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Grayson, Clydia

Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewee: Clydia Grayson
Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Dr. Mary Ward
Daniel White and Patricia Wright
Date:ND

Transcriber: Patricia Wright

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): This is the fortieth interview for the Bronx African American History Project and we are interviewing Clydia Grayson. My first question is when did you family move to the Bronx?

Clydia Grayson (CG): I got married in 1944 and I came to the Bronx.

MN: Yes

CG: No, what am I in there? This is the Bronx right?

MN: Right, yes.

CG: Oh, I moved in the Bronx in, when they first built the new projects.

MN: Which project did you move into?

CG: Webster Avenue. 1348 Webster Avenue

MN: Okay, was that Claremont village?

CG: Right.

MN: Okay. And where were you living before then

CG: 127th and Lenox Avenue

MN: Okay.

CG: I mean 127th and between Lenox and 5th.

MN: Right. Okay, so you moved to the Bronx in the 1960's. When they built the Claremont Houses.

CG: Right. When they built them.

MN: Okay, now, now -

CG: I was, nobody was never in my project but me.

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MN: Yes. Now -you had been in the beauty business. Hello? Could you explain a little bit about your store?

CG: I graduated in 1932 in Louisville, Kentucky under Madam C.J. Walker.

MN: You trained under Madam C.J. Walker?

CG: Yes.

MN: And she had a school in Louisville or in Harlem.

CG: She had a school, yes she had a school in Louisville but she lived in Indianapolis.

MN: Yes. Wow and how did-

CG: And I had a beauty shop, and when I was young around about - 22 at the - in Louisville Kentucky- on - done forgot what street it was on. But I had a beauty shop there in 1942.

MN: Right, no how did you end up coming to New York City?

CG: By getting married. My husband was from Savannah, Georgia and his people lived here in New York. So I got married in 1944 and then we come to New York. He was a staff Sergeant in the army. That's when I met him.

MN: Now did you open up a beauty salon when you came to New York City?

CG: Yes I did. Between Lenox Avenue and 5th Avenue. First I worked in a shop on Madison Avenue.

MN: Yes. Now what kind of work did your husband do when he left the armed forces?

CG: Worked for the city Transit Authority.

MN: Oh, okay. Was he in subway or bus?

CG: Subway.

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MN: Yes okay, now I'm going to leave it to Patricia to ask some of the beauty questions because this is not my expertise.

Patricia Wright (PW): Some beauty questions...okay first of all, how, how hard was it to set up a business for a Black woman.

CG: It was very easy cause when I graduated from beauty school from Louisville, Kentucky, I had my shop [clears throat] I opened up a shop then. And - my father died in when the democrats got in so I went to beauty school then and my mother said I was too young. I said no just let me try. And so I graduated in 1944 and I've been doing hair ever since. Up until last Tuesday I -last Monday I retired from doing it two days a week at Hudson Center for 18 years. I had outlived all my customers so I said it was time for me to get out. Maybe I would be next.

MN: So, wow, so when you were - you came to New York. How did you go about attracting new customers to a new store?

CG: I first worked in a beauty shop on Madison Avenue for a lady. And then when she went out of business I went to advertise the shop for her to go out then I opened up mine at 127th and Lenox Avenue.

MN: Yes

Dr. Mary Ward: So she got, you, you, you had your own clientele from the previous experience so you, they just came with you to that shop.

CG: What?

MW: The people that you serviced at the shop-

CG: Yes, the other customers.

MW: Yes, they would go - they followed you to your new place.

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CG: First I went home cause I decided after I had my first child, I opened the shop in my home and - he let - I had a - the one that owned the shop he - he was Italian and he let me open up a beauty shop there on the top floor. And I sent to Kentucky and got my furniture and I opened up there until my baby son was two years old. First I had a single next was twins.

MN: So, how many children did you have?

CG: Four.

MN: Four children and two miss.

MN: When you moved to the Bronx did you - and this was - were your children grown at that time or they were the still in school?

CG: When I come to the Bronx?

MN: Yes.

CG: I think they were, they were grown but they were born in the Bronx-

MN: Yes.

CG: I think-

MN: Okay, so, when you say- DO you remember the name of the project you moved to - was it.

CG: When I moved-

MN: To the Bronx. Do you remember what year you moved to the Bronx? Was it in the 50's or the 60's or-

CG: This is the Bronx, right?

MN: Yes.

CG: And I had to shop here in the Bronx. I moved in the Bronx- when they first opened the projects, what year was that?

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MN: Well it depends which project-

CG: The new, the new project where I worked at Webster Avenue. The projects - when I came here we had private houses but they opened up the new projects. Nobody was never in my building but me.

MN: Okay, so you were the first one in that building?

CG: Right.

MN: So, did you open up a, a beauty shop in the Bronx after you know, you moved to the Bronx.

CG: Yes, in the -18 years ago later.

MN: Yes

CG: When I come up here

MN: Right

CG: - and open up.

MN: Yes - Okay. Did - were most of the women whose hair you did, you know, from Harlem? - the ones at the shop you owned at Lenox Avenue and 127th street?

CG: Yes they was in Harlem. But when I moved to the Bronx, I had a lot of customers from the Bronx and I outlived them. So, they all died out. I used to work from 10 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon. And after they all died - I decided two weeks ago for, time for me to retire -

MN: Yes, now-

CG: -from two days a week.

MN: Right. Now, what church did you belong to in New York City? Were you a member of a church?

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CG: First I joined Mount Moriah. That was my first church. Next time when I moved to the Bronx I went to - oh what is that church - 169th - I just left them last - a year ago. And I'm at Greater Center in Manhattan.

MN: So-

CG: Cause I lived in Manhattan - in Riverton I've been there since 1994.

MN: Now so when , how do you get to this center?

CG: By bus.

MN: Yes, You take the Bus?

CG: Yes

MN: From Riverton in in Manhattan to come here?

CG: Right. Then I belong to Hudson Center. I belong to 127th Street Center. I makes three- two, two and three center seven days.

MN: Yes, and you all do this by public transportation?

CG: All with the public transportation - and 90 years old - [Dr. Naison chuckles] so I thank God on Sunday.

NM: Oh, yes. Now, when you moved to New York did you miss Louisville or did you miss Kentucky?

CG: No because my husband's people was all here and they took me right in and about me being a hairdresser and everybody came right to me.

Daniel White (DW): What was your community like in Kentucky? Was it-

CG: What?

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MN: What was your community like in Kentucky? Was it predominantly Black was it

[Crosstalk]

CG: Oh, we had soldiers stationed there at Ft. Knox. You know about it I don't, I mean they don't.

MN: Yes.

CG: And my husband was stationed there and he was a staff Sergeant. And so I met him - we used - I used to eat at a restaurant and I had my beauty shop then. I had a beauty shop when I was about - 27,28.

MN: Yes. How did you stay unmarried so long. You're very good looking.

CG: I was very popular but I enjoyed the fellas cause when I came out we didn't have cars. We had buggy and wagon then when they had the cars, I was very popular with the fellas but that's as far as we go. [Laughs] So my husband said I always sit in the restaurant when I'd eat... look like I wasn't interested what the fella was telling me. I said well, they talking talking, I'm listening. So, wasn't nothing for me to say because I work I'm tired. So, I just listen. I had my own beauty shop then.

MN: Yes. Now were you able to keep your business going when you had children?

CG: Yes- I - when I had my first son, I sent home and got my furniture and my landlord let me open up a shop in the house. I was on the top floor and I brought my furniture there and opened up. And I only had a few - people's hair that I washed because all my other customers come up these seven flights of steps. And these people would tell the landlord I was - using up all the hot water. And we didn't have a good - you know super. So, then I went over when my baby son was two years old, I opened up a shop at 127th and - between Lenox and Fifth. And they was

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telling the landlord I used up all the hot water. So, he said well I'm so glad Ms. Grayson. I said now thank you, you were beautiful to me. So, I went from there on up.

MN: Now, what denomination have you been church wise?

CG: A Baptist.

MN: You're Baptist.

CG: Always a Baptist.

MN: Always a Baptist.

CG: Baptist. And my children was brought up Catholic because they went to school and at that time- my - the teacher had died. And so I figured they'd go to Catholic school was much better. So my children was Catholic. But my only son say he's Baptist cause he was Christian is a Baptist.

MW: So, three of your children became Catholic? They chose to be catholic?

CG: I had four

MW: You had four children, right?

CG: Three was Catholic

MW: Three of them are Catholic

CG: -cause the older one said he wasn't but when he went to Catholic school he was ten years old.

MW: Oh okay.

CG: So he said he wasn't catholic.

MW: Oh okay.

CG: But the others was raised Catholic.

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MN: Yes.

CG: I learned Catholic too. I only went to class 'cause you had to go to school. You had to go to class before they could go to school.

MN: Right. Now was your husband Catholic?

CG: No.

MN: And so he didn't -

CG: He was Methodist.

MN: He was Methodist - but did he ever convert to you know -

CG: No he was from Savannah, Georgia.

PW: So did you all attend different churches as you were -

CG: What?

PW: So did you all attend different churches as you were-as the children were growing up then?

Or did the children decide -

CG: No I would go take them to Catholic school, I mean church early then Id come back to Baptist. I always took them to catholic school, I mean Catholic church because you had to be the mass.

MN: So you would essentially go to a mass -

CG: I would take them first and then come back to Baptist church. Cause I was right around the corner from Mount Moriah.

MN: Right, okay. Did you ever find it like confusing to be in two different churches in the same day?

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CG: No - I took up Catholic. I'm with the study but I never joined it under Father Mahoney - it was back in those days.

MN: Now how would you describe the difference between a Catholic mass and a Baptist service.

CG: Well, Baptist, we have preacher - he preaches. We sing and everything. And Catholic mass, you go to mass and the priest have you, you come around and they give you sacrament. You know -

MW: Sacrament? The Holy Communion

CG: Yes. Communion, right

MN: Now, when your children were going to church was there singing in Catholic church? You know in -

CG: Yes big blonde. My baby's son he still is a Catholic. He's a FBI [Inaudible].

MN: Yes, yes -

CG: And my oldest son, he works in Riverton.

MN: Yes - Oh, he works in the building complex that you live in?

CG: Yes.

MN: Oh, okay.

CG: So, I've been wonderful blessed. And my twins - my - one of my twins he was dead - both of them was dead smart. One went to Lehman College.

MN: Now, did you - yes

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MW: I just wanted to ask when you lived in Harlem and the in the Bronx did you -were you aware of a lot of churches and people going to church? Was that part of your life or did you [interrupted by CG] -

CG: I only went to Mount Moriah and - I was right around the corner from me. And then when the pastor died - then we had another pastor and he got killed by a car so then I decided I would come - you know - go move my membership to the Bronx.

MW: Oh, Okay.

MN: Now was there ever a point where you felt unsafe traveling in public transportation where, you know, you were worried about leaving the house or going in a bus because there was a lot of violence?

CG: No, I was never afraid. And now I go out at night. They yell at me for going to church at night. Im not afraid. I take God with me and go all the time because he's been so good to me. 90 years old and from Tennessee to Kentucky. From Kentucky to New York so I have a lot to thank God for. And me 90 years old, no aches and pains.

MN: And you're going to take the bus back to Harlem?

CG: Oh, I travel by bus all the time. All the time. No aches and pains.

MN: Wow. Yes, is there anything that you ate over the years that you attribute your health to? Any foods that we should be eating?

CG: I attribute - I take sauerkraut juice, that's my medicine.

MN: Sauerkraut juice

CG: Yes, you used to could buy it like orange juice and they found out it was a medicine.

Orange - I mean - what I say, orange juice, not orange juice -

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MN: Sauerkraut juice

CG: Sauerkraut juice. And so that's what I take all the time.

MN: Now, did you learn about that in the South? Or this is something you figured out later?

CG: No. I learned that when I was a youngster. A lady from the foreign country from Af- from - Africa told me that it was a medicine. You used to could buy it just like orange juice in the store. And they found out it was a medicine so they taking it away. You can get it at a health store.

MN: Okay. Now, where did you meet a lady from Africa when you were growing up. This was in Tennessee or Kentucky?

CG: No Kentucky. I - that was when my children was little. I met her. She lived downstairs and I lived upstairs.

MN: Now was she a foreign student?

CG: She was a foreign lady. She was a lady from - some, from the West Indies.

MN: Oh, she's West Indian.

CG: She was West Indian.

MN: And she told you about sauerkraut juice?

CG: Yes, told me about the juice. And you could buy it just like orange juice in the store. Then years later they found out it was a medicine. So they take it away, 'cause she told me it was a medicine. And so that's what I've always taken, still take it.

MN: Now, when you were younger did you go dancing?

CG: Yes! Red poppa.

MN: What kind of music did you dance to? What - any favorite bands?

CG: What we did was - Charleston. [laughing]

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MN: Charleston -

MW: Well, you were born in what year, now?

CG: 1913.

MW: 1913

MN: So you- oh and you -

MW: Well my mom did the Charleston and she was born in 1950.

[Laughter]

[Crosstalk]

MW: My mother taught me the Charleston.

MN: Right -

MW: My mom taught me the Charleston.

[Laughter]

MN: Now, did you do the Lindy Hop also?

CG: Oh I was, I was smaller than I am now and I still got my shape.

MN: Yes- [Laughs]

CG: That's what they tell me now. I pass the street and a fellow holler "mama you together"

[Laughter]

CG: And - all along the street they say "mama you together". Im not dressed up today but they say I know how to put it together. I said what they taught me in beauty school if you couldn't make yourself look different you couldn't do nothing for nobody else.

PW: Right, that's right.

MN: Now did you go dancing when you were in Louisville?

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CG: Oh yes, big poppa!

MN: Yes. Now what were some of the bands -

CG: That was had got cause. I love Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway. My husband liked Show. I didn't like Show. But I'd go to Show with him so he would go hear Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway. That's who I loved to go to the theater on, you know, where Harlem theater is.

MW: The Apollo theater?

CG: Yes

MN: Now was there a - did you go to the Apollo theater when you were living in Harlem?

CG: That's what I'm talking about.

MN: Oh you- oh, okay. The shows at the Apollo.

CG: That's where we'd go to the show. Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway-

MN: Yes, now did you ever go to shows in the Bronx? Did you and your husband ever go to clubs up here?

CG: Yes I have but I done forgot. Year after we came to New York at least his health got a little bad. He started to have trouble with prostate gland. And that's what happened. They operated on him at Harlem hospital. The wasn't even doctors. So I went to see him and he said to me if anything happens to me- first he said pray for me and if anything happen to me get a good lawyer but I didn't. And they wasn't - and it came out in later years they wasn't even doctors that operated on him. So he died in 44.

MN: Now were you left alone with four children after he died?

CG: They were grown.

MN: Oh, Okay so the children were grown.

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CG: Yes. My baby son he has two daughters. And my oldest one had one daughter. And I had a great grandson, he's four-four months old and he look up when he was born as if to say "whats happening".

[Laughter]

MN: Yes - Any other questions?

CG: So I've had a beautiful life

MN: Yes, well -

CG: And God is good. So ya'll always pay to him in thanking 'cause he has kept me. You see me 90 years old -

MN: Well we've got to get some sauerkraut juice [Laughing]. This - you could start a company marketing- you put your picture on it and market sauerkraut juice. It would definitely sell. All the yuppies would buy it.

CG: It is good.

MN: Yes,.

CG: No aches and pains. Only I have hearing.

MN: Yes

CG: That was wax had built up in it. Of course I had it blowed out about ten years ago. And this is the first trouble I had with it here lately. So now I'm better. The week before last I couldn't hear at all.

Daniel White (DW): I have two questions. One- the first is over your long career in beauty school and in doing hair did you ever do White people's hair and Black people's hair too?

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CG: Yes, when I first started I had a lot of White customers. And, but, see all you had to do is wash their hair and curl it. So then when I had all these customers and I had my shop I had to let them go because I couldn't do their hair with all them and they'd want me to do it. And the girl I had, - three girls worked with me. But they want me to curl it all the time. I tell them that they have to let other girls help them sometimes. I couldn't do it all. All of my customers always wanted me to curl. I always - love to curl. When I was a kid, I used to try to curl with a fork. And my grandmother say, you going to die and go to hell curling hair.

[Laughter]

CG: I always wanted to curl so I was a good curler and all my customers wanted me to curl but I couldn't curl everybody cause I had three girls working in the shop. So you have to let them curl you sometimes. I said but I'll do the best I can. They all wanted me to curl. They would let the girls cut them but Id have to curl.

DW: And the ladies, the White ladies who came into the store?

CG: Yes I used to do them all I had to do is curl and they waited. Most of them waited

DW: Was this during the 60's or the 50's or 40's?

CG: In the - it was when I first finished beauty school.

DW: So the 40's

MN: So that was - was that- that was in Kentucky then -

CG: That was [crosstalk]

MN: Yes. Right. But in Harlem your clients were all Black?

CG: All Black. I never - In Kentucky where I did the White- when I first graduated.

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DW: And my second question, you were in Harlem during the 60's. Do you ever remember seeing or hearing - Malcolm X or any of the other Civil Rights leaders.

CG: Yes. Malcolm X. I think I went to his meeting about twice. And he was very good and I went to when Malcolm X got killed in the Bronx and I went to where Malcom X got killed.

MN: Yes -

CG: In the Bronx. I had been to that theater to hear him.

DW: Audubon ballroom -

CG: Yes, right. I had been there

DW: So you had been to that place before

CG: To hear him. I was there I think two Sundays before he got killed

DW: Is that right?

MN: Yes

CG: And then we had a march. They didn't want to - nothing to go in there - Malcolm X's people wanted to go there. So they said-told him that they would let his picture be there but they build nice, a beautiful restaurant.

MN: Yes, there's a restaurant right across from Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. They -

CG: That's right, they didn't want -

MN: They have an upscale café in the old Audubon Ballroom.

CG: Right. They didn't want it to be there.

MN: Right.

CG: Our people didn't. But they told them they would let Malcolm X's picture be there -

MN: Right, yes.

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CG: And they went right on. The marched and all that. I didn't go for that.

MN: Yes.

CG: And they marched when they was building - the center on 7th avenue, what's the name of that?

DW: The mosque, the mosque down there?

CG: No - 7th Avenue.

NM: In Harlem or in -

CG: Yes, In Harlem

MN: Yes.

CG: Remember they marched they didn't want that-

DW: -at 116th street?

CG: No, 7th Avenue between 127th. You know the building -

MN: Oh the big office building?

CG: Office building -

MN: Oh, the Harlem office building. I guess they were displacing some of the local business.

CG: Yes I was there when they didn't want that built. They marchin', sit up late on mattresses and what not. But I didn't go for that I was just marching and seeing.

MW: Do you remember when Adam Powell was trying to get - black people to work in the 5 and 10 on [crosstalk, inaudible]

CG: I marched in that! And I marched, and I went to work in the 5 and 10 for a while - when we got it. And my - goddaughter she was the first -got a black in -- what was the department store?

MN: Blumstein's?

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CG: Blumstein's. I walked for them to get Black in there. We had all White in drug store and all in there. But when we marched to get in the store - 5 and 10 store, I went there and worked for a while as a counter girl. And I got so many tips they say "how do you get so many tips?" I say well people you know they saw me from the beauty shop. I still had my shop.

MW: When did you first come to the Bronx? Was it after WWII or before?

CG: After WWII. Yes, my husband was in WWII. He was staff Sergeant.

MW: And where did you live when you first came to the Bronx?

CG: In - Webster house. The first building. The projects.

MW: Claremont Village?

CG: Claremont Village. That's where my shop was where I just quit

MN: Oh so that's -

DW: 90 years -

MN: So what is the name of the place in Claremont Village that you cut hair? The Hudson -

CG: Hudson Center.

MN: Oh, there's a something -

MW: Yes there's a senior center there on 168th street and Webster Avenue.

MN: And that's called the Hudson Center. And you've been cutting hair there for 18 years.

CG: I've been pressing and cutting. But they had outlived two barbers. But I left, we have a barber there now. So after all, I outlived all my customers I said its time for me to quit last Monday. [Laughing]

MW: Did they have a party for you? The customers, did they -

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CG: No, but they told me to keep in touch with them. I went back to them and took them five dollars each to gold dollars in which- in thank them. So they told me to keep in touch. They going to keep in touch with me.

MW: Do you remember the - there was a big supermarket across from the - Claremont houses. And I forget the name of it but it was owned by a man named Llewellyn. He became a millionaire. This was - supermarket chain.

MN: Oh that was Bruce Llewellyn.

MW: Bruce Llewellyn, right.

CG: Right

MW: But the first store that he had was on Webster Avenue and about 169th -

MN: Oh really, cause he founded 100 Black Men. That organization.

MW: That was, you know, that was before he, well he may have been on the rise with the 100 Black men anyway. And, I, my sister went to school with his, his I guess niece or something.

MN: Right, Yes.

MW: But he, but that, I think at one time was the largest New York City housing development in the city.

CG: Right

MN: Yes.

CG: When first we had private houses then they all moved out in front of us.

MN: Right, Okay.

CG: You was a teacher there in school wasn't you?

MW: No I taught over here on 165th street. And - between Union and Tinton.

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[Crosstalk]

CG: Yes, Right.

MW: Do you remember me?

CG: Well we had a senior citizen down there for a while.

MW: Yes, Forrest neighborhood houses.

CG: That's right

MW: And my daughter went to the - daycare center. And I was involved with that -

MN: So you used to go to Forrest Neighborhood Houses?

CG: Yes, go, yes. I go down, I went all around. Still make three and four centers.

MW: Well that was when the [crosstalk] was in the Bronx. Over there -

CG: Right

MN: Yes

CG: First then they moved to the other. Down your way was -

MW: I'm flattered that you would notice that.

CG: Down your way was the first one.

MW: Yes and you remember - the daycare center they had there? With the little.

CG: Right

MW: -little kids. Yes I was the president of the parent association at that daycare center when it first opened. Cause my daughter went to the daycare center.

MN: Yes

[Crosstalk]

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CG: So -, my memories now is got a little, my memories now is a little foggy. I forgets. But I said I thank God on as well as I am. But I do forget quite a bit now.

MN: Yes

MW: They call that, you're having a senior moment.

[laughing]

MN: Right, that's the new phase, having a senior moment

[Laughter]

CG: Is that what it is?

MN: Yes, having a senior moment is what they call it. Okay. Well thank you very much.

CG: Well thank ya'll.

MN: This is a great pleasure.

CG: Okay.