, hat, H-A-T-T-O-M. It was named after Reverend Hawkins, his brother in law, and a minister, Reverend Bowen, who put money into buying this camp. And they called it Camp Bohattom. And they bought this chicken farm and we would do fundraising for turning over, it had one maid house and I think about six chicken coups. And we fundraised and we had and he since died, in fact he was murdered, and I don't even think he knew what they were saying when they came to rob him because he was from, Eugene was from, I think his name was Eugene, he was from Puerto Rico. And he was an excellent carpenter, and he built the main home. We fundraised for a swimming pool, and we had one of the things I can visualize was we had an area called the Pines. And it was nothing but Pine Trees. You could just go and sit, meditate, write, do whatever you wanted. It was just a beautiful area. And he always thought the inner city kids need something, fresh air, sunshine, getting away.

NL: And so kids from St. Augustine's would make regular trips to Camp Bohattom?

GF: Camp Bohattom, they had regular - in Ravena, New York.

BP: Ravena, New York.

GF: Ravena, New York. I don't know nothing about the Catskills. Some from St. Augustine's, some from even, some came from Trinity. Some came from other places. It was just a matter of filling out the application, and it was a minimal fee, and they started, Reverend Hawkins got a station wagon and volunteers to take the kids up to Camp Bohattom.

NL: And how long would children stay on average?

GF: One week, two weeks.

NL: That's nice, that's really wonderful. And how long did that go on for? Do you remember?

GF: We lost Camp Bohattom in the 60's because, see Reverend Hawkins and his wife knew about camp life, people like Jim Foster, I didn't know about camp life, but Jim and some others, Mr. Thomas, his brother in law, Reverend Hawkins' brother in law, Mrs. Thomas, Thelma's sister, they knew about camp life.

BP: Thelma was?

GF: Thelma is Reverend Hawkins' wife, Thelma Burnette. And they were able to - and she, the church actually supplemented a lot for Camp Bohattom. When, and we could have retreats there. It took you maybe three hours or so to get to Camp Bohattom. So it was a place you could go in the morning and come back in the evening if you wanted to, or stay over because a lot of the youth groups, the Young Adults, we went up there one time. And it was so funny because we were in the old main house, and I said, "Alright, the girls sleep upstairs, the boys downstairs, and I oversee everything."

[Laughter and Crosstalk]

NL: Uh oh, there was going to be no monkey business up there huh?

GF: And even with our dancers at fellowship house. Oh we used to have our community dances and all.

NL: And what kind of music would you play?

GF: You played the music of the 60's, which was very nice. You had Billie X. Dime, Diana Washington, those, dance music, Ella Fitzgerald, slow drag, and Rev would come in and turn up the lights, and say, "I wanna see a ruler between the boys and the girls." [Laughter] I mean, he related to young people. "Oh Rev! We need to get the mood!" He said, "Keep the lights up you can still get the mood. You can see the young lady." [Laughter] He always had something to say. And then he was in and out. He was the sort of person who wasn't, what shall I say, pompous. And that's how he attracted so many young people. And we had one of the first black neurosurgeons came out of St. Augustine's. Oh gosh, Tom Lewis, he's dead now. He actually established Interfaith Hospital, but he came out of St. Augustine's years ago. And then we had several ministers, several doctors, teachers, in fact, Jim used to say, "What do you mean you're not going to college? You're not going to business school?" You know it was that kind of motivation.

NL: Yeah, it was just expected of all St. Augustine's kids.

GF: It was expected, most St. Augustine's. We just had a Dr. Maurice Phillips, who just died recently, a dentist; he came out of St. Augustine's as a young man. And Reverend Hawkins because of the way he could speak to his congregation, and also because he was a listener and because of his exposure to other folks the congregation would support and help. And then some of the money I think came out of Reverend Hawkins' own pocket. But he would help young people get through school or direct them to the resources where they could go on to school. He was, and there was, I'm trying to think of what else I wanted to say before we could - he became a community activist. And in this book he ran for, he became a community activist because as he went out in the community he saw that it was void of our people really getting into any, into the political regime, in the Bronx, and you know he was involved. And he also --

NL: He ran for public office?

GF: Just one year. He didn't win, but it gave his people and the powers that be, a wake up call.

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO; BEGIN TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE]

BP: I know that Reverend Hawkins was involved in the Civil Rights Movement as well.

GF: Yes he was, the early Civil Rights Movement.

BP: And I even saw a flier of Dr. King coming to speak at St. Augustine's.

GF: St. Augustine's Church.

BP: Do you remember any of that?

GF: No because I had no one to babysit. Jim was there, I wasn't. Yeah he was there.

BP: Did Jim go to the march on Washington with Reverend because there is also a-

GF: We both went. In fact that was the first time I ever heard Martin Luther King speak. And the person [Crosstalk]

NL: Now this is the march on Washington? Wow.

GF: Yes, the person who they were expecting, the great expectations were for Adam Clayton Powell. And then there was this, young minister, and it was Martin Luther King.

BP: And so did you go with St. Augustine?

GF: Yes, yes. It was two bus loads I think that went to the first march.

NL: And was it just a general you know kind of cross section of the population in the congregation, or was it specific clubs that went down?

GF: No, I think it was whoever could attend for the fee. And then all the churches were, I think all the churches, I'm not sure -

NL: All the churches in the area sent busses?

GF: I think that's how it was; it was a long time ago. Reverend Rawlins a pastor after that was a friend of Martin Luther King's.

NL: I heard, that's what I heard.

GF: And marched with him, but talking about the community and I told Meghan to follow through because one of his daughter's is alive. Rev had two daughters, Renee and Ellie. And Ellie died, Ellengale died at age 50 of cancer. But Rev had, I told you he loved the arts and culture, we had concerts at St. Augustine's that we would attend. He brought culture up to the Bronx. Walter White, the -

BP: The NAACP.

NL: The NAACP

GF: Right, spoke at St. Augustine's. In fact, it was very interesting, well you all wouldn't know what he looked like, [Crosstalk] I barely know. Yes you do? Well he came up--

NL: We weren't his contemporaries but we know what he looks like.

GF: Oh alright, well he came up, when he came to speak at the church, and he came smiling when he came in he said the taxi driver who brought him up - now the Bronx was nice, it was just full of colored people or Negroes as they called them. The taxi driver said, "You have to be careful because you're up here with these people and you just have to be careful at all times." He listened to the whole dissertation of this taxi driver, who was bringing him to Prospect Avenue and 156th Street, so he said when he got out and gave him his fare and gave him a tip, he said, "Well I'll be careful," he said, "because you know those colored people are part of my people," and he said he said "goodbye." [Laughter] He said, they forget we're multicolor. But Walter White came, Muhammad Ali, and a young actor, who Lost in the Stars was a play on Broadway about South Africa, and they came. These were extra things that we did; we had concerts. Duke, before Duke Ellington, Roland Hayes, the last outstanding tenor of color, Roland Hayes came and gave a concert. And our last big bus was, oh Sammie Davis gave a fundraising downtown for the church. I think it may have been for Camp Bohattom. And Duke Ellington came. We had a concert there; those were some of the things that I certainly wanted mentioned.

NL: Do you think that St. Augustine's played a role in people's political awakening in the neighborhood?

GF: Oh yes, a big role because he informed you, you know, along with giving your religious sermon, and Jim used to say, "Now listen Rev, we're Presbyterians, we don't stay in church all day." [Laughter] Two hours is your limit. Jim was clerk of sessions for years. But, oh yes, Reverend Hawkins came at a time when he had good resources, good people, that would listen, that he could counsel, and listen to because some - he never had a day off, I'll put it that way, because sometimes you think Rev was asleep, he was down at Rikers Island because somebody's child got in a little bit of trouble and he wanted to make sure they were steered in the right direction. But he had, what shall I say? He had a surface to work with, words sort of skip me at times, he had the, not culture, but when you in medicine when you have a culture and you want to grow organisms on the culture to find out about illness, he had that kind of people to work with. They would listen and he could direct them. Reverend Hawkins was responsible before these houses were up. There was a beach club that had been here for years. And when we moved here in 1960, my husband said, "That's the first place I'm going to integrate," 1960.

NL: I wanted to ask you about the Castle Hill Beach Club. What was your experience like with it?

GF: Reverend Hawkins in a way was instrumental. It was the right time because a lady had won the case before but they couldn't find her. We had a little article how we integrated, but Reverend Hawkins was instrumental in us integrating the Beach Club. And my attitude because of attitude of one of the neighbors doesn't matter to me I could put a pool in my backyard my kids can go get in the pool. And Jim said, "That's not the issue. In 1960," and we integrated, we went in in '63 I believe because we weren't able to afford before that. And we went in, we moved here in December of '60, in September of 1960. But Jim's attitude was, that's not the issue, the issue is that they're discriminating against you because of color. And he said, and for that reason this is New York, even the south is integrated. Why he said, finances that's something all together different. They're the country club, we know we can't afford them, our family can't afford that. But why when I have 4 little children, this is a block away, and they have swimming pools, they had a large swimming pool and a small swimming pool, a kiddie pool, they had baseball, several - they had a restaurant. He said, why should we be restricted from there because of our color? He said that's what I'm talking about. I can put a little pool in the back, I'm not interested in that. Why because of color? And he was so well when he went over there the person who managed the beach club didn't realize, and I didn't argue with him. He said Reverend Hawkins has never been here, I wouldn't allow them to let Reverend Hawkins come without me knowing about it, showing him the place and Rev had been there because he was that sort of person. Once we got in, he wanted to come as our guest. Don't tell them; don't tell them who I am. I just want to see the area.

BP: And what was the reception like for you and your husband and your family at this club, the Castle Hill Beach Club?

GF: It's just that Castle Hill Beach Club. One of amazement, [Laughs] some were very pleasant, some told, Jim had a reputation of being arrogant, and not friendly. He said, "Trudy, you know, you speak to the folks, that's fine." But I didn't come over here to - I've got my friends. In fact he said, "I have friends probably with more education than they have." But he said, the thing is when we got there it was sunny private but they had a gentleman's agreement that no one was to sponsor, it was negro during that time, sponsor them for a membership. And so when I got over there he said, you got the policeman, the postman, the teachers, a few doctors, what's private - and I forget what the membership was - what's private about that? So and at first I didn't even want to go into their showers; I said I'll come home and shower. And Jim said, you're wrong, he said, those women they shower, he said, they even clean their teeth and everything. Take your towel, bathe your children over there [Laughter] save your water bill.

NL: Save your water bill, that's right.

GF: And he said, and have your clean clothes and all. And I took, some would come up and greet me and say, well it's about time. And others would look at you - one time I forget, a lady looked at us and with shock. And I turned around and looked at her too and went on walking. [Laughter] you know because - and then I had to tell them because we had passes, I had to tell the people who managed it, I went over there because Cameron got angry one time said, "They always stopping me or Mark! They always stopping me for my pass! They don't stop that little boy, but they gonna stop me!" So I was home at the time, and I went over to speak to them, and I said, "You know who I am, I'm Mrs. Foster." "Oh yes Mrs. Foster we know you, we know your husband." "And you know my children. So if they don't present - if it's the law to present the pass, that's one thing, but if you're stopping them to ask if they're a member and you're not stopping Barbie, that's another thing. Do you understand what I'm saying?" "Oh yes Mrs. Foster, we didn't know, who was that?" Well I said, "I don't know who it was but I just want you to know. You know who the Foster children are." And then the trophies, a lot of these trophies come from Castle Hill because once we got over there, they have all these little - because my husband said, "White people are ahead of us because opportunity comes their way and they grab them." But my kids began they had relays, and my kids began to be in the relays, and they didn't learn swimming from over there. They learned it because I took my 4 children to the swimming lessons at James Monroe High School Y. And then Jim used to pick us up because he said, what their activities are, those are our activities too. And once they learned, five and under, speed swimming. Once they learned, I said that's why they don't want us because we take away their trophies. But one thing leads to another because that's when my children also became involved in the Y, the Flushing Fliers because, and that's getting a little ahead, but taking them to the Y, one of the coaches, Al Galgano, was a, he was a wonderful man.

NL: Spell that last name?

GF: Galgano, G-A-L-G-A-N-O.

NL: Italian I believe?

GF: Yes, but one who saw children, not color. But he saw Keith. Keith was, Keith was the middle child, he had a lot of problems being the middle child. And then Cameron was ill and we almost lost him; so it was a whole that's another bit. But Keith could swim, he could cut that water, and Al said, "Mrs. Foster who swims in your family?" I said, "I don't know, I don't swim. My husband had to learn," but I said when children are involved in sports and they learn at a very early age, I said they either show an aptitude or an interest. And he was the one who got me, he said, "I know that you will follow through with a swim club." And got me involved in the swim club in Harlem and later when - and this was a man who taught the Olympics. A white man, and later when I don't know what was happening down at the Harlem Y, they were protesting, Jim said later for them, and we went to the Flushing Y, and as a result it's a way of keeping your children out of problems, busy, and you started traveling because I didn't know there were competitive swimmers, and we were always running behind. Can you imagine, 8 and under swimming competitively for state champions?

BP: I was wondering, we brought the story about [Crosstalk] you know up to the 19-you know up to you living here, in this community, I'm just wondering if there's anything, unless you have any other questions.

NL: Oh, I just had a question about how you actually chose this neighborhood because I wanted to know you know how did your husband even find out this was available.

GF: Oh, because for one thing, we were looking. Jim knew why he had to get me out of the area where we lived. We had a relative who took us - and Reverent Hawkins was involved because he had the car, we didn't even have a car, to looking at something in New Rochelle. Up, an old house and her attitude was I didn't want it, there was too many repairs, and the attitude, my attitude was they're showing me the cast offs. The others have moved on to better horizons, they've left stuff behind and we're buying it. And her attitude was, well you won't be living in Westchester. And to me, I could care less about Westchester.

BP: What did that mean?

GF: Westchester, you wouldn't be living in Westchester County, and that was considered a social apple, you know, nourish. I'm from New Rochelle-

NL: She was saying you'd be better fitting from a designer address so to speak.

GF: Right, right. And the other thing, we were looking for an area where we could still get to St. Augustine's Church. And they had these, this was a development called King David Terrace, or something like that, I think it was King David Terrace. And as Jim said, "It's open for those who get here first." And it was an integrated group, in fact, the houses on the next block, that's a different development. Those rectangle houses, the

houses with the arched roof, that's those four houses, are a different development. I think we started further down, but yeah, on Howe Avenue. And then these were built, and we saw a model apartment, and I said, "Well, this is nice," it was off the Beaton track, but we're still we're available to all the highways. We had bussed, we had transportation, it was, and even there well it was sort of social but you had two car fair zones which kept out many other people but you had from the bus to the train and so on. So it was the fact that we could meet the mortgage, and I had one of the children's Godmother's stayed with us temporarily for about 5 years, and it was open, clean, the projects were middle income, and it was integrated. And as far as the decrease of integration for these houses or for the area, many of the others, many of the Caucasians died. It wasn't that they left, they died. And then I thought to myself, people die at all ages because we had Mr. Polechesky who had a heart attack, I forget how old, he was in his forties. And that was the corner house over here. We had a polish family that lived here forever; the wife died first then he died and then they sold the house. We had an Asian family; well they moved I'm sure looking for more people in their community. We had a German family; and the wife died first and then the husband died, and they had a teenage daughter and I know she wanted to move on you know after your family dies, but it's primarily blacks and Latino's right now. And I have no problem with that at all, and I had no problem to begin with. It's the caliber of people that are going to live in a community. Are they going to live as homeowners or are they you know of a certain status? And you know same thing over here because I went to community meetings where they told me about low income housing, we need low income housing for people, for poor people, I said, you have it. I said, let's keep this community like it is, with a co-op. you have the Castle Hill Projects, keep it residential. You have lovely homes going here and if you go further down you'll see homes all along Castle Hill Avenue the side streets. Let's build, I didn't have to worry because they're not going to get water into water front property to people without means anyway unless you go out to Foreign Rockarent Way and all. So, and as the people came I used to have the dogs. So I was walking through - well I always walked the children around the community, but I welcomed the people coming in and told them you know what the area was like. I don't know what the schools are like anymore.

NL: You know I wanted to ask you what those were like when you were actually sending your children to school because we had an interview recently with some people who lived over, a little bit further over, the Petersons, I don't know if you knew them. But they lived on Lacombe Avenue and they talked about living directly across from the Castle Projects and the difficulty they had.

GF: Oh, when the projects changed.

NL: Right, and I was wondering did your kids, do you remember your kids experiencing difficulties?

GF: Well see my children when they were going to the local schools-

NL: Which schools did they go to?

GF: They went to 138. [Crosstalk]

NL: Right, P.S. 138 on LaFayette.

GF: And it was, they were the minority. And then for one semester Keith went to 131 and Cameron went to 124. So they were just in public school until they were 12 years old and then my husband in reading the New York Times read this article about the old men of Harvard and how their children were rebelling. Going to schools like Deerfield, Milton, what are the other schools?

NL: Andover.

GF: Andover, and all those schools, those private schools and they didn't want any parts of that, they considered their parents had cheated and this and that to get what they had achieved. But Jim in reading this article wrote, there was a Cabbots and a Largets that went to Milton Academy which is in Milton, Massachusetts. And he wrote Judge Cabbot, and he said, I have a son, of mixed visage, can I send him to Milton Academy. And that really started the ball rolling. Judge Cabbot answered him almost six months later with an apology that he had been on a world tour and he was, that's why the delay in writing. Jim said, "Can you imagine this man world tour? I can hardly go for two weeks." But anyway, I'm not beating that category, that they were interested in Mark. And Reverend Hawkins again, it was Reverend Hawkins and also Jim's close friend, Mark got into Milton Academy. He went a little too young, it was a prep school, and actually the time was right because the headmaster wanted more diversity in the school anyway. But Mark went to Milton, and as a result Jim was on the board of Federation of Protestant Welfare and in telling them about his experience with Judge Cabbot someone came up to him and said, "Well we have a school, we're looking for other children." And Jim said, "Well, I have some more children." [Laughter] And Keith and Cameron went to the Hill School in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. And Al Galgano came to, I forget what happened, but he came, he was so interested in what we did with our children, he came to proctor an exam for Keith next door and incidentally Barbara McNana used to live next door. But they went to the Hills School. Mark got a little home sick and Mark said in a way it was, if he'd been older and hadn't come from such a, what will I say, not cloistered, but a home where he saw his parents all the time and then he was in with all these white kids.

NL: Right, he went from sheltered, a sheltered kind of existence to strangers.

GF: And although he had a lovely housemaster, Mr. Torney, and his wife, that really took Mark under their wing, but his exposure - Jim said, "Leadership is not born, it's grown. Look at these books that they study." When we went to the science lab Jim said to me, "Trudy how many people shared your microscope?" I said, "Oh the whole class." And even in nursing school. these kids had individual cubicals, their science lab and then their science library next to it. The vast difference; when people said, I sent my children to private school, it depends what's the private school. Is it Parochial or is it a school like Andover, or Deerfield, or Milton, or Chilt, I think that's where Roosevelt went. Or he sent

us a completely different environment. And then Nadine didn't want to go away so she went to Riverdale Country School.

NL: So you said all of your children are private schooled?

GF: Yeah, so they went to private schools after junior high schools. So they did not know much about the local schools around here. And the local schools were also in the process of transition. Now when they were in 138, Jim told me, he says, "You know I know why people are ahead of us," he said, "because they get involved." So I said, "Well Jim, our people are working two jobs many times," he said, "and here we come with our excuses." So I wasn't working at the time so I became involved with the parent association up at 138.

NL: And that was around what year, like the mid-60's?

GF: Mid 60's.

BP: When your children were attending?

GF: When my children were attending. And so, also learning about the political arena of schools and in '68, this is when the Ocean Hill, Brownsville with Rody McCoy and Oliver were involved but these schools were still teaching, they teach others up to theirs and teach down in a way to ours. I won't say they did that to our kids because I was always making sure that they stayed in the special classes, the honor classes.

NL: The SP?

GF: Yeah, it was called IGC I think at that time. And then I got involved, there weren't many of us who got involved, it was Elvita Harris, well she became the president during the year that I was on the Parent Association. And she said, "I certainly appreciate you being here with me Mrs. Foster because not even many of my own support me," and that has its own connotations. But we were responsible for getting the first black principal at 138, Mr. Richardson I think was his name. Qualified, you know its just like they just got two black coaches in football, after all these young people have broken their backs and they as Cameron or Keith said, they will recycle the white coaches for all these jobs and finally give us the opportunity. But Mr. Richardson was, he came at the right time, and if you're able to because I think I was the only one, this was when parents association had some input, I said, "Why can't we have him? What are his qualifications? What is his background? What do you have -" And I really [Laughs] Madeleine said, "Gertrude you go to that meeting and you can talk them into getting Mr. Richardson." Getting back to my children as far as going to prep school, Mark said it was difficult for him to readjust himself in away, although the community was small, he said to, he had a difficult time with his peer group because they believed that because we had a house we were wealthy, and then we sent our kids to prep school. We sent them on scholarship and struggled to pay the rest of the bill. [Laughs] But they didn't know that. But its you know you're

caught and until you get older and understand, you know it comes with maturity. With me growing up it was like an old head on young shoulders. I was never a child in a way because I was around, one thing I was a foster child, and the other thing I was around older people, but with rna, but you survive, and like Jim said, "We make mistakes as parents, but it was for the well being of you."

BP: I'll stop it right there.