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Interviewee: Mildred McGee (w/Leroi Archible)
Date: 11/6/2007

Transcriber: Robert Cardos

Dr. Brian Purnell (BP): Today is November 6, 2007. We're in the home of Mrs. McGee, and this is the second interview in the Bronx African American History Project's interviews about the late Judge McGee. Mrs. McGee is present, as well as Mr. Leroi Archible.

So, the first general question I'd like to start with is—both of you—how would you describe the late judge's personality, or his character? I mean, he seemed like a pretty memorable individual, from some of the things you said about him.

Mr. Leroi Archible (LA): Maybe I can start, give me a chance to go through my mind. When I first met Jack McGee, I was afraid of him, number one, because he was more direct, I guess. Sometimes they say the lost man was from the streets, and he seemed like he was—I would say sophisticated, to me, a little arrogant, to the point. And once you let him explain what was happening, trying to go on, it was easy to understand him, and I think he was—to me, at a young age—more of a point. And meanwhile, I said I had a problem with one of my boys, and I didn't know where to go, and I had been talking to him about a couple of issues. One of the issues is my situation with the military. I guess, it was personal, and I explained to him why I needed to get involved with the community, and he gave me some things to do. One was to be sensitive what I did and fight for my discharge—I had a dishonorable discharge from the military. I guess in California, smuggling drugs, dope. And when I got out, I had a bad discharge, and I needed to straighten that out, because my aunt, my grandmother was alive, and they said that "you need to get yourself out." So, I used to say this to McGee, and he was one of the forerunners in helping me appeal this decision that the military gave me, and ended up—you know, I'd been cleared of the charges, and got an honorable discharge and was able to move on from there.

BP: How old were you when you met Judge McGee?

LA: I roughly was about 24-25, just out of the military.

BP: Was he a judge at the time?

LA: He was a lawyer—Oh, he was in a law office, I believe, on 125th street there, and that's where I was referred, to go down there with my son and my wife. And my wife looked at him and said "oh, that guy there, he's gonna be all right." And I'm looking at him cause I'm on the side, you know, where he looked. And the toothpick thing he did scared me [laughter]. You know, he'd pick his teeth a lot of times, and then in that teeth picking he would stammer. And looking back, in retrospect, I said "That was for him to get his speech together, so he wouldn't have to give up his stammering." And I tell you to death, like I said, he was a powerful man to me, and talking and talking. And when I found out that he was a high school dropout that understood my position, with him, as been dishonorably discharged from the military, and I saw that he was fighting, so I began to fight, and I've been fighting ever since then. And thanks to the judge and some other letters, it gave me an opportunity to live not a shameful life, a more comfortable life. And the lying part, McGee was a stickler for lies—

BP: He was a stickler for lies?

LA: For lying, not telling the truth. And one thing I learned, that if you tell someone the truth, and it's coming from the person that's supposed to—about the incident, then you more have to believe it than somebody else. So, I have always said, sincerely, "If you want to know about Arch, ask me. Don't ask nobody else. And whatever I tell you should be sufficient. If you can't go for that, what am I supposed to do?" And I learned that from McGee.

Another thing, that is not with him. If he asks you where you been, you need to tell him right away, rather than tell him how you got there, and he didn't like that.

BP: Can you explain what you mean by that?

LA: [laughs] Well, the way he would say it, you know, is: "Where you been?" And I'd start, "Well, I met so-and-so." So he said, "What I'd just say to you? I don't want to hear that other shit." [laughter] And I'd go, "Okay, man," and, you know, and then I would tell him. And it was nothing, just tell him what he want to know. I don't need to know all the in-between stuff or anything. And as I get a little older, I get it down like that, because I understood him, man.

I was out of work, in the process of changing jobs. And one day McGee said to me, "How do you get along without your children?" Mr. Hill was the district manager for community board 3, and there was a position open there for assistant district manager. And he said to me, looking at me across the table, and he was sitting there, I looked at him, said "How do you get along?" This came from—Mr. Hill and I was working in the same office, but I was a youth coordinator back in the day. Each board had a person that dealt with the youth and the community, and I was assigned community board 3 from 51 Chambers. He said, “You have any trouble with Mr. Hill?” and I said, “No,” and looked at James James—you remember him?—James James, and said, “you think he can handle it?” And James said, “Well, let’s see.” He said “You want the Assistant District Manager job?” And I said “Yeah.” “You got it.” So that’s where I went.

BP: So, it would be good if perhaps in a bit we could talk about—it sounds like Judge McGee was a mentor—

LA: For me, he was.

BP: —so I want to hear more about that. But, just to be clear: how did you know to first go to Hansel McGee? How did you—when you and your wife and your son—you said your son was having some trouble. How did you know to go to this individual?

LA: Well, I had mentioned that, in the Jackson club, you would come there on club night, and it was nice that they had Legal Issues. And my wife said that we needed a lawyer, because the way the case was going, there was still a chance that my son would be marked for the rest of his life with whatever the offence was about. So I said to—it was Ed Stevensons—I said, “Ed ,I need some help. I need to find a lawyer.” He said, “Well, talk to Judge McGee”—well, he wasn’t judge then. It was Dr. Hansel, they’d always say. I found out the secret word from Harlem was “Hank.” When you call him Hank, you were supposed to have known him a little while, because that’s what he was called in the streets. And he told me to come down to his office, and I came down there, went to his office with my wife and my son, and we talked. And he went to family court and—

BP: And he advocated for, on behalf—

LA: Yeah, for—of behalf of my son. And it paid, cause the same son that he helped went to school at Albany. And he later went back. And now he's working on his master's, I guess, up there, and he's married and he hasn't been a headache since.

BP: So, perhaps we could come back to your relationship with Judge McGee, but oftentimes—especially with someone like Hansel McGee, who is a very public individual—there's the public person and then there's sometimes the private person. Sometimes they're not different, but I'm curious: what was Hansel McGee like? What was his personality like in the home?

MM: What you see is what you get. [Laughter] He did not change. This was him. He didn't have any time to change. You'd take him for what it is. You don't like it, move on. That's the way. I was just listening [laughs]: the truth? Tell them the truth. And the one thing he used to always say to me: "Did I ask you all of that? What did I ask you?" So it got the point that I knew, he asked me a question, gave him the answer. That was it. He didn't want any frills. And I finally took that on. "Is that what I asked you?" You know, I did that in school, with the kids. "If I ask you a question, give me the answer." When you write a paper, answer what they ask you. No more, no less. And that I learned from him. He wasn't a different person when he came home.

He was the same person. He had a marvelous sense of humor. Sometimes you were the butt of his humor, but he did have a humor.

BP: Could you give some examples of his sense of humor?

MM: No plowing, no fun. There was that. “No plowing, no fun.” He’s just—there’s just no one thing

BP: Right.

MM: —that I can think of that was—he found laughter in most things. Something to laugh about in most things. The only time you won’t see him laughing is if you mess over a child. He didn’t like that. He did not like abuse of women. Those things I knew that he did not like. And then you saw a different side of him, where there was *no* fun, *no* jokes, nothing at all. He’d look at you dead in the eye and he’s asking his questions, and if his question is “Why?” he wants to know why. He’s very specific that way. [laughs]

BP: You have two children—

MM: Yes, my son—

BP: Elizabeth—

MM: And my son Leland.

BP: Leland, how do you spell that?

MM: L-E-L-A-N-D. Leland.

BP: Is that a family name?

MM: No, I just knew it wasn't going to be another Hansel. [laughter] I knew that. He's named after his father, and I knew it was going to end there.

BP: Leland is 5 years younger than Elizabeth.

MM: Yes.

BP: Do you have any memories that stick out of—now, Hansel McGee, Judge McGee, with his combination of a strong sense of humor, but a very serious side, he must've had some interesting disciplinary or parenting techniques with his children. Does anything stick out of—any moments when he gave some good lessons to your children? I'm going to assume particularly your son, because boys sometimes tend to get into mischief more than girls.

MM: Yeah, but you didn't get into mischief. You never—you didn't get into mischief. [laughter] You didn't get into mischief. He did not—and if you stayed around him, you knew what he was like. And you knew he would *not* accept mischief—although he seemed to have been mischievous when he was coming up. And he could—and play jokes. He used to tell—I remember going across, it must've been going across the bridge. A bridge. And the only place I can think of is Jersey, but I don't think we were going to Jersey then. My son was small. And you know those big white things? They must have something to do with the oil or something like that? "Daddy, what's that?" "Oh! That's the moon that's come down!" He's listening, he's listening. He believed everything he said. He believed everything he said. That's the kind of humor. And the **Ballsy** thing that I think this is on the tape: He and **Ballsy** solved, you knew, they solved the whole war.

BP: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

MM: And that's the kind of thing that he would say with a straight face. And you'd sit there and you'd look at him and you knew the cat was lying. But you couldn't tell from the way he was telling it. But he was there, you know, and he was on the radio [imitates radio sounds] [laughter]. It was funny. He was funny.

BP: So, Judge McGee—I asked last time when he began to become more involved in civic affairs, public affairs. And it sounded like he had always been involved in something outside of his work, but it seemed like there were two different areas. There was one as he was working for IBM, he was also doing community work. He took leaves from IBM to do community work.

MM: Yes, he went on leave. But his job—he knew he had to earn a living.

BP: Right.

MM: And he was going to earn a living. But, I believe, his life—the joy of his life—was after he left the job, when he came back to the streets. I said the man was for the streets. That's where he's from. He enjoyed being with the people. He enjoyed being with the people. With IBM, you know, I guess they learned not to mess over him too. Cause, you know, when you talk about promotions and things like that, he was not going to stand for any foolishness. You know, "If I got the qualifications, and you're going to put somebody dumb over me, I'm going to let you know that."

BP: Right.

MM: And he wasn't going to bite his tongue. Come home once and said, "They got some dumb fella ahead of me that don't know *nothing*!" He's not going to sit down for that. He's going to fight for what he knows—if he's qualified, that's it. So, the things that happened away from the job is where he got his joy. Where he got his joy. And I guess it's because he worked form the time he was 14. And he was always selling newspapers, selling rope, or whatever that was available. So, he knew the hardship, but he also knew the problem of not having two parents in the home. And to his dying day he loved his aunt, because she never, never gave up on him. She's the one that gave him his sense of what he had to do. I mean, there was no foolishness: "you going to school. You are going to school." And there was no question about what he had to do. He was a family man. He got that sense of family because of his sister, who was 10 years older than him, and his aunt. Those are the two ladies who meant a lot in his life. So that whenever he had to deal with people who had problems and families, he's coming from that end of it. He's coming from that end of it. And I can remember one time he came home, he was so mad, he said "You know, they're putting a child out of kindergarten." Well, you're talking to the wrong person, because I'm a teacher. "Yes, they put her out of kindergarten. The child did not know how to socialize. Did not know how to behave." He was furious! I couldn't convince him. "You can't put a child out of kindergarten." So I just shut up, backed off. "You go up there and find out for yourself" that kindergarten is not for everybody. Some children don't know how to—they're not—no socialization skills. But he's—in dealing with family and children, I think he was able to translate this conversation with them. He had all the time in the world. You need some help? I don't know what he was doing or how you could do it, but I guess as a judge and a lawyer, you can manage your own time. "You come up and you sit down and you talk to me." That's the kind of person he was.

BP: Do you know—when did he get involved in the Jackson Democratic Club?

LA: I met him in the late 60s there. I met him in the late 60s I don't really know.

BP: And you were living in the Bronx at that time?

MM: We had came back from D.C., we moved in '66. And when he came back, I think he walked into all this political thing. Cause I could remember them all coming to the house for one reason or another.

BP: Who were some of the people?

MM: Don’t even ask me. All I did was serve collation when there was collation to be served.

BP: What does that mean, “serve collation?”

MM: Food, you know, the food. [laughter] [crosstalk] That’s not my thing. He always thought that that was not my thing. So, others want to tell you about his political side.

BP: Okay, so, between the two of you, was there an understanding that he would be involved in the public and the politics, and—but, well, you were a public person yourself, you were—

MM: But not in politics.

BP: But not in the politics.

MM: Not in politics. And that was a definite—not a written thing, or a said thing. But I knew that that was not my thing. I don’t particularly care for politicians and politics, but that’s where, that’s where—He liked the challenge. He liked the discussions, and he liked the movement that occurred with politics and politicians. And the different kinds of people that he could meet and deal with.

BP: So Arch, maybe this is, if you could tell us a little bit about what was the Jackson Democratic Club? And why was this such an important place that somebody like Hansel McGee would be involved in and then connect to somebody like you, as a young man with your family and your own—

LA: You know, McGee was a leader, and when I was sent this way, it's like—when I went in the club and he asked what I wanted to do. And I just said, I wanted to help, I wanted to get involved, but I didn't know one end of it. And then he and Mrs. McGee said that. And I went through the same thing, I guess. Now, she dealt with the judge on the political end. My wife gave me the same thing, and I think what turned her off, we got locked in the school one night, with Ramar Malez**.** And my wife said, "You can stay. But I want to go." But I did leave with her, but then later I came back. With the Jackson Democratic Club, the more look back at history, it was—if I can say at that time, for the blacks in Morrisania, because I've always looked at Morrisania as the sugar hill of the Bronx, back in the day—it was sophisticated, clean. There was a difference between the bottom and the hill and how like from the bottom and the hill was up on Boston Road. And I always used to say in my mind, cause it was so neat and clean up there, that this was the Sugar Hill of the Bronx. So to be part of—I guess then, the end thing was to be involved in the politics, because I went, I guess, back in the 60s and 70s, I was on mainstay. And everybody was in that thing for "I'm black and I'm proud and I want to get involved." And I think McGee fit it in with some of his—I called it "outside challenges" of it—and the job, and all of us in there would listen to him in the cellar of, I guess some politician. I really got to pay attention to him, is when—again—is when he asked me, did I want to get involved. And I said "yes," and they run me for a district leader. And I found out later: that's what the strength was in the cub, was being involved with the community and helping people with—you call "constituent service," when you help both sides. And McGee was good for helping. And I noticed on some nights in the club, when they had—when you get your legal thing, he would always kind of cheer, or a different movement in there. Again, he was sincere in what he'd do. And he was a delegator, and any idea that you had, then you had to go get it. And then he'd ask you about it later on, where you stood.

My understanding of politics then was to be—was when you gave yourself, allegiance to someone. And I felt that allegiance for McGee. My main thing was that he helped me with my son, who I guess then I was trying very hard, cause I had three boys at the time. And I had hopes for all of them, and, you know, I think McGee gave me something to deal with.

The club, it was like everybody in there seemed, at this time, was up on a pedestal, like, belonging, you know. You're walking down the street, and folks say hi to you a lot, or "how you doing," or got some problems that I think most of us learned how to—[through] constituent service from being in that club—how to help people and research. Cause at least once or twice a month we had services. HRA would come there, DSS would come there, someone would come and explain law. Someone come and have a landline tenant. And so anybody who was around then was in the, I guess the upper crust of the club, got all that information. And he was always, like, up. And McGee was good for having resources. And I guess at this time, I really—like I said—I didn't really know, cause I was coaching football and baseball at the time, and—. McGee—you know, the more I think about it, and sitting here talking about McGee—he was a frou-frou kind of guy. But then again, he was strict. And I'd always say he was strict, but fair, and firm. And I think that's what made the club grow. We were the majorities because, not understanding the politics again, that—the white establishment liked the Jackson, because the Jackson was one time in the Bronx the most powerful political club. And I think it was mainly because of guys like McGee, Ed Stevenson, Paris—and Paris was [laughs], he didn't tell McGee to sit down. I won't say it on your tape, but, where your feet are, you know. And he was correction, and that used to be the funny part, and Paris would tell him—look over to Hank and say "Didn't I tell you to sit down?" [laughs]

BP: What was Paris, Paris' name?

LA: Paris Davis. He was a part of the club. In the club—one time, I think I told you this before—but I really learned when he would run for surrogate judge, and I used to chauffer him around. And when him and I used to talk, and when you get talking you get close and you get some personal stuff. But I noticed that he didn't play around, and again—like McGee said, my thing was always my kids. And I think I got a lot of that from him, just making sure that your sibs are alright, and whatever else that you do. And one time I saw him real angry—this was at Carlisle Birdy's—

BP: This was—

LA: The other guy that worked with him was in the club with his man, Carlisle Birdy.

BP: Carlisle Birdy.

LA: Yeah, McGee was gonna knock him out. I mean, was probably going to break both of his leg and his jaw. I'm being serious. We was putting up the Christmas tree, and Carl kept stuttering away. And finally McGee: "Didn't I tell you to stay the fuck away from me?" Carl kept on "Oh, man, Hank," and all this and stuff. And McGee had to stand between us, and he goes—and, you know, he's a big guy, he can make a fist like that—and he's ready to burn this guy, man, because he just kept telling him to stop putting the tree up. "Don't want that light!" That's what it was. McGee kept saying "Carl, you're a stubborn old man. Go sit down." And that used to get him. But the club was a holding point, I guess. After I got involved in the Jackson Democratic Club with McGee, Gloria Davis, Ed Stevenson, Paris Davis, Carlisle Birdy, Mary Atkin, Henry—I can name them all—seemed like in that political thing it brought a little family there. It made a family.

BP: Excuse my one second folks, I need to pause this, and—

LA: So, when I began to do this research—and this takes me back as to why I had a lot of fun in the Jackson—after going up into Albany, and I really found out I knew the political angle, and I wanted to see who was the first elected official, cause I was told a lot of other stuff down in there. And I used to hear this lady's name all the time, which I still did and didn't know the story. That was the honing point of **Hallot Pallot**, because Estelle and Gloria would sit down and at the same time she's running against her. And McGee didn't want to pull my coat—cause, like I said, I'm tough mad, and I'm about ready to tell everything. And he'd tell me to kind of "keep your fucking mouth shut."

BP: That's what McGee said?

LA: Yeah, cause that's when I found out that Gloria was scheming against this lady. And the Jackson Club came into existence because we were the minorities in Morrisania, and they thought we needed black representation. And it went a little further than that. Then, what it was, it put that up, and McGee was an executive in the Jackson Club, him and Joe Gallagher called a lot of shots, and that's how that club began to—it was the only African American club in the county.

BP: When did Hansel McGee win an election as Circuit Court Judge?

LA: No, he didn't win that.

BP: Oh, he was appointed?

LA: He was neither. That's when I really saw the other, the radical, side of McGee in what they call the political negotiation. It's like, they set the tone of who they want to win, and there's still a lot of—back then; they don't do it anymore. They sit down and deal who put the best for forward. So at the time McGee had ran for surrogate judge. He had support of the county, and the county leaders and the district leaders.

BP: When was this, in the 1970s?

MM: Might have been 80s.

BP: 80s.

LA: 80s.

BP: So for about—a little bit over a decade, from the late 60s into the early 80s—he basically just was a leader within the club.

LA: Yeah.

BP: And then he runs—

LA: Then he—let me get it right—because before he went to surrogate court, he was something in the legal aid. He was director of the legal aid on **Cortland** Avenue there, where you get free services. And all the young lawyers in there was kind of afraid of him because of his **disposition**. And someone went on to bigger and better things. When he ran for surrogate judge, we used to ride around and go to these places and talk and everything. And then one night they were sitting down, negotiating with him. And I saw this part where they was trying to juggle somebody instead of him. And they finally said one night that—George Freeman and the judge and Gloria was all sitting there, and I was sitting there—they asked him, "well McGee, if you would win this seat, what would you do?" And they started talking about the money part of it, cause when you're in surrogate court, you're in charge of all this estates, and you give them out to your crony lawyers and what. And he said—I thought he was joking at first [laughs]—he said, "I'm doing the Puerto Ricans and Blacks, and I ain't giving white folks shit." [laughter] That's that he said. And then we'd laugh out.

This is leading up to what I'm going to say about him. All this term, we cleaned a petition, cause I learned how to clean from him. And when you clean a petition, you make sure everything is right, your "I"s, "T"s and everything dotted on the petition, whatever you're supposed to do in closing it off and sending acknowledger's signature. **Washer** had been used, the word "wash," as to fool, spelling of "wash" had been used for years coming up to this point. And when Kelly challenged him—the other people—challenged him, this Lee Holdsman, when these folks challenged McGee, he lost all of that. And I find out later through the grapevine that that was the reason that they iced him, is because the statement that he made, it was a racist statement. So he never got the seat, but then he went to civil court.

McGee was housing court judge for a while.

BP: And that was an appointment?

LA: Well, he was elected. Am I correct? He was elected one term—I mean one time, and next time—you know, then this judicial thing, I'm not too clear on that, you can run here, but you can be appointed here with the political climate. And I think [that's] what it was. And they always hold my feet to the fire, because when I saw that, and I see they was making decisions on who to run, and not nothing coming from the state committee, district leaders of other judicial committees they have. So I tripped the dog, and the leaders—the district leaders and the county and the state committee people—and they shot me down. And McGee was in support of that, you understand. Who gives county the right to tell us who to vote for? We let the people say this. And that was my thing. Let the people make the decision, because they're the ones that matter. And McGee was in support of that, but he didn't—Before he passed, they didn't run me again. And he asked me, was I affected by it? I said no, it didn't bother me. Cause I was trying to leave anyway, because there was something other things, that Gloria didn't want to run me or something, because they couldn't hone me and twist me the way they wanted to, so Hank seemed like he was alright with it if I didn't.

But back to your thing again, it was all leading that way is that—McGee just was a force, man. I mean, with the club, I have never seen anybody in that club, even now, I think [if] there was a McGee now that could pull them back together. Because the Jackson is split. And I was really upset, because after all of them, the Jackson Democratic Club was a black club, it has history in the county of putting more judges to the bench than any other club in the county. It was powerful because you could run—a county can run down there in the 79th—or the 78th at the time, or he 76th was at the time—and they'd have to go outside at **Claymore Village** or Concourse Village, where they lived, cause that's how the building was. And he was a force in that. He also believed that you couldn't win as a candidate sitting in office. That was his big thing, and he'd come down there on election day, and you sitting and you're a candidate, he'd tell you get your ass in the streets real quick. You know, people want to see—That's why I'd always say that he was firm and stern, but fair. You win your own thing, even when you're running for candidate, he would only tell you how to kind of dress, you know. The word would be “dress to impress. You’re candidates. You gotta look like something that’s happening.”

BP: How many years did he serve as a judge. When he passed away, was he still—or had he retired?

LA: No, he had retired. He retired in—

MM: 96, wasn’t it?

LA: 96. Yeah.

BP: And he was a judge in the—or sarting in the 1980s?

MM: I’m thinking 82 sits in my mind.

BP: He was a judge about—close to fifteen years. So Mrs. McGee, I’m curious: for fifteen years as a judge, did—actually, I’m gonna pause it here, and start again.

For fifteen years as a judge, does anything—did he ever—what were some of the things that he would, I guess, come home and speak with you about, in terms of his experiences on the bench? Or, did anything ever stick out in your mind? Stories that he might have told, or particular cases that really might have stuck out in his mind as being eventful or significant that he spoke with you about?

MM: He never spoke to me about many—*any* of the cases. Now, he may have spoken to the kids, his children, my son and daughter, to prove a point, or to make them understand the point. But he didn't—you know, he didn't discuss his cases. And I think I only went to court to see him, to see what he does when he presides about three times. You know. And I just sat in the back and just [laughs], with a shut eye and sleep. He says "Out there, you're looking like this, like you're sleeping." Didn't miss a thing. Did not miss a thing. Did not like lawyers who tried to be cute, and tried to make him look like a fool. [FIX THIS NON SEQUITUR]

BP: What would he do?

MM: He would just tell them, "You trying to make me look like a fool? Come on, man, stop that." You know, I guess, also too, there still weren't used to seeing that many black judges.

BP: Which part of court did he sit in? Was he in criminal court, or civil court?

MM: Civil court.

CM: So, I imagine as a judge, it just comes with the territory, he must've had some critics.

LA: Oh yeah, oh please.

MM: Yeah. Not only even as a judge, as his personality.

BP: How did he respond—better question: did he respond to critics?

MM: I know when he said to me once, “they’d criticize Jesus Christ!” [laughter]

LA: I remember, and he got involved in some real radical stuff there, one time. I was with his nephew.

MM: Oh, Roger?

LA: Yeah, that’s when they—he had a big controversy going there. I don’t remember the case, but I know he stood up for, like a gambler.

MM: They didn’t want him to be involved. They didn’t think he should be involved. But you see, that’s where family comes in again. He was a part of his family.

LA: That’s right.

BP: What were some of the specifics of the case, do you remember?

MM: He was supposed to be—they said he was what they would call today a terrorist. Planning to overthrow the government or something like that with guns and such. This is my nephew. [crosstalk] And he—and you know, everybody going to come and ask your opinion, you know, what your opinion is—and he wasn't gonna doubt him. Because basically, what my nephew was talking about was the same thing that my husband was talking about: justice and fairness. And when I went to—I went on the stand—forgot how that turned out, why that—well, I guess the lawyer asked me if I would come. And we were willing to put up our house. And they asked, "You're putting up your house? Your husband let you do this? With kids—" And, it's family. And nobody is going to go against family, especially if they feel the family is right. And they pulled him down on for that.

BP: When did this happen? Was this in the—was this early—

MM: Must've been in the 70s or the late 70s. Guliani was prosecuting—was he district attorney?

LA: Yeah.

MM: He tried the case. So whenever that man was in, at that time, that's when it was.

BP: And your nephew's name was—

MM: Roger Wareham. And he lost. Guliani lost. So that was in that time. And there was no question about what—well the house was my husband's and mine, but basically his. You know, he put the money up and bought the house. But there was no question about whether we would support him. That's the kind of person he is. Now, I do believe that if he believed that my nephew was wrong, he was not going to support the boy. He's not going to compromise his good name for something that he knows is wrong. That's the kind of person—if you're wrong, you're wrong, and I guess if you say that you're wrong and you're going to do better, and stuff like that, then he'll go along with that. And he will also follow up to see if you *are* doing better, like you said. Cause that was your word. But it was a sticky thing. It was in the newspapers and on the television and on the radio, and he got off to do community service. And he's been doing community service ever since. He's a lawyer now, and been a lawyer for a while, doing community service. He's on the Human Rights Commission that they send to Geneva. Every time you turn around, he's in Geneva, or Africa somewhere. It's people, he's another one that's going to fight for the people. "Now, you don't want to fight for the people, that's your business. But this is the way I'm going." And this is the way my husband is: "This is what I'm going to do, this is how I see it, and I'm going forth with it" You know, "And if I have to go down, I go down."

LA: I can tell you something. Well, I said it with Mrs. McGee, and here's so many things: I think some of it went and rubbed off on me, the short time of being around him and hearing him say, "you have to devote to something," And he'd always say "You never stop being a parent, and families should stick together." And one of my things is that the family runs the country. You know what I mean? I mean, we have to stick together. And I think I picked up a lot of what I really understand by just being around him. Sometimes you get what they call—not somebody just ramming it in your head, but their movements and what they say is matching with something inside your head saying, "This is the way. I wonder if it's right." And he just continues to do that. I believe McGee, if he was alive and with me right now, in this situation that I've been through, that he would've supported me if I brought it to him and said, "this is what's happening to me." Because I got a problem in **South Carolina**. And I didn't want to appear yesterday. And they're my kids. And I almost got thrown out of court yesterday because, "You're moving here without her having a lawyer?" I know that's illegal. And then the lawyer from my son-in-law's side, he's got this new stupid guy, and I'm trying to tell the court clerk that I can get a lawyer for my daughter. But she's been three times and nobody thinking. I thinking, "If McGee was here, then I could've put that to him, he'd have told me exactly where to go to do that." But I learned just by being connected, somehow, with him, back in the day. It's like, I'm his understudy in some instances, because, you know, when someone has—I don't know how to say it, but you can just be around them and get a gift, or something that fits in your mind. Because I've never—I've sometime may have gotten angry with him, but not totally disagree. And then he'd look and me and say "Well, alright, it's gonna happen anyway," so then he would leave me alone.

[END OF SIDE ONE]

[START OF SIDE TWO]

MM: You don't get angry with him. Every now and then, I'd ask, "What's wrong with you?" [laughter] Cause I know a *lot* of people got angry with him. Even at—I believe it's my son at the funeral said, "No matter what, you may not have liked him, but you had to respect him." And that's what he said.

BP: He retires in 1996.

MM: Yes.

BP: Why did he retire? Was it for—

MM: He lost his sight.

Dr. Elizabeth McGee (EM): He retired because he reached the age limit.

MM: He lost his sight. Well, how old was he? 96, six and six are ten, eleven. He'd have been 81 this year. Eleven. I guess 70. He was 70. And he retired, but he didn't stop.

BP: Yeah, I was gonna ask, what did he—he doesn't sound like somebody who would've—

MM: No.

LA: You could find him down at the King Center. [laughter]

MM: Yeah, King Center you said? Yeah, Martin Luther King Center.

BP: And where was the King Center? Where is the King Center?

LA: 165th street and Boston Road. 1-6-5 and Boston Road.

BP: What would he do there?

LA: Well, in his community involvement, he came very close to a gentleman named Virgil **Hodges**.

BP: Virgil **Hodges**?'

LA: Yeah. He was involved with the Department Labor and some things. And I guess McGee was in the term, was trying to get something started. And Hodges was close to the King Family, and decided that that's when the King—and they was doing all centers all over, and changing names of streets—so they gave us a center in Morrisania. I'll take you by there sometime.

BP: So, it was a center of tolerance?

[crosstalk]

LA: There was a group in the Bronx called MRC: Morissania Revitalization, that—he was the chair of that program, and what they do, housing. And McGee and them started with this out of concept and the community board 3 in their planning, they created LCDs. And then he helped commit—you know David Powell?

MM: I know *a* David Powell.

LA: Light skinned David Powell.

MM: Yeah.

LA: Then there was something happening to Lela. And David when he was college [laughter]. So—and I just found that out when, but anyway, McGee had him winning. So they created what they called a LCD, was Morrisania Revitalization. They had five on the board, and McGee was the organizer, the coordinator, the manipulator, and all of this here. And I think that's what kind of got Gloria Davis in a little hot water too. But, McGee was the chairman of the board. When he got ready to step down, I think he came to somebody else with something, but he saw that to its fullest. That was a legal—he was more the legal mind of that project. And they had—I don't know what, they might be worth, I would say a few billion, because they do housing down there.

BP: And they're still in existence?

LA: They're still there.

BP: And he passed away in 2002?

LA: What they did, what Morrisania Revitalization did—also, McGee was involved, at the time, when KITES put a moratorium on the buildings. Of course, they was buying them for a dollar or something. And in Southeast Bronx they would sit in and call himself 70. He was a chair there for a long time. He put that in existence, to get the corporation to swear. They own property—they still have property in the Bronx that haven't been developed. I don't know what's happening with it.

MM: They just gave up Gala. They just gave up Gala**,** or it's coming up on the 14th.

LA: 70. He has to entities that he left here, that are still going. Southeast Bronx Neighborhood Centers, they do a lot of after school, and also a mental health piece he was involved in, in the beginning, to get funded in seventy-something, Bronx Neighborhood centers, to have a mental house piece.

BP: These are all things that he was involved in after he retired?

LA: Yes, And—

MM: And while he was working.

BP: And while he was still working.

MM: Yeah, he just never gave it up. He worked up, I believe, until the morning he died.

BP: Mrs. McGee, this a good question: What, if you could, from your memory, what was a typical day like for Judge McGee? What time did he wake up, leave the house, what time did he come back? I mean, what would say was a typical day in his life, when he was working, or when he was doing all his political activity?

MM: 7:30 up, I guess, to go to work. And he came back nine, ten o'clock at night.

BP: And that's—

MM: He was gone. That's what I said, he was gone. He was doing all of his activities. And I was like a secretary for a while. Answering, taking down the messages, taking down the messages on the phone calls. He was out. He was out. He was busy with them, and you couldn't separate him from his activities. You never could. He was loyal, he was loyal to the end. When I first met him, he had to call a friend. And I realized then that I was not going to separate him from his friends. Now, I think this a mistake that some ladies make when they get married. And he, right, there is nobody coming between him and his friends. And I learned my lesson then, and I was not even going to push it.

BP: [laughs] Right.

MM: That's right. And he was with his friends until died. One of them just died last week, and I guess there are just two left of the group.

BP: And who are those gentleman.

MM: They were just Sam Gracin, Kenneth Rollock, Walter—Walter's the one that just died. Old Weston—I'm gonna give you a name, but I shouldn't do it. I won't remember the name. If I say Old Weston and—that has a connotation I'll never remember. I'll never remember your real name! [laughter] And Harold. These were the people that he socialized with at a bar on Lennox Avenue between 138th street and 137th street: Stewart's. It's no longer there. They called it heaven. They called it heaven. It was heaven. And if you wanted to find them anytime, they were there. That's where he, that's where—big arguments went on there. Big arguments. They fought over the war, they fought over who was in office and who was not in office. But, whenever you got in there, whenever you went there, it wasn't so much bar bar. It was like the barbershop used to be, where you'd go in, and—[laughs] when, it either burned down or it moved, while I was—while we were in Washington they called and they said "Heaven is gone." [laughter] I tell you, what a sad day that was for him. They never found another place. They used to be up on 169th Street and Prospect, the bar that used to be up there.

LA: Jobo's

MM: But it was a meeting place where they got together and they argued, and carried on their—and that's where you saw the lighter side of him. And that's also where you heard him stammer.

BP: And the place they tried to meet at in the Bronx was called Jobo's?

LA: It used to be a jazz spot on Prospect and 169th street. Yeah, there was always a bunch in there, the musicians and the politicians and the conversation that goes down. And they put you down in there if you weren't up on something, you know. [laughter]

MM: Yeah, what do you call—Crazy Dozen. Oh, they'd hurt your feelings. They're hurt your feelings.

LA: I know when I ran into one of Judge McGee's friends up there on Boston road, they asked me where I lived at. And I said, "I'm living in that building over there." And he said, "No, man." Another said, "like I heard it. Nigger, you know you live in the projects!" [laughter] You know, that's the kind of put down. You're trying to hide—

MM: Trying to be somebody you're not! [laughter]

LA: Jobo's was a place you could go on Sunday afternoons and most evenings. You know, sometimes, like Mrs. McGee said, you come from work and you want to hang on. You don't feel like going home, and sometimes you get in there about four, five, or whenever, and then it's, you know, ten, eleven. Lot of things goes in there: music, some guys come in and try to play their horn again. They shoot him down, tell him they throw the guy out. Jobo's was one of the bars, and then, when the Jackson Club was there, right there on the corner of 169th street and Boston Road, we had two places that most of the club members would go, sometimes before and after club meetings was—I can't think of the name of the bar that was right on the corner, next to the club, when you walk out of the club. But really, one time, you had to walk across the street. So then after the big—there's a building there in the square—they got in trouble or something up there, and then they moved across the street into a little store front. There for a long time. Then the bar. Then around the corner they had a place called Gutchen.

BP: So, is there any last things that you'd like to add about who, you know, who Hansel McGee was, and why he was important, or what things that people should know about him that you haven't shared? I mean, you shared quite a bit, but—

LA: I would think that to history, and when you're talking about education, it says, you shouldn't give up, with him. And like I said, when I found out that he had dropped out of high school to make some moves and he just come back and pick up the speeding, continuing to become a judge and then a lawyer for IBM. So, you can make it. I think, if you're to express history in the Bronx and to the young folks, then let them know that there's folks that lived in this neighborhood and survived, went to public school and had a success here.

EM: I can't think of his name.

LA: Oh man, Jesus Christ. [laughter]

[crosstalk]

BP: Mrs. McGee, is there anything you'd like to add? Any—

MM: As you can see, I have not much to add. You can see that his life was very full [laughs]. I can only talk the lines of politicians [laughter].

LA: That is one of the greatest things in the history, is to say that McGee had passed this and left a real serious log, because I believe that his folks were allowed to just run on with policy that had been sitting in there, that had passed away, and A lot of other folks that was—had passed and went—had passed, and we went to St. Augustine to a funeral. And I would say St. Augustine was a cornerstone for most black politicians. Most of them even belonged to that church. Then it built off, and some of us younger folks at the time, because before I went in the military, there was a church to go, to play basketball, to get involved with somebody. I would say that if—the good thing is that McGee's life should all be in the focuses, just like somebody else here in the Bronx if you're talking about African American Descent, there's quite a few other folks that goes up there with him. But he do have a special place in the Bronx, because he did definitely leave a legacy to me, of those programs that still exist. There's three buildings that are named after them. I don't know how, and if history isn't kept in its worth, those buildings will go, just like the building with Ed Stevenson, Sr. and Warren H. Gladwood. The house is still there, but it doesn't look like its part of the history of Jackson Avenue. So I would say McGee is a legend in his own right in his community involvement. Probably the buildings that are named, there's no pictures posted in those buildings there, because I'm quite sure there might be some younger folks that had seen him from a little personal perspective and who was he.

This may not play into the tape, but I also feel the historians—and you can kind of focus out, cause when I wrote Mark, I found that Mark puts my conversation on email, and I got a piece, I'll show you, that I didn't even know he was doing that until I got it. But, to change history, those guys should be immortalized sometime, like a part of—you say, history not always looked the weak. You and I probably looked at Martin and all them guys, and we should find someplace for these guys if there's nothing but a calendar on the wall. You know, when we do history, we here to exhibit—kind of remind folks who been through here, and what can happen, especially with the young folk.

BP: Well, I'll stop it for now, and I mean I think this was—it was thorough.

MM: You don't want my last words? [laughs]

BP: Sorry? Oh, I thought you said it.

[crosstalk]

MM: He said it. I think he is a good example of what you can do when you put your mind to it. Definitely. He put his mind to succeeding, and he accomplished more I think than he ever dreamed that he would do. He was a good illustration, a good example for young people who think that they're going through a whole lot of stuff. He went through a whole lot of stuff, and I think it helped mold him into the person that he ended up becoming. He was a good example to his children. They didn't always agree with him, but as his son said, "You gotta respect him."

You gotta respect him for what he tried to do, and what he is. And for myself, you know, I appreciated what he was trying to do. He was trying to make the world a better place. It had to be something better than what it was. And he wanted to be a part of making that change. And I could no more make him come in and sit in the house and go like this, even if he was willing to. I think that he was important to the Bronx. I think his friends found him important. And, more than anything else, he didn't forget who he was. Judge or not, he met with his friends. If a judge is supposed to look a certain way in a group, he didn't look it.

LA: Yeah.

MM: You would walk by, you know, "which one?" cause he was laughing, throwing his head back and laughing out loud. He was a loud laugher. Laughing out loud, talking with the fellows, just like he saw them the day before. And I think that's what they appreciated. He didn't put on any airs. As I said before, what you see is what you get. And he was a regular fellow, but he definitely had [a] definite way of seeing things and doing things. And you didn't want to see him necessarily get angry. That you do, you didn't want to see. I think I've seen it twice, or maybe three times. And it had nothing to do with him. It was somebody else. And it was just not right, and he didn't see it as right. And—he was tall. And he was big. He looked like a football player, or what you thought a cop would look like. And I remember somebody—a teacher—had said my daughter had a spot on her homework. And she said, "Oh, you're a dirty child, handing me in dirty work like this." And this is a child that didn't like Fs, didn't like nothing like that, and like her clothes looking a certain way. Came home, and by mistake told her father. [laughter] Next day, before he went to work, her father was in the school. He got to the door and it looked like he just filled up the whole door. I could look at the panic on the teacher's face. And he just looked at her: "Just watch what you say to her. She's not dirty. And something must've happened why her homework looked like this. Cause she's a clean child coming from a clean home, and proud of putting in good work. Watch what you say." The woman couldn't even speak. I could just hear her, "Please, get out. Go now," before the woman has a stroke and dies. [laughter] Cause the classroom was quiet. He didn't raise his voice either. But he was big, and very imposing when you saw him. So that he just said what he had to say, turned around, had no trouble with that little Irish lady. Went about his business. And that's the way—it had nothing—it wasn't him, it was her. She was hurt when she came home. And he knew that people want to hurt you all the time. You just had to rise above it, and you don't let it get to you, and you go on and do what you got to do, you know.

BP: Excellent.

[END OF SIDE TWO]

[END OF INTERVIEW]