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Fox, Hetty

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Transcriber: Jacqueline Soboti

Mark Naison (MN): We're here with Hetty Fox, who was born on this block.

Hetty Fox (HF): I was born in Harlem.

MN: Oh, you were born in Harlem?

HF: Yes, yes, 1937, I was born in Harlem. Lived on 122nd Street between 7th and 8th and then in 1940, moved to the Bronx.

MN: Was this neighborhood like when you first moved?

HF: Well, it was a lovely neighborhood. Trees up and down Prospect Avenue, and I was so thrilled when we turned the corner and my dad pointed to our house two doors down and said, "This is where we are going to live." At that time, I think we were the first black homeowners when we moved; we were the first black family on the block. There was a family called the Muranchi's who lived next door. They had twin girls, same age, as I was, who challenged me when they saw me in there. They said, "Hey! What are you doing in that house?" I said, "Getting set up." Their pop lived right next door. I said, "My father had already bought this house." So they said, "Well, you come down here we'll slap your face!" So I said, "Stay right there!" Something told me that is I ran from them the first day I was going to be in deep trouble, so they cut back. From the first few days we never had a fight, we got sick off sandwich cookies in their basement playing room. After they came to my birthday parties. I can show you pictures of these things at these times; I can drag them out if you have some time for that. But, so that was my Christening and my introduction to the neighborhood defense. [Laughs] Make sure you challenge and make sure what's going on, and I appreciated that very much.

MN: Right, well, did you go to public or Catholic School?

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Richard Richardson, & Mark C. Smith

Interviewee: Dr. Hetty Fox

Date: n/d

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HF: I started in Public School 54, was on Intervale and Freeman Street. And then I went to Saint Anthony of Padua over on Prospect and 166th.

MN: Well, I know that well because the Shontels, a very famous singing group, came out of that school.

HF: Yes, my brother may remember them. George Fox, he's four years older than I am and he has this memory, like an elephant; you know he's fantastic. He lives on Riverdale now, and I remember racing. I graduated from St. Anthony's then I went to Cathedral, then I went to Hunter. You know, way back when I played ball at St. Anthony's, I was foul shooting champ of the Bronx and New York City, at St. Anthony's at the time. And then I went to Cathedral and I played ball there also.

MN: Now, where was-- Is Cathedral in Manhattan?

HF: Yes, Cathedral HS on 151st at time. So, it's moved over to First Avenue now, nearer to the Archdiocese. But after that, I went to Hunter College.

MN: And, you were brought up as a Catholic?

HF: Yes, yes.

MN: Now, could you have imagined, when you were growing up, what would eventually happened to the neighborhood?

HF: Not in a million years. That was the shock that got me moving. And I didn't even know what I was going to do when I came back home from California in 1970 and saw the conditions. And of course, being older, I knew it was extremely dangerous to see the number of houses that were being fired up, and it was like an angel of death, with a sword, moving from Vyse Avenue and slowly creeping up this way. And somehow we were able to stop it at Stebbins Avenue there, which is now called James Polite Avenue.

And, God rest her, the singer, Maxine Sullivan, used to have a place called the House of Jazz build right over here near me. And at that time, she was also fighting to stop the deterioration from getting any further. So somehow we managed to kind of keep this little village area in here relatively together. I didn't know what was happening too much on the other streets. I just knew I was trying to keep Lyman intact.

MN: Right, now, how did you end up going out to California?

HF: In 62, I went out there for the speech movement and the next thing I knew I decided to stay a little bit longer. I went and applied for a job at the department of employment and-- but to my amazement, I got the job. So I was then doing unemployment insurance and then I went into vocational counseling and then a job specialist, I specialized in seniors, skilled trades, like you know, engine laid operators, torrent laid operators, machinists, with a lot of guys out of San Fernando Valley. And I lived in Hollywood. And I'd drive by-- I'd often hear these sports cars in third and fourth overdrive and-- [Laughs] I love that car, going through Fifty-two Hollywood Hills, and that's what I was doing out there. And also counseling; I was also chief counsel for an independent school called [Inaudible] college, which was a new training center that they had. And also in 65, after they had the riots in Watts, they opened up about four or five new training centers. I was head counselor of one of those new training centers-- before-- taking a position, teaching psychology, sociology and race relations at Cal State Northridge.

MN: Right. Now, did you have a Master's degree when you were doing that?

HF: I worked on my Master's afterwards.

MN: Right.

HF: Yea.

MN: Now, as a professor, I wonder why anyone would leave being a professor.

HF: Well, I was a professor since I was three. My father told me--

MN: [Laughs] Oh--ok.

HF: [Laughs] It was no big deal.

MN: [Laughs] So it was no big deal.

HF: But I've never placed your profession on a higher level than your humanness and your home. To me, its, you-- you should be bringing those talents and skills and anything to your home, to you family, to your father. I mean I think we should be working for our fathers, and mothers, our families and therefore the neighborhood. And therefore, that is the highest calling, not necessarily the titles and the degrees. Those are things that you're using to bring more emphasis to the first cause. And this just from getting familiar with a lot of different cultures. [Crosstalk]

MN: Got it. Now, what led you to come back from California?

HF: I came back, let me think. I don't remember exactly what got me back here. I think my sister was expecting-- I wanted to see her. She and her husband Dr. Michael Mitchell I think were going to go to Brazil. So I said let me just visit with my sister, and saw them when I got back. And I saw these creeping signs of total deterioration--

MN: So this is it, by 1970 that you already saw--

HF: Oh yes.

MN: Now, you left in '62 and you hadn't seen any of those signs?

HF: No, no.

MN: Ok, that's very interesting because I've been doing all these interviews at the Patterson Houses and they also pinpoint what happened in the middle and late 60's.

HF: Yes.

MN: What did people say had happened to the neighborhood? When people, your family members, your neighbors, said, tried to describe to you what happened, what did they think the causes were?

HF: Well, at that time, we didn't realize, of course, how devastating these initial signs of what was to come were. So their feelings was people were just moving away. People were not caring, or the city owned property they're not taking care of. Buildings were showing the signs of becoming empty inside, but it just looked like normal erosion.

MN: It didn't look like a plague. It was erosion and decay.

HF: Yes. It didn't seem to have the ominous kinds of signs at first. It just seemed like, oh well-- if someone was going to show up--

MN: Were there drug issues that people stated-- Were there more drugs in the street in the 70's that in '62?

HF: Not necessarily. Drugs really hit heavily in the fifties. Because I remember, we used to sleep up the street with our doors open. Not locked, and not even shut. We used to sleep on the fire escapes. So we didn't lock doors or anything. And all of a sudden we noticed young men sneaking around, going into windows, and we said, "What the heck is wrong with that guy?"

MN: And that happened here in the 50's?

HF: Yes.

MN: Because in the Patterson Houses, they said that stuff started in the 60's there.

HF: Yes. It was probably in the late 50's. I think that's where that guy Tony [Inaudible] wrote that book *The Harlem Gangs* [Inaudible]-- He was kind of the source-- [Inaudible]-

- But I'm just remembering that he wrote book about the violent gangs, and some of the gangs we saw going through here when we were growing up. And my mom, that was the picture showed I you, she was one person, I mean, she scared my brothers off, she used to yell at them, "Don't use that language on our block. Be respectful!" And then, "Don't come in here with weapons!" And things like that.

MN: Right, do you remember the names of the gangs?

HF: Bishops--

MN: Bishops?

HF: And the Cardinals. There were classical names. My brother probably remembers more that I do, cause I was suppose to be, we were suppose to be--

MN: This was in; this was in the late 40's and 50's you're talking about?

HF: Yes. So these signs of erosion-- we presumed that someone in the city is going to be taking charge and doing something. But it didn't happen.

MN: And then it just escalated?

HF: Yes. Then, by the time I got home, I knew immediately that this was going to be a very serious problem, because, it's unconscionable to think that buildings would be staying empty for so long. And when I went downtown one day, after I had gotten home and came back and found a building gone, I had never seen that in my life. You know, somehow you think in your neighborhood you're going to come home and talk to people about what you've been doing. So, when you come home and find nobody is able to recognize you, or knows you, you say, "Well, something has changed alright." You know, where's so and so?

MN: So, in other words, there was huge turnover in population between 60's and 70's?

HF: Absolutely. And my brother used to play a lot of basketball. We had a lot of stick ball games around here. I tell the children about the sewer down the street- my brother was a three-sewer man.

MN: Right, that's pretty good.

HF: He would hit the ball from all the way down there up to the roofs on Freeman Street and when I show them that distance they say that there were giants I'd play with.

MN: Right, that's pretty good.

HF: He would hit the ball from all the way down there up to the roofs on Freeman Street, and when I show them that distance they say that these were giants I'd play with.

MN: Yea, that's pretty amazing. I mean two sewers was good.

HF: That's right.

MN: But three sewers was fantastic!

HF: Fantastic!

Mark C. Smith (MS): I have a question for you.

HF: Certainly.

MS: You said something about the Bishops and the Cardinals. In other interviews that we've had people talk about the gangs development and how that caused the urban decline in the Bronx--

HF: Yes--

MS: But you said in the 40's and 50's, were the Bishops and the Cardinals really there as gangs for the protections of neighborhoods, or did you see them actually active in illegal activities at that point?

HF: Well, we didn't really know that much about the internal operations of any of the.

We just knew sometimes when they showed up-- they had members-- to take care of something or whatever, they're a group. Even now, you have the Bloods and the Crips and so on, and you don't necessarily know what the internal mechanisms are--

MN: Now, basically, did these gangs have guns at that time?

HF: I had heard about victims, but they would think they would make it. But them, they were making their own scoots, you know, they were pretty handy guys. And many times, they were neighborhood guys, so, in some ways they were protecting their neighborhood. Almost trying to keep, almost like a tribal connection.

MN: Right. But when you were growing up did you ever feel unsafe coming home at like 10 or 11 at night?

HF: Never. Never.

MN: You could get off the subway at midnight and no qualms?

HF: Absolutely. In fact, I worked full time for a while, while I was going to Hunter, and going to night school, for about three and a half years, so I would be coming home at 11 o'clock quite often and I never felt unsafe. I don't know whether it was just because of ignorance or what, but I felt the comfort, and I still feel it, in my neighborhood. I always walk with purpose. I always feel that you have to have a purpose when you come out of the house. I don't wander around aimlessly; I just kept going. I worked at the Public Library in the stocking division, Science and Technology division, and so on, and so my mind was always occupied on something also. I was always aware of something.

MN: Right. Now, when you came back in 1970, what sort of work did you do at that point?

HF: Well, at that time, I wasn't sure exactly what. I was going to write this definitive work about some of the things I had uncovered and learned in California. The experiences I had in California were rather phenomenal. This is when Black Studies was just beginning its whole surge-- And Angela Davis and that whole-- the beginning of the forty-four members of the Black Congress, Black Review Forum, other organizations, Maulana Karenga, and so on. And there were groups that were coming up. So there was an emerging sense of coming together, to try to make a meaningful difference in your neighborhood. Many of us were being trained to get out, you see, and I felt at the time that that wasn't really the best thing in the world. So, at the time of my coming home I was going to pursue work related to what I had learned during the 60's, and I was going to make this here, distinct work or so, and it was going to be in my father's basement, up the street. That's where I kept it. So, then I came out one day and realized that there were problems in the buildings. I said, I can come running out of my basement with this great answers, and my block would be gone. So I thought, well that wouldn't mean anything, so I put that great definitive work down and I said I better start saving houses, you know. And that's when I began to get involved with the meetings that we have, the city had given dispossess notices to people in two of the main buildings here, the building next door was already empty, the one across the street was already empty, so I said, no, this is outrageous. I mean, you cannot have this as one of the dangers for children. So that's when I began to worry. So, that's when I said, I don't know what I'm going to do. So I saved that house that was on the corner, just next door to my dad's house, and I made an after- school program for children, and that went on for about 15 years. I stayed open six nights a week until 10:30, and we had chess, we had checkers. I put up my list

of 186 African tribes that's on the wall over there in the next room. I put up my 11

languages, and I teach the children how to count, and I played and danced with about five different African groups, so I pulled all of this--

MN: Now, were you still dancing at that time?

HF: Oh, yes. I was performing with a group called [Inaudible] Africa, which was a group from southern Africa in Swaziland, and we did performances up and down the coast, here, east coast. I danced on the West coast with a group also Tawada African Dance Ensemble-- there was a master drummer there from Ghana named Kwasi Baduka-- he's dead now, and also a guy from Nigeria called Toji Widel. And I played and learned dances. We'd perform at UC Santa Barbara, UCLA-- different places on the weekends, and then I would do my teaching-- all my professional work during the week. But that to me was normal.

MN: Do you still have drums here?

HF: Yes, my drums are upstairs. I've got them upstairs. I put them away for the Christmas party and haven't brought them back down-- I still have my drums upstairs. That's always an integral part of the music and the dance-- very important-- for my own culture, I mean I have to keep my own development always foremost in my mind and to share, to share those things with children. And this became like a project, because there is no reason for me to use my skills to make sure people don't lose their homes. So that's why I got really involved in the block work myself, and seeing it was the right thing to do. And that how I maintain a culture in New York, I don't know how we're going to teach the next generation of New York kids if we're not here, and if we don't try to keep New York kids stable in their own lives. It's very important for the economy of

New York. The city's losing so much money, it's unbelievable. Unbelievable. So, I feel like we have to stabilize the economy and that's where it starts. This area should not be the poorest congressional district in the United States. That's an outrage. So, I feel so committed, just on that level.

MN: Have you worked with any of the community development organizations like, the Bronx Desperados?

HF: In a way, not as directly as I would have liked to have. I don't think many of them knew the depths of the work I was involved with because we actually had saved these buildings even though NAD mal-managed this building. But they were not as responsive to come of the sociological and psychological implications of a project like this, and what it means to have long time residents. But at the time, they were just developing as well. They've mushroomed into quite an organization. They're pretty huge in terms of the number of blocks that they have. So, I hope that maybe, they have a new director now, maybe the relationship can become a little bit more-- how shall I say-- stabilized, meaningful. Maybe they'll want to participate financially. Most of the work I do get, I have to find myself.

MN: Right. Hi Rich, how you doing? Can we shut this off for a second?

MN: Can you tell us about the house?

HF: Yes. There's a little red house on Forest Avenue that I used to attend kindergarten when I was about 4 and a half years old. And I remember Ms. Mizel was my teacher. And the first day I went to class, I was so upset. I didn't want my mother to leave me. And my mother made me a nice, green, plaid dress with new, red buttons that looked like cherries. And I remember I wore that dress and Mrs. Mizel, while I was crying, came

over to me to say, "Oh, what's the matter, why are you crying? What a lovely dress you have-- and look at those cherries! The buttons-- I'm going to eat them!" And I look at her with such amazement thinking, "Why would she eat my buttons?" [Laughs] You know what, I stopped crying when she showed me blocks and the corner, and I began to play blocks, and before you know it, I was good.

MN: Now, you must have actually watched the Forest Houses being built?

HF: Well, actually we were quite a distance away. We could see Morris High School from my dad's porch, and always thought that was the Catholic School. So I was just in kindergarten and I would tell my mother, don't rush me because I knew my times tables and my substitution.

MN: Did you have friends who went to Morris High School?

HF: Do, I did not. Going to St. Anthony, they have to pass by that street to get to Morris. So I didn't really know that many people from Morris High School at that time. We were pretty involved in the academics and the sports. You know, the merry old nuns, they were pretty good and tried to convince me to play on the girl's basketball team, and we were so good, I used to score twenty points a game. I was the center forward, and our numbers were like fifty-four to nothing.

MN: Now that's the time when you had the two sides of the court for--

HF: Right. They had the dividing point. They didn't think girls had the stamina to run full court ball, so, I was center forward and we had--

MN: So you were a professional scorer?

HF: I mean when you have scores like fifty-six to four, you know, or fifty-six to nothing-- realize, we played Peter and Paul, we played St. Anselm, we played other grammar

schools. The Catholics had their own league. And I remember I sprained my ankle just before the big game at Fordham, the championship game, and I was so miserable I begged them, "Please let me play, you've got to let me play in this game!" And my father, I love him, used to come to the games and my father used to get so amused to see the nuns jumping up and down, their hats are flying [Laughs] But they were all involved in the game-- for religious reasons.

MN: Now in 1962, when you left was this still a racially integrated block?

HF: Pretty much. Pretty much. Mainly a black block, by that time, but still we had Hispanic people, and black people mostly.

MN: When did the whites start leaving this area? When was it noticeable, in that 50's or 60's?

HF: It's hard to say. I would say the 50's. I don't know when the Mulanchi's left, or the Rigalas.

MN: So most of the white families in this block were Italian?

HF: Italian and Jewish. The girl who lived next door, we called her the Jewish girl, and Sondra left-- that was the house in the front that got empty after I moved in. I can't remember much else. They were the main family I recall-- used to play everyday-- and I used to love this house-- you know how children get, you get to look for things that are around you. But that's pretty much what I recall. My brother would probably remember a lot more. Henry was older, and came home just in time to show him how to jump double-dutch, and was always into shooting scalbies, be called them bloating. But we'd be playing scalbies, and it was always underground. That's why in the play street program we have here for twenty-seven years; we play something in the street everyday.

MN: You're going to do it everyday during the summer?

HF: Everyday, everyday. And I try to teach about this all the time, because any block, any one-way block that has no parking meters, no bus route, can be a play street if you go to your planning board people and get the application-- I try to explain to the people-- there goes my spring box, it just fell down-- sorry-- the Wagner that I give out everyday is in a box and I keep it on-- the little ones just tipped it over-- anyway-- so we try to inform people about the play street program. On the radio show I talk about that as well.

MN: And you do a radio show for the Points?

HF: Yes.

MN: Now, where is this? Is this locally broadcast?

HF: Very locally.

MN: How far is the--

HF: I think about five blocks. I have a drive-by show [Laughs] if people drive by you can hear my show [Laughs]

MN: Wait a minute, now the Point is down in Hunts Point.

HF: That's right.

MN: And, its only in Hunts Point that somebody can get? Can they get it on this block?

HF: No, I don't think so, not yet. They're working on another antenna that will increase the signal. For the last two years I've gone on every Wednesday, 7 to 8, it's called the Hetty Fox Show, and I tape a lot of our shows-- so many people tape theirs-- and I talk about so many things that we should be doing in our neighborhoods. I talk about the ridiculous way which the city sometimes approaches things. They're not anchoring the neighborhoods fund sufficiently well, and they should, because that's what's happens to

the money in any city. It should not have trillions of dollars, travel, publicity, and nothing covering to secure the neighborhoods-- which is the first thing that people tend to see when they visit our city-- how are you taking care of your children? They may not notice that because they may be looking at the rich, on 42nd street, but actually the neighborhood is what anchors the dollars. So, if we don't have that time to anchor and we're one of the poorest parts in the country, that says that someone downtown is not taking a look at the bottom line, and what should be happening with the dollar.

MN: Now, what was the shopping like here when you grew up? Were there a lot of stores that were in walking distance?

HF: Yes, yes, absolutely. Southern Boulevard always was a good shopping area. Boston Road area had many more stores than they do now-- although, they're maintaining. They didn't do too badly considering the slaughter that we took here. And my mother and I used to walk to Bathgate Avenue. My mother used to sew and my father was a tailor. He used to run a factory downtown called [Inaudible] Sportswear and so her skill-- she taught me how to knit and sew and stuff when I was four years old and we used to walk over to Bathgate Avenue to get buttons and string.

MN: Now this was Bathgate near Claremont?

HF: That's right. We'd walk through there from here. And also Southern Boulevard down by Freeman was very filled with stores. Wilkins Avenue is called Louis Nine Boulevard now that was full of hardware, clothing stores, things like that. There was F&W Woolworth there. I worked there for F&W Woolworth when I was growing up. I think I told a fib about my age to get a job, but anyway, I worked there and earned some money for school.

MN: Did you ever go to Crotona Park?

HF: Absolutely. I learned to swim in the pool. I've been going to Crotona Park since I was about sixteen. There were many years I've spent there. Also Ninety-nine Park which is not too far from here.

MN: Ninety-nine Park is very famous for hip-hop--

HF: And basketball.

MN: And basketball.

HF: You may not know about the basketball days of the 50's and 60's.

MN: Well actually, one of my main informants, Nathan Dukes, played with Hilton White, who was his mentor.

HF: Yes. Well, they knew my brother George Fox. My brother played for St. Anthony's played for Cardinal Hayes, played for St. Francis College in Brooklyn, and he played court ball. So Floyd Lane, all of them were good friends. They lived right there on Prospect Avenue. Walter-- not Walter Dukes-- Ray Felix--

MN: Ray Felix was favored on the PS 18 community center in the Patterson Houses. And then Hilton White had his own group down in this area.

HF: Yes, so my brother knew all of them. And that's how I learned to play-- no really-- I used to have to go get my brother at Ninety-Nine Park to come home, and we walked of course.

MN: Now Ninety-nine Park is associated-- its cause of the school right?

HF: Yes, they call it that. I used to wade in that pool when I was a little girl, about three to five years old, and played basketball on their courts, when my mother said so. They used to send my brother to come get me, when I stopped coming home, and then my

mother had to send my little sister to get both of us, because if I was going to be playing basketball my brother used to bet on me to shoot from half court. I had a hook shot. So-- [Laughs] Anyways.

MN: Now, when hip-hop started, were you aware of it? Or, did it-- it didn't grab your attention?

HF: In a way, because we had the corner building and we used to have a dj stand, where kids would try to train at dj-ing for parties. So, I would try to make available to them the electricity or whatever we could use-- a stage, or a small stage-- in the storefront there so people could-- so kids could get their act together. It wasn't as pronounced and a lot of times I was visiting with activist families, but I could see the seeds of it.

MN: Cause you know, Grand Master Flash worked out of Ninety-nine Park?

HF: Yes, yes, yes.

MN: Do you use hip-hop in your youth work now at all?

HF: Not so much. Only because I'm like the big sister in a sense. I think of myself as that, or as Godmother. I'm concerned about the housing, the meetings, the politicians, and [Inaudible] or throwing a block party or something-- you know, we haven't gotten any help through these positions, in terms of the work, but I feel like just, everything that might be available is a development of the cultures, and keeping their enthusiasm for the neighborhood, and their respect. Making sure they know this is home base to be protected, and try to keep it healthy.

MN: Now, Mark and Rich, do you have any questions?

Rich Richardson (RR): Ma'am, I'm from Fordham, and I come to a lot of the talks, not for my thesis, but, I stay pretty much on top of these things, but I came across-- what was that-- lading or loading, is that you said?

HF: Loadies, yea, we call it skelzies.

RR: Oh, really? Cause I interviewed a girl one time and she was telling me about that and I had no idea-- what is that really?

HF: Loadies?

RR: Yeah.

HF: Oh, well, Loadies is a game that you'll see in the street, its got small boxes that have numbers and you shoot a bottle cap that usually you put clay in or wax, so it slides along the street evenly and you shoot that cap into each one of the boxes. And the thing is, who could get out, going 1 to 13, 13 being in the center, and one of the smallest ones to get into, and then you start backwards and then out. And whoever could do that, successfully, gets out first wins. And your skill is also increased if you hit another player then you can maybe, you can get one of the boxes and go onto the next box, the bigger box, and so on. And that's it. But, the whole skill is in control and aiming.

MN: Now, were these games played by both boys and girls?

HF: Yes, well, you had to have skills as a girl. I mean you just couldn't just, you know--

MS: So, not just any girl played?

HF: No, boys hate little girls. [Laughs] You had to really prove yourself and if your big brother's hollerin', "Don't hit her!" That helps too. But you know, the little one who came in, Habir, he's already aiming his loadies-- they're already here squaring off trying

to make sure they can shoot-- he's two. But he's so fast, he's noticing everything around him, and he remembers everything.

MS: I had a question.

HF: Yeah.

MS: When the burning of this section took place, I was just wondering how hard was it to get businesses, people investing in this section, after that happened?

HF: Well, it was almost impossible. First of all, the full force of the destruction that happened was so devastating and so continuous, that business had shied away completely. In fact, I held four international energy conferences here on this block. The fourth one I invited 39 countries. On the back of the flyer that I made, I had listed all of the countries that I invited on the front of the flyer, on the back I put a restaurant map of the restaurants that were still existing-- one on Southern Boulevard there, that's still there-- that came through the horror. One on Boston Road, and about, oh, about eleven others that were in the area. And the whole reason behind putting restaurants on that flyer was to answer the two raising questions that people might have; can we go there? Are people still alive there? Can we get something to eat? Can we go to the bathroom? So I figured these maps would answer those subliminal questions, so we wouldn't even have to say, "Yes, you can come here-- we're still alive." It was shocking and frightening. Mayor Koch, put a Neighborhood Preservation Office in many of the areas around here-- would not put an office in this area. He said we were too far-gone. This to me meant that we were totally vulnerable-- to anyone in New York City, I've already talked about that.

MS: I think you're absolutely right.

HF: And I'm seeing the mathematic of this. I'm seeing that if we're the most devastated area in the county-- having the most closed housing-- without there having been a war, and we're also simultaneously, the poorest part of the country, it seems to me that that's a pretty clear indication, you know. So, the mark of where mature members of the society have to dress down the possibility of keep the wrongness of here, so every generation is starting from scratch.

MN: And that's the idea, that every generation is starting from scratch because the leaders who grew up here and knew the terrain are not there, and they have to reinvent the wheel. And reinvent the wheel in more difficult conditions each, each generation.

HF: Yes, yes, yes. Precisely. Certainly, we didn't have things to deal with in our generations like AIDS, and some of the other ailments that are eating up on us now-- which I think is also directly related to not keeping a healthy environment for young people. This place we try to wash down everyday with [inaudible]--

MN: You have asthma, tuberculosis, you have, you know, which are, those are totally preventable diseases. Asthma and tuberculosis should not exist in advanced society.

HF: Yes. It really should not and for me to be here, to me is normal. If I look as though it's not usual for someone like myself to be here, than something is wrong with the complex, you know, weight of wisdom that pulls society-- it's not correct.

MN: But, you know, even at the level of the university, I'm suppose to, now that I've had a book out and I've had all this publicity, want to go to Columbia or Princeton or Yale--

HF: Yes, yes.

MN: And I don't. It's like success is suppose to be leaving the place where you have your greatest impact and greatest joy. And I think it needs to be contested.

HF: Yes. Absolutely. I've designed a whole new education system now. I really began to feel like it's futile to try to correct what seems to be a runaway railroad road off the cliff, because, where are all the PhD's that came out of this area? That's one thing that hit me when I noticed the second stage of deterioration. We should have an army of people in here almost immediately. If your body gets cut and I tell the children this, everyone rushes there to figure out what happened, what went wrong? And to start healing those wounds. We had the biggest cut in the United States' history happen here, nothing rush in. Nothing, no one. They just looked at it as though they were watching television. And then when I mentioned before about not getting a Neighborhood Preservation Office in this area installed--

MN: But that was because the philosophy of the Koch administration was playing shrinkage with Roger Starr, they, you know, the HU, Housing-- he used the term 'planned shrinkage' let's withdraw public services out of neighborhoods that are far gone and concentrate on the neighborhoods that can be saved, so, this was, an area where firehouses were closed, parks budgets were cut-- they were left to die. And it was city policy, planned shrinkage, right?

MS: How'd they justify it again?

MN: We have limited resources-- this is a fiscal crisis-- why don't we put them in neighborhoods, which could be saved, some neighborhoods are doomed. It was like, urban triage.

HF: Yes. And then when Moses came through with his plan for the Cross Bronx Expressway, his feeling, well, we have to really cater more to the traveling public than to the residents. So, it was ok to close off, you know, or lock out half the houses in that area

of the Bronx, we're gonna put 'em all in farms, we're gonna lock to doors downstairs, even though they're in prison-- so-- it's incredible when that happened, you know, that democracy of misgiving. And when Koch of course came through with the \$300,000 to put in four windows in those buildings--

MN: Were those false windows?

RR: Cause there's pictures of like--

MN: Of flowerpots. You used to drive along the Cross Bronx Expressway and they plastered abandoned buildings with pictures of flowerpots, you also saw it along the Major Deegan. It was the most incredible-- And also, I also used to drive to Fordham, I live in Brooklyn, from Easter Park--all along Easter Parkway-- used to drive me crazy.

MS: I actually saw a documentary about Moses and how he built the Cross Bronx. Now, why is it that people in the Bronx didn't ban together like they did in Manhattan?

Because Moses was planning on having a highway right through Manhattan, but they banned together, business owners, the elite down there-- I guess that's the key word-- and they prevented that from happening. That's why it's the only major city in the United States that doesn't have a highway running straight through the city-- because they banned together. Why didn't people in the Bronx do that?

HF: Well, my feeling is that, because of this continuous erosion or encouragement to get out of the neighborhood, we never have a band, tight response. I mean, there was a basic neighborhood response, certainly, that wanted to ban together-- the same ones who tried to save buildings that did not have to be close. They could take out those guys who were doing the vandalism and on, people were making the stand all over, and got no back up from the city at all. In fact, many got arrested. My feelings is that there was a constant

erosion of people who had the wherewithal and the brain matter and the passion to attack this thing, but there wasn't that coalescing around them-- people were exciting outward-- even mentors.

MN: Yes, I mean it was, the whole idea was to keep going north in the Bronx. I mean, people did try to fight, but the better-educated people ended up saying, well, it's easier to leave. It's easier to leave. And they keep running. You remember that song I played, "Run, Charlie, Run"? The Temptations' song, it was about white flight. But it wasn't only white flight; it was better-educated black and Puerto Rican Families.

HF: Absolutely. And this was the thing to do.

MN: Yeah. I mean, I look at, of all the people I'm interviewing from the Patterson Houses, most of them are in the North Bronx or Westchester or--

HF: Or China by now, who knows--

MN: Right. One's in Luxemburg. There's a banker in Luxemburg.

HF: Yes, yes.

MN: No, no, this is true. In fact, he's going to write a memoir-- it's by Allen Jones-- who was a basketball player who played in Europe and became a banker and radio personality in Luxembourg.

HF: Yes, yes.

MN: There are people all over the world!

HF: I know, I'm telling you. In fact, I had this idea once that I would have seminars here for people to adjust to the shock if they ever wanted to come home again. And they could go to their neighborhood like the remember--

MN: Well, I'm going to bring Allen down here when he comes to the United States and have him meet you.

HF: Ok, because I feel like some people will need a re-entry, kind of like, you, having a binge, or having left and then coming back here like-- and wondering what in the heck happened here. Because I think it would shock them senseless to realize how many changes we went through. I can't even believe we went through it, you know, with this many challenges.

MN: Yeah. Well, it's powerful-- there's a passage in this book where I describe what it's like to take the Third Avenue L to Fordham and watch the Bronx Buildings burn everyday. And then, in 1974, the same thing was happening along the Jerome Avenue L-- and this sinking feeling like, there were people's society-- and my girlfriend had two sisters who lived, one near Claremont Park and the other near Taft High School and so there were, I knew these neighborhoods-- and it was like, the most unreal thing to watch this happening. And the sense of hopelessness and also, where were all the people from the 60's, where did they go, why wasn't everybody down here?

HF: Believe me, and you know, internally you can feel that heat. We all had a spirit about our neighborhoods, about our blocks, that should have been applied immediately, but they just weren't put into the present. You know, the whole idea of defending home base is integral to everybody in the world.

MN: Yea. You know the other thing that happened was like, a lot of people I work with, they went through this like, going to the country thing. They went to Vermont, or Maine, or the homestead, and I feel like I was, you know, left here, like a sewer rat, to sort of fight this battle out. And I'd wonder, who the hell else is doing this?

HF: Oh my God! I had to devise so much strategy just to make people feel at home here; make sure mothers would feel comfortable, because if a mother doesn't feel comfortable, she's not going to correct her children. Alright. Don't break the windows; don't do this, you know, because she's thinking. I'm going to a place that's on the edge of the earth [Laughs], like Colin Powell's mother, you know, so, don't do anything with your kids because you're going to go someplace else. So, my feelings was, I had to also focus on the buildings, and make sure that mothers felt comfortable. There are a lot of things you can do to make children feel happy, but-- and that's also very key to help.

MN: And the other issue, which you know, is something we've talked about a lot in our department, is, when you talk about mothers, which means, what happened to the men? Because, when you were growing up most of the families were two parent families where the father was working.

HF: That's right.

MN: And at a certain point, that mold cracked apart.

HF: Well, I think that when the highest per capita allocation in the budget systems of government became \$60,000 a year, for a guy in prison, it suddenly tilted the scale.

Because I can see them going to buy a business a \$60,000 a year, but they were spending a lot of money on throwing kids away. Remember they used to have nigh centers?

MN: I grew up with night centers.

HF: That's what prompted me when I had the building on the corner to stay open till 10:30 every night, six nights a week, because I remembered the night centers, at least kids knew they had some place to go, even if they thought it was a bummer.

MN: yea, we always had, every public school was open till 10 at night. You could play basketball. Did you every play double-dutch when you were growing up?

HF: Oh, absolutely. That was one of the things I was teaching my sister; I was afraid she's be absolutely useless in life because she didn't know how to jump double-dutch. I said, you have to learn this. I mean, it's part of your defense as a woman! [Laughs]

MN: When did you learn double-dutch?

HF: oh early, early, early. Sex, seven, eight years old.

MN: Now, was there double-dutch in Harlem in the 30's?

HF: Oh, yes, I'm sure. I mean, I'm saying, I'm sure quickly because it was such an integral part of your average work, you had to learn what's most stuff, that I'm presuming it had to be. You know I wasn't there, but right out there in this street is where I jumped all my double0-duch. I mean your legs were almost sore at the end of the day because there was always double-dutch, then backwards one, and just straight rope-- sometimes the boys would join in, in the straight rope. Sometimes we'd make them turn double-dutch for us. [Laughs]

RR: I lived in the Forest area when I was six years old. I didn't have to but I figured there were a lot of girls on my block so the pressure was on when you played with the girls.

HF: Oh, absolutely. It had to turn right, right? It had to be double jointed.

RR: Oh yeah, they taught me how to jump sideways, backwards, everything.

HF: Well, my sister thought she was under punishment because I said, "No, listen, this is required-- it's part of what you must know!"

MN: Now on this block now, are there any-- is there adult male influences to speak of?

HF: Absolutely not. You know, I try to emphasize family-- like with the landers. I give out everyday, everyone gets about two colors, and t I give about two arms lengths of landers everyday to everyone. But guys with eight children can get three colors, so a lot of times guys will come up and say, well I went three colors, well, how many children do you have? Well, I don't have any children, I'm not married. Well, when you get married and have eight kids you can have three colors because we value family life very much. There's one family on the block where the mother had eight children. And those eight children were born right here on Lyman, and the father grew up on Lyman, he was from the South originally, and the mother was born on Lyman. And family life was what was the whole purpose of trying to fight to save the buildings-- not just a program to save buildings. Save the buildings, they can maintain family life, and they can encourage children to understand relationships, get to know each other, form. And this, this is like maybe the third set of kids I've been raising, many of them have moved away. There's still a tendency for kids to move away. I've lost some beautiful kids out of this block, you know, fabulous, fabulous, beautiful, young women. I remember growing up, we had gorgeous women. My brother was madly in love with, you know Juanita across the street, and Charlene, and so on. Where did those gorgeous women go? They should be here. You know, now, I'm sure their graciousness would help o lay another groundwork-- we have to fight a different war that's one thing. In the construct that people would like, we really do. We have to use, all of, a different set of skills. Love, beauty, music, you know, dance, whatever we can use to help to persuade people to understand that, the values in New York, the real war, is sticking together.

MN: That's interesting. I'm going to introduce so you to somebody. He's a guy named Hakim Hassan, who runs something for the Urban Institute at Metropolitan College. And he's preoccupied with the issue of how you can make neighborhoods a decent place to live. Because what he says, he lives in a poor neighborhood in Jersey City, and the things that strikes him is how people disrespect the neighborhood in the way they live, and the fact that you can't get a decent magazine, you know, there isn't a bookstore, and that sort of thinking, what would, what are the things that would make people respect themselves and their neighbors and want to stay around. What sort of, not just programs, but what kinds of stores?

HF: Well, this is a very tricky issue because it's not something as academics as it may appear; it's something that you have to do. So I realized that from early on that I couldn't approach this project as an academic issue, I had to approach it from my understanding of my feelings growing up here on Lyman Place. So those principles I began to apply and use my academic background and any special skills from my background to help bolster that. But basically you have to be there. You have to live there, and you have to demonstrate your care by what you do. You have to presume you're on camera at all times, because there's always a three year old in the window watching you, who may not speak English, but she knows what you're going with a broom-- you're sweeping the street-- You're out there demonstrating for them. And you're turning on the hydrant, or you're making little things for children, or you're making help for adults. They party we have here every year for 100 kids, my Christmas tree is still up-- as much of a tree as we have-- but that was a celebration anyway. And you create events and yearly things that

children can look forward to, or that the neighborhood can look forward to and have a reason to call when events are up.

MN: Let me ask you, this may seem like a weird question, are there ever-empty apartments, which open up in this lot?

HF: Oh, yes. There are some empty apartments right now.

MN: I, you know, it would be interesting to try and get some, some Fordham students to like, live there.

HF: Absolutely, absolutely. That would be fabulous. You see, because it's a continuous demonstration of, how should we say, we have all kinds of people who are living among us. And children really should grasp many different faces in their growing up. Like this little one here, he's gonna be an engineer, or a doctor, or something because he's investigating everything, he wants to see everything first hand, he wants to participate, his dad's the super, he helps clean up, he doesn't like dirt out on the streets already at two years old. And he's watching the younger ones kind of loose those habits, so it's very important for children to be able to look at, if you're the shoemaker, if you're the engineer, if your this, or the insurance man, or the guy who works at the cleaners, but they have to have a sense of variety of things available to them, not necessarily just the drug guy. Cause that's the only occupation that we see-- that's what you kind of like, get your two things together as far as--

MN: Let me ask you a question; is there a bookstore within walking distance of here?

HF: No, no, no. And the way that childhoods move, it's advanced in such a way that children are absorbing information so rapidly that it's beyond any book can hold. You almost have to slow them down to introduce the book. There are books right there that

are ethnically oriented books, you know, a friend of mind has a book company and so on, and they don't necessarily pick those up, but you see they're very quick with all the video games-- they're right on top of all the latest everything-- and that's how fast the information is moving. It's quite rapid, and we just have to accept that I think as--

MN: I think we're a post book civilization.

HF: We really are. We really are. And its not that children don't want to read, I read three newspapers a day and the children know it, and they know I do a radio show, they know I slip articles-- again I'm demonstrating by what I do-- so they're absorbing all this, and how much used they make of it in their future, but I just want their bag of tricks to be big. You know, to have a wide variety of things they can recall and remember. That's why those things are on the wall; every now and then they might look up on the wall and see those things, and the list of tribes and the languages. And I try to sing those numbers to them and I want to make recordings of those things. I started that about ten years ago but it fell apart and so now I want to get back to that. And put out a video of some of the things they may be.

MN: You have video equipment here?

HF: I do have a video camera and I take a lot of pictures. You know, over the years I have boxes of pictures from 1970, 8- and you know the play street. Every summer, we go to the Bear Mountain. We just had our Bear Mountain Trip last week, Thursday. We got back just as the blackout hit. So the blackout was like one big party for us. You know, people were dragging everything out of their refrigerator, and cooking it up the sidewalk [Laughs], so, you know, the party lasted all through the night. Unfortunately,

some of the guys in the elter business, as we call it, won't come back. They came with their cars and had their radios on and we were dancing.

MS: We need to have more blackouts!

HF: Right!

MS: I had a good time that night. I don't think I've ever had a bad time during a blackout.

RR: Me to. I just moved into a new neighborhood, near Astoria, got to meet my new neighbors, people across the street, it was a good time.

HF: Yes, yes.

RR: Once a week that wouldn't be too bad.

HF: Right, right, right, right, right, right.

MS: I'll bring some drinks!

HF: I don't know, when we had the blackout of '77, I dragged out my drums and I got on the subway and went over to Prospect Avenue and we were playing. You know, and the cops were there, trying to stop all the vandals and they heard this sound, so they swooped up with their lights on, and they realized pretty quickly that we were just playing music and they looked shocked. They didn't know what to do and they just rode off and we just kept on playing.

MN: You're whole concept of what you're doing is so powerful and unfortunately so unusual.

HF: Well, I think we're responsible always to bring the state of the art home life always up to date. University and huge corporations is usually trill. I mean they're far behind in terms of how they interpret things and they want a safety net. They'd don't want to

necessarily get their hands dirty. They want to interpret things nicely, or write a book or whatever. But as far as I think, its up to us take this to the next level. That's why I'm trying to work in a new education system that better reflects New York. New York is fabulous, fabulous internal city, and there are 200 languages being spoken here. There kids are so fast, the catholic system is slowing them down to get their message across. But that's the wrong thing to do with many of these children. They're already going 90 miles an hour, many of them. So, it's painful to watch the killing brain matter. That's what's happening in the classroom, the crunch.

MN: Is there a library around here?

HF: Yes, Boston Road. Up the way, about three blocks from here. So that's the closest book area. But as far as bookstore, that's something I was talking about earlier.

MN: Now, one of the things I thought was interesting is, how would you use students and volunteers here? What do you need people to do?

HF: I have so many things. I've been like a lone warrior doing all the parts. I would have to really take down the steps-- how to break a child down. Columbia University students came here one day to help me, just getting some borders. I have a bunch of arts and craft stuff in that back room. This room in the front that you see here, that has all of my supplies and things along the wall, all kinds of papers, they helped me to do that. I'd have to get a break down what's needed for the next stage. Cause I've always tried to break open new territory depending on what plants tell me-- what needs to be now to keep the order? So the Christmas party that's coming up, that's the most immediate thing. We're having a fundraiser in October, I just figured this out. Because this is the guy, named Frankie Sdu, and he's putting up a one- man show called, "The Griot," and

this company that's sponsoring it is by a guy named Bob Gumbs, who trades books for them and also grew up on this block. So it's begun to him them, after thirty-three years that, geese, you've been doing something you've been doing something up here all these years, and maybe you need some help. So this is going to be at the school of Harlem, the Jefferson School on 123rd Street, October the 12th. So that will be the first time that anyone from our neighborhood has actually helped with something. So, students can help with that. They can help-- I think Fordham has a radio program right--

MN: It's a station, which seems to be Bronx-phobic-- Do you need like tutors or things of that sort-- people to do educational sort of projects?

HF: Well, that's a big if, because I'm breaking open new educational territory in a sense, and I realize that what happens is that we try to make students better able to defend themselves through grade school than to get through grade school. But it's also feeding into the same system that's sending them away. See, cause there is no way to prepare them to do better in a place where people are telling them to have to get out. So, it's a quandary. And it puts me in a dilemma. Because I don't necessarily want to help with the same process that cause what happened here to happen to beginners. And I feel it's putting New York in a greater risk, even more so now that we have people who don't want to see New York succeed. So we have to build all we can, while the focus is inward, not outward. It's not to say that you can't leave and go someplace, but it's nice to have an idea in your head that you're able to come home and find people who know you. So, I'm walking a very fine line now in terms of how much I encourage participation from places that I know that is not sustaining the kind of championship excellence that I know the children have, and what do we do to train teachers to

recognize the genius in these children? We're surrounded by little geniuses here.

They're some of the fastest kids in the world. And I think of them as little kings and queens, and I try to treat them as such. This is not the kind of treatment that they get in public school. They're getting the same kind of thing where, you know, "This is not your home, you're not going to make any difference here. And you're poor, so you have these sort of qualities or don't have them," all these attitudes, and they're coming out and therefore not releasing their power on New York. You see, in ten years these are going to be the young men. There's a need to make this turn following so that America, actually can beginning to understand its true role in the world, so that, I would need help in how that begins to break down. How do we get out more newsletters that children can participate in, that puts out the word a little bit more.

MN: So a newsletter, or some kind of publication, is that something you'd be interested in?

HF: Absolutely, It'd do it on my own.

MN: You know, Rich is a real good writer, you could have him work with you.

RR: Do you want this one tape?

MN: You can take this off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]