

6-24-2004

Hanson, Avis Interview 1

Hanson, Avis. Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewee: Avis Hanson #1
Interviewer: Dr. Mark D. Naison and Harriet McFeeters
Date: 6/24/04

Transcriber: Patricia Wright

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Hello this is the 68thst interview of the Bronx African American History Project. We're interviewing Avis Hanson who grew up in Morrisania attended local schools and taught at many schools in the Bronx including Morris High School. And with us this interview is Harriet McFeeters one of our community researchers associates on the Project, who was a long time educator in the Bronx and other places and retired from the position as an assistant district super intendant. Now, to begin we always start with questions about family. Where is – where are your family's roots? In the Caribbean or the South?

Avis Hanson (AH): They are in the Caribbean. My father's a Jamaican, my mother's an Antiguan and the difference between the is enormous. But they met here. My mother was married when she was 18 I have an older sister who died and a brother who is still with us. Of course both parents are dead. But we were living in Harlem minding our business the way all Black people should. My mother worked in the day my father worked at night and -

MN: What sort of work did your mother do?

AH: My mother was what they called a finisher in the dress industry. She did buttons and button holes and hand and seems under collars when clothes were more carefully made.

MN: Was she a member of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union?

AH: Absolutely. You had to be otherwise you couldn't have a job. And Thank God for them because she was a peace worker. For every dress she handled she handed a chip

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and for every chip you got paid. And we watched as these chips became more and more valuable. Every now and then if she could she'd bring home a little something and she'd show me how to do it and I'd do it. [Laughs]

MN: Now did she work in a predominately Jewish shop or there were many people-

AH: The owner was Jewish and his name was Mr. Block. And I remember him because he used to give my mother some lovely dresses. I remember one blue one in particular. And most of the workers were Italian. And my mother learned a few Italian phrases. Which she forgot when she retired. But we were very grateful for that job.

MN: And what sort of work did your father do?

AH: My father was a laborer. He worked at a printing shop and I'm sure he did not do type setting or anything like that. He did what you had to do at a printing shop to make it possible for the guys who were professional to do their job.

MN: Was he a member of the union?

AH: No. He was not a member of the union. And as I said he worked nights.

MN: Where in Harlem was your family living when you were born? What street-

AH: I don't know. But when I came to consciousness at the age of maybe 4 - 3 or 4 - we were living at 148th street three doors from 7th Avenue. I went by there two summers ago drawn by nostalgia to discover that mine was the next house to be torn down. So it's not there anymore but I remember it quite vividly.

MN: Was this a five story walkup?

AH: Yes but we were lucky. WE lived on the second floor at the back. So when you looked out the window you saw other people's backyards.

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MN: Were there any other members of your household other than your parents and your siblings?

AH: We were the poor people. WE ad some relatives who lived up on the Heights my dear – Washington Heights. And every now and then we would take the 145th street cross-town bus. And it was a nice day we'd walk through Audrey Park and visit them. They'd come down to visit us particularly at Christmas time.

MN: Before we were talking about how your family came to move to the Bronx could you tell that story for the record.

AH: That's a cute little story. My mother used to read to me every Sunday from the New York Daily News Sunday edition. She'd read me the funnies. That's how I learned to read. I would say to her "Where does it say that?", "Who said that?". And then I got curious. "Why is her picture in the newspaper?" "Well she did something." "Well where does it say that?" So I learned to read. One day my mother said to me " You're getting too heavy to sit on my lap. You've got to read this for yourself". So I did. I don't know what I said to her but one day in between seasons in the factory my mother shows up in my classroom. The teacher is nowhere around. I'm sitting in the high chair. I've got the flash card and I'm teaching the class. I'm six years old and I got these kids answering questions from the flashcards. She came back three or four times that week and not once would you catch the teacher in the room. The teacher is down the hall having coffee with the Principal. Cant you just see this Black woman going to the Principal and saying "Hey get your friend back in my kid's classroom". So that night I hear (inaudible) This is PS 90 at 148th street and 8th avenue. Its still there. Its got weeds

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around it but its still there. I checked out. I Hear my mother and my father talking. And this is the agreement they came to. My sister's name is Ivy. "Ivy is pretty but Avis needs an education" Well that's the tonic, you were pretty you got married. If you weren't pretty you had better learn to make a buck. So, my mother went back to work and they said where there are Jews there are foods. That was the Bronx.

Harriet McFeeters (HM): I heard that too.

AH: One-

HM: In some ways I thought it was true.

AH: It is. It was. At that time. So one Sunday the four of us. My sister Ivy and I, my mother and my father, we put on our good clothes went across the river and started to walk. Now she must have known something. We just didn't do this hit and miss. We fell into PS 23.

MN: What street was PS 23 on.

HM: 166th street and Tinton Avenue.

AH: Okay. So my mother said okay we've got the school. Now we've got to find a place where the girls can come and go by themselves because she's working now. We run into 815 East 166th street which has been torn down. There's a packing crate there now.

MN: Now what year was this?

AH: 1930.

MN: 1930?

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HM: That's about the time we were there. We lived at 818 East 166th street which is across the street from where you're talking about.

AH: Near St. Albanese Catholic Church.

HM: Right next door to the convent.

AH: So we went and the adults - there were two sisters. I was amazed because I didn't think women could be landlords. These were the Jacob sisters. And they made a deal and my parents rented the apartment. I come out and I look at the side of the building and there's a huge sign it read - which says "We accept select colored tenants".

HM: On the building where you lived? That's interesting.

AH: So I said to my father, "Are we select colored tenants," and he says, "My child we are select people," and that's that.

HM: Now how old were you about?

AH: I was seven can you guess my age?

HM: No, I mean we must be about the same age.

MN: Now this was on the side of the building.

AH: Yes, you couldn't miss it.

HM: At that age-

MN: Because Dan that- Daniel began to find advertisements that used that language in the newspapers. "Select colored tenants".

AH: No, this was on the building. That's why we had the nerve to go in.

MN: So you were - had your first Bronx apartment.

AH: That's it.

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HM: 815 East 166th street?

AH: That building no longer stands. For some reason they've torn it down. And there is as I say a packing crate there now with a hand lettered sign that says 815 on it.

MN: Now, was this on – between Boston Road and Franklin.

AH: No it was on the corner of Union Avenue.

HM: Between Union and Prospect.

AH: It was at the corner.

HM: I was on that same block.

MN: It was in that same area.

AH: It was wonderful.

HM: The same block. I must have lived across the street from her because I was at 818 and she was 815. She was on the other side of the street.

AH: My mother didn't know it but I'd sit up half the night leaning out the window while sitting on the fire escape. As I told you in Harlem we lived in the back. Here I could see stores and people walking and cars.

MN: Now this was also a walkup?

AH: We were on the second floor.

MN: The second floor.

AH: It was okay.

MN: And how many rooms in the apartment?

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AH: It was – my mother got her sister and her husband to come with us because we couldn't afford it by ourselves. So Aunt Millie and Uncle Josh came and lived with us and they had two or three rooms and we had two or three rooms.

MN: Now they were Antiguans.

AH: Yes they were both Antiguans. Millie was my mother's older sister but – I have my mother's obituary (inaudible) you may want to read it. My mother came here first when she was seventeen. And she's the one who made the money to send home.

MN: Do you have any memories of Harlem.

AH: Yes.

MN: And –

AH: They're all good. I remember on a very hot summer night of course there was no air conditioning, we didn't even have a fan, and my father's working. My mother would take a blanket and two little girls and we would go to the park and she'd spread the blanket and we'd sleep there.

MN: And this was – what was the name of the park?

HM: Bradherst Park.

AH: Bradherst Park. We'd sleep there until we expected my father home. But can you imagine. When you think of the reputation Harlem has these days here is this woman with these two little girls fast asleep on the grass in Bradherst Park. When the dawn begins to break we've got to go home because Pa should know that we did this. That was the only thing that worried us. We were out there all like- We had, as I said, we were the poor ones and every now and then we'd go up to the Heights or they'd come down to see

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us. Some of the people that we knew would come in Saturday nights and we would make hot chocolate. My sister took piano lessons. I would sit under the keyboard and watch her play the piano because I was scared of everything. Now I can't tell you one thing that didn't scare me when I was a kid. When there was a place to hide I found it.

MN: So you didn't have an experience of playing in the street with other kids?

AH: I did. My mother controlled my sister and me through letters on the kitchen table. When we came home from school she would tell us how late we could stay out, which vegetables to prepare for dinner, how she wanted to see the homework done when she got there. That was her only – she said, “I don't want to get a call that one of you is dead in the street.” So we did it. We played- I was the fastest runner on the block. You couldn't catch me. But that was how I got run over. By a car. I could beat any kid running but I couldn't beat the car.

MN: This happened when you were in Harlem or in the Bronx?

AH: Harlem. We were playing Hide and Seek. And I was sure I could get across the street before this car hit me. But, [Laughs]. So they took me to Harlem Hospital to patch me up. I still have a lump. And afterwards- my father brought me flowers. It was the first time anybody brought me flowers. I was so happy it was almost weepy when I looked at them.

MN: Now how did you feel your first day in the Bronx? You mention your father taking you by Morris High School and it looked like a castle?

AH: Yes that was quite some time after my mother had due her to a boy to make it. And I began to ask questions. Where does the baby come from anyway. So Pa took me over

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to Morris High School where there is an elevated place where a little kid can walk and he – he always did things to encourage me not to be scared. So he put me on this ledge and explained to me what had happened to my mother and what had happened to my little brother when they died.

MN: When you moved to 166th street was it a racially mixed block or was it predominately African American.

AH: You wont believe this, I don't see race. I have a hard time distinguishing or remembering who is what. It seems to me that we had some Black friends, my sister and I, It seems to me we had some friends who were not Black. I'm not able to tell you the proportion. I can tell you one thing about this is, its, and my teacher said it to me. "Well Avis, you speak so well. Who taught you to speak so well?" And I said, "I taught myself". Which of course is true. Children teach themselves to speak according to what they hear. When I went home and told my mother it took me years to understand her reaction. I thought she was angry because I had the effrontery to say I taught my self. She was angry because the teacher had the effrontery to suggest that I had no business speaking good English. But it took me years to come to that revelation.

HM: Did your mother have an accent?

AH: No, my mother had-

HM: A Caribbean accent?

AH: No my mother has, had, a more pronounced New York accent than I. Except when she got mad.

HM: Was she the Jamaican?

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AH: She's the Antiguan. My father, the only thing I can remember- he used to call me "My child" he used to call my sister and me "My child" but I cannot remember – he used to correct my English.

HM: Did he speak Patois.

AH: No.

HM: I mean, that was a separate language they had.

AH: No if I didn't match up my subjects with my verbs he caught me.

HM: So he was a model to you actually.

AH: You learn at the age of four or five that you'd better match up your verbs and your subjects even if you don't know what they are.

[McFeeters Laughs]

MN: Was your school experience in the Bronx positive.

AH: Yes. After the teachers got used to me. You don't want to hear about my sixth grade teacher.

MN: Well-

AH: She and my mother fought a battle.

HM: Was her name Mrs. Sherman?

AH: No, her name was Ms. Sullivan. She became Mrs. Geller. Three things about me she did not like. She didn't like my brain, she didn't like my hair, she didn't like my bosom. In those days eleven years old you didn't have bosom. Now you do but in those days you didn't. And she was furious with me. She used to feel my hair and I remember one - we used to wear **median** skirts thank God because nobody knew that you had only

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two. One day we were allowed to dress otherwise and I don't know where my father got this t-shirt, this Mickey Mouse shirt, knitted. I nagged, nagged, nagged. He and my mother must have gotten it from somebody, they couldn't buy it. So I wore it the next day. And Ms. Sullivan said, "Avis when you go home for lunch today take that shirt off. After all there are boys in the class". Not one kid stared at me. Not one. And then she and my mother had this argument. She wanted ten cents for lunch or something. I cant remember. My mother sent her a note. "For God's sake leave her alone I'm not giving her the ten cents,". So we had a contest, an essay contest. I won everything. I won the district. We had to go somewhere on the subway. So this woman waits until I am caught in between my seat and the closet and she said, "Avis, you have won but you are not going to the award ceremony because if your mother cant afford ten cents or whatever it is she cant give you the nickel for the subway!" Max, Max, bless his heart, was a round Jewish boy in brown knickers. He left the boy's section which was nerve, came over to the girls section put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Don't worry Avis. Being poor ain't no crime,"

MN: Wow!

AH: She got even with that. I don't want to –

MN: No, no, go ahead these are-

AH: That's a story with her and my father.

MN: Tell it. This is very important to capture the battle that people had to fight.

HM: Very important.

AH: Well I wasn't fighting any battles.

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MN: Your parents were.

AH: They were fighting.

HM: And the teacher was fighting a battle too to accept this new kind of person within the school.

AH: Yes, but you know she always had me around her desk. I would straighten it out better than anybody. I always knew where everything was on her desk.

HM: But she couldn't accept her intellect.

AH: Well that and sixth grade she was furious with it. Anyway one of these days she sent me up and down the stairs a million times and even in those days I didn't like stairs. You know the sound that kids used to make on the steps? [clops hands on table imitating kids skipping down the stairs]. I could never make that sound.

HM: Oh that's jumping going down the stairs fast.

AH: I could never make that sound. Then she's sending me back and forth to her friend up on the fourth floor. So I say, I'm going to see why I'm doing this. So she catches me in the hallway reading the note. "I need to see your father,". So I was clever enough and everybody wore a fedora in those days. And when he was nervous he used to take his hat and go like this. So he walked in very humbly and said (inaudible), "I understand my daughter has a problem with you," She doesn't get it. "Yes" she says. "What problem does my daughter have with you?" "Well, I caught her reading my notes." "How did my daughter get your note?" "She was taking it to my friend". Oh but you see ma'am, I send her here for you to teach not to send the notes. I have to go home now. Excuse me please". You know when he came in he gave me a look like "You had to do this to me?"

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I thought I was going to die. Well it took all that I could to not say anything. When I got home, he gave me hell but not in front of her.

HM: But he let you know in his own way that she was wrong.

AH: Oh yes, yes.

HM: Were your other teachers Irish? The ones behind the fifth or other grades?

AH: One was Italian, Ms. Bonno. Do you remember the Rappids?

HM: Oh yes.

AH: This woman was not going to let -- not going to suggest me for the Rappids in junior high, but Ms. Bonno did. She came up and she said, "I don't see Avis's name on the list," Because she had had me in [inaudible].

HM: Did you go to 120?

AH: No I went to 60 on Stebbens Avenue.

HM: That's right. That was the girl's school wasn't it?

AH: Yes it was a great school.

MN: Where was 60? Stebbens and where?

AH: Stebbens Avenue and where?

HM: Longwood.

AH: No, no. Intervale.

MN: Intervale, yes.

HM: Its still there.

AH: Great school.

MN: Now what extra curricular activities did you participate in elementary school?

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AH: None. My mother did not believe that either she or her children belonged to groups clubs whatever. After school you came home. That's where you belong. I think a lot of that had to do with her panic at working and wanting to know where you were every minute. So I did not participate in any --

MN: Did your sister still take piano lessons?

AH: Yes she did until we moved and couldn't take the piano.

HM: Where did she take the lessons?

AH: Ms. Galasco charged three dollars. She lived on Riverside Drive.

HM: And she came to your house?

AH: No, we went there and I used to love it because she had one of these --

HM: Beautiful apartments.

AH: -- beautiful Manhattan apartments with these velvet drapes, and fancy lamp shades [inaudible]--

HM: Did your mother -- do you recall any of your neighbors that lived in your building or children that went to the same school with you? Like the Dixon family? Do you remember the Dixons?

AH: The only thing I remember is Dorothy. She was my best buddy, Dorothy also [inaudible].

HM: Because I know there was a family named Dixon and the boy whose about your age or maybe a little older became an Olympic track star. And he lived at 8 something either it was on that side of the street.

AH: Now that you mention track star, Larry Ellis --

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HM: Oh yes I know Larry.

AH: -- Larry Ellis when we were living on Jennings Street in the Bronx. Across the street from junior high school 40. Larry Ellis was two doors from us and he became the coach, didn't he?

HM: At Princeton University.

AH: Yes also for the --

HM: The Olympic Team.

AH: --The US Olympic Team right.

HM: His wife and I went to school together. And I think -- I don't know if he's still involved with her.

AH: I don't know but his sister and I ran into each other when we both went to the first Presbyterian Church in Mount Vernon. But she died.

MN: How soon after you moved to the Bronx did you begin attending St. Augustine's?

AH: Quite some time. We were going -- since we were from the Caribbean the background was Episcopalian. And we were going to St. Margaret's church on Colin Powell's side of Kelly Street. We lived on the other side of Kelly Street. He was over Longwood Avenue. And I was in the junior choir, my mother let me do that. She wasn't working anymore and --

MN: Oh this is in the middle 30's or the late 30's?

AH: Late I guess. My brother is born now. He was Christened there and the Deaconess took a liking to my mother and she would come over and sit and chat in the afternoon.

Well one evening my sister who is light skinned and I were walking and this woman that

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we passed they were commenting that “these half cast people don’t know where they belong” [imitating English accent].

MN: These what?

AH: These half cast people don’t know where they belong. [imitating English accent]

MN: Half Cast? [imitating an English accent]

HM: That’s interesting. But this was a white lady or--

AH: Yes. So we go home and we tell my mother. And she says you ain’t going back there no more. So were looking for another church.

MN: Oh so this is from one of the White women in the congregation?

AH: Yes she objects to my sister and me particularly because we spoil your church. So somebody told us about this new black minister at St. Augustine. It was a cousin of my father’s. And my mother said alright we’re going to try it. So I remember dragging my kid brother there when he was about four and saying to him this is my baby brother. And that’s how we met Reverend Hawkins. He became a family friend. I don’t know whether you have this book.

MN: Yes.

AH: Somebody gave -- I don’t even remember who gave me this book. But somebody gave it to me. And this is a letter I wrote somebody just casually. And they liked it. So you might want to see as a non professional person --

MN: I’m just going to stop and just --

[stops tape]

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MN: Okay now we were talking about going to St. Augustine's. Do you remember the first time you set foot in the church? How old were you?

AH: I was, I guess twelve, thirteen [inaudible] I've never seen anything so beautiful.

MN: So you were impressed by his physical presence as well?

AH: When I say gorgeous I mean the church. I was impressed by the contrasting facets of his personality. He came over as a very almost timid shy gentle person. Well he was gentle but he was as hard as nails. He had to be. And what amazed me was how personal he could be with how many people. I would hear about you from him and I would go to visit you. And there on your dresser would be a picture of reverent Hawkins. And I wouldn't even know that you know him. I'd go visit my cousin and next to my picture and somebody else's picture is a picture of Reverend Hawkins. And I began to listen to him and he talked about the Civil Rights Movement and when the people on --

MN: And this was in the late thirties?

AH: Yes, and the forties. And when the people on the radio say that we shouldn't criticize them for being so right wing because a lot of ministers have been left wing. I'd have to say in that respect they're right, thank God. I taught Sunday School at St. Augustine's. My brother went to Sunday school. [inaudible] Something had just slipped my mind but it will come back. Anyway, he made me aware so that I began to listen to other people. You know that there is a Forest House don't you?

MN: Yes.

AH: Which is a neighborhood house.

MN: Right. In fact Harriet and Jim Pruitt walked me by there. Its on --

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AH: Its still there.

MN: But it now a Seventh Day Adventist center.

HM: Oh you're talking about the Forest House.

MN: Yes.

HM: Is it -- was a -- is a housing development.

MN: Yes.

HM: And the housing development had a daycare center --

MN: But Jim -- you guys --

HM: You're talking about the --

MN: What was the -- It was Forest Daycare house --

HM: The Council House.

MN: Council House.

HM: You're talking about the Council House on Forest Avenue.

AH: Yes, right.

HM: Okay, that was a different place.

AH: That's when I became aware of Bryant Rustin. He used to come there and talk.

And I remember that we'd get together (inaudible) and go listen to him talk. And little by little this is beginning to sink in. You don't have to put up with all this nonsense.

MN: Now, do you remember something that Reverend Hawkins was concerned with, what they called the Bronx slave market?

AH: Union Avenue.

MN: Where women lined up --

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AH: Yes. On Union Avenue --

HM: 160th Street.

AH: -- right, under the L.

HM: Or near the 5 and 10.

AH: Yes. Women would sit on up ended milk crate boxes. And whoever needed a day maid would come by and pick out somebody and take her with her and they did it for a price. That's how she would go. That's how you made your living.

MN: And did he talk about that in the church?

AH: I don't remember his having talked about it. But I remember the situation as you mention it.

MN: Now, was your household one in which there was much political discussion?

AH: No. No, This is why I remained so ignorant of the Movement for so long. We were so busy seeing to it that the shoes were shined and mini glass was clean and there was food on the table and so-and-so got home on time. In those days when you had one parent working at night and the other working in the day, you had to coordinate things pretty closely. And this is what we spent our time doing.

HM: It's interesting that you went to Hunter College High School. So you had to take the subway every day when you were going to high school.

AH: I did my homework on the subway. This is an interesting story.

HM: That was a very difficult school to get into.

AH: You took a test.

HM: You had to be an excellent student.

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MN: It's still the hardest school in New York City to get into.

AH: It is. Well we took a -- anyway its amazing how the chance word of a person who doesn't even know you work in television. I had a job -- I was on 96th street, that's where the school was at that time -- I had a job during lunch hour at a little neighborhood store. I was late for my class one afternoon. And the teacher said, "Avis, it's not like you to be late. What are you doing?" I said, "I'm sorry." I told her about the job. She said, "You don't have to do that anymore Avis." "Why?" I'm going to get you a job in one of the offices in the school," and they had a fund. So I worked in the intendant's office. But my name got on a list. One Christmas time we were living on Jennings Street. The doorbell rings. There are a couple of people from the school with a Christmas food basket. My poor father.

HM: Your father had a stroke?

AH: He said, "Do you know those girls?" "Yes daddy", "Are you going to see them when you go back to school", I said, "yes" . I couldn't find him. So I went, and there he was in he bedroom crying. "What's the matter pa?" "I let you down. When you face those girls you just keep your head up." That's my story.

HM: His pride was just so hurt.

AH: His pride was very damaged. His daughter's family had to receive a Christmas Basket. But my name got on the list because my teacher got me into this program --

HM: --that got you the job in the school.

AH: --that got me the job in the school.

MN: Now you went to junior high school 40.

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AH: 60.

MN: 60. Now did they--

HM: That was a girl's school.

MN: That was a girl's school. Did they have any programs that encouraged your writing? Was there a school newspaper or magazine or anything of that sort.

AH: Nothing. The classes were very good.

HM: Mrs. Conmore, was she the principal?

AH: Yes.

AH: The teachers did beautifully. We -- I was in the Glee Club and they allowed you to choose your gym class. I mean I was so excited I chose the dancing class so I could go and talk about people. But anyway that was a big deal because I couldn't play basketball. The teacher used imitate me running with the basketball and say "Take bigger steps!" So she was glad to get me out of there. And I went to dancing class. But no, I'm trying to think about high school. Well High school was a good time.

HM: They must have given you much more respect in junior high than that sixth grade teacher in elementary because-

AH: Yes I had a good time in high school.

HM: They encourage you to take the test for Hunter so along the way, even though there were prejudiced people-

AH: Well I have to say about Ms. Sullivan, she'd do what she had there but I stepped out of line when I was there. [inaudible]

HM: What room when you were growing up adolescent and - so it must be hard

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MN: Were there any teachers at junior high school 60 that stood out for you that made any sort of lasting impression on you or shaped the kind of teacher you became. Did you know you were going to become a teacher at that time.

AH: I may have subliminally. My mother's best friend in Antigua was a woman she called teacher Avis. Who was her teacher who became her friend. And remember I was teaching when I was six years old. So I enjoy being on either side of the desk. I love to be in class with students. I like equally to be in class as a teacher. I love the exchange of ideas. The only video – the only television program I watch with any consistency is Charlie Rose in the afternoon at my home. We were talking about ideas.

MN: Was there a lot of political discussion in the community or in school? Were people talking about the war and the depression or any of these issues?

AH: Longwood avenue was a main source there. That's when I first heard Tito Puente.

MN: In the street or in the-

AH: Upstairs under the dancing ballroom. Upstairs on the way to the market where the ladies used to sit for a days work to clean somebody's house.

MN: You could hear Tito Puente playing.

HM: Was it in his apartment?

AH: No he was in a ballroom. I'm not just bigger than this-

MN: Was it the Tropicana?

AH: No, nothing like that, this was in the Bronx. A little place- a little nothing of a place-

HM: On 163rd street?

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AH: No on Longwood avenue approaching the fifth avenue subway station which is elevated. But there were people who used to get up on the little platforms-

MN: Soap Boxes.

AH: Soap boxes. There were plenty of soap boxes.

MN: Okay now that's important because that neighborhood sort of had a socialist communist tradition among – and so you saw soap boxes up there?

AH: Absolutely.

MN: Now where was the soap box corner?

AH: On Longwood avenue. OD you have a picture of where Longwood Avenue is?

MN: Yes.

AH: Near Prospect Avenue. Near that intersection.

MN: Right and that was where the soap boxes were.

AH: on Saturday night. Now sometimes they'd be talking s about some nostrum, some cough medicine. Other times they were talking about the landlords and how we were being taken advantage of and what we ought to do about it.

MN: Now so this is something that was a visible presence in the thirties and even the forties?

AH: Yes.

MN: So you had – did people live in the street more than they do in the era of television?

Do you think that was a factor?

AH: I think television killed a lot of things. Television – The Ed Sullivan Show killed the Sunday evening worship service at St. Augustine's Church.

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HM: Did you belong to the Evervesper group cause that's what I – I belonged to St. Augustine-

AH: I belonged to the Walter Mullins's group.

HM: Walter Mullin and Clarence Gabe.

AH: Clarence Gabe yes.

HM: Yes those guys.

AH: I belonged to the Walter Mullins group. I began what we called the young adult group, the YAGs.

HM: And that was Sunday evening.

AH: I don't remember. I used to have out meetings-

HM: I guess I belonged to the same group. We used to go to the ice cream parlor in Myers Ice Cream.

MN: Where was Myers Ice Cream located?

HM: It was on Prospect Avenue right next to the RKO.

MN: Was that not too far from –

HM: 16- it was between 163rd street going down toward the 5 and 10. It was like 160-61st.

MN: Did you go to any live music in the neighborhood when you were growing up?

Any of the clubs like the Hunt's Point Palace or-

[McFeeter's phone rings]

AH: Only at Church.

MN: Okay so-

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AH: I remember Handels Largo before Ed Sullivan killed off the Sunday evening worship service.

HM: Hello?

AH: The organist used to play Handels Largo and the Young Adult group.

MN: Now how many people do you think were in the congregation at St. Augustine's?

Are you talking hundreds or do you think its over a thousand?

AH: [inaudible response]

MN: Right. Now when you were at Hunter and this was-

AH: Was it the high school or college?

MN: The high school. Did you start planning your professional life at that point?

AH: No I just had to pass all my classes. [something falls on the table] Cause if I didn't they'd put me out.

MN: Now so when did you decide you were going to become a teacher? Was that at Hunter College?

AH: I guess so. I guess so, yes.

MN: And did you have friends who wanted to be teachers?

AH: Yes. I was an English major. I loved languages so I had Spanish, not Spanish, I did that later, French and Latin and I took Spanish when I went as a chairman to Fashion Industries and I had to be the language chair for English, French and Spanish. SO IO figured in order to know what was going on in the classroom I'd better learn something. I went down to the Spanish institute on 42nd Street and took about a year there. So at

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least I would know what was going on when I walked into a classroom. But, so we didn't go- we went- my mother would let us go to the library. The Library had storytellers.

MN: Was this the library near McKinnley Square?

AH: That was one. There was another one on Woodstock, the Woodstock library. It was on 160th street by forest avenue. And there was Hunt's Point East of there. And I used to go to Woodstock and the hunt's Point. McKinley came later.

MN: Now did you take library books home?

AH: Oh sure. If I did all my chores and saw that they baby had his nap then I could get to go to the library. [inaudible]

MN: Now what were the highlights of your Hunter high school experience?

AH: Well maybe sing. It was one extra curricular activity that I cold participate in. Sing is 150 both in the college, have you heard of it?

MN: We had Sing in my high school. In Arasmus High School. Did you have sing in your high school?

Patricia Wright (PW): I've never heard of it.

AH: Well you took a beat and you put a little musical comedy with words to popular songs.

MN: They still have it at Midwood high school in Brooklyn which my daughter attended eight years ago. Song was the big event. There's even a movie –

AH: In Hunter College I was working I wasn't trying to go to Sing. But in High school I did.

HM: Sing was a big deal. Did you go to the high school, college also?

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AH: Yes. But not Sing. But that time I was doing – but I did once- I participated –

HM: Did you belong to the two Toussaint L'Ouverture Society at Hunter College?

AH: Yes. I had forgotten about it.

MN: That was the African-

HM: That was the African American people that were in the college mostly affiliated it some way. And we had a dance group.

AH: Can I tell you what my father used to call the sororities that I pledged?

HM: Which one?

AH: AKA of course.

MN: What does that stand for?

HM: Well I was a Delta of course.

AH: Well it was because you were so smart. This was Alpha Kappa Alpha.

HM: You all had to be smart to get into Hunter College.

AH: They put you through woodshop as pledging. And my father said, 'What are you doing down-' because he used to call the sore- asses. [Laughter]. Well they marched us up and down 135th street with our hair in braids and then I went to one meeting at which time I graduated and I had two jobs. I went to this meeting and there were al of these old ladies rocking back and forth singing "Oh AKA". I said I don't have time for this and I never went to another meeting after all that.

END OF SIDE 1

HM: --the daycare center.

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MN: Now when you were going to school were you always having jobs outside of school?

AH: Sure.

MN: What are some of the jobs that you worked at like when you were in junior high and high school?

AH: I used to go to the store for people, I used to baby sit, when my mother would bring home stuff from the factory I used to do it there. What else? I can't think now.

HM: Did you work in the college in the building?

AH: No in college I had a job with William **Brothers Moving and Storage**. And I went looking for them a few years ago. I couldn't find them.

MN: Were they in the Bronx?

AH: No they were in Manhattan on 6th Avenue. I couldn't find them because they had become a hole in the ground. [Laughs] And I went back and they became a high rise apartment building. They were wiped out. They were in the high twenties on 6th Avenue. And I worked there when I was in college.

MN: Now did you take a teacher training program at Hunter or were you an English major?

AH: No. I don't believe in that. I believe that if you're going to be a good teacher you become proficient in your field.

HM: What was your field, English?

AH: English. And then you take up my courses in education as you need to to satisfy the requirements [crosstalk] I got into trouble that way though. They thought that [inaudible]

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the secretary weeded out waited until the boss and was giving me a hard time. WE didn't know what to do. He went down the hall and got my speech board okay. Isn't that wonderful?

HM: There's a lesson you really need to keep in mind. You never know who is going to be helpful to you.

MN: Were you able to begin teaching right after graduating from college?

AH: I worked for about six months at the Veterans Administration down on Wall Street. IN those days you couldn't get near a school unless you took an exam. And I had to take an exam. So I began in the junior high school. That's how I wound up here.

MN: In PS- in Junior High School 45. And what year was your first year at that school?

AH: It had to be in the 40's.

MN: During or after WWII would you say?

HM: In the 40s?

AH: It was after because I remember [inaudible]

HM: OD you remember where you were on VJ day, the end of World War II?

Everybody went to Times Square and I was working in the Veterans Administration building.

AH: Really?

HM: We left the building and all came up. They have that picture of the people kissing, the sailor –

AH: Show me a crowd and I go in the opposite direction.

HM: Oh, okay.

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HM: I let my mother know that later.

[Laughter]

AH: No that's what I do. I odnt like- I like to be in New York. I like to be near crowds.
I like the hustle.

HM: But not in it.

AH: But I don't want to be in the crowd. And I want to be able to go here when I want to. Not because some crowd is on me.

HM: But your first teaching license was elementary ort junior high?

AH: I id- I taught for five miserable months in an elementary school. Then I went to junior high.

MN: Where was the elementary school located?

AH: In Manhattan. Not far from the Willis Avenue Bridge that's the best I can do for you.

MN: So it was-

AH: That was in the 40s.

MN: Now were you-

AH: The principal hated me.

HM: You were a substitute teacher.

AH: I was a substitute teacher.

HM: Because they hadn't given exams for a long time.

AH: And my kids made noise on the stair case. Oh my God.

MN: What sort of noise?

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AH: They talked and laughed.

HM: That was not allowed.

MN: They were very rowdy?

AH: Oh my God. You could actually hear them.

HM: They were used to those Irish teachers like Ms. Sullivan.

AH: She was very patient with me but she really wasn't that – she really wasn't sorry to see me go.

MN: Now where was your family living at that time?

AH: In the Bronx in Morrisania. We also lived among these other places. We also lived up Boston Road.

MN: So you moved several times after you move to 16th street?

AH: Oh my goodness did we not. Yes we did.

MN: How – a number of people like we interviewed said that moving was a very common thing, that people would just go from place to place to get the better rent bargain especially in the depression.

AH: Nobody ever told me why they just told me when it was time to pack. But this time I made a really big decision about living was when I decided you can have it with Jennings Street. It was five flights up. I had just had an operation and it was painful for me to do it. My father had reacted to my operation by being almost crippled by arthritis. And my mother reacted to the whole thing by crying every evening. So I said it is time for us to get out of here. And that's when I went to the poor kitchen, and we got- I bought a house in Williams Bridge.

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MN: And this is when you first started teaching?

AH: Well this is when I got my permanent job.

MN: Right.

AH: I was teaching in Morrisania.

MN: Okay, so this was in the early 50s.

AH: Yes. We got – we moved therein 63.

MN: And do you recall what street – you bought a house in Williamsbridge.

AH: 216th and Willis Avenue.

MN: 216th-

AH: One block West of White Plains.

HM: On Willard Avenue?

AH: Willis.

MN: Now was this a predominately Italian are when you moved in?

AH: Yes. We were quite a novelty around.

MN: And you had- you were only able to get a mortgage from Carver?

AH: Well that was the second place I tried. But republic was the first place I liked and they thought it was very funny. So I went to Carver. I noticed that they now have branches in other places on 125th street. There's one on 8th avenue and 26th street. And what am I doing on 8th avenue and 25th street? I'm buying Boston Market too.

HM: Ther's one in the Bronx too.

AH: Where?

HM: Right on Tremont Avenue.

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AH: Its easier for me to get to 25th street.

MN: SO you buy-

HM: They deliver by the way now too.

MN: Do they deliver to Fordham?

HM: Yes, Im sure they will.

MN: We could have Boston Market cater our interviews.

HM: They do catering too.

MN: Really?

HM: Well I told you that last party I had-

MN: Well get me their menu. The next time –

HM: You wouldn't like it. Both with chicken or ham.

MN: I love Boston Market because when my son was playing-

HM: crosstalk [vegetables]

MN: We'll do this. [laughs]

AH: Even if such a swild and wooly place there are coming together places.

HM: Do you ever come into the city for the theater or anything.

AH: My dear of course. What do you think Im doing in West New York? Im over there because its close to New York City. NAd its on the safe side of the Tunnel. As my only living relative or one of my few living relatives [inaudible] an im on the 26th floor. When I look out of my window at night I-

HM: You can see the skyline.

AH: I see-

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[Tape stopped then resumed]

MN: When did you first begin going to Broadway plays? Was this something when you were in high school, college or-

AH: The first Broadway play I recall was Othello with Paul Robeson.

HM: I saw it too.

MN: You got to see this? Oh my god.

HM: When you're a kid you don't know better. But you know about it.

MN: I know about it.

HM: But my family made sure that we went to see it.

MN: So this was an event that politically intellectually conscious African Americans families-

HM;; I don't know why you generalize.

MN: Did you go with family or with friends?

AH: With an aunt an uncle. No I went with friends.

HM: My father- m y mother's brother was a kind of – well he knew a lot of people in show businesslike Josephine Baker and all of those people and he was- he knew Paul Robeson. So he made sure that we got tickets to the theater to see him.

MN: Do you every recall Paul Robeson coming to talk at St. Augustine's?

AH: No. He may have come but it doesn't mean that – but I remember this about Paul Robeson sister. Somehow she met my mother and we were living at **Lewed Avenue** then. And they would go and they had a house on the beach. In Atlantic City, what I don't know, Asbury Park. I never know the difference. And he said to him, "Bring your wife

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and your mother and your sisters. The house will be empty. You can stay there for a few days,” Wow!

HM: Did you go?

AH: Of course. Wasn't that nice of her?

MN: So you stayed at the Robeson family vacation house.

AH: She had stocked the ice box.

MN: Wow.

AH: She made potato salad and left it there. I mean and ham, you know-

HM: Was she here in the country then or was he over seas?

AH: I think he was here in the country but he wasn't-

MN: Did you have Paul Robeson records in the house? Was this something-

AH: No its not something that we made – I have now. Its not something that we made a big deal about.

MN: Right. What other plays did you go see that made an impression in those years?

AH: I saw Pappa Jones. But I have about 100 Playbills in my house. Ill throw them all on the table. I am a theater buff.

MN: Now what about-

HM: Did you see Raisin in the Sun the original one?

AH: Oh yes. Of course. And the first time my sister in law came to visit us as a married lady we took her to see the Archie Davis Play.

MN: **Pearly Victorious?**

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AH: Right. And I was just so enchanted with the rhythm I was used to Reverend Hawkins tales which were very- [crosstalk].

HM: Exciting. Yes.

AH: And he was [loudly imitates the rhythm of Vicotrious' speech]. And Im snapping my fingers and people are telling me- to me its music.

MN: Well I heard Ozzie Davis give a memorial talk about Paul Robeson at a Hundredth Centennial celebration at Rutgers. It was one of the most powerful public speeches I had ever heard in my life. He was extraordinary.

AH: I'm so glad they found each other.

HM: Was Ruby Dee at Hunter at the same time you were?

AH: Not that I know of.

MN: She went to Hunter?

HM: She went to Hunter [crosstalk].

AH: who was that other dancer?

HM: Pearl Trainis.

AH: Yes I remember hearing her name.

HM: She was in Hunter also. Now they were ahead of me but they were Hunterites.

AH: You'll be happy to know that while I was in Princeton I did take an exercise class at the Y which is situated is situated at [inaudible].

MN: Did you also go to museums? Was that where you were a museum **presser**?

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AH: The first museum my mother took us to was the museum of the City of New York on 103rd Street and 5th Avenue. And we were fascinated by that and then she took us to the Aquarium.

HM: I'm amazed that we didn't know each other. It sounds like we have the same mother almost.

AH: Your face is growing on me.

MN: Now, did you ever go to **Minisink**?

HM: Camp Minisink.

AH: I never went to Camp Minsink but my kid brother did. And when he came home he was so dirty my mother threw Tide or something in the bathtub and put him in there with all his clothes. I never went to camp until I was an adult when I went to a Y camp up there Hyde Park.

HM: **Barnikit**?

AH: I cant remember. With the Y.

HM: Was it mostly Black children at the camp?

AH: No these were adults.

HM: Oh.

AH: I used to speak with the National Conference of Jews. I used to speak with gatherings about the Bronx.

MN: This was in what years? Was this in the 50's?

AH: 50's, 60's yes.

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MN: Now how were you drawn into the national conference on Christians and Jews.

Was this through St. Augustines or through-

AH: I think it was through the National Council of Negro Women. And Ann Libby and I got to be friends.

MN: When did you join that, the National Council? Was this when you were in college or after?

AH: No after, after and we tended not to be frank. We went to Maine to Orino Maine because it was a cheap vacation. And her husband, Jimmy God bless him he's dead,-

HM: Is she still alive?

AH: I don't know. A couple of years ago I heard that she was. And the person who was going to be instrumental in getting us together [inaudible]. But I still have her earring. And we went up to Maine, I think it was under the auspices of the national conference of Christians and Jews. That's how I met her. She said, "I've got a cheap vacation, you want to come?"

MN: Okay, I'm going to cut this now because the next phase is going to be your teaching experiences. Are there any things about your childhood and school experiences or family that you haven't said that need to be said or about the neighborhood.

AH: Ill think about that.

MN: Now one issue, did you notice gangs or - when you were growing up?

AH: All I can say is this; when we were living on Jennings street wed send a kid out [undecipherable] now he thinks he's my father, wed send him to the store and it would take him forever to get back. And the reason it did was that if we lived here and the store

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lived there, the store was there instead of going this way he would walk all around because he knew if he took the direct route he'd have to run a drug gang.

MN: And this was in the 60's?

AH: 50's.

MN: In the 50's. So-

AH: We didn't know- no before the 50's. We didn't know about that.

HM: How much younger is he than you about?

AH: About a decade.

MN: So this is even in the 40's there were-

AH: Yes there were drugs going on at the corner of Union avenue

MN: And Union and-

AH: -and Jennings Street.

HM: Were those Black gangs or Italian?

AH: I assume, I assume. No there were no Italians. But he would go all around to avoid having to cross their path.

MN: SO for a young man the gangs were more of an issue than for young women?

AH: Yes. Girls didn't join the gang until quite late. I remember being surprised reading the newspaper that girls had been picked up.

MN: Now did you -another question- did you in the 30s and 40s see a lot of signs of poverty and distress in terms of - and how down and out people and so forth.

AH: Peoples' furniture on the sidewalk. That's how I learned the meaning of the word eviction.

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MN: So you saw evictions?

AH: Routinely.

HM: That's interesting.

AH: Peoples stuff out on the side - both at home and in the Bronx people thrown out of their apartments and their stuff in the street.

MN: Did you ever see people trying to organize against evictions to put the furniture back?

AH: No.

HM: Were these people who lived in the tenement houses or-

MN: So this is part of what drove you parents so hard to work is a sense that poverty was right around the corner?

AH: I think what drove them to work is that they were both- they both grew up with the ideal that that's what you did.

HM: They were ambitious people.

AH: Nobody asked questions you were supposed to work.

HM: They wanted the best for their children.

AH: You work-

HM: And they were spiritually grounded.

AH: When she was a kid, like ten years old, her mother would take her in Antigua to the "ground" that's what they called a plantation. I guess that's the idea where she got the idea to take us to the park- put her to sleep because her mother was a fantastic girl. I mean this woman was way ahead of her time my Grandmother. She assessed the income

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for the local estates and she set the price and retail price and income price. And what did she do with the kids? She was sleeping under the tree.

MN: Okay anything else that either of you can think of?

AH: Im very happy to have met this lady and I m happy to see you again.

MN: Oh wow-

_____STOPS TAPT AND STARTS AGAIN_____

MN: You were saying you were tenement kids.

AH: Yes always. The only- well I have owned two houses and two apartments but that's me as an adult not my family. When Clara came to my house she saw a picture on the wall of a sunset over a silver sea. Quite lovely. That was given to us by Mr. Moses.

Why is Mr. Moses significant here? He was an immigrant from Jamaica and when he came over he did what a lot of single people from Jamaica do. You find a room to let in somebody's apartment until you get on your feet to get a job get your family and your own home. Mar. Moses was a friend of ours when he died.

MN: So your family rented out rooms to Mr. Moses?

AH: To Mr. Moses because we know- my father knew his family in Jamaica.

MN: Right but he was the only non relative that lived with your family?

AH: Right.

MN: Did your family ever take any borders?

AH: No. Mr. Moses stayed with us - I remember when my mother was 70 years old. We were living in Mt. Vernon and Mr. Moses came to see her took her to lunch, my father had died, bought her flowers and she was so [inaudible].

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HM: Did he do well? Did he make a lot of money?

AH: He did. He drove a cab and then he owned one. I don't know the name. But he did well enough to live in a neighborhood that we would think is [inaudible]

[Laughter]

AH: They would leave me with him in the little space between the time that ma went to work and pa came home. They left me in the apartment and Mr. Moses was there. That's how they managed.

MN: Now one thing. Did you ever remember - you saw people on soap boxes. Did you ever- and you saw evictions- did you ever see marches or demonstrations?

AH: O. Id see that only in newspapers. I did not hear about Garvey until years after he died. Although he must have been marching through the streets of Harlem when I was there , I was not aware of him

MN: Okay.

End Of Tape

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