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McGee, Mildred Interview 1

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Interviewee: Mildred McGee
Interviewer: Dr. Brian Purnell
Date: 10/23/2007

Transcriber: Robert Cardos

Brian Purnell (BP): Um, today is October 23, 2007. I'm in the home of Mrs. McGee, 904 East 232nd St. We're here to do an oral history interview for the Bronx African American History Project with her, to speak about her life in the Bronx, and we're going to build up to the point where she meets and marries her husband, the late Judge McGee. Also present is Mr. Leroi Archible and Mrs. McGee's daughter, Dr.-

Dr. Elizabeth McGee (EM): Elizabeth McGee.

BP: Elizabeth McGee. So we can first start with Mrs. McGee and Dr. McGee, but Mrs. McGee, if you could say and spell your first and last name—including your maiden name—and your date of birth please.

Mildred McGee (MM): My name is Mildred McGee, M-I-D-L-R-E-D M-C, Capital G-E-E, and maiden name is Wareham, W-A-R-E-H-A-M.

BP: Thank you, and your date of birth.

MM: I was born June 29, 1927.

BP: And Dr. McGee, if you could do the same.

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(EM): My name is Dr. Elizabeth McGee, E-L-I-Z-A-B-E-T-H M-C, Capital-G-E-E. My birth date is August 11, 1950.

BP: Mrs. McGee, Mrs. Mildred McGee, if we could start: where were you born.

MM: I was born in Manhattan. 55 West 140th street. That's where I was born. They were not too happy to have black people in Harlem Hospital at that time, an early time. And doctors visited, and Dr. Mausof was the doctor that delivered me.

BP: In your parent's home.

MM: That's right, in apartment, apartment 5.

BP: And you said this was what year, 19—

MM: 1927.

BP: Wow, ok. Your parents, what were their names?

MM: My mother's name was Ester Elizabeth Wareham, maiden names Byrnes. And my father's name was Samuel Sterling Wareham.

BP: And were they also born in New York?

MM: No, no, no, no, no.

BP: Where did they come from?

MM: They came from Jamaica, British West Indies. And I guess they arrived here—my father must have come here about 1917, 1916 or 17.

EM: 1916

MM: 1916.

BP: What type of work did your parents do?

MM: My father was a bricklayer. A carpenter and bricklayer. I think he wanted to be an architect. I think that may have been what he was doing. And when he came here, he was doing—I don't know. I don't remember him doing carpentry and bricklaying when we lived on 7th avenue. We lived on 7th Avenue, 2400 7th Avenue. But then we moved from there and moved to 141 st.—127 West 141 street. But I know when we were living on 140th street, that's what he did for a living.

BP: Dr. McGee, did you want to add something?

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EM: Yes, cause I know he used to tell me that his first job was sweeping up in stores. And he said it was a Jew that hired him, and he said if it hadn't been for a Jew, he would have never worked.

BP: That was his first job when he came to the U.S.?

EM: When he first came to the United States, even though he had the training of a carpenter. My Grandfather actually had—he was the youngest of 7 boys and he was left at home to take care of his mother and sister. And his older brothers went off. A lot of them went to Panama, and one went up to Costa Rica. One went to Cuba

MM: And one went to Philadelphia.

EM: and one went to Philadelphia. My Grandfather, when he left Jamaica first, went to Panama, but the canal was already built. And he went to Cuba next, and I guess he didn't find work there. And then he came to Phil—well, he came to New York, cause I saw the manifest where he went through Ellis Island, as did my grandmother two years after him, but— And I guess he went to work. He went with his brother, but it didn't work out, and he just stayed in New York, and he was sweeping. He was just cleaning up stores wherever he could get a job.

BP: Did he eventually move on to work as a bricklayer or a carpenter?

MM: Yeah, but after he was sexton during the Depression. He was the sexton at St. James Presbetyrian Church on 41st St. and St. Nicholas Avenue. And he was there for quite a while. And then he went on to be a carpenter, and joined. He joined the union, was able to get into the union. They had their own union. And he was able to get into the Carpenter's and Bricklayer's Union.

BP: You say "Their own union." There was a—

MM: [Crosstalk] There was separation between the blacks and the whites in the unions. And the black unions were the ones that he was a member of. They had their office on 141st St., I think.

BP: Did your mother work outside the home?

MM: Yes, she did, eventually. When, I guess when I was in elementary school, my mother was a cook in Howard Barlow's home. Howard Barlow was the director or the Orchestra leader for the symphony that came on WEAJ on Fridays. And she was a cook there, and then she was a cook for a lady who moved—and I can't remember her name, because they always called her "missus"—she moved back to England. And it was just a funny thing that my mother sent—during the war my mother sent food packages to her, in England. And her son was at my wedding. And that's how I met them. But my mother worked at that job, and then she went to work for the Board of Education, as a cook in an elementary school.

BP: Did you have any siblings?

MM: Oh yes. I have a sister, and I have a brother. Both of them are older than I am.

BP: You're the youngest?

MM: Yes.

BP: Okay, okay. For how long did you live in Manhattan? Cause I know eventually your family moves to the Bronx—or did you just move to the Bronx as an adult?

MM: As an adult.

BP: So you grew up as a child in Manhattan? A Teenager?

MM: Yes I did.

BP: Where did you go to school? Elementary—

MM: I went to PS 119—they've now changed the names—between 133rd and 134th St. between 7th and 8th avenue in Manhattan. And then I went to Harriet Beecher Stowe, or 136, on 135th St. on St. Nicholas Avenue. And then I went to Music and Art, up on the hill. And after that—I guess after that I went to Parson's School of Design for two years, and I got married—well, I did

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little odd jobs. I was—I went to business school, the Y business school. And then I was a legal stenographer for a little while. And then I got married.

EM: I'd just like to interrupt here, because she went to Parson's School of Design at the time it was only a three year school. At the end of her two years they told her she didn't, quote unquote, "sew fast enough." The real story was they had never graduated a black person from the school at that time.

BP: Oh, my.

EM: And so when she left, she tried to take her design, because she was a fashion designer, really a couture fashion designer. But her works were all one of a kind, and when she took them around everybody told her that they couldn't mass produce the kind of work she did, and that's when she went off to do these other things. Because her older brother went off to college, and he had a scholarship, and then he joined the ROTC and went to dental school in the ROTC and then went off to the Korean War.

The next in line, her sister, went to school at night, and she graduated from high school at the age of sixteen, and it took her 8 years because she had to work during the day, but here was no money to give her to go to school. So when it came time for my mother to go to school, they had some money. But then after those two years were up and then they told her that, that was that.

BP: So, your experience at Parson's, that took place I guess in the late 1940s?

MM: I went there 1947—1946, I'm sorry. 1946 and 1947.

BP: Your time in elementary school in the 1930s in Harlem: what was your experience like in the classrooms that you attended as a child?

MM: They were all positive. I had a good time in school [laughter], in elementary school. You know, looking back, I'm trying to figure out if we had any—we didn't have any black teachers in elementary school—in *my* elementary school. And I later found out that the principal was a German. And he ran that school—I guess that's why we had a good time—like a military camp. I had—One of my neighbors at Concourse Village told me about her. She did. She would stand up on a bench in the yard, blow her whistle, and, where we were, we stopped. “Line up!” And everybody lined up, and a teacher played music [imitates marching music] [laughter]. And we marched. We knew which way to go. We marched to music up to our classrooms. The classrooms—the classes were probably large. They were large—but there was order. They had **delaying** cards. They would give a question, and pick out the card, call your name, and that's when you had to answer. And that's how they marked you, according to those **delaying** cards. So you had fun. You had fun at lunchtime and after school—but you were there to do a job. And I had one teacher, Ms. Seaspraig. She said to us: “Don't ever be ashamed of who you are, of your color. Because if it was so bad, why would so many white people go down to Florida to get a tan?” [Laughter] I have *never*, ever forgotten her, and I have never, ever forgotten that. But she told us that, and that's the way it was.

BP: She was white?

MM: Oh yeah! There were no black teachers in my elementary school. In junior high school, we had Mrs. Roberts. She was the gym teacher, and the lady who taught—who taught, I guess, social studies. She trained us to be secretaries. Secretaries or teachers, because she said that's all we could be. We were all secretaries. We, and—I don't know if you're interested in this—

BP: Oh yes, absolutely.

MM: We had, in 136, a mock apartment, where you had a kitchen, and you had a bedroom and a living room. That's where I learned to make hospital corners. We had to make the beds, and we had to pull them straight and we had to make hospital corners and tuck them under, so it was neat.

BP: This was in Junior High School?

MM: Yes sir. And I learned how to do brown Betties. That's the little apples. Apple Brown Betties. We had to make things. And we also, there, learned how to sew. We all made blouses or skirts and then we had to put the seam binding on the bottom. I'll never forget that. We learned how to sew. We learned how to keep house, because I think the concept was, that's all we were going to be able to do. But it stood me in good stead, because I learned how to sew, you know, and I was introduced—not that I needed it, cause my mother was a cook—to housekeeping.

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BP: Your peers—the other students in the school—was it an integrated school, or was it mostly African American?

MM: All African American. There were *no* Caucasians, I think, in Harlem going to school, except **Rice** on 125th St. But then the elementary school—

Leroi Archible (LA): Is it still there?

MM: Oh yeah. Junior high school was all black, alright? And it was that way until I got to high school. And when I got to high school, it was totally different.

BP: What was high school like?

MM: —

BP: Or how was it like?

MM: [Laughter] I'm looking at you, just trying to figure out what it was like. I enjoyed—I enjoy learning. Let me put it that way. There were only ten in my class, my graduating class. Ten blacks in my graduating class.

BP: Okay, so let me just interrupt—

MM: [Laughs] Yeah, I thought that would catch your attention.

BP: You went from elementary and junior high school—which was *all* black—to a high school where there were only ten?

MM: That's right. And at the time was the war, so we had a lot of Jews. From France, and those from Germany who could get out, who had gotten out. And so they all sort of hung together as Jews—but then they separated when it came to the French, who were not going to have *anything* to do with the Germans. And then I had a few—I guess my friends were Italian.

BP: So, if we could just back up a little bit: How did you come—Where is Art and Design? Where was it when you attended it, and how did you come to go to this school?

MM: Very interesting. Music and Art.

BP: Oh, Music and Art, sorry.

MM: That's alright. Because it's now moved into and it's probably down into art and design.

EM: Performing Arts.

MM: Performing Arts they call it now, its 135th St. and Concord Avenue. That's where Thomas—not Norman Thomas, but it's named by a black person the school is named for.

LA: It's still there.

MM: Yes, the school is there. People think it's a part of City College. I had a teacher in the fourth grade who I liked and who liked me. And she needed somebody to clean, and my sister was looking for something to do. And my sister went to clean her house. Mrs. Liebowitz. And she gave me—cause I went with her—She gave me a book—I know this like this the back of my hand— that had a picture on the outside of—who's the artist who cut his ear off?

BP: Picasso—or, Van Gogh.

MM: Van Gogh. A scene that Van Gogh did. I fell in love with that. And I sat on the floor and she gave me paper and I copied that scene. And she encouraged me, she encouraged me to go. And what happened was that you had to take a test to get into Music and Art. And I took the test, and I got in as an art student. And everybody wanted to know what I was doing up there on the Hill, cause we just never went past St. Nicholas. There was a hill and a valley, and we lived in the valley. And that's how I got in: I passed the test. And if there was any way the people decided who you are according to your name, they'd have no way of knowing—cause Wareham was mine, and that's a German name background.

BP: Your Junior High school—Where did most of your peers from Junior high school, where did they go to high school?

MM: **Stit.** I don't know what—**Stit.** 164th, or something like that. And when they went to high school they went down to Seward Park, my girlfriend went to Seward Park. (There weren't that many high schools). Seward Park, the Business school. They had a business school that taught business. A commercial high school. Central Commercial high school.

BP: Yeah, that's where my mother went.

MM: Yeah, Central Commercial High School.

BP: So, you're doing something different—

MM: Pulling away from them—

BP: Yeah, what were people's reactions to that, either your peers or even some of your teachers?

MM: Peers wanted to know what I was *doing* up there, cause I had to go to school earlier and came home later than everyone else. And they just laughed—cause, you know “what are you doing up there?” That kind of thing. They wouldn't dare try to stop me, because they knew my father and my mother from walking back and forth. They knew there was no chance of ridiculing me or getting me to turn around, cause they were that kind of person.

The school: I learned early not to fight. That was against my family's thing. You don't fight. And I had one fight in elementary school. This child called my mother black. Well, that was big time

then, calling my mother black, black something, whatever it was. And you didn't let anybody do that.

BP: Well, there was another, well—

MM: I'm going backwards now to get up to where I was. Where I hope to be. And they put something on your shoulder, and knock it off. Dare you to knock it off. That's the crowd that's egging you on. And I got into this fight with this girl who must've been seven feet tall [laughter]. And we fought in front of the school and around, and the principal gave me a note that had my mother come to school. I gave my mother the note when I got home. "What is this?" And I told her. No word. She didn't say anything. She marched to the school, and she came back. I don't know what they said. They must've made some arrangement, cause they said they were going to put me back. That meant I was going back to the third grade. And my mother came back and she said, "What were you fighting for?" And I told her—Dolly King was her name—had called you black. And my mother said, "Am I white?" [Laughter] And I said "No, ma'am." She said, "What you did: you fought for nothing." And she beat the crap out of me. [Laughter] That's right. Stupid. And that was the last fight I ever had. So there was nothing they could do up there to me in high school. And it was such a large school that, you know, they didn't—they didn't bother me. Except when I got, I guess in socials—no that was in college. They asked double questions in college. [Laughter] In high school I just went and did what I had to do, because they knew that you had to have a certain average, maintain a certain average to stay in there—to get in there and to stay in there—and you had to have a skill. So if I was there, there must've been a reason that I was there. Okay, so I got through that and the ten of us would see each other all the time, and we

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would talk, depending—most of them were music students, so I didn't see too much of them. So I got through it that way, you know. It was alright. Graduated, came out. I had an enjoyable time, had a very good education according to my sister. Because a lot of things I learned there, she was learning at Hunter. They prepared you to go to college. There was no question about it. They prepared you for college.

BP: And then you went on to Parsons?

MM: Yes.

BP: You said, you just mentioned in passing, that there was some things that happened in social studies class at Parson's?

MM: No. I mean—

EM: You said in college. She meant—she went on to Hunter later on.

BP: Oh, okay.

[Crosstalk]

MM: I met some very good people, some very nice people there.

BP: Three years you were a student?

MN: It was a three year school. And I only—You had to pass. You had to be accepted by designers. You had to do designs. You had a segment, whether it was for sports, or nightwear, or evening wear, that was the project, that's what you had to do, according to the designer who came in a judged the work. I never had anything turned down, never. So, when it came time to go on—

EM: During her final year.

MM: Yeah, cause they chose something an you're supposed to work it up. And you had to have a model, and I think Courtney Parker was my model. And it was done. You had to sew it. They helped the boys. They helped the fellas. And they helped certain females, but they helped the fellas. I knew I could sew, because my mother taught me how to sew. My mother was a seamstress also. She made all my clothes. So, I knew I could sew. But the only thing they could get me, they washed me out: I didn't sew fast enough. And that hurt, because, as my daughter said, they saved money. My sister was sacrificed in the middle. She's a typical "middle child." Not enough money, after you spend all the money and send the first one out, you don't have much, you have to regroup and recoup something. And by the time they had gotten something, it was my turn. And I felt that I had wasted their money. I'd wasted their money. I did not—well, one, two of us from the school, we were going out, what you do is you go down to the district and you sell your designs. And one: I didn't know anybody down in the fashion industry. The white kids did, and if they didn't, they had admission. So I tagged along with them. And what

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she said was true. It was not something you mass produce. And that's where I went. We went to places that mass produced. And if I had gone to FIT, I would've had a better chance. But FIT was just started, and they didn't think FIT was going to last.

So, "that does it. Let me go take a course and come back and earn a living." [laughter] You have to have pride all the way home. I went to the Y and I learned how to take shorthand and typing. And that's where I went, and I did not go to college until after I got married, until after my kids were born.

BP: Okay, Okay. So, you took a course at the Y to develop a different type of trade, skill.

MM: That's right, so I could earn a living.

BP: And what was your first employment? Where did you first work?

MM: On 135th street, 200 West 135th street to a lawyer. Not **Denkins**. I forgot his name, but I worked for a law firm, a man and a woman on 135th street. I got along with the man fine. Didn't get along with the woman. And I was only going there temporarily. I went to finish up when the girl that they had went on vacation, I took over. They asked me to stay, and I stayed. And the woman gave me a hard time the whole time. '47 I met McGee. And he said, "What you staying there for? That woman is giving you a hard time" [laughs] And I said "You're right. You're right." And I left. And I went to work for Dr. **Pritchett**. Dr. **Pritchett**. He was my doctor and I worked as a receptionist there, for Dr. **Pritchett**. And from there I got married.

BP: What year did you get married?

MM: 1949.

BP: So, perhaps we could speak a bit: How did you meet your husband?

MM: I was going with a friend. I had a friend, and he was his friend. And I don't even know how that happened, [laughter] but we started going out.

BP: Oh, when you say you were "going with"—

MM: My boyfriend. I don't want you to interfere with this. Back off [Laughter]

My boyfriend—at least I thought he was my boyfriend anyhow. And he introduced me to my husband. And we started going out. And that's how I met him.

BP: Oh, okay. So perhaps if we could begin to speak a bit about your husband. What is his first and last name, if you could spell it, and his date of birth?

MM: His name was Hansel McGee, H-A-N-S-E-L, McGee, M-C, capital-G-E-E. His birthday was June 13, 1926.

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BP: And what—when you met him in, 1947 you said. When you first met him, what was he doing at that time?

MM: I think he was going to City College.

EM: At night?

MM: Yeah, he was going to City College at night.

BP: So if we could maybe back up a little bit about, and do a bit of his history, his biography.

Where was he born?

MM: He was born in Key West—no, where?

EM: He was born in Miami.

MM: Oh, he was born in Miami. You tell him [laughs]

EM: He was born in Miami to Lawrence Albury, A-L-B-U-R-Y, McGee, M-C-G-E-E, and Hansel Leslie McGee. He was a Junior. And he was born in Miami. Shortly after that, his parents split, and his mother moved to New York. She had an aunt, Aunt Julia. Who lived out in Long Island somewhere, and her sister was living with her, and she took her sister to come live with her. And my grandmother had my father and his older sister and her younger sister.

BP: The McGee Family, were they originally from Florida, from the Miami area, or are they from—

EM: Well, my father always told me that my great grandfather, Moses McGee, was born a slave. But his—my Great Grandmother—was from Key West, Florida, by way of the Bahamas, where—I imagine most of the black people in Key West were from the Bahamas, at least at that time. So that's the history. Moses McGee was from Georgia. That's where he was a slave.

BP: And so Hansel McGee Junior, your Husband, he spent most of his life and his childhood in New York City. Do you know anything about where he lived, where he went to school or—
[crosstalk]

MM: Well his mother died when he was about six or seven. He was raised by his aunt.

EM: She died just before his sixth birthday. She had Asthma, **Statis Asthmatica**, which is a condition that, even if she had been able to get medical treatment, she probably would have died anyway. But it was the kind of thing that—I mean they lived on 138th street in Harlem where the Greater Harlem Nursing Home now stands. That's where their apartment building was. I think it was the fifth floor. And the day my grandmother died, she told my father to be a good boy, don't cause anybody any problems. Just be a good boy and go to school. And she sent him off, and she had this **Statis Asthmaticus** later in the day, and by the time he came home she was dead.

But my great grandparents—my maternal great grandparents—No, it's the great-great grandmother on the maternal side didn't like boys—I mean, didn't like girls. So when my maternal great grandparents died, my grandmother was like 16, 17, so she came—she stayed in the United States, and she took her younger sister, who was only 5 years old, and the brother stayed in the Bahamas. And she pretty much raised my aunt. So when my grandmother died, my aunt saw it as her responsibility to take care of my father and his sister. But by that time my Aunt was like 16, 17 years old, and so she went off on her own anyway. So my aunt raised him until she got married, and her husband didn't want him in the house because he was a teenage boy and, as far as I know, her husband never worked. He gambled. And so I guess he figured my father was smart enough to figure that out, that he wasn't on the up-and-up, so he didn't want this teenage boy in the house. I know that my father then went to live with his father, who had not a clue about what it was to do to raise children, and my father got up in the middle of the night one night to go to the bathroom. But they were in like a railroad apartment, and the bathroom was in the front of the house. And so he went to the bathroom and when he went to go back to bed my grandfather said to him, “what do you think you are, coming into my house all hours of the night?” And he put him out. And then he went to live with his cousins, who were up here in the Bronx, Francis and Denny, and then the father sent him to Key West, Florida to live with his mother, and that was a crazy thing too. And so he left there and came back. He had been—I guess he went to a junior high school, 139, which was the male—

MM: P.S. 89

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EM: Okay, P.S. 89 and then Junior high school P.S. 139, which was all male, black, in Harlem. I

know he spent time at **Dewar** Clinton high school, Mars High School, and Rhodes Academy.

I'm not quite sure where, if he did, graduate from one them. I'm not really sure.

MM: He might have graduated from **Dewar** Clinton.

EM: He might of graduated from **Dewar** Clinton.

BP: So when you first met him and started courting each other, he was living in the Bronx?

EM: He had moved by that time to **Lymon** Place, and he was living with his sister, who was up on **Lymon** Place. And at that time Thelonius Monk was there, and I don't know who else was there.

Leroi Archibald (LA): Bob Gumms was there.

EM: Yeah, Robert Gumms was there, his family, because he said he met my father when Robert Gumms was five. They lived next door to each other.

MM: But you forgot to tell who his teachers were in 139.

EM: Oh yeah, 139: County Cullen was one of his instructors!

MM: He was his first teacher.

EM: Yeah, and I found an autograph book, which I think we still have where County Cullen had signed, you know, autographed it, when he graduated. Yeah so that was exciting. I mean, Langston Hughes was walking around then. All the people from Harlem Renaissances were just people that he knew—I mean, well, didn't *know* but—

[Crosstalk]

But I can even remember my father telling me the day that they integrated 125th street, where they hired somebody black to work on 125th street. He said, so they all ran from 138th street down to 125th street. But the person was so light that they were light enough to pass, so they couldn't figure out who it was [Laughter] who had been hired. There were no blacks on 125th street. But he—At one point my father dropped out of high school because of all of this moving around, but he did eventually finish.

MM: He was supposed to go to **Townson** and Harrison.

EM: He was supposed to go to **Townson** and Harrison, which was a special school. And he would have graduated at the age of 16, because he had been in what they called the Rapid Advance. Because he was a bright guy and he was just moving along. Had he not had all this other kind of trauma in his life, he might have finished and, you know—

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BP: Mrs. McGee, when you met your future husband, he was a student in college and you were working?

MM: No, I didn't work. I raised my children.

EM: No, when you met him.

BP: When you first met him.

EM: He was working too.

MM: Oh! Yeah, well, he was a salesman. He was working at anything he could get his hands on
[Laughs]

BP: I saw a photograph of him in a Navy uniform. So, had he already gotten out of the service when you first met?

MM: [laughs] yes.

EM: He was a radio operator in World War II.

[Crosstalk]

EM: He would tell us all those kinds of stories.

MM: That's right. I don't know if he had a plate in his head, or in his knee [laughter]. He was with the police somewhere, where he went down and he was shot, and he was going—

[Crosstalk]

EM: S.O.S. [laughter] [crosstalk]

MM: That's right, cause there were no black radio men. They were all working in the mess hall. And how he got that, I don't know.

BP: Do you know if he volunteered to go into the service, or if he was drafted?

MM: I figure he was drafted [laughter]. He was not gonna leave the hood.

BP: So when you first met him, he was a college student?

EM: And working.

BP: And working, as a salesman. What was your dating relationship? How did that go? You were living at home with your parents.

MM: You got that right. You didn't leave me home.

BP: What were your parents impression of Hansel McGee Jr.?

MM: Well, I'll tell you one thing, and I think I watched them—Archie do it. My husband used to stammer, used to stutter. And stutter bad. And when he got excited—And my father wondered what I was going with this man who didn't know how to talk. [laughter] And for us, they would ask, "Does he have a job?" That's what my family wanted to know: Does he have a job. And "yes, he has a job."

EM: And what are his prospects? [laughter]

MM: But, what did we do? We went down to all the jazz things. Three Duces. All the places on 52nd street. That's where we went. We went to all the jazz concerts, anything that they had. They had a couple up—well 8:45 club always had a deal of some sort. 8:45 club. That's the sum total. We went to the movies. And at that point, too, they had a lot of dances in Harlem. They had the **Renniasance**, the **Suboy**, the Autobahn Ballroom, the one on the **Dorm Casino**, on 7th ave and 141st, and 139th street. He had a place on 110th street—all these places were band halls. So you went to all of them. And each club, each state had a club: South Carolina, the West Indians had the Jamacia Benevolence Association among **Stratures**. Each one of the islands had a club. And I think this was a survival kind of thing when they came here. They bonded together, they put their money in for health purposes and insurance and things like that. So each one would give a dance. So we always had something to do, always had someplace to go and dance.. And he liked

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to dance, he liked to dance. So that's the sum total. On occasion we took in some plays, and then you also had plays in Harlem. So there was always something, you know, to do.

BP: And you're married in 1949. And did you then move to the Bronx?

MM: We didn't move to the Bronx until 1954.

BP: So you lived in Harlem for the first five years.

[END OF SIDE ONE]

[START OF SIDE TWO]

MM: Right, right.

EM: Well is 98th and Lexington Harlem?

BP: Oh, you didn't live in Harlem—

EM: Well some people consider that Harlem.

MM: We lived in East Harlem, on 98th street and Lexington Avenue. 183.

BP: So you lived on 98th and Lex, in the late 40s—early 50s.

MM: Early 50s.

BP: What was that neighborhood like back then?

MM: Mixed. It was in development. Still there. Still there. And good years. And made some good friends. And we still have some of them—those who are still alive. They were good years.

BP: So I guess if we can perhaps move into the Bronx chapter of your life and your marriage: Why did you move to the Bronx in 1954?

MM: We moved there because my parents moved a year before and they bought a three family house. And they said it was ridiculous for you to be living down there, paying rent, when you could just move here—

EM: And pay rent. [laughter]

MM: And pay rent. That's right. Gotta put that down. And I think this is where your auntie got the idea that we all lived together as a family unit, and I think—maybe she was right. Maybe that was the idea, that the whole house, everybody would come and live together. Like the old days. So we moved there, and we stayed there until 1963.

BP: Where was this home?

MM: Wheeler Avenue. 1230 Wheeler Avenue.

BP: And did you have children at that time?

MM: Yes, we moved on her [Elizabeth McGee's] fourth birthday. We moved when she was four. And when we moved up, there was Italians and Jews in the whole area.

BP: It was Wheeler Avenue?

MM: Yeah, Wheeler, in the whole Monroe High School Area.

LA: Soundview now.

BP: Were there any other African American families?

MM: They came after us. They came after us. I didn't know that of the Bronx even existed, cause we never came past 138th street. 138th street to get the bread, to the bread place, came back across the bridge and that was the sum total of our trip to the Bronx. That was a whole 'nother world.

BP: What was—I just—I'm sorry, I'm drawing a black. I was just going to ask you something.

You said something and I was going to ask it to you—

EM: While you're thinking, can I fill in something?

BP: Please.

EM: In 1952 my father graduated from City College, before they moved to the Bronx. And he was working as a research chemist. He got a job as a research chemist at the Manhattan DA. And he did that for a while.

MM: He must have did that and then went to IBM.

EM: Well I know he went to IBM in 1960.

MM: Well he was there a while then.

EM: You know, cause that's the year he graduated from what was then Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, which is now Polytechnic University, I think they call it. And he had this masters in Organic Chemistry. And he went for a job. I think it was Brook Haven, out on Long Island. Was it Brook Haven?

BP: This is later in the 60s?

EM: No, this is still the 50s. And he went out to Brook Haven. And all they saw was his resume and Hansel Leslie McGee. So they assumed he was Irish-German, okay? And my father was like 6' 4", a good 200-225[lbs]. And he shows up for the interview, and they told him, "We know you're not Hansel McGee." [laughter] "We know that you couldn't be Hansel McGee."

[crosstalk]

And he told them "Yes, I am." And he brought out his credentials and all that, but you know it was a no-go, cause it was just wasn't happening at that time.

BP: Where was this again?

EM: I think it was Brook Haven, but it was way out—it was a research lab out on Long Island.

BP: So he didn't get the job.

EM: He didn't get the job. But then he got—well, he got the interview because they didn't know who he was. And then he went to IBM and he got the job there doing research chemistry. And somewhere he made the decision to go to law school. And, at that time, to be a patent attorney, you had to have at least an undergraduate degree in a science. And he had that. And he was up at Yorktown Heights Research center there for IBM. And he started going to law school, and they must've asked him if he wanted to become a patent attorney, and one thing led to another. He

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was at Brooklyn Law School, transferred to George Washington University in D.C., where he could work in their patent office during the day, and get on-the-job training, and go to school at night.

BP: What I wanted to ask was: what was the address on Wheeler Avenue, where you first lived?

MM: 1230 Wheeler Avenue.

BP: And when Mr. McGee Moved to D.C., did the rest of the family move s well?

MM: [Laughs]

EM: As my grandmother said, “a family that prays together stays together.” So I tried to stay, and she told me that I had to go.

[crosstalk]

BP: How long did you live in D.C.?

MM: 3 years.

BP: Just for his law school?

MM: Yeah. And I enjoyed it. I would've stayed.

EM: And she went to school full time down there.

MM: I went to D.C. Teachers, and I was on my way to graduating.

BP: Did you finish?

MM: Not there. I had to spend, what, six more years, three more years? We came back and—three more years in the city at Hunter, because they refused to accept some of the courses.

BP: When you moved back, where did you move when you came back from D.C.?

MM: We stayed with my parents for a minute, and Concourse Village had just opened. So we applied for Concourse Village. After we had gone all around—I see it's happening again, I'm reading about it in the newspapers—groups had to be formed to get blacks into the suburbs, Westchester. If there was an apartment vacant, and you were going, by the time you got up there, it was always filled. So what they did was send a group—a couple—ahead. A white couple ahead. And they would find out either ahead or after you to find out whether the apartment was really sold. And I'm not going to take my children up to a place where they're not going to be able to live. So we went and applied to Concourse Village, and we got into Concourse Village.

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EM: And she said “children.” She forgot to mention, my brother was born on May 17, 1955, at the—

[crosstalk]

MM: He was born in the Bronx.

EM: At what was Bronx Hospital—is now Bronx-Lebanon Hospital—but the Bronx hospital on Fulton.

[crosstalk]

BP: So you come back to New York, you live with your parents and then you move into Concourse Village. The neighborhood on Wheeler Avenue, had you noticed any changes? I mean you weren't gone for too long. How had the neighborhood around Wheeler Avenue, where your parents owned their home. How had that changed in the—I guess where talking from 1954—when did you move to D.C.?

MM: '63

BP: And then you came back in '66. So over ten years at best—

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MM: It had begun to change, yes. More blacks moving in. Because I'm sure that the whites ran.

They ran. [crosstalk] One or two remained, Annie in the first building, there on the ground floor—she wasn't going nowhere—and about two or three others. And the school was good, so I'm sure a lot of the people stayed for the school. The school was an excellent school. And then when they got a chance to sell, they sold and moved.

BP: Where did they move?

EM: No, the other people. [crosstalk] That house is still—my grandparents died in there.

BP: Concourse Village, what was your address?

MM: 790 Concourse Village West.

EM: Apartment 6K.

BP: And what was that community like, in terms of who was living there at the time you lived there?

MM: There were white folks living there. There were white folks living there. And I was told they had to let blacks in, cause they were the ones coming in for the three bedroom apartments. The whites was crowding up in the two bedroom and the one bedroom. But they blacks came and they were looking for three bedrooms. And they came.

BP: Dr. McGee, what are some of your memories? I guess you were a young girl—

EM: I was a kid on 1230 Wheeler Avenue. Learned to ride a bike, play games. I went to PS 77. There was one black teacher in the school, Ms. Jones, the kindergarten teacher. But I don't think she was mine. I think the saving grace about that school was the orchestra and Mr. **Flyshacker**. I don't know how to spell his name. But we played, when I was in elementary school I played the viola and we played at Carnegie Hall.

MM: This was the only elementary school that a full orchestra.

EM: We had a full orchestra.

BP: In the Bronx?

EM: In the Bronx, right up there on 172nd street and Ward Avenue, right across from James Monroe High school.

MM: That's right, full orchestra. City College they played up at.

EM: And we played at Carnegie Hall! We played at Carnegie Hall as an *elementary school*.

BP: And you played the cello?

EM: I played the viola. And I ran into a guy that was in that orchestra, Oscar—I can't think of his last name. But he teaches law at St. John's Law School now. So it's almost like everybody who had—well, music is a discipline. And from there I went to Junior High School 123, where I was in the Special Progress Unit for 7th grade. And then we moved to Washington D.C.

BP: Oh yeah, you really didn't want to leave.

EM: Absolutely not, absolutely not. And I did 2 years there in a junior high school, and then I went to high school for a year at Western High school. And would've stayed again, but had to leave, and came back. And I went to Walton High School in the Bronx.

LA: It was girls at that time.

EM: And it was all girls school at that time, that's right. But they also, because I was coming from school in the South, it was D.C., they wanted to put me back a year, because they assumed that I had to have had an inferior education. They never stopped to think that where I had gone to school was in Georgetown, with a fair number of diplomat's children, even though it was a public school. And when my father—I'll never forget my father and my mother coming up to school, my father before he went to work. And I guess he was mad because they made him late for work. And he came in a suit and tie, and he went through this whole thing, and by the end of the time, they were asking me, did I want to be a senior that year and graduate [laughter].

[crosstalk] I opted not to do that, and—

BP: A few things. Now that you just mentioned that about your father, I thought of a question about him, but I did want to—the music program at your elementary school, and speaking of oral tradition: we've heard numerous memories and oral histories about the roles that school's music programs played in young people's lives in the Bronx in the 50s, and even in the early 60s.

MM: When I was coming up, every school had a glee club. Every school had a glee club. And the Kindergarteners had instruments that they played.

LA: And took home.

MM: That's right.

BP: I was going to ask, could you take these instruments home?

EM: Absolutely. We had to practice.

BP: Yeah, how did you learn to play the viola?

EM: Well, I ended up by taking private lessons at West Manor right there on Westchester Avenue, but they had lessons in the school. And we had instruments that we could take home, but my parents eventually bought me my own viola.

MM: My son played the bassoon.

EM: Yeah [laughter] [crosstalk]. But it teaches—they need to bring music back to the schools, because it teaches a discipline. It teaches a discipline that you can use—you know, it's transferable. It's a skill that's transferable.

MM: And it's good for you because—my son taught himself the clarinet and the flute.

EM: And I taught myself the oboe.

MM: And when they're stressed, he used to play the flute. He said he found it very calming.

BP: And to jump a bit, moving a little bit—

MM: I know you going to edit it, so that you can do that—

BP: Oh yeah. But you raised a story, or an anecdote, that I think says something about your father, that I want to speak a bit about his personality. So at this time, it's 1966, so it's the late 60s. He finished law school and he's back in New York working as a patent attorney.

EM: For IBM

BP: For IBM. Nonetheless, when you had a problem at school. He was there advocating for you.

EM: Absolutely.

BP: So what was his personality like, or what was his approach to, say, community involvement, community affairs, or even just civic involvement? Was he somebody who was involved in those types of things, or?

EM: Yes, because at that time we lived in Concourse Village and he was organizing—the two of them were in charge of the Youth Group. And they had organized dances—organized all kinds of stuff.

MM: Basketball

EM: Basketball, anything to keep us—to uplift us, educate us, and keep us out of trouble.

MM: That's right, and our house was always open.

EM: All the time.

[crosstalk]

EM: You know there were guys that showed up when my father died, and they were standing in the kitchen crying, and I was comforting *them* cause they looked so broken up. And I didn't even

know who they were. And then they told me they used to live in Concourse Village. Used to live in Concourse Village. He did so-and-so, he did such-and-such. What can I do? You know, cause he always did it. When my brother was in junior high school, the two of them led some group when they had some strike [crosstalk]. So I mean—and education was always key. It was, you know, with this Harriet Tubman Charter School, the focus is: all of those students are going to go to college.

BP: Now that's the charter school that he founded?

EM: Later on. But with my brother and I, we were going to college. It, you know, it's always been: "you're going to college." And I can remember saying something to my mother one day. My father was there. And I said, you know, I've decided I was going to college. And my father said, "but we always knew you were going to college." [laughter] and My mother said, she said, "When did *she* decide she was going to college?" It was like, he knew it. There was no option. But, I mad the decision at a certain point in time, which I think, you know, if you don't make the decision, you don't finish. So, but anyway.

BP: So Concourse Village in the late 60s is a racially mixed residential area. This is on Grand Concourse, right?

EM: It's one block east of Grand Concourse. It was racially mixed, but there weren't that many white kids. I don't really remember that many white kids. There were white people living there, but they—[crosstalk]

There were a couple of biracial kids—you know, like Olivia Smith—but it was kind of like, she kind of walked the line. It was obvious she was black, but it was kind of like she didn't know where she was supposed to be. Cause that was a time when I think people just didn't know where they were supposed to be. Because people were becoming aware of, you know, black is beautiful and all the rest of that. So how do you justify "I have a white mother and a black father"? And it was not, we were not at a point as a people to say "it doesn't matter, we're just gonna move on."

BP: And you graduated from Walton High School?

EM: Walton High School. And the principal who had just retired before I started was a Vassar graduate. And I had Mrs. King as my guidance counselor, who was determined that I was going to go to a good school. She was from the West Indies, I want to say Jamaica. And I was in the honors program, and I was the only black person in my class, and there were two Chinese girls, and everybody else was white. No Hispanics. And she picked me and one of the Chinese girls, who I later found out had started at the school the same time I did. And the principal had gone to Vassar the year before—the year of '67, they sent the first black girl from my school there, Sigrid McAfee.

BP: Her first name was Sigrid?

EM: Sigrid McAfee. And they might not have known she was black either, but she was like a physics whiz. So she went to Vassar. And Mrs. King had me apply to Vassar. My father wanted

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me to go to Cornell, for whatever reason. And I don't remember the third school I applied to, and then the state university system in City College. And I was waitlisted at Cornell, I got into Vassar, I liked Vassar, and that's where I went.

BP: Was that an all women's school at the time?

EM: The first year, and then it went [co-ed], yeah.

BP: I think for today's interview, I'd like to build up to when Hansel McGee, Esquire becomes Judge McGee. But I do want to hear a bit from Mrs. McGee about the organizing the youth group in Concourse Village. This might sound very basic, but why did you and your husband do that?

MM: Well, there's nothing for the kids to do. And I had a son who was, he was there [crosstalk]. You were going to school, but he was—as a boy—he was making friends there, and there was something—he was 5 years younger than her. [crosstalk]

BP: Okay, so he was like 13?

MM: Right, and we were giving him something to do, because of complaints. There were complaints about the kids, the kids all the time being out there playing ball. And what it was, was that the children were visible, and they didn't like it. So what we did was organize the kids into something, and in the summertime we hired—

LA: Summer youth

MM: Yeah, we hired somebody to come, a young man, to come and run the program, the youth program there, to take them on trips and do whatever it was, to keep them together. And when they had the dances and parties on Friday, we were down there too, to chaperone, and run interference between them and the others, the people who lived in there. Because they figured that once they started having basketball and they were having parties, people from the outside

EM: From the projects

MM: Across the street would be coming in and then there would be a lot of pranks, and all that sort of thing. So we were very strict about that. There was no smoking and drinking on the premises. So you were responsible for who you bring in there. Cause you have to live here after they're gone. So that worked out very well. We had a lovely time.

BP: And at this time, you're continuing to go to school at Hunter? Or have you finished. Are you, did you start teaching yet.

MM: I didn't start teaching until 1969.

BP: So this is right about that time where you're about to make that transition?

MM: Right, I was going to school. I was going to school at night.

BP: At Hunter.

MM: At Hunter.

BP: And what was that experience like, attending Hunter University?

MM: I was no lady, by all standards. You know, cause I started college late. And the professors liked me because I was older, and I didn't fool around. They figured that I was there for some reason. You know, I wasn't just there to waste time. So I got along with the professors and all them very well. And with all the students. And it was all right. I got on the elevator, cause they all thought I was a professor. They let me ride the elevators, you know. I got to know everybody there. I found it very pleasant—with the exception that night students were not considered students of Hunter. And I didn't like that. You didn't have the same kind of access to counselors, guidance counselors and stuff like that—because you were at night. I said “you aren't giving it to me for nothing. I'm paying for it and I'm entitled to it.” But other than that, it was all right. I graduated. They gave me hell. That's right, I forgot about that—to graduate. They told me I needed more of this, more that, more the other. And I'm saying—I'm getting ready. In fact, I had already paid for the robe, and you're going to tell me I don't have enough credits? Whereas I have made a point of going to the guidance counselors that were available, and I made sure that my credits were up. And if something was wrong, they should've told me ahead of time. So they told me that's the best they can do. And I said, “That's swell, I want to see the president.” And I

got to see the president. And I told him, “that’s why the kids go on strike, why they sit down in the lobbies. Because you give them a hard time unnecessarily. Now, I was here, I wasn’t here fooling around. They messed over me. They messed over me.” And he said “Yes, you’re right. Will you do me a favor, and go take one course up at Lehman during the summer? Because I want you to graduate.” And I told him wasn’t going to graduate to no funny school. I don’t need to graduate, just give me the piece of paper. But the pact we made was I would come to graduation. So I took the course, the chemistry course, up at Lehman, came back and I showed him.

BP: And then you graduated.

MM: That’s right. He was there, down there, to see that I walked that line. And that’s how I graduated.

BP: When did you start teaching as an elementary school teacher?

MM: 1969.

BP: And where was your first job?

MM: In East Harlem. I always taught in East Harlem. PS 57.

BP: Where is that?

MM: 115th street, between Lexington and 3rd.

LA: That's El Barrio.

BP: And at this time Mr. McGee is still working for IBM?

MM: That's right.

BP: I guess I'm curious to hear: how did he become a judge?

EM: He was doing all these other community activities.

MM: And all this stuff is under the table.

[crosstalk]

EM: And he was doing all this during that time. [crosstalk] And what he did: he was still working for IBM, but he took a leave of absence.

MM: That's right, for a year—or was it three years?

EM: He ended up either 2 or 3 years [crosstalk], at Bronx Legal Services in the Bronx.

LA: That's where I met him at.

BP: If perhaps I could—Arch, what was Bronx Legal Services?

LA: That was mostly what we call, we liked to call them pre-paid lawyers, cause they was from the community. Sometimes, when you get in trouble with the courts, and you can't afford a lawyer, this is where you pull a lawyer. A legal aid service. That's how I met him, because one of my boys was having trouble in Co-op City, my third son. And it was something they kept telling him. And one time--McGee and I was together he kept to stay away from Co-op City cause they don't want you there. But then when I needed a lawyer, that's when I was told by Ed Stevenson that he and Hank had the law firm on 125th street at the time. That's where he came from.

MM: Your father went to the office on 125th street. That's where he met that lady, the other day, that secretary. [crosstalk]

BP: So, Mrs. McGee, was he one of the founders of Bronx Legal Services, or was he just—

LA: No, it was a new thing, I think, from the way I learned it later, that came later from the social element., in their legal aid offices. And I don't know how McGee got to do that, but that's where I met him.

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EM: See, at the time, IBM had this program where you could do a year in the community and give back. And I think they paid his salary. And he went there and he was head of the legal services. And he kept asking them permission to do another year to serve the community. [crosstalk] And I think by the time the third year was up, was when he started running for judge.

MM: Didn't he run for district—

[crosstalk]

BP: Well, maybe this could be a good place to pause. And when I come back, with or without the archivist—well, the archivist will come back, but (let me just turn this off)—Come back, and we can pick up from there and perhaps we can—

EM: Fill in some of the blanks.

BP: —fill in some of the blanks by looking at some of the plaques, to see all the community things that he did. And Arch, if you could be here then, to explain what some of these organizations were, and speak about how you came under his wing, and what you learned from him. So, does anyone want to add anything to this first part?

[crosstalk]

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BP: So perhaps we could pick up from there, talk more about his political—well, moving away, I guess, from the private sector to the public.

[END OF SIDE TWO]

[END OF INTERVIEW]