

1-16-2008

Greene, David

Greene, David. 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

Greene, David. January 16, 2008. 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.

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: January 16, 2008

Transcriber: Ariana Allensworth

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Hello, today is January 16, 2008 at Fordham University. This is the Bronx African-American History Project, and we are interviewing David Greene, who is a teacher and football coach from Scarsdale High School, who grew up in the Bronx. Could you start off by spelling your name and giving us your date of birth?

David Greene (DG): David. D-A-V-I-D. Greene. G-R-E-E-N-E. My date of birth is November 3rd, 1949.

MN: And tell us a little about your family and how they ended up in the Bronx.

DG: Background. My mother was born - - I will start on my mother's side, my mother was born in Russia. She left there when she was 14, came - - she's very proud to say came second class, not steerage, to the United States in 1928 during Stalin, and her father had come here about eleven years earlier, to become a citizen, bought the rest of the family over, and because the rest of the family had settled in the Bronx, so did she. So they ended up in East Bronx, where the Cross Bronx Expressway now is.

MN: So in the Tremont section?

DG: Tremont section, the West Farms section there. My father's parents are from Austria-Hungary Poland-Russia, depending upon the date and who had and where the borders were at that particular time. They ended up in East Harlem. My dad grew up in the East Harlem family, along with some guy named Dutch, who turned into Dutch Schulz and another guy who ended up as Burt Lancaster and some other unsavory characters at the time as he tells me. They met, married in 1939. I was born ten years later.

MN: Now, did they meet in the Bronx or somewhere else?

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

DG: You know, I am pretty sure they met in the Bronx because my mother and her mother especially, would probably not let her out of the Bronx unless she was going to work just out of Manhattan.

MN: What level of education did your parents have when they married?

DG: My mother, I think had went no further than sixth grade. Her problem is when she came over, she spoke Russian and a little bit of Yiddish. And there was no ESL, and so she struggled to learn English. She was placed in her class according to age, and so she never really was able to succeed in the schools. Although she grasped English well enough to succeed in life, and so she dropped out of school in the sixth grade I think - - My dad went to Monroe High School, but I don't believe he graduated.

MN: Now, was your mother working when your parents met?

DG: Yes.

MN: And what was she doing at that time?

DG: She was a model, and down at the Fashion Industry. She did some print work but very little. Most of it, she worked inside various fashion companies.

MN: Now, do you know how she got that job?

DG: No, I don't. Which surprises, which always surprise me because knowing how unrisk taking my mom is, the fact that she would actually get a job like that is - - even back than throughout the glamorous industry always surprises me. But I've seen pictures, I have pictures of her from back than. Sort of looks a little bit like - - who was in *Casablanca* originally?

MN: Not Lauren Bacall?

DG: No

MN: Ingrid Bergman - -

DG: Ingrid Bergman!

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

MN: Really? So she was dark?

DG: No she had dark hair but had, it was a very classic kind of face. So she was that classic kind of model back in the thirties and I was always surprised that she would do this, because it is not in her character.

MN: Right.

DG: But then I found out some other stories, she met some very interesting people that asked her out and she refused, because she thought they were unsavory. And it turns out that - - oh gosh my memory is slipping - - who is in *Odd Couple*? Who's left in the odd couple?

MN: Felix?

DG: No, the other one, Oscar? In the original.

MN: Tony Randall?

DG: No, the other one.

MN: There's a sloppy one.

DG: Yeah, the sloppy one. Well anyway she went out with the sloppy and thought he, he was you know - - I mean - - and so she ended up somehow with my dad who is more unsavory than any of the others [LAUGHS].

MN: Was your, what was your father doing at the, what sort of work was he doing when your parents met?

DG: At the time, he was just starting out on his own as a trucker. His dad owned a produce store on Simpson Street. And - -

MN: Describe where that store was.

DG: Just off Southern Boulevard. Simpson Street in what you called the Jewish market earlier. And it was one of the neighborhood - - you know, there's the butcher, the produce guy, the baker, and the deli person, you know the kosher food guy, you know all the other people, the

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

tailor, you know everybody was there sort of like a medieval town I guess. And so he originally started working part time for my grandfather and drove the trucks to go pick up the stuff from the Bronx market or Hunts Point Market as the time progressed.

MN: Where was the Bronx Market?

DG: Bronx Market is not far from Yankee Stadium.

MN: So now the Bronx Terminal Market?

DG: Bronx Terminal Market. Yes. And it's still there. I am not sure how much of it is still recognizable and being used and such, but it's still there. And then it turned out that he branched out and got friends and friendly with some people who were truckers or owned trucking companies and then, and again at Hunts Point at the time there were lot of small manufacturers. Some of whom, they were manufacturing truck engines and things like that. He got really involved in things, and interested in that, and so through them, he was able to invest in or partially invest in a truck of his own and started doing trucking and produce trucking because that's what he knew and could pick out a fresh melon from forty paces, and ended up doing most of his business traveling around in the South and in Texas. But at the time that my parents met, he was just getting that business off the ground.

MN: Right. Now, did either of your parents speak with an accent?

DG: My mother - - again it's hard. I don't know how much of her accent she had then, but she still has a bit of an accent, so I'm "DJay-Vid" [Saying David with an accent]. And there's, so we used to live on Vyse Avenue except we lived on "Wyse Avenue" when she would say it.

MN: Yes. Wy-ise.

DG: Alright? Yes Vise, right? But what was interesting is that when people first met my mother, she trained herself as best as possible to not have that accent. And so, for some reason, they thought she was from Boston. [Laughter] Right.

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

MN: And your father was born in the United States?

DG: Born in the United States and raised in New York.

MN: Now did he - -

DG: We used to come home in the Bronx.

MN: Did he have, sort of a New York accent or - -

DG: No. Because of the traveling that he did, I think he was able to develop a non-accent. But the more time he spent in the South afterwards, and he eventually moved out in Miami, he developed a little bit more of a drawl.

MN: What, how many children were in your family?

DG: Just me.

MN: Just you.

DG: Just me, there was a stillborn and a miscarriage, one before and one after.

MN: Now, you mentioned something before that you ended, your family ended up moving to California for a short time.

DG: Because of my father's penchant for taking chances, and in the forties, California was the place a lot of people wanted to go. He had a deferment from the Army, a physical deferment. So he wasn't involved in the war.

MN: What sort of physical deferment?

DG: Something with his foot, as I recall. He didn't shoot himself in it, but I think it had something; he may have had flatfeet or something. Which is, which is odd because he was an athlete and he played minor league baseball for a little bit. But anyway, he took a chance, and in the early forties, they went out to California, and he had - - because of his more unsavory associates back in New York, apparently spotted him some money to start a business out there with some associates of theirs. It didn't quite work out, and so they moved back to New York.

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Then there was another opportunity, after the war, then they went back out there again after the war, and while that opportunity fell through, I was born, and then we moved back here, when I was, I guess about 18 months.

MN: What are your first memories of the Bronx. Where were you living at - -

DG: Okay

MN: At that point?

DG: First memories of the Bronx. At the time somehow - - this was when my dad, when my parents were still together and he was supplying some money for us, we had an apartment on Wallace Avenue on Pelham Parkway, right on the corner right across the projects over there.

MN: Right. Okay.

DG: And my first memories are of kindergarten there, for a little bit, and this big rock called - - we used to call it the whale. It used to look like Moby Dick, probably still there. And climbing on it, falling off, we trying to learn how to roller skate, I skinned my knee, my father said "don't cry, get up," my mother crying, trying to wipe it off, that kind of stuff.

MN: Yes.

DG: I remember the apartments, I remember I was I guess about five years old.

MN: Was this a building with an elevator?

DG: Yes, yes, yes. It was a, you know, 1930's art deco building with the elevator.

MN: Yes.

DG: The apartment even had a sunken living room.

MN: Right. Now this was not too far from White Plains Road?

DG: Yes, about 3 blocks from White Plains Road.

MN: Yes, okay.

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

DG: And so my oldest memories of there are when I am a real little kid. My cousins and my aunts and uncles lived nearby because they had moved up and out from the part of the Bronx that they had lived in earlier, and moved into nicer apartments or a house on Yates and Mace, which is a little further up near Allerton. My other uncle had an apartment on Wallace Avenue also. My third uncle had moved way up, he was the rich uncle. He moved up to Yonkers, had a house up there. So I guess, when my dad came back and I was born, he wanted to kind of live near where my mother's family was, because since him being out of town so much, they wanted to have - -he wanted to have her - - she wanted to be at least within walking distance, and we were within walking distance to a mile, and because that had always been the case that everybody lived in the same neighborhood, but not in the same building. When they were younger, they had lived within a couple of blocks from one another, because of some sort of an extended family but not in the same house, it's always within the same neighborhood - - there was a lot of Jewish families who did that.

MN: Yes.

DG: So that's my earliest memory but that wasn't for very long, because when my dad left and all of a sudden, the money wasn't coming in we couldn't - -

MN: Now, do you remember your parents fighting a lot?

DG: I remember them fighting, I don't know about how much, but I remember learning about how to become a referee at the time, and ducking as things got thrown around the house, a little bit. But again, my dad wasn't there a lot. So that's probably a good thing in the long run.

MN: And then, there was a certain point when you moved again, and how old were you when - -

DG: I had just finished kindergarten I think. And again we - - depending upon who you ask, we either had to leave, or we couldn't afford to pay the rent, and so we ended up at my

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

grandmother's house, who lived right around the corner at Minford Place, right around the corner from Charlotte. And there's Jimmy Carter, you know the famous picture of Jimmy Carter?

MN: Oh yes, I know.

DG: The famous picture of Jimmy Carter, probably standing over what used to be our old apartment building. And so we lived there for a little while. My grandmother... her husband, had died just before I was born. And there was a guy who lived with her, we weren't quite sure if he was a boarder or lived with grandma. We didn't know. Because everybody kept secrets.

[Laughs]

MN: Oh Yes!

DG: And they all spoke in a foreign language.

MN: So there was Yiddish, they all spoke Yiddish, when they did not want you all to - -

DG: Oh yes, absolutely, it was the foreign tongue, never to be taught to the children because then they would know everything they were not supposed to know.

MN: Right.

DG: So we lived with my grandmother for a short period of time, until we were able to get help from my uncles to get an apartment of our own. Also within walking distance and that was Longfellow Avenue and 172nd St.

MN: Right, fairly close to Southern Boulevard?

DG: Let's see [unclear, mumbling street names to himself]. Four blocks from Southern Boulevard.

MN: Now, when you moved there, was that block multiracial or was it still all white?

DG: Not all, it was still primarily white and of the white population primarily Jewish. But on that particular block, you could, if you went 2 blocks south, 3 blocks over, things would change.

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

So the neighborhood was very mixed. The elementary school that I went to which was P.S. 66 which was extremely integrated at the time.

MN: Now, you went into first grade there?

DG: Yes.

MN: Or second grade?

DG: First grade. I was originally in - - in first grade I was in class 1-3. For whatever reasons I am not quite sure at the time, I was probably socially maladjusted. [Laughs] Maybe a little, because I was a November baby, that was before the psychologists knew how to explain all that stuff.

MN: Right. Yes

DG: The following year I was put into 2-1.

MN: Really?

DG: The difference between 1-3 and 2-1 was that although 2-1, which was my probably the best thing that ever happened to me in my entire life history, outside of family, that particular class, several stories by itself. But the difference between 2-1 and 1-3 is that 2-1, although it is still integrated, had more white Jewish kids.

MN: Now you said that class had a really big impact on your life?

DG: Right. Huge.

MN: Tell us a little bit about that.

DG: First of all it's 1956-57 and this is Little Rock time, you know all that stuff is going on. The teacher we had was Rita Stafford, who is now Rita Stafford Dunn at St. John's University, who is, she and her husband have authored books on learning styles. And so she's turned into quite the academic in education and educational psychology and things of that nature. But that time, she was our second grade teacher. And apparently, we were like guinea pigs, and so what

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

she did, is that she kind of threw out the first grade curriculum - - second grade curriculum, and we were doing long division. She challenged us in every which way, shape or form, we did all sorts of activities, that were - - if it was New York City now, she would be fired for taking these kinds of risks and chances. But it was fun back then. And so, we constantly were being pushed, and controlled in a far more enjoyable way. She praised us up and down. We strung our planetarium from the ceiling of the classroom. We were doing all these things. And this one project, which is phenomenal at the time, she started telling us about the Little Rock stuff, and what was going on down South, and integration in education systems et cetera et cetera, and so we started doing a project on it and one of the things we did is we wrote letters to the president, to President Eisenhower, and sent him letters, and he had one of his cronies send us a response back. But, apparently word of this got out to the New York Times, and so when I was seven years old, I was quoted in the New York Times.

MN: Do you have a copy of this?

DG: I have a copy; I will get you a copy of that article. And so, here's his article about this second grade class in the Bronx, integrated, sending letters to the president of the United States, with our suggestions about how to handle it. I cannot remember everything word for word, but my suggestion was that he had to take things into his own hands and maybe he should send the National Guard or US Army or something.

MN: Yes.

DG: Turns out, he did, and I thought that I - - [Crosstalk]

MN: Right, there you go.

DG: There it was, it was *my* letter, he'd read *my* letter. [Laughter]

MN: You got to him to send the National Guard to Little Rock.

DG: I got him to send to Little Rock.

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

MN: We have to put this on historical record.

DG: So ironically enough, this past fall, Terrance Roberts, one of the Little Rock Nine, came to our school, to Scarsdale High School to speak. So I met him, and I gave him a copy of that newspaper article, to say that we were thinking of you then as well. So it was those kinds of things that made that a memorable thing, and what we ended up doing at the end of the year, is that we pledged that we would have an annual reunion at Christmas time, at Howard Johnson's on Southern Boulevard, and Fordham Road, that no longer exists. Now it's a McDonald's - -

MN: Yes.

DG: Right down the block. And we did that for ten years up until we were all high school seniors, and we went all our different ways. And about four years ago, it's probably more than that now, we had our 40th anniversary - -

MN: Really?

DG: Meeting at her house up in Pound Ridge NY.

MN: Isn't that something?

DG: So it's, its one of those lasting, lasting memories, and the interesting piece is that all, we had somebody who's a- - Puerto Rican women who came all the way from Puerto Rico because she moved back to Puerto Rico, a Nuyorican.

MN: Right. Yes.

DG: She moved and she came up to the reunion. One of them, the black kids - - the black kids, because that's how I remembered everybody. We all had these little - - his name was Anthony Roland. And I always remember Anthony because he was always slightly taller than me, and I always wanted to be the tallest kid in the class, it was always Anthony.

MN: Yes.

DG: And Anthony was skinny, and he always wore these bow ties.

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

MN: Yes.

DG: Right. So there's this image of Anthony in my head. And so he came back, and it was a marvelous, marvelous kind of thing and the idea - - and there was also an article in what was the Bronx Post, which existed at the time.

MN: Right.

DG: And it was just a terrific, terrific thing and she inspired everybody to do something with their, with our lives.

MN: Yes. Jesus. That's really something.

DG: And then she turned out to be quite famous in her own right.

MN: Yes. Do you know anything about her background?

DG: No. [Laughs]

MN: And this is a white woman or black woman?

DG: White woman. Who ended up by - - decisions of the Board of Education... designated back then, who was going to teach in their buildings. Circumstances, she was a second grade teacher assigned to class 2-1 in P.S 66 in the Bronx.

MN: Right. So would you say she was a relatively young person at the time?

DG: She was probably 22, 23, and of course we thought she was ancient. [Laughs] But she was in her early 20's and what it turns out when we spoke to her finally afterwards is that she was kind of doing some of her initial research on learning styles and what makes kids learn better, and using us as guinea pigs. And it worked, I'll tell you that.

MN: Wow. Now one of the - - were either of your parents political? You know, that neighborhood had a lot of people who were trade unionists and socialists and, you know, Henry Wallace supporters. Was their any of that in your family?

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

DG: My, my mother was apolitical. She was more about day to day lets get enough money to and feed ourselves stuff. My dad - - God he was complex. Because here's a guy who would tell stories about going down south, and *deep* south, segregated south, and having to go to truck stops and restaurants and he put himself in danger because he felt a greater affinity to the black folk down there. And so he would go inside the restaurant, bring food out and they would all sit outside by the trucks covertly with black drivers and doing that. And so he would tell me these stories about this and so here he is in his own way like a political activist and rebel you know.

MN: Describe him because you know - -

DG: Oh. Well he's - - Physically?

MN: - - describe him physically and then his dress and his affect.

DG: Physically he's about six feet, about 200 pounds, he's athletic. He's very athletic. Good looking, he's about your size. And [laughs] because he sort of pictured himself as a Jewish cowboy, as I told you earlier. He would be driving around with a Stetson and boots and you know jeans, and of course because he was in the South a lot, and his original last name was Greenberg, he changed it to Green with an E at the end, to fit in, and carried, had a Colt 45 on the front seat of his truck which he didn't take out unless he actually felt that he needed. He was a sort of imposing I guess - -

MN: imposing figure.

DG: figure. Yes. An imposing, athletic kind of a figure. And I think part of that allowed him to to - - he's not the stereotypical Jewish looking person, to put it to you that way. And he spoke with, I guess he was sort of, had a wayward dialect to use it - - to find a drawl when he needed it.

MN: So, he could speak in almost any - -

DG: Oh yes. He spoke Southern. So he can do that and whatever, you know he tells - - he wasn't trying to scare me or scare anybody else about some of these things, but he sort of

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

tempered the way he told the stories, to say that he would do that he would go, if he had a choice, if it wasn't that he tried to size up the situation. He would prefer actually going around back and meeting in - -

[Empty section on tape for about 30 seconds]

DG: So when I was younger, these things couldn't mean anything to me, but as I got older, and then I said, that doesn't make any sense. And then obviously as I got older, and I got more into my 20's and you know, I was in college and it was the 60's, we got into some heavy arguments about politics and social issues, and there were a couple of points in time that we actually didn't talk for a couple of years.

MN: Yes. Now where did he live after, where did he hang his hat?

DG: Eventually?

MN: When - - after you and your mother found your own place.

DG: He hung his hat down in Miami. He actually for a period of time - - had a house boat off Collin's Avenue on the intercostals and he lived down there for a long time, and continued to live down there.

MN: And how long, how often did you see him in those years?

DG: Very rarely. I did not go down to Florida until early 70's and he had been down there since the early 60's on and off.

MN: Right and how often?

DG: He came up to visit us.

MN: How often would he visit you?

DG: He would visit me when he drove up here on business. Once he stopped coming up to New York to drive - -

MN: Right. Now what was your block like? And was your block an important place for you?

Interviewee: David Greene
Interviewer: Mark Naison
DG: Well, there were blocks.

MN: You moved several times. But you started out in Longfellow?

DG: I started off in Longfellow. I start out at Longfellow, and I am there through the sixth grade. The block was basically. There was school, and there's P S 66, there was a school yard at PS 66, which we would go down to and play baseball but still you know how it is. And it was a typical kind of schoolyard because, it was, had to fit into New York City streets, so it was really long. And the building was on one side, and it was narrow, and you had to learn how to hit to one field because if you hit it over wall it was an out. And so, it was just everybody was in school, you would go home. You would either - - there were those who went home and did their homework, which was most of the Jewish kids. And then there was me, because I hated doing homework. And which is why ironically I am a teacher. And so I would go down to the schoolyard and play with the kids who thought play was more fun than ever doing the homework. So as a result I sort of self selected out a more mixed group of kids, and so we would just play ball until it would get dark or mothers would start screaming out the windows and you know say "Get up here for dinner blah blah blah blah" et cetera, et cetera. Or, I would be with some of the kids on the block. And then stay really literally on the block, because blocks are very territorial. So the schoolyard was a place that people in the neighborhood would go to but if you were on the block, you stayed on the block.

MN: Right,

DG: And you played on the block. So you would play stick ball, the long way, you know, one shot, one sewer, two sewers. You would play stoop ball, you would play off the wall, you would play all those various games that all of us city kids grew up with. And rarely ventured off the block, because if you ventured off the block, even though we weren't in gangs or anything there was till that sort of territoriality, where if there were three or more of you, walking from one

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

place to another in the wrong block, people would look at you strangely. And you might have to defend yourself.

MN: Right.

DG: Which happened from time to time. Then I moved, I forgot, I don't remember exactly why, but then that neighborhood - - that block was beginning to change. My mother started getting nervous about the block because color crept up Longfellow Avenue from South to North. And so the southern side of 172nd Street became darker and more Hispanic, and my mom, started creeping out about that, but I didn't care. And then so she decided it was time to move. We couldn't afford to move where all of the other white folks were going to move, so we moved 2 blocks West, up the hill to Vyse Avenue and 173rd. And this is when I, it was junior high school, and I was going to Herman - - and that's when I started to go to Herman Ridder. And essentially, it was the same thing, except now because I was in 173rd Street, PS 66 was off limits, because it was a different neighborhood, even though it was only two and a half blocks away.

MN: Right

DG: So at that point, it's more people on the block. PS 50 was down the block between 173rd and 172nd, so we go there and Crotona Park.

MN: Right. Now, did your mother have these whispered conversations about the Schvartze [Yiddish word] the way my - -

DG: Well, some were whispered and some were not. So, you know, we would have conversations where we would talk about friends who could come to the house, and she would always - - because my mother's a very polite very caring person. Again, another dichotomy. I mean, she would go out of her way for anybody, and anything and forgiving and generous except the word [Schvartze] would come up. Or the quote, I'm sure it's sort of an international Jewish quote, at least in my mind, "you can be friends with them they just can't come into the house."

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

MN: So she - - and this was for anybody who wasn't Jewish but or was specifically for blacks and Hispanics?

DG: Specifically, for Black and Puerto Rican kids because as far as we knew all the Spanish kids were Puerto Rican.

MN: Yes.

DG: Or as my mom would say Spick.

MN: So she used the word Spick?

DG: Oh yes. Rarely though, rarely though. And because she was not a person who used foul language, but she - - I think, she felt more comfortable using the English slang word for a Puerto Rican than she did used the word Nigger for a black person.

MN: Yes.

DG: Because they were called, I am sorry they were colored. She'd say, not the coloreds.

MN: Not the coloreds.

DG: With the finger. You have to shake the finger, not the coloreds. So this was 1960 is when I left Longfellow Avenue. And so I started Ridder and I was there until 1963. And during that 3-year period of time, the pace at which the neighborhood changed increased geometrically. And so she got more and more worried. When I went to Ridder, at that time, Ridder was still integrated, but probably now sixty-forty, all right, maybe sixty five-thirty five with white kids being a minority as I started. Then as I stayed there, it was more and more a minority and I became more and more a minority and there were very few white kids by the time I graduated. So in the middle of my last year there, my ninth year there, we had to move somewhere else, again not affording up northern Bronx or some of the other places like Riverdale, which people in Riverdale never claimed that they were in the Bronx, they thought that their was a separate borough called Riverdale. We moved again to the great Jewish portion of the Grand Concourse.

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

But at the time, the Concourse was also changing. So we moved to the Roosevelt. The

Roosevelt Gardens was a very famous building. It's a block long, it's named after Theodore Roosevelt, it was built in 1903. It was a huge complex of apartments - - buildings that opened up into this huge courtyard. It was probably at one time, before I moved in, beautiful, but it was already starting to be handed down from landlord to landlord so it started to deteriorate and things but yes it was a great place for a kid growing up. We had a long built in neighborhood and at that time, I started going to Taft, rather than the local school yard, I think it was P.S 64, on my side of the Concourse, the game was better, basketball was better, the street football was better, everything was better. And Taft had this huge place out there where we could actually play full games of softball, full games of tackle football, even though it was asphalt. And so I would go to the other side of the Concourse. So that was the other area that I went to. But again, because I was not the studious type, I was always out playing more so than anything else, so I was out adventuring around with people outside of the little Concourse, and therefore coming in contact with more people of color.

MN: Right. Now, back to Longfellow Avenue, did you get exposed to music in the streets, at the same time you got exposed to sports and street games?

DG: Not so much.

MN: There wasn't that much of the doo-wop stuff in your neighborhood?

DG: No that was, those were in other neighborhoods, other blocks over from us. But, I was young, so it may have been there, I might have not noticed it, because I was really tuned into playing ball more so than anything else.

MN: Right. Now did you - - your mother did not let you invite black or Spanish kids to the house, did you get invited to their house at all?

DG: On occasion.

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

MN: Yes and what was that experience like? Any memories of that? Like food-wise - -

DG: Well, I used to develop a really interesting habit, depending - - and it didn't matter which family I was with. My mom, used to work, she used to get home late. So usually she used to get home at 7 o'clock. And I couldn't touch anything. You were not permitted to cook. So I would have to - - so she would come home, and my mom is not a great cook, of normal food. And so the staple was baked potato, remember she's Russian. Or forms of baked potato or mashed potatoes, and in the old days, you would put them in the oven, and it would take seven days to bake a potato basically.

MN: [Laughs]

DG: And she would take meat, and shove it in the boiler, so it would come out grayish-brown. Yes, it was really ugly and disgusting. And you would have to kill it with you know, salt and pepper, so then, I wouldn't get to eat until 8 o'clock.

MN: Oh God! I wouldn't - -

DG: Yes, and so this was before I had any money. And so it's like I wasn't a big, you know a bigger kid, that could just go around the corner to 174th Street, which is another one of those Jewish market lanes. You know, great place to buy everything except I didn't have any money to buy it. So if a friend of mine would invite me over after playing in the school yard, and it was time to eat, and [laughter] they'd invite me for dinner. And I would go. Well you know I shouldn't, because you know and my mom is going to cook dinner and [in a squeamish kid voice] so often times I had 2 dinners. I had a dinner at a friend's house, and then dinner at home, and let me tell you the food was better at their house [laughing] than it was mine. And again, it depended upon who I was. So I had an early face-to-face confrontation with a bean, at a Puerto Rican friend's mom house. I was looking at her kind of strange and chewing on it like, what is that? And then rice, rice was a whole other. You know so and in depending upon who it was.

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

So I learned about rice from Spanish guy and I learned about Spaghetti from an Italian guy who lived up the block, so it would depend but because I was taught to be polite, I didn't do that very often.

MN: Yes. Now what was Ridder Junior High School like, that experience for you?

DG: Well all you've got to remember, that's the most awkward time in any human being's life is Junior High. So what am I, only like 12, 13, maybe 10 when I first started, because I skipped a grade in elementary school. I was also younger than everybody else. So it was very awkward for me, more so because of my age than anything else. I was a lot younger than anybody else. So it's sort of a period of time that I'd rather, it's kind of like I am glad it's over, or it went quickly. Because I felt a little awkward, a little shy, I was going to a new school, new people and new area, kids that I didn't know. And I learned - - you know, you had to make a choice when you went into Junior High School. You want to go into the chorus or you want to take up an instrument? So I said - - I used to like Harry James, so I said, I like the trumpet. So, Harry James, and Louis Armstrong. That was cool, if I had to learn something, I'll learn how to play the trumpet. So because I filled out a lot on the application form or whatever it was that you filled out back then, trumpet, I ended up in the band. And because I was in the band, again there was a whole big mixed group of people, but by that time I remember, as I said earlier, the percentage of white kids in the building was growing increasingly, increasingly small. And so there were a bunch of guys and a bunch of people, and there were a couple of kids who came from my elementary school. Everybody else had moved out of the neighborhood, and so I became friend with Ron Ingram, not the DJ, all right, Walter Jones - - all black guys. I forgot what was his last name was. And so right at that period of time, the guys that I was closest with in junior high were black and Puerto Rican guys but at the end school, they went back to their own neighborhoods, because again, it's the Bronx, and everybody's - - So I would go back to

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Vyse Avenue, or I'd take the bus the Concourse when I was in 9th grade and everybody would go back to where they were. But the one place we had to go to was the band room. Now if you look at Herman Ridder, Herman Ridder's a V shaped building, it was about 3 or 4 stories of classroom, and right in the middle was this sort of phallic, a tower.

MN: A big tower, yes.

DG: It's a gorgeous building. And the band room was up in the tower, and so that would be our headquarters along with our lunatic music teacher Jack Gerard who astounded me. I took private lessons, to learn the trumpet from him. He had an extra music studio on Fordham Road just off of Webster. Slightly up the hill and his claim to fame is that he actually played 2 instruments at the same time, coming out of his mouth. So, every once in a while, he would show up, [making horn noises] clarinet over here and saxophone over here, in harmony and I have no idea, and I was struggling trying to learn how to play the trumpet. And I also figured that having bigger lips would help me play the trumpet, that was an advantage. So basically, that was my junior high experience. At one conversation that, of all of the conversations I had in junior high school, I remember it was with my friend, Walter. Walter went on - - interestingly enough Walter went on to Science with me. We had no idea, just turned out that way. And [laughing] he used to say, you know I really feel sorry for you. I said why? And he said, because all white girls are ugly. [Laughter] And he said, the black girls are really much more attractive. And remember he's like a year and a half older than me.

MN: Yes. Right.

DG: And remember, he's like a year and a half older than me, so I'm like, who cares? And then I would look around and I would realize that he was right, but at the time I didn't care enough to do anything about it. So, that was one of the things, that's just really funny, just a random conversation.

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

MN: Now, in any of the situations you were in, did you experience open racial tension, like in the street, in the school?

DG: One time. This friend of mine, who was the white kid I became friendly with, we were walking home from school one day, down on 173rd Street. So we were walking down the street three black kids we didn't know, mugged us. The only time I ever had a negative experience when I was there. Of course my mother freaked.

MN: Now, did they use racial epithets, did it ever come up that you were white?

DG: Again, I think, I can't actually recall, they said something about us being white. But I think mostly because we sort of weren't the toughest looking kids in the neighborhood either, because A we were younger, and we were a little pudgy at the time. It was more that we were an easy target.

MN: You felt very comfortable in school, and going to school, and walking around, and on your block.

DG: There were some times as I got older, again this is back when I was at the school, that I somehow felt a little ostracized, I don't know if it was a condition of color, or me being uncool, or whatever it was. But there were some times I felt a little excluded from the things that were going on, because we literally didn't have a schoolyard, so we'd go out in the back, sometimes I just wasn't involved in the things people were doing. But that was an awkward stage in my life, it was bad.

MN: Did you make any connections between what was going on in the country in terms of Civil Rights, and your life in Bronx? How did you think about that?

DG: Yes. Again, because of my experience back in second grade, that was always at my fingertips, it was always something that I had almost been programmed to think about. Again, you know there's a difference between looking at it in a little picture and in a big picture. You

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

know, as a kid, I didn't want to read the newspaper, but there it was, and on occasion I would read the newspaper, and stuff that was going on, and I remember being very interested and intrigued with the March on Washington, and what was I 12-13 years old? And Martin Luther King and what was the guys - - Adam Clayton Powell, for some reason I got very intrigued with Adam Clayton Powell, because I liked his hat, when he was standing behind Martin Luther King, he had that hat on, and I said who is that guy? And then I found out who he was, and I was like oh wow he's from here, he's New York, because very few people from New York who were involved in that. And so I was looking at that, but most of it I was trying to figure out.

Politically, in 1960, I do remember this, in the presidential election, I think my mother was a Republican because she liked Ike, and so any friend of Ike had to be a friend of hers. And so Tricky Dick, was a friend of Ike was a friend of hers. So, you know, somebody says hey can you hand these things out door to door. And then I got to a friend of mine, who said, why are you handing these out door to door. Do you have any idea? And so we had this conversation, at which point is I dropped the Tricky Dick stuff up, but he gave me some stuff from JFK, and I started liking JFK, and that period of time brought me to really appreciate what he did, his speech, and the whole idea of the country coming together behind Civil Rights, and so because I was still more of a, I want to go play ball, than anything else, that was the center of my life, but there was a growing interests, although at some points I do remember wishing I was older that I could do some of the things like, I knew people going down to Mississippi, but that was a little later on in 64 and stuff like that.

MN: Now, did you ever become completely immersed in music, like the rock and roll stuff?

DG: Not until later. When I could afford something to play.

MN: You never got into singing groups or any of that stuff?

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

DG: I got into it later, mostly because, you know, living with my mom on her meager salary, and not getting a whole lot of alimony and support from my dad, we were kind of like living from day to day. And so, the privilege of having a record player, and being able to buy records was not something I had

[END OF TAPE ONE SIDE A: BEGIN TAPE ONE SIDE B]

DG: Up until I got into high school, did I really start learning how to collect, and get stuff, and now it's like you can't move around my CD collection, there's just too many of them and I keep gathering. But at the time I just felt that, you know, I couldn't do it because I couldn't afford the record players.

MN: At the time you're entering high school, did you have a sort of sense about where you fit in the Bronx, and where sort of the Bronx fit in the world?

DG: I got angry, as I got into high school, as I got older. I got angry at a couple of things, I got angry at my family, and I got angry at my friend's families who left. And I remember that everybody was bitching and moaning about things, and I just kept saying, but if you didn't leave it would be okay, if you were here, the schools, everything would be fine. You know, everybody lives together. And I remember having real arguments with people in my family, my mother, who wanted to move, couldn't move, couldn't afford to move, but she defended everybody else who did, and our building began deteriorating, literally. And I began to learn my landlord's name, who had become one of the infamous slumlords in the Bronx.

MN: This is in Roosevelt Gardens?

DG: Roosevelt Gardens. And my mother having to deal with the heat that didn't work, and the faucets that wouldn't get fixed, and the paint jobs that wouldn't get done, and watching this place deteriorate in front of my eyes, and everybody moaning and groaning, and it's the new people

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

moving in, and I knew everything, and it's not the people moving in! It's NOT the people moving in ... it's the landlord! And so I started getting angry about that, and then when you go to Science with people who are living all over the Bronx, and other places, and that's when I began to see differences in opinions, that I did not like. And people would say to me, what are you the anti-Jew? Why don't stick u for your own people? And these kinds of conversations. So, that was going on in high school. That and, to get back to your music thing, it wasn't until high school - - First of all, I started playing The Beatles at the time because all the girls were screaming about The Beatles, and this time I'd gotten interested in girls. But, my friends and I, and this is where we finally kind of got into music, was with The Temptations. So, that's where I started my interest in music, was with The Temptations and The Four Tops, and so we had about four or five friends and we used to go down to the D train station on 171st street, and there's a little echo corner over there. So we, having known of the doo-wop groups, and knowing how they would find these little corners where they could echo off the sound of their voices, and to get a beat, so we started doing that with the Temps and The Four Tops. So we knew all of The Temptation songs, all of The Four Top songs all of the steps.

MN: Now was this a multiracial group or this was mostly white?

DG: No these were the remains of the white kids in Roosevelt Gardens, and one friend who lived down on University Ave. And so we would go down there and sing, and Melvin Franklin was always my favorite, because I always had the deepest voice, and not matter how hard I tried to get as low as Melvin Franklin I could never do it. So, that's were I really started - - So, The Temptations, and The Four Tops, that's when I really started saying I've got to have more and more music. But that wasn't until '65.

MN: Did any of your friends in the Bronx come from left wing families?

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

DG: No, most of them were hard working, middle-class, but so concerned with their day-to-day lives, they were not too political at all.

MN: Did you get exposed to any kids who were active Civil Rights advocates, like high school C.O.R.E types?

DG: Only by name. Bronx Science, there were some. That's the other part of it, was in Science from '63-'66, the Civil Rights Activists who were there were probably three years older than I was so I was in that cusp of a generation, that was post-Civil Rights, pre-Vietnam when I was in high school. So my activity didn't start, such as it was, until '68, '69 when I was already at Fordham.

MN: Now where did you go college?

DG: Fordham,

MN: Fordham downtown?

DG: Downtown, right on Duane Street, started out in the old school building down there on Broadway, and when the Lincoln Center campus opened up moved up in there.

MN: Now how did you end up at Fordham?

DG: Remember all those times I said I didn't like to do homework? And so,

MN: [Laughs] [Cell Phone rings] I'll get it, that's my phone.

[Tape stops recording, then starts again]

MN: Okay, so you were saying..

DG: I was not a homework kid. Because I learned early, that you should only do what you have to do well, and so elementary school was a breeze, junior high school got to be a little tougher, actually 7th and 8th was great. Then I ran into algebra and French in 9th grade and that was nasty. I still didn't want to do work. So anyway, that went on through - - I got into Science because I was able to pass that test, probably would have been better off socially and academically if I'd

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

gone to Taft, ended up going to Science. At Science, I didn't really understand the importance of work until I got to be a senior, and so as a result, out of a class of 950 I, with an 80 average was 901.

MN: That's impressive. [Laughter]

DG: Now, again we didn't think about college, because there was the track. Okay, all of my friends everybody we knew, because we couldn't afford private universities, we went to one of the city colleges, if you lived in the Bronx, you applied to City, to Hunter, became Lehman, and or Queens, because those were reachable by mass transit. So I did, it just so happened in 1966, because of the baby boom, and the huge numbers of people who were applying to these schools, they upped the admissions standards which were based upon averages at the time, and SAT's were like - - nobody really cared about them, and I did well enough well on them, but my average was not high enough to get into either of those three, or not even Bronx Community College, at which point I really said this is why I should have gone to Taft, because if I had been to Taft, I would have gotten much better grades et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So I go, my mother and I go rushing to a college counselor, a guidance counselor and say what do we do now? And they say apply to Fordham University school of ed, and they would be willing - - and this is in April of my senior year of high school.

MN: And this was into an education program?

DG: I had to apply specifically to the school of ed and I didn't even realize they had an undergraduate program at that time. And it was interesting because, I had already had an idea that I wanted to teach because of my 11th grade economic teacher. Who, we counted, in one 40 minute period, uttered the word uh 436 times. He was horrible, and at one point I said, you know, I can do a better job than this.

MN: Uh? 436 times?

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

DG: 436 times, as I just said now. [Laughter] So, again, I said you know I can teach. And my mom, as soon as a started talking about this, oh that's such an honorable, respectable position. And I always though of it as that, and I still do and I'm really glad, ironically enough, that I ended up going to Fordham. If I had one to City, I probably would have been with the same crew, I don't think I would have ever gone outside of the same bubble they lived in and learned experientially about other people and other cultures et cetera. And I don't know if I would have gone into teaching either, who knows where I would have ended up, so as a result of this, I ended up going to Fordham, ended up becoming a teacher, I ended up learning more about how to learn about other cultures, because again, it was fit for me, I was always the minority where I was growing up, so why not be the only Jew at Fordham, it would be perfect. Again, I made friends when I came to Fordham in the School of Ed. Black, Jew, Puerto Rican, along with the Italians and the Irish down at Fordham, we all became close friends. And so again, all of these little ironies, you know, you don't know where your life is going to take you, but I like to thank the fact the because I played ball so often, and didn't do my homework, I ended up at Fordham.

[Laughter] My son's a senior in high school, and it's interesting because he's like me, it took him a little while to get going academically and he's doing well, he's doing fine, he's applying to some nice colleges, and he's really much better now as a thinker, as a senior, I hope the same thing happens to him as he continues, I think I grew a lot when I got out. But, he's doing really well and he's taking AP Calculus and math and he says to us at dinner, you know I'm not doing any homework. I don't know if genetics has anything to do with it. [Laughs] At any rate - - I think it's ironic, and I really feel lucky that it all turned out the way that it did.

MN: Now when you look back on your sort of growing up years, how do you feel about that whole experience of growing up in the Bronx?

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

DG: I cherish it. I cherish it in a lot of different respects. As I deal more and more intellectually with people who think they know everything, and who haven't experienced anything outside of their own little bubble of mostly suburban middle class, I just feel that to have been working-class poor in an integrated urban setting where I grew up just allows me to think much more freely about things, and often times I end up having to explain stuff to people who otherwise they have no - - you see this all the time, because we've talked and we have some similarities. They just don't get it and we have for example this, we're trying to figure out how to teach our kids in Scarsdale more about race, and so there's a committee, there's black people on the committee, there are Islamics in the group, and a whole bunch of other people, one of the people on the committee is Fred Goldberg, Fred Goldberg and I first met at Stevenson high school, he taught English, and he ended up marrying Eddy Pinckney's sister. And if you know, Eddy Pinckney was part of a New York City championship team from Stevenson at the time, went on to Villanova. I would always have to - - when I stopped teaching at Stevenson, well actually, once I moved up to the suburbs and had to hear all the nasty, but politely nasty comments about the schva [Yiddish word for black person]

MN: They use schva?

DG: Short hand for Schvartze [Yidish word for black person]. All sorts of acronyms with come up.

MN: This is - - I haven't been in the suburbs ever. So I never heard the term schva before.

That's the short name?

DG: That's the funny thing, because depending upon the - - I got incredibly frustrated because some of the people who I became neighbors with, you know I was teaching in the Bronx, and some of them teach in the Bronx, and so when they got out, and they felt free to say all of the things they couldn't say when they were working in the Bronx, because you couldn't say it there,

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

because once you were mixed with your own, in the barbeque in the backyard you could talk about the spicks and the niggers and the shva, and they had acronyms. Like PITA, (pain in the ass,) which would normally mean pain in the ass, could also more specifically mean black or Hispanic pain in the ass. And all these little expressions would come up, and I used to have arguments, and let's just say that we never became one in the neighborhood, because I was constantly defending A the kids I was teaching, the neighbors I grew up with, the friends I had when I was younger, but I just felt like I was in the position of having to defend everything that I thought I was right. From people, from oppressed people, who couldn't help but oppressing somebody else, if not physically, but financially they do behind people's backs. So, these were people who represented my profession, and as a teacher and person who grew up, that identity is still a part of who I am. So I feel that my earliest experiences in those neighborhoods, with those kids I grew up with made me respect and understand respect. So here we are in this conversation around this table at this race committee, and people are afraid to talk about the subject, and the people who are most afraid to talk about the subject are the people who haven't lived through anything, or haven't actually been in contact with anybody other than themselves. So as I'm relaying stories, and I'm not saying anything outlandish, this, for example the conversation about the use of the word nigger, somebody in the conversation couldn't even say the phrase, how to the word nigger, they would say how do you use the n-word? And I would say in my opinion, if your not calling someone a name, but you actually want to talk about the word, you can actually say the word you want to talk about. But I will tell you stories of when I was a kid, I was someone's nigger, I was a white nigger, I would tell stories about when I was coaching at Stevenson and we would scout - -

MN: Football?

DG: Yes.

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

MN: Oh I didn't realize Stevenson had a football team.

DG: Oh it did.

MN: Does it still have one?

DG: actually Stevenson is barely a school anymore, the school's been phased out. So, I was scouting Stuyvesant and there's this - - I'm watching them play and one of Clinton's running backs came and swept down on the sideline and one of the defensive backs from Stuyvesant just came and just crack, and all the kid starts screaming, the kid who hit, took off his helmet and it was an Asian kid. And so the black kids on the JV are screaming, 'damn did you see the hit the Asian nigga just did?' And so I'm telling the story, and the people are looking at me like, you can't say that. I'm saying, but I'm telling a story, it's okay to tell a story. And again, it's personal, but it's because of my upbringing and who I was with and all of this stuff that makes me feel allowed to do these things, that I can at least have a story that uses the word. There's this whole p.c. climate of people don't know the true experience, because they're so concerned about being p.c. about things, and it gets swept under the rug, there's nobody willing to have open conversation about anything. So that's another reason I feel privileged to have the upbringing I did and in that neighborhood.

MN: Okay. This is terrific, thank you very much. Dawn do you have any questions?

Dawn: I can't think of anything right now. When you were in college you mentioned you started with political activism?

DG: This is Vietnam era and at the time I was still living in the Roosevelt Gardens, because I commuted back and forth. This is post-Civil War but Vietnam

MN: Civil Rights

DG: Civil War? [Laughter] Right. So my friend Bruce Malin and I, so it turns out as I read your biography I think my friend Bruce was associated with some of the organizations you were in in

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

your youth. And new some of the people in that collation you were involved in. And so as a result of that connection - - Chet - -

MN: Fishbein? Powerfully built guy? Yes, he was one of my boys - -

DG: Bruce was a friend of his - -

MN: And his sister Helane lives in Park Slope!

DG: Well in my first wedding in '72, I think came, and gave as a present as a gift to my wife and I a candle with the Vietnamese flag. That went over real big with my parents, let me tell you that - -

MN: Oh my God. Fishbein was significantly nuts, he was huge organizer at Colombia, and he was a tough little kid, he'd fight anybody.

DG: So Bruce was a friend of his - -

MN: Oh okay.

DG: And actually eventually disappeared somewhere, for a long time we couldn't find him, and popped up again one of my close friends of mine Lenny when I was in LA, he was out in LA, and he said do me a favor [mumbling] so anyway, so Bruce, I said yes - -

MN: Well you know what, Fishbein, didn't he live right off the Concourse? Did you know Ray Reese, from Lehman his professor?

DG: No.

MN: There's a whole bunch of people you probably know. There's a whole bunch of people who lived around Tremont and Concourse in the late '60s early '70s.

DG: And Bruce, at the time, lived off of 168th street and University. Anyway, so - -

Dawn: We were talking about the political - -

DG: Oh yes. So that was my connection to radical activism, except I was much more of a pragmatist, and so Bruce knew of all these things were. [Crosstalk] So we went down to the

Interviewee: David Greene

Interviewer: Mark Naison

March on Washington, so Bruce and I decided, we had no idea how many other people had this brilliant idea, we took this big white sheet and we painted the red and white stripes, and where the stars were we painted a peace sign, and we took it on a bus with us and went down to Washington, and it was huge, it was a king sized sheet, and so the two of us are walking down and watching all the guys with the FBI cameras taking pictures of us, and so Bruce is kind of my kind of entry to radical activism, but when I started hearing about some of the things that he and the other guys were doing I said eh - -

MN: Yes, it got pretty rough. I don't know if you knew Terry and Timmy Doyle, they were a couple of tough Bronx kids, from like the Castle Hill Projects - -

DG: The only kid I knew from the Castle Hill Projects was one of my friends from second grade who, he and his twin sister moved to Castle Hill from neighborhood, Steve Sparr, S-P-A-R-R. So Bruce, my end road to that fringe activism.

MN: No, it's interesting because the Bronx Coalition attracted a lot of, you know, tough working class Jewish, Irish, Italian kids whose families stayed when the Bronx changed. And one guy I don't know if you ran into him, Eddy Hott, he's now head of the New York Central Labor Counsel. Roosevelt Gardens was very close to where a lot of these folks lived.

DG: And Bruce didn't live in the Roosevelt Gardens, like I said, on University. I went to college when I was 16 and a half, so I was young and naïve, for the most part, in high school, it was really in college from '66 to '70, when I grew up a lot. In terms of understanding, not just my own little world of race relations and political relations but a lot the bigger world of such. So that was an experience. It ended up, long story short, with the flag that we had, the flag that we had, when we all got to the Washington Monument, we got really close to the stage area, someone came down from the stage and took our flag, and started waving it around.

MN: Alright, well thank you.