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## Hanson, Avis Interview 2

Hanson, Avis. Bronx African American History Project  
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Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison, Natasha Lightfoot,

Patricia Wright Interviewee: Avis Hanson

## Interview

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): This is the 70<sup>th</sup> interview of the Bronx African American History Project and we're here with Avis Hanson for the second interview and participating in the interview are Natasha Lightfoot and Patricia Wright. Now to begin with, I'd like Natasha to talk a little bit about the West Indian and Caribbean connection in Ms. Hanson's life.

Natasha Lightfoot (NL): My first question for you would be if you could talk a little bit about your parents. When did they migrate to New York City, do you know?

Avis Hanson (AH): Yes I gave the doc here the bio of my mother at her funeral which I wrote. She came here in 1916. She was 17 years old - - her picture at the age of 18 is on that wall in the other room complete with white gloves to show her mother that she was still a lady, even though she was living in New York City. She came by herself with her mother's friend, somebody called Gordon. I don't know if these names mean anything to you - -

NL: And she was Antiguan?

AH: Yes. She was my mother's friend. My mother got herself a job as an au pair so she had a place to live and a little money to spend. In due time she met my father, who came from Jamaica. He came up to Boston and made his way back to New York. My mother [Inaudible] and I swear I'm going to go to Ellis Island before I die to see where she came. Do you want

to know her biggest memory of Ellis Island?

1

NL: I would love to hear it.

AH: She had gorgeous teeth and some woman held her mouth open and said "Come and look at these teeth!" And my mother liked to die of embarrassment. But anyway, she got through that and in due time they got married.

NL: He came to New York and met her?

AH: Yes, they met here in New York. And they were both Caribbean - - I'm sure they were both very happy to meet each other - - you know, it was sort of like - - and they got married and they had my sister who unfortunately is dead, and in then in due time they had me and much later they had my brother - - he's the baby. But between him and me there's another boy who died and after him there's another boy who died. So there are three of us and now there are two.

NL: Did your parents integrate themselves and you all and your siblings into a local Caribbean community when you were coming up?

Were they members of any organizations?

AH: No. My mother did not believe in joining clubs, groups, organizations, associations. I don't remember one association that my mother joined except for the Lady's Garment Worker's Union and St. Augustine Presbyterian Church in the Bronx.

NL: OK, I was going to ask you that - - So they joined a church; were there many Caribbean people who attended the church?

AH: No.

NL: Not at all?

AH: No, we started out in Harlem. And I explained to Dr. Naison last time how we got to the Bronx, so I don't need to do that again. But after we got to the Bronx the main

2

thing was getting the kids to school - - that meant my sister and me - - getting back, seeing that they were clean, seeing that they were fed. I have to go to my job; you have to go to your job, "Hi, nice to know you." That is what I remember in my childhood. For a time, we were janitors in the Bronx on Kelly St. which is famous for Colin Powell but he lived across Longwood Avenue on the ritzier side. Then we managed to move from there. My mother worked until her 70's and my father - - I remember crying when my father retired because I remember that this was a station in his life, so that that made me very sad. But by that time we had bought our own house and we were living in Williamsbridge, which is - - you know Williamsbridge - - the Jamaicans have taken over Williamsbridge.

NL: I was going to ask how long - -

AH: Before they took over? We moved to Mount Vernon in '71 maybe and the real Jamaican invasion came in about '75 because I used to come from Mount Vernon back to Williamsbridge to buy Jamaican patties on White Plains Rd. in a store that used to be an Italian bakery.

MN: OK, so when you moved to Williamsbridge, it was predominately Italian at that time?

AH: Yes. It was. Predominately Italian and there were very few blacks of any kind. I have to let you know that my parents were not particularly interested in ethnicity.

NL: So they didn't maintain any connections to people back home or anything?

AH: They did. I remember when we were in Harlem for instance, people would come up and my mother would make toasted cheese sandwiches and cocoa - - would you believe it? And they would play whist because I think that nobody knew how to play

3

bridge. And my sister would play the piano to entertain them and I would scrape on the violin and when we moved to the Bronx, we were by ourselves a lot because nobody else had moved. We moved for the schools. The person that we knew in the Bronx was a family named Dreidon who is related by marriage to my father. The reason I mention them is that they lived very close to where I think Mrs. MacFeeter lives on Holmes St. and I remember that I used to - - she used to pick up my brother after school and when I came home after school I'd pick him up from there and take him home. But no, we didn't belong to any groups.

MN: Now what about the cooking in the house? Was it West Indian?

AH: Yes, yes it was. And I did a lot of it. In high school and in college, I was expected

to put the supper on the table.

MN: And what would be a typical supper?

AH: Well, some kind of starch, some kind of meat, and some kind of vegetables. And I still think in those terms, in those three terms. My father preferred potatoes because he was Jamaican and my mother preferred rice because she was Antiguan.

NL: Did your mother make things like Ducana - -

AH: What's that?

NL: Ducana is that kind

of - AH: Dried codfish?

NL: - - dried codfish that you make that in - -

AH: Oh yes. And you know when I liked it best? The second time. She'd make it for Saturday and we'd have it hot and then Sunday morning we'd have it cold with hardboiled eggs and that was great, I really enjoyed that very much. And I liked plantains but

4

I didn't like to eat it because if you cut it in the middle you saw all the innards and I'd go crazy, I wouldn't touch it. You know Monk on T.V.?

NL: Yes.

AH: I'm Monk. I'm a herky-jerky-nervous-scared of everything type. And they had to show me that it was alright to eat the plantains because they said to me "You know, if you eat a banana the stuff is the same in the middle only you don't know it." So I stopped eating bananas.

[Laughter] Also, my mother loved okra, the slimy old things and I wouldn't touch them. And funky?

NL: I was going to ask you about that too next. You didn't like it? MN: What is funky?

NL: Funky is boiled cornmeal that's rolled up into balls and then put into -  
- it's kind of greenish-yellow and it's usually served along side okra.

AH: And you had a funky stick and you went like this  
in the pot. NL: Yes, you had to turn it.

AH: My Aunt Milly used to do that. She's turning the funky.

NL: So your aunts came - - other family members came for your parents -

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AH: Yes. My mother sent for my aunt. Would you believe it? She was the baby; no she was younger than Milly. But she sent for Milly.

NL: What was your mom's family name - - I'm just wondering.

AH: My grandmother was Keane, who was some woman, let me tell you about her - but she was Gumbs. Her father was Portuguese. You know the Gumbs?

NL: Yes, I know them actually, I know some people that have that last name now.

5

AH: There's a Gumbs who is teaching up in Harvard Divinity School and he's some sort of 15<sup>th</sup> cousin of - - you know, who knows. My mother, she was called baby Gomes. She was a big deal in her place; she recited and read and she'd win elocution prizes and the reason she came here, and maybe the reason I'm a teacher, is that she took the exam for teaching and failed it because in the geography section she was supposed to give an example of "What's an island?" "An island is a body of land surrounded by water." Now you were supposed to give an example and she left only an example and they failed her so my grandmother said "Go to New York. There's where you'll have advantages, you'll have opportunities." I can't see a 17 year old by herself in those days going off to New York.

MN: Did your extended family spend a lot of time together in New York?

AH: Some. We were always the poor relations; I have to let you know. And my father's people lived up on the Heights. My aunt Bell who is my father's oldest sister had an apartment that looked out on the [Inaudible] grounds when it was there. You know that area?

NL: Right, yes, yes.

AH: Well, on Christmas we got to go up there. We'd go through Bradwurst Park or up the hill - -

MN: What is that - - Edgecomb is the street up at the top of the hill?

AH: Yes, that's right. And we'd go there and they liked tall skinny Christmas trees and they'd come down to visit us and we liked short fat Christmas trees. So that's how we \_\_ and that's how I learned to eat all those things that are bad for you, like candy corn \_\_ you know, you put it in a little paper cup and then you hang it on the tree and then you eat

6

it when nobody's looking. So yes we - - and the thing that I don't understand to this day though is unless my mother did it, the two groups didn't get together. Her folks didn't get together with my father's folks because her folks were small island.

NL: And the Jamaicans are the big island.

AH: They really thought they were something.

NL: That still goes on in this generation too.

Patricia Wright (PW): So was there a lot of tension?



AH: No, it wasn't tension - - no tension, except they never thought about each other. But on certain occasions, my mother would have the whole gang in. She'd have pa's folks in and her folks in - - they had a wonderful time. But we never went to pa's folks and found her folks there. We never went to her folks and found his folks - - you know what I'm saying? The only time they got together is when my mother did it. You know, if she had some sort of thing going on or my brother's wedding reception or a confirmation or one of us was born and she invited people to the christening party and this and that, but you know what's interesting? One of my mother's cousins Leslie, who was an Antiguan, poor fellow he thought he was an Englishman. He married a Jamaican woman, so that was an interesting combination. And for some reason they were Catholic, I don't know how that happened. And when my brother was christened Episcopalian, they were the sponsors. [Laughs] He almost didn't want to take part in the ceremony. But he got over it and I learned to like him very, very much.

NL: I had one last kind of question about this whole Caribbean thing: how do you think that people of Caribbean descent from your generations and your parent's generation related to if at all the new comers? You know, you were saying you would go down to

7

Williamsbridge in the 70's and get Jamaican patties, but how did you - - did you guys have other interactions besides kind of - -

AH: Well, the church that I belonged to in Mount Vernon when [Inaudible] Princeton in '76 or 7 the church was mostly WASP with a few people like

me breaking in, having a wonderful time. When I came back it was mostly - - not mostly, but a lot Jamaican. A constant in this was a Jamaican woman whom I knew the first time I was in the church who was still there when I went back and I have to call her because her father's not well. Let me tell you about Jamaicans. I am only now coming to terms at this stage in my life with the fact that it is not unusual for people to want to dominate the area where they found themselves. I've always said "If you don't like me, leave me alone. You don't have to interact with me, just leave me alone and I won't bother you and you won't bother me." But people have a way of wanting to be "it" getting rid of other people but that's not unusual and I'm only learning that. And I don't have long to live with that idea because it has made me very unhappy for a very long time. But there was a group in this Mount Vernon club called the Caribbean Club. "Avis, when you come back you want to join a Caribbean club?" "Oh yes." Well that meant the Jamaican club. When they had that horrible [Inaudible] I done sent my check to Brooklyn where they're going to send the money to all the islands - - they're busy collecting all the money to send to Jamaica. Anyway, they let me be the chairman of the scholarship committee and I got to do some nice things. We had a celebration every August which I go back to every now and then after all these years. But I want to talk about one woman who swears she's my cousin. [BREAK]

AH: She said "I see that man in the hall and I put my nose in the air and I walk by him and I don't say hello." But I owe that church an awful lot;

but in that church I got to develop parts of my personality that I didn't know I had. I did voter registration, I did poll watching.

NL: And this was in what period? The 70s?

AH: Yes. And when I came back also - - after I left Boston and came back in the late 80s. Those people were wonderful. They welcomed me back - - so they were great.

And I really owe them a lot because as I said, the degree of kindness and acceptance was extraordinary. So you'll notice as soon as my mother died - - within a year after my mother died, I had left Boston, I was back in New York State and I had a job. And the only reason I went down to [Inaudible] was to get her next to my brother because she was getting older. We have a pitifully small family and I figured, you know, if she's going to enjoy any time with relatives, it's me, we better do it now. So we packed up and moved down to Princeton and I stayed there until she died and then I came back to New York. I consider this New York.

MN: Natasha and Patricia do you have any more questions about the Caribbean background?

AH: I'm trying to think - - oh, you might be interested in this. When Carla Rodriguez was here, she was interested in that picture. Why do I put it there? That is from Mr. Moses. Now Mr. Moses was a good friend but I never heard him call my mother anything but Mrs. Hanson, Mr. Hanson - -she never called him Charlie, my father never called him Charlie, it was Moses and Hanson. How did we meet Mr. Moses? He was from Jamaica and at that time, this was a long time ago, this was like the 20s or 30s - -

where's he going to stay? He can't get into a decent hotel. So my father knew his family

and he brought a letter from his family and by the network my father got a hold of him

and he rented a room in our apartment in Harlem.

MN: Did he also come with you to the Bronx?

AH: No, by that time he got married, he drove a cab, which meant he was much richer

than we ever thought of being. When my mother was 70 years old and we were living in

Mount Vernon, the bell rang one day; he remembered her birthday. And he came and

took her to lunch and bought her flowers.

MN: Wow. Now when you were living in the Bronx did you have other people living in

your apartment?

AH: No. This was an arrangement that suited both he and him in my family.

MN: OK, now I'm going to switch gears and talk about your teaching experiences. Your

first teaching - - you had gone to Hunter and was your first teaching job in the junior high

school after that or did you do something between then? Between graduating from

Hunter and getting your first teaching job?

AH: I worked for 6 months at the Veterans Administration because in those days you

waited for an exam and then you waited for them to promulgate a list and then you

waited to be taken off the list and moved to the school.

MN: OK, so you took the test - -

AH: No, I didn't take the test, the test wasn't given. I went into the Veterans

Administration while I was there I took a test - - I spent a disastrous six months in the

elementary school - - I was lousy .. I'm mean - - [Laughs] anyway, we all survived

somehow and then I wound up in your neighborhood up there in Fordham.

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MN: Which elementary school did you teach in first?

AH: I can't remember but I used to get off the subway at 125<sup>th</sup> St on the East Side. MN: So this was East Harlem?

AH: Yes.

MN: That was your first teaching position.

AH: Yes. But there were plenty of white kids - - in those days, that was still a mixed neighborhood. And they are very happy experiences - - and the reason I know that I was one of only three people in my class who was not an Italian American is that the assistant principal told me when I had that little thing with the priest, she herself was Jewish, and she said to me "Well you know where you are don't you?" The priest had objected to my telling some kid who was beating up one of the other two non-Italians in the class because she was Jewish and she had killed Christ - - he was beating her up every lunch hour. And I said to him "First of all, what are you talking about, secondly, the Jews didn't kill Christ the Roman soldiers did." Two days later the local priest was in my class room. What am I telling the kids? So we had a little discussion. So he said to me "Well you teach them English, I'll teach them religion." And I said "Well this is not religion sir, this is history." So people found out about it, but one mother - - I think she must have been a neighborhood leader because she had come to check me out when I took the kids - thirty kids and me on the Hudson River Dayliner up to Bear Mountain. You couldn't do that today. Kids just are not the same. [Laughter] But this mother came to check me out and

she said OK go ahead, you can go. So thirty kids and I went up to Bear Mountain, had a hell of a good time.

MN: Now this is without parents? Without an assistant teacher?

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AH: Just me and the kids on a Saturday. I didn't want any interference.

[Laughs] So this same woman said to somebody to get back to the Jesus thing - - "Jesus wouldn't want a little girl to be beat up in his name."

MN: Could you elaborate a little bit about what you mean by kids were different then?

AH: I wouldn't be a kid today for anything. It must be terribly confusing. There are so many different influences pulling and pushing at you that I don't know how the kids can figure out where to turn. In those days if the teacher said do this and she said it nicely, you did it. I remember coming home and saying to my parents "The teacher did this or that to me," and they said to me "So what did you do? What made her do that?" And I'm sure they were not the only ones. Nobody, as much as they talk about it and as much as Alex Tribeck says "I love having teachers on my show," nobody respects teachers. I go to the supermarket over here, to the market, and if I go at a certain hour I'm met by kids coming from the local high school and I look at those kids and I say "I don't think I could make it."

PW: When you say different influences are pushing and pulling at them do you mean like morals say taught in the school as opposed to taught

in the home as opposed to in church?

AH: Television, magazines, billboards - - the problem is everybody is an expert and everybody will tell you that what he, she, or it say is the only truth there is. But they are so conflicted. Now I don't want to make people unhappy by being too restrictive. I think I was brought up too restricted. Absolutely. But there has got to be a midway between me and some of these poor kids whose parents are scared of them. And I can't understand it and it makes me unhappy. Let me give you an example. For instance, I had

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the [Inaudible] when I was in Morris, you had to take your pictures to the year book and I had the nerve to stand in front of them and say to the girls sitting in the front row, "I don't want to see one knee, fix your skirts." Nobody said mind your business, nobody said what do you want from us, nobody laughed. They fixed their skirts and then they smiled and they're looking very happy. I wasn't squelching them and if I thought that giving them license to do anything they damned please made them happy, I would do that. But it doesn't. Some of those kids are so mixed up. For instance, I heard some kid being interviewed; she was 14 so of course she was sexually active. I mean she's going to wait? And somebody said to her "Do you do this because you like sex or because you want to be accepted in your club?" And she said "I'm scared of the sex, I want to be accepted in my club." I don't worry so much now - - when she's 24 what's going to be her attitude? That's what worries me.

PW: So do you see a decline in let's say the community raising a child?

Say others in the community watching out for the children?

AH: You're kind of frightened to talk to kids but see, when you get to be my age you can take chances. You know? I do things, I talk to people I wouldn't have thought of talking about. I started talking to some man, I was sitting on a bench and he was smoking and he said to me "Do you mind?" because I was going up a hill and I get out of breathe so I was sitting on the bench and he came and he sat. And he said "Do you mind if I smoke?" And the wind was in the other direction so I said "No, of course not." I said "But what about you?" And he told me the history of his life. He has three kids, dope addict, jail, hospital, two wives - - the whole bit! And every time I started to say something he'd say "Wait a minute," and when he finished he said to me "Pray for me." And he got up and

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walked away. Now that's because I said to myself at my age I can say anything to anybody. And they'll say well who worries about that old lady. And that way, I get to learn a lot more about people. And I see kids on the street, I talk to them and they talk back to me nice. I wouldn't have done that 20 years ago, I would have been scared.

PW: But why is that? Why is there a fear of young people?

AH: Not - - of anybody, not just of young people, of anybody. There's a kind of reserve that one faces, especially if you're a New York woman. You have a kind of reserve, you need it. But as time goes on you see that that's not actually necessary.

MN: You were in Morris between 1949 and 1962; did you see the change occurring in that period?



AH: No. I was in love with those kids and they were in love with me. And it was just fantastic. Let me tell you, I had a very serious operation in the 50s. I went back to school - - I was out for like 6 weeks - - I couldn't write on the board [Inaudible] deprived my muscle of course to write on the board. Some kid pokes me on the elbow, takes the yellow slip that I had written the notes on out of my hand, and writes it on the board. I had five classes. Every day I walked into a class there were two/three kids [Inaudible] because the words got around, two or three kids hanging around waiting [Inaudible] to write on the board. Now I ask you: would that go on today? I don't know.

MN: And this was a basically working class/lower middle class, multiracial school?

AH: Morris? Yes. And for the first few years of my teaching there I lived in the neighborhood and then as I said, I got a steady job and bought a house and we moved to the North Bronx.

MN: What year did your family move to the North Bronx?

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AH: '53. So when I knew Clara, already I was [Inaudible]

MN: Morris had a reputation outside as a tough school.

AH: I don't know why.

MN: That was not your perception - - students were respectful, they were polite and -

AH: Absolutely. I don't know what people were talking about. I think simply

because there were so many black and Hispanic students there, it was assumed that they had to be tough. You know? One of the things - - and we had also some kids from Highbridge. Do you know Highbridge?

MN: Yes, that was a mostly Irish neighborhood?

AH: Exactly, you know your Bronx. And one of the Irish kids from Highbridge wrote this on his Regents paper - - composition - - "Now that I have known Ms. Hanson, nobody is going to say anything about Negroes in my presence and get away with it." So this is why I think - - I hate to use these words because they mean different things to different people - - why I think exposing people to people who are different to them helps. I have worked in situations where I was the only black or one of two or three blacks and people would say "Well, why don't you go with your own people and serve them?" Well, I figure, I'm serving them just as well if some other person knows that I'm not a monster. And so I appreciate that very much and what this kid wrote in his paper - God bless him I'm so glad he passed because if he hadn't passed I would have faked it for him. [Laughs]

MN: Was there esprit decorum among the teachers at Morris?

AH: Absolutely. Let me tell you - - the difference between college - - one of the things I did just a few years ago, I worked at the African museum and there's a woman there who

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worked every day of the week: Sunday, Monday, Tuesday - - she was there every day - and she did not show up for a week and a half and those people let her stay there.

Nobody called her, nobody beat down the door, and when they finally did, she

was dead on the floor. I called finally because I'd seen her and she'd said to me - -last time I'd saw her was on the bus, we were talking about [Inaudible] how well he prepared his presentation [Inaudible] can I take some notes with me? And she said no. Look at the way Sinatra prepares himself for performance: everything is done perfectly and that's what I want you to do. That was the last time I saw her. She said "I'll call you." I said "When?" And she said "In a few days." Because they kept changing exhibits I'd have to go in for more training and so I finally called up the museum and I said "Who can I speak to?" And they said "Oh I'm sorry to tell you, but she's dead." So when I went to her funeral there were hundreds of people because she belonged to organizations. Not one of those damn people had called her up to find out why she didn't show up. So I finally said to the African fellow, the Congolese, "This happens, you go, you break down the door." He said "Avis, that's what I did but it was too late." It was the African fellow who went.

MN: And at Morris people cared.

AH: Thank you for reminding me. The clerk was away from school [Inaudible] nobody could reach her. Four of us after school went to her house. She wasn't there; somebody said "Oh, I remember her mother." She was in the hospital and her mother had forgotten to call. There was an esprit decor. You rooted for each other. I remember when my friend who is still my friend to this day, she's even older than I am. And we spoke yesterday on the telephone. She brought her daughter to school one day and my kids - she taught next door to me - - my kids came running in "Oh Ms. Hanson, Mrs. Cyclin's

daughter's here today, can we have her here to say hello?" These are high school kids - . these are 16/15 - - they're not too sophisticated to get excited about that and they were great - - really great.

MN: What were your - - did you teach English?

AH: I taught English. I taught the honors class. I remember I was trying to get myself teaching art and this kid who belonged to the Art Students League, who really knew something about it, he said one day in class "Oh my God Ms. Hanson, what you do with art." [Laughs] That's ok.

MN: Now were you also the adviser for the paper?

AH: For the Piper and I was the [Inaudible] and a few other things because I was interested in these kids. And I had the time. We got along very nicely - - I enjoyed working on The Piper very, very much.

MN: How many times a year did the school newspaper come out?

AH: Maybe three or four times a term. And we worked in [Inaudible] Clara had bought seats both for her and for me. It was in the balcony - - I can't do balcony's. So I said to Clara "I cannot get up there and even if I get up there, I'll never get down." Bert Shanus was standing there - - Bert Shanus has been an editor for the New York Daily News, he's been this, he has been that, he has been the other thing - - He was one of the editors on The Piper.

MN: Wow.

AH: He said "I have an extra seat in the orchestra." So he and I sat together - - it was the nicest thing - - [Laughs] He babysat me to the point where I [Inaudible] to hook up with

Clara because I see her there and I'll watch for it. But here he is babysitting his old teacher.

MN: Now we live in a society that is fairly race conscious. How do you think our views of race differ from the way people were looking at race at Morris High School in the 50s!

AH: You remind me of a conversation I had with one of my colleagues who was talking about celebrating something. Celebrating the way we get along with each other - - we were very conscious that we're exemplars and I said to him "Do you have to celebrate what you do well? Do you have to make a fuss about it?" And he said "You have wedding anniversaries." So there you are.

MN: It was a lot of pride that Morris was an integrated school?

AH: Absolutely. [Inaudible]

NL: Was there a lot of discussion around the whole ongoing Civil Rights agitation that was taking place in the South? Did that really affect the way students related to each other or the conversations that were had in classrooms?

AH: Do you know who brought the idea of the Civil Rights Movement to my attention? It was Reverend Hawkins. He would mention it frequently in his sermons or I belonged to the young adults group that he'd look in on every now and then. No, there wasn't that much talk about it. I told you how naive I was - - in the 50s I present myself at the bank asking for a mortgage and they laughed in my face. Here comes this black woman and she wants a mortgage. Is she kidding? So I found a bank that did give me one and we got the house but I was surprised. I should not have been. But we were so sheltered in this place that we really didn't know the war that

was raging outside of us. Now I don't know if that's good or bad.

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MN: Was there a lot of cultural life surrounding Morris? You know, music, art, theater, in the school? Was there a lot of performing art?

AH: In the school we had two magnificent organizations: an orchestra and a band. Herby Fine was the other fellow; Herby Fine did the band. And Shelens [Inaudible] But I'll remember the name of the orchestra leader the minute you all leave. We also had a choir, we had a drama club - - but in the Bronx, we had, I don't know you may know it, we had a live theater on Kingsbridge Rd. where it veers off Fordham. That's where I saw Born Yesterday.

MN; You had a live theater - - what was it called at that point?

AH: I don't know but I saw Born Yesterday there and I also saw something with Ethel Waters, right there.

NL: So this was a performance base where local groups would come and play?

AH: Yes. Fordham Rd. was really something. Two big reasons: [Inaudible] I never got onto the Fordham campus until I came to your office - after all those years of living in the Bronx. But I'm trying to think of other places - - the best place to go for a date was the Loews Paradise Movie Theater, it's not there anymore - - which was at 182<sup>nd</sup> St at the Grand Concourse and they had stars in the sky - - that was the best place. And then you'd go across the street for ice cream or you'd go to Sudda's for coffee and cake. And then there were local things going on. On Longwood Avenue there was a Hispanic dance band upstairs and when we were going to the

market on a Saturday night - - because that's when the prices were the cheapest - - when we were going to the market we'd pass by and that music would come floating down.

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MN: When was your first exposure to the Puerto Rican families and Puerto Rican culture?

AH: We lived for a little while on 114<sup>th</sup> St and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue which doesn't exist anymore, it's all projects. But we lived there for a while. My father was terrified he would say "You know honey, they could be plotting to kill us and we wouldn't know?" Of course I - he could never explain to me why anyone would ever want to kill us. But he just couldn't stand being in the environment. But you know what they liked? The food was the same. So we'd go to the open market before they closed in the market on Park Avenue under the railroad tracks, we'd go to the open market and buy cassava and yam and edo's and plantain and all that stuff. And my mother and my father's sisters would go crazy.

MN: Now when you were teaching at Morris was there a significant number of Puerto Rican students at the school?

AH: Yes. I remember some of them by name and I remember - - one of the things that has always annoyed me about kids growing up in New York is that in the most cosmopolitan city in the world they don't get around, they don't know what the other is like. So when I was in the junior high school in Little Italy which they called themselves, I'd take them all over; I'd take them to the Hudson River, I'd take them to the Bronx Zoo, I would

take them to the Botanical Gardens, anything so that they would know there's a world out there. And in Morris, I would take the kids to the theater. We saw Joan of Ark, we saw This Side of Paradise, I would take them to the [Inaudible] Museum on 53<sup>rd</sup> St. One day me and my Jews and my blacks and my Puerto Ricans [Laughter] and a few Irish, we stormed . . . St which is my favorite street in New York which then, even more

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than now, was full of art galleries and we opened the door of every last art gallery on that street. You should see the expressions on the faces of the people inside.

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

AH: - - is that when a Puerto Rican sees another Puerto Rican on the street or a Hispanic he says hi because we'd be going along and Guss would say - - or we're sitting in the courtyard of the museum on 53<sup>rd</sup> street with our bagged lunches - - and we said "Do you know all these people?" And he said "No, when one Spaniard sees another, he says hello." And I got invited to a couple of homes for dinner and that was nice. Also in the junior high school where there were only three of us that were not Italians, there was one German American girl and one time she handed in a composition and I said "Damn it Ms. Sammit you can do better than that." And her father wanted to see who this was. So he had [Inaudible] on east 86<sup>th</sup> St and he invited me down and they gave me pastry and chocolate schlopp - - he wanted to see who cared enough about his daughter to cuss at her. So that was done. But I took them around and when you take



somebody out of his environment, you learn more about what he's used to.

MN: Do you think teachers had more connection with the students and their families than they do today?

AH: Yes. And you were allowed to. And you weren't afraid of being sued. People are - we are so litigious that people are afraid to open their mouth. They want to sue Arnold -

MN: Arnold Schwarzenegger.

AH: - - that clown out in California - - for something that he said. Well that's the least of what he said. Do you know there has been - - how long do yellow jackets live?

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MN: I don't know.

AH: Because there has been a yellow jacket trying to get into that window for weeks.

It's shut tight. Anyway - - yes, I learned something about that. Around here, this is a lousy town. It's crummy, there are certain elements of gambling here. That's because in Cuba, gambling is legal. I was coming from the airport one night and the cabdriver said to me "Lady, don't you never come here by yourself at night." And I said "OK." And I came and I asked somebody why. Well that's gambling and prostitution and he's warning don't you never go there. It's a crummy town. But I hesitate to cross the street because I know my back may kick up and I don't have as much balance as I should, if I hesitate long enough I'll feel a hand on my

elbow. They don't know me. But it's very warm, I like it here. We have a very warm staff; there's a guy here who thinks he's everybody's uncle and if you have anything wrong with your plumbing or anything, you don't put a note downstairs through the office, you wait until Sunday when you know that he's bringing in some little thing from the store for the lady downstairs and you call him and he'll fix it for you.

MN: Now, after you left Morris, where was your next teaching job? AH: I went to Taft.

MN: And for how many years were you at Taft? AH: I'd say for the better part of the 60s.

MN: Was it in that period that you began to see a negative transition in the Bronx or was that later?

AH: All that I know is this: there were people in the neighborhood who were upset by what they saw coming off the subway. Here's the Grand Concourse, here's a 172<sup>nd</sup> exit,

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there's Taft; and there were people who looked out of their windows and were shocked at the number of black people who were coming off the subway and into Taft because they had just relaxed the rules about where you had to go to high school. But there again I found myself in the minority. When people tell me "You know, Avis, you're in the minority," I though [Inaudible]. I was the only black person in my department!

MN: Wow.

AH: But I became the assistant acting chairman. I have to show you a letter. The person who took the place of the chairman because he was sick simply could not get along with anybody in the department, so they put me in there. And that's when I learned I could do this job. Because I was making peace between her and the rest of the department and I was writing programs and making curriculums and making up exams and I said well why not get paid for this? So when my friend Pearl died in California who I met in Morris, said to me "Avis, we're going to take this exam, we're going to pass it, we're going to get paid." [Laughter] She had also left Morris but we got together and we studied. I have to mention Ralph Frier who was my chairman at Morris. Such a bright man, such a lovely man. When I was sick do you know who wrote a letter to my mother? "I'm sorry she's sick and I want you to know when she comes back to us we'll take care of her." When my father died, I was in the exam. You know these exams last like a year and a half, two years and I was in the exam, he was helping us through them, he was telling me how to present myself, how to organize myself, how to study. He wrote me a letter. I don't know if bosses do that very often, but he was so smart in addition to everything. He accepted a principal position in a junior high school and that killed him, he died of a heart

23

attack. That did him in. But I remember the first time I went to a chairmen's meeting at the board I thought everybody would talk like Ralph Frier. Oh hell no.

MN: Now were you at Taft during the teacher's strike of 1968?

AH: Yes.

MN: And was that a traumatic event?

AH: It was horrible. Remember the woman I told you that I was working with in the English office? Do you know what she did to the people who came to work? She slashed their tires. Of course I took the subway to work because I was safe, but somebody organized a local school for kids that wanted to go during the strike and that's where I spent my time.

MN: Right. Was this a point - - was the 60s a period where race became more of an issue in the schools than it was at Morris?

AH: You have to remember that there was probably an awful lot said about race out of my hearing than in my hearing. The only person who ever called me a nigger to my face was a woman in Scotland because she didn't know that you don't say that to people.

Now I don't know how many people called me a nigger behind my back but the only one who did it to my face was the woman in Scotland and she was mad because I bought a very expensive tweed jacket for my brother [Laughs] and she wanted to know where I got the money and I said "Mind your business." [Laughter] So yes, I was aware there were tensions and like I said, the people in the neighborhood, you know, who lived in the apartments - -

MN: Was that a mostly Jewish neighborhood at that time?

24

AH: Yes. Oh there was a deli there where if you went for - - you notice I'm interested in food - - if you went for a turkey sandwich the guy would

carve it off the carcass and he'd make you a turkey sandwich on rye bread with Russian dressing, you could die.

[BREAK]

MN: OK, what you were saying about the Jewish deli --

AH: Well, we don't have a Jewish deli around here - - even the pizzeria is run by Spanish people. [Laughter]

MN: So that was - - you came there in '62

or '63? AH: I was there a while when

Kennedy was shot. MN: OK, so that's '63.

Robert Kennedy?

AH: No, no. Jay - - Jack. I was there '62. I left Morris right after Clara and

she left in '61 so I left about '62 and as I said I have to show you - - I

can't tell you these things because it embarrasses me but I'll have to tell you some of the evaluations of my work.

MN: Oh, I'd love to see those.

AH: And you'll tell me what you want me to make copies of and I'll send it.

MN: Now did you know when you had Clara as a student that she was something and was going to - -

AH: Absolutely. There was an edge to Clara - - I like an edge in people. I

can't stand sweet people. [Laughs] I wonder what they're hiding. But

you know Inspector Morris on T.V.? He was an old grouchy British

detective I liked him.

MN: So there was an edge to Clara in high school too?

AH: Oh, yes.

MN: Oh, let me hear about that.

AH: Well there was a woman there called Catherine A. Ryan who was not crazy about me and she was in Catherine's English class and my honors class. The honors class was not honors English it was a class where you could try to get the kids aware of [Inaudible] OK, well Clara had said something and Catherine Ryan said to her, "You're never going to go to college anyway." And Clara said "You want to bet?" So Catherine said "That's does it." Somebody told me about it and I went down to the guidance office and I got the application to the college and I gave it to Clara and I said "You fill it out, you're going to college, what are you talking about? This is nonsense." She was bright, articulate, pretty; and I know which boys were in love with her and I know which boys she encouraged and which she did not. [Laughter] She was a joy to have around because she never said anything to you simply because she thought it's what you wanted to hear. And I appreciated that. You keep asking me about the difference - - do you know what I find? That in a way, these kids that I worked with all these decades ago were much younger. But in another way, they were more mature. They had the opportunity to develop themselves - - we don't give our kids a break. I have friends whose grandchildren after school go to this class, they go here, they go there - - these kids never have a chance to sit and be themselves. And when I'm all for giving kids all the advantages you can, I'm wondering if sometimes we don't over do it, if there isn't an overkill - - an overload, you know? I could see Clara sometimes, she'd be sitting there - - and I know sometimes she'd be musing, I'm out there beating my brains out and I know her mind is wondering but I look at her face and I can see she's thinking. I leave her alone. And when she comes to, then I call on her. I

think all of us need a chance to be ourselves, to talk to our selves, and even adults don't get that opportunity. I have friends who have the radio

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going in one room and the T.V. going in the other room. Why? My sister and I got along very nicely, God bless her - - no, she's got a problem and she just called me last night to tell me that she went to the doctor and she's OK which is why I'm thinking about her now - - I've lost my train of thought - - well, we'll let that go. [Laughs]

MN: It must be very interesting to see students when their young, 14 or 15 and then see them when they're 40 or 50 and see the threads and the connections.

AH: Yes. I think we are ourselves very early in our life and as we get older, we get to be more ourselves. Those of us who are nice get to be nicer and those of us who are nasty get to be nastier. [Laughs ] Yes, I think my mother used to say give me a child until the age of 7 and I will tell you what that child will be at the age of 17. She thought that was the turning point. She had a lot of sayings. Do you see that ash tray? You know who gave to me? Clara when she graduated from Morris.

MN: You still have it?

AH: I wouldn't part with it. And there's a sister to it - - I know where she bought it, it's Venetian glass and she bought it at Alexander's. And I wouldn't part with that. A couple of years ago my brother brought some of his friends here, one of them a little girl, and she fell in love with that and she wanted it and I said "No, you can't have that." But I did buy her something else, it was a good excuse to go to New York and I went to New

York and bought her something and mailed it out, they live in San Francisco.

MN: Did you have the same kind of students at Taft that you had Morris?

AH: I had richer students - - there were enough of middle class Jews of the Grand Concourse to change the feeling of the group. Example: One of the families was burned out and I was collecting money for them and this little girl raised her hand and said "Well

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why don't they just use their insurance and go to their bank account?"

And I started to get angry with her but then I realized, that's an honest question from her. She could not understand.

MN: So that's interesting. Morissania was a neighborhood of struggling, working class people - -

AH: There's a historian.

MN: - - trying to make their way up and the Grand Concourse was more middle class.

AH: Yes, they had made it. In Taft, we were reading the Diary of Anne Frank and this black kid I guess got very annoyed because after all, as far as he was concerned, Jews had it made. So he raised his hand one day and he said "You know Ms. Hanson I don't know why I have to be bothering myself reading about this Jew girl and her troubles." So I said "Well do you want to hold off on that a little while and we'll see?" So we held off a little while then of course the other kids got a hold of him, which is what I was hoping for. So he settled down, he could see that it's possible to be this Jew girl and still have trouble and still have somebody



worry about her and still be concerned about her because she's suffering the way we all suffer. But that showed - - that question never would have been asked at Morris. But this kid was reacting to the reaction of the Jewish people who were saying is there no end to these people who are coming here from Harlem?

MN: Did you here the term Schvartze thrown around?

AH: Of course. I remember Codge saying that Dickens was a fancy Schw - - I hate that name - - a fancy Schvartze. [Laughs] I tell you, New York can survive anything. If they survived Cadge and Mus - - Mussolini I almost said! [Laughter] Giuliani [Laughter] they can survive anything. Yes I've heard Schvartze but people have been awfully careful

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about the way they talk to me about race. Somebody said to me "You should smile because when you don't smile you're pretty forbidding." But not around here. When I'm trying to get across the street I'm not smiling but they always come to put a hand out even when I don't need it they come to my rescue. Yes, I've heard the term Schvartze. Wait a minute now - - I heard the term Schvartze once in Spain.

MN: In Spain?

AH: In Barcelona. I went to Barcelona and I took a course in Spanish because when I was chairman at the high school of fashion industry's I was chairman also of languages, but that was the wrong city because they speak Castilian in Barcelona - - anyway, there was a German fellow there and I don't know, maybe he was talking about me, I don't know what it was, but there was a group of Europeans and me in this Spanish

class.

MN: Were you at Taft when portions of the Bronx started burning?

AH: I think we had moved to the North Bronx by then - - yes.

MN: So you were teaching in Taft when you began to see the

Arson and the abandonment cycle hit?

AH: Yes. Actually, the real reason we moved from the house in the

Bronx is that my father died. It was a three family house, we were the

landlords - -

MN: What was it, 213<sup>th</sup> St?

AH: 16<sup>th</sup>.

MN: 216<sup>th</sup>•

AH: I was not interested in being a landlord anymore. It was too much

on me. So we moved by stages and Pearl, the same girl who talked to

me about taking the chairman's exam, she found a place in the Lefferts

Houses in Mount Vernon.

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MN: When you were at Taft did you have any experiences with students

being rude and disrespectful to you? Or was your persona such that it

discouraged that even when it was happening to other people?

AH: You know that's an impossible question to answer

don't you? MN: That's why I asked it.

AH: Aren't you something. [Laughter] Of course. Of course. What you

mean did anybody cuss me out because I was black?

MN: No, no. Nothing to particularly do with race, just students being

- - "I'm not listening to you."

AH: You know what they did to me and by them I meant the administration - - they gave me a post, you know, you have your teaching, you have your lunch, you have your free, and you have your assigned. My assigned was to be at a door where the kids used to sneak in and out. They put me there. And of course I had little run ins with quite a few kids who resented being in and out, in and out. It's amazing. Actually, the disrespect I found in a very sophisticated way from teachers. I'm coming home on the D train and I'm sitting next to the French teacher and she says to me "You know what I can't understand Avis?" And I said "What?" and she said "I have both types of students in my class. I have the smart kids and I have the colored kids and what I don't understand is, how come the colored kids can speak so much better than the smart kids?" So I get up and change my seat because I'm tired and I want to hit this woman. So I get up and I change my seat and she doesn't know why I'm upset. Now she's got the kind of faith you cut out her picture and put her on a mother's day card but here is this very sweet

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woman - - do you know the damage that this woman is doing? MN: Was there a lot of that or more than - - I mean - -

AH: But do you know what saves the situation? Oh God, I hate to say it but I will because I have the proof of it - - there were people in that school who knew that the reason that English department didn't

explode was I was there with this woman who nobody could stand.

See, I had known her from junior high school so we worked together, and I think that is what protected me, maybe I shouldn't have had the protection, from more overt expressions of hostility. There was one time - - do you remember Farmer, James Farmer?

MN: Very well.

AH: He had a son. One day his son came stomping into Morris High School, found me in the English department, and got mad at me. He said "You're doing a white man's job."

MN: This is when you were in Morris?

AH: This is when I was in Taft. I'm in the English office, I'm writing programs for teachers. And I said "Excuse me, I don't want to be talking to you, I'm busy now. Go away." So he went away and he went to the principal to lodge a complaint and the principal said "I wish I had been there to hear her." But people get very confused sometimes. They accept things that they shouldn't accept. There's no such thing as a white man's job or a white woman's job or a black man's job - - I don't acknowledge it. And if you do, well then we can't talk because we're coming from different directions so that was the nearest thing to a blowout that I had and it was from Farmer's son.

MN: And he was a student or a teacher?

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AH: He was a  
student. MN: At  
Taft.

PW: Were there any Latino teachers at all? Or it was just African American and white - Italian?

AH: There must have been about four black teachers, mostly Jewish. See, when I was in school, most of the teachers in New York were Irish. They're what Codge used to call "Secular Nuns." Most of them were Irish and then as I went along, most of the teachers were Jewish. I think that's still the case. But I'm trying to remember - - I can't remember any Latino teachers.

MN: So that teacher strike, was there - - how many black teachers were there at Taft when that was going on?

AH: About four or five.

MN: And did all of the black teachers decide to teach during the strike?

AH: I don't remember.

MN: Was there a spill over of tension after the strike?

AH: The major tension among the teachers when I was at Taft was between the teacher's union and the teacher's guild.

MN: OK, sure.

AH: That started when I was in Morris.

MN: Now, the teacher's union were the people who had been close with the communist party?

AH: That's what they said. And the teacher's guild was the other group.

MN: The social democrats.

AH: That was the tension that started when I was at Morris and which

continued when I was in Taft. Can I tell you a lovely story?

MN: Sure.

AH: One of the teacher's who lost her job in Morris because she was very active for the teacher's union and had too many friends of the wrong political persuasion, she actually lost her job.

MN: Well there was actually a commission called the Rat Couder commission that investigated teachers and close to a hundred teachers were kicked out of the school system and this woman was somebody who was kicked out of Morris.

AH: Helen Anne Minns was kicked out of Morris. Into Helen Anne Minns' spot stepped Regina Pomeroy, who is my friend to this day, she stepped into her spot. We got to be friends, her daughter got married the other day. One day, I meet with Regina for you know, old ladies do on Wednesday for coffee and a show, and she says "You know Mary Omni my daughter is going away for a year to study on a scholarship, on a fellowship. Helen Anne Minns, the woman who was fired, had left in her will provisions for a young Jewish woman who was studying Jewish literature to have [Inaudible] on a fellowship.

MN: Wow.

AH: And who's daughter got it? The woman's daughter who had stepped into her place when she was fired. Talk about full circle.

MN: Now did you find there was any difference between the teacher's union and the teacher's guild people?

AH: I didn't give a damn.

MN: So it wasn't something that made any difference to you one way or another.

AH: I remember we also had a strike in Morris and I'm coming up out of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue L and I'm walking to school and somebody stops me and they say "Look, you can't go in there, Avis." Literally I cried. So we went to Eddy Valen's and had coffee and cake. I really didn't care, just get it over with so I can get back in my classroom, I don't care.

NL: So you were a member of which?

AH: I joined the teacher's guild only because that's where most of the people I hung out with joined. [Laughs]

NL: Right, there wasn't any type of political persuasion in that? AH: I didn't care.

PW: I just wanted to ask, this teacher's strike was it Bronx-wide or city-wide? AH: City-wide.

PW: I was speaking to Jessie Davidson the other day and he was telling me about a strike led by a Reverend Galaminson in the 60s where the community was upset with how the schools were teaching the children so they boycotted - - they wouldn't let their children go to the schools, they pulled teachers out of retirement and they had their own little schools set up. Did you hear about this?

AH: Galaminson rings a bell.

MN: He was a minister in Brooklyn who was leading school integration campaigns and they were very dissatisfied - -

AH: Brownsville.

MN: Well, the Oceanhill Brownsville was the teacher's strike.

AH: All I know is that the strikes that I was involved with, where I stayed out, were citywide and the one that took place when I was in Taft, I thought it was a local development

that had pulled people together. I think it was really just to keep us busy and there's something to be said for keeping you busy. Instead of sitting home and chewing our nail, or slashing people's tires. I was in this group working with parents and teachers and kids and we were keeping each other busy until the strike would be over. I don't know how much real teaching we did.

MN: Did you ever reach a point in your career as a teacher where you felt it was becoming difficult to reach the kids?

AH: Oh sure. After Taft when I finally got on this list for chairman, I went down to this high school for fashion industries and there for the first time, I felt that racial tensions permeated the place.

MN: Where was the school located?

AH: West 24<sup>th</sup> St in Manhattan. When I read some of the reports that the principal wrote for me, about me - - it's hard for me to reconcile that with the way I felt about him. Because I felt that he was racist. He thought it was an awfully funny thing that his name and the name of the chairman or the president of the teacher's association were the same and he was say "[Laughs] Can you imagine that guy's got my name [Laughs] I wonder what's going on." That to him was a joke. And I said to myself you creep. [Laughs] This is my boss. Anyway, as long as I did my job and thanks to my mother's training I always do my job - - as long as I did my job, fine, we got along. We used to fight but never about anything professional. He was a military person. He would go every summer to reserve training in Georgia and he said to me one time "You know what, you don't even respect the fact that I," I said "No I don't, you're getting a little old for that, you're going to drop dead one day under the sun." That was our



relationship. But when

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it came time for him to write a report, man I could get elected president on it. But I did feel racial tensions and there were a couple of other people there who felt that - - you know, they talk about damning with fake praise. There's also a way of insulting with over praise.

MN: Oh, you're so articulate sort of stuff.

AH: You get a hold of a kid who has managed to write the alphabet from A-Z and you say "Oh look what you did!" You want to hit these people in the face. A lot of that went on.

MN: Do you think that those attitudes taken as a group phenomenon were a significant factor in affecting the educational performance of black and Latino kids in the city?

AH: Of course. Of course. Everybody knows that a kid will aspire as high as you allow him to. You cannot expect a kid to learn anything and maybe you don't and maybe that's deliberate, if you convince him that he cannot. A kid will learn practically anything he thinks he can and he gets a lot of his opinion about what he thinks he can do from this stage. And it's the teacher who sets the bar. And I was just furious with people who said - - I was more furious with people who set the bar too low than I was with people who thought they were setting it too high. Oh yes, I'm very - -

MN: Did you see a lot of that in Morris or something you saw more in Taft than Fashion Industry's?

AH: I saw most of it at Fashion Industry's. We had two tracks you know at Morris and in Taft and I got rid of it in Fashion Industry's as chairman. Because that's where you threw kids you didn't want to be bothered with, into the slow track. So let's not be throwing kids anywhere - - but it annoyed me when I walked into a regents class and

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there were hardly any black kids. And when you walked into a general class it was mostly black kids.

MN: You saw that mostly at what school?

AH: Mostly Taft. In Morris to a certain extent too, but not as much.

MN: Do you think the white teachers were more cynical and less concerned in the 70s than they were in the 50s and 60s?

AH: No, I think they just had more kids to deal with. Let me give you - - and I think a lot of this is [Inaudible] this play on Broadway. The advertising is very interesting. They advertised it as a play about a black maid in a Jewish household and the son of the household. For you to assume that there's a romance going on. The son is eight years old. He's having his own problems because he's Jewish and his mother is dead but the phrasing is interesting anyway. The step mother in this play thinks that she's going to solve, to a great extent, the race problem by allowing the black maid, when she's doing the laundry, to keep whatever change she finds in the kid's pockets. That's her solution. And she's not an evil woman, she's just stupid. She's naive. [Laughs] But her opinion counts for much more in Louisiana in 1963 than the maid who knows what it's about or the maid's teenage daughter who was the really smart one in that

whole play, so that the lives of so many of us are controlled by people who don't know what time it is and that's what's so frustrating and enraging. Why am I preaching? Well they say preaching and teaching and acting are all the same.

MN: I'm going to wind my part down. Patricia, do you have any questions?

PW: Yes. When you were teaching at Morris or Taft did you encourage any of your students to come to Fordham University? The reason why I ask is that you said Fordham

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was the first time that you had actually visited the campus was last month when you came for your first interview with Dr. Naison and I thought that was interesting because I kind of feel like Fordham University is some what of an island in the middle of the Bronx which is predominately black and Latino. And for an area to have such a large African American and Latino population how is it that they find Fordham University and the campus as foreign?

AH: I know what you mean. It's like Riverside Church, which you can see from this window. And until quite recently, Riverside Church sitting on the edge of Harlem was predominately white. And I think they even got themselves a black pastor or something. MN: Right, Forbes.

AH: Yes. In Morris you were lucky if your parents didn't need the money you would have earned if you had not gone to college, so that a pay college was simply out of the question. You follow me? Take me for example; when I was thirteen years old, my mother said to me "You want to go to college like your cousin Daisy?" My cousin Daisy was my father's

niece; she was the first person within shouting distance of our existence who had ever gone to college. She went to Hunter and I said "Yes". And she said "Well, that means you have to get the grades to get into Hunter." Because in those days, it wasn't the SATS, it was grades. She never said another word to me, but I knew that if I wanted to go to college - - and I have to tell you that all the time I was in college, I was aware that if I were not going to college, although I had a job and I paid for my incidental expenses, that if I were not going to college I would be able to contribute more money to the family. And I always had that feeling. Now, to go to Fordham where I had to pay, forget it. It was simply outside of my existence. Now, to tell you how things change:

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my brother comes along ten years later, eleven years later, he's all set to go to Hunter because at that time, Hunter is co-ed. All of a sudden he gets a scholarship offer to Howard. The first thing my father says is "Is it a full scholarship?" And said "Yes pa, it is." He said then "OK then bless you son, you go." But that's the only way he got there on a full scholarship. For us to expect the family to give money - - no such thing. So I think it's mostly financial, but in these days with fellowships and working and what not, I think Fordham could do a better job of advertising itself. Much better job. Now I took courses - - I took one course at Fordham that was a bust. I went to the old lady's school on 60<sup>th</sup> St, you know, Fordham at 60? And here is this man with all kinds of credentials teaching a course in religion. And I'm very upset because he's tracing the history of Christianity and this and I realize he hasn't mentioned Africa once. So during the break, I

say to one of my classmates what I just said to you, my classmate says "Why don't you ask him?" And I said "No, I'm a teacher I don't challenge other teachers in public, I can't do it." So he did. You know what this guy said? "Oh, we don't know anything about that."

MN: Do you remember what the guys name was?

AH: Of course I do, do you think I'm going to tell you? [Laughter] So he doesn't know that Ethiopia was the first Christian empire? My sister in law has a framed picture on her wall so I called her up one day and I said "Carrie is there a date on that?" She said "No I'm sorry." So I called up my brother and he told me which chapter in the Bible to look up and there it is. Now St. Patrick got to Ireland in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century because of trade routes. Christianity had gotten to Africa a couple of hundred years before that. Also when I was in the African museum I saw artifacts from that era. So for this - - it was a

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toss of his hand. So we have a lot to do. And I think that Fordham - - now that I know the Doc here and now that I've seen Clara again and now that I've met you - - it seems to me you're from NYU? I got my masters at NYU because you needed your masters to take the chairman's exam - - but it seems to me that you could do more about publicizing yourself and what you do and the courses that you give because kids have a greater opportunity these days to go to college.

PW: Do you feel that the kids see college now as an option, do you think they see this opportunity?

AH: Yes. How do I know? Because in the mid 90s when I first moved here, I

got myself a volunteer - - I have to talk to you about my volunteer work which is more important than my teaching. I got a volunteer job in one of the high schools in New York City as a counselor.

PW: Which one?

AH: Environmental Studies. They've changed the name -

MN: That's in Midtown Manhattan?

AH: That's a beautiful neighborhood.

MN: When did you start working there? Because I think I know the principle.

AH: He's not there anymore. A young man? He's not there. I worked with those students and taught them that you have to start thinking about going to college when you're a sophomore. You have to prepare for the SATS and if your mother doesn't have \$800 to give to Kaplan for a course to study for the SATS then you've got to find other ways of doing it. And yes, kids - - they didn't have to come to my little sessions but they did, I used to come twice a week and they came in droves to find out what to do, how to

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read a college catalogue, how to see what are the requirements how to get into various schools.

[END INTERVIEW]