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Transcriber: Danielle Lund

Mark Naison (MN): [Machine noise] The 177<sup>th</sup> interview of the Bronx African American History Project. We are here at Fordham University on October - -

Natasha Lightfoot (NL): 28<sup>th</sup>.

MN: 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006. The - - we are interviewing Damien McCreath, who works at Citicorp and grew up in the Castle Hill section of the Bronx. Our lead interviewers are Natasha Lightfoot and Mark Naison, and let's get started. We - - the first thing we always ask people is tell us about your family and its history. When did your family first move to the Bronx, and, you know, where did they come from originally?

Damien McCreath (DM): Okay. My mother, Naomi McCreath is originally from Montego Bay, Jamaica, and she came to - - first she came to the United States I want to say in 1972, and she originally settled in Philadelphia. I think she spent about two years there, and then she migrated to the Bronx and lived with her brother on St. Ann's Avenue, and then she lived with her sisters up at 233<sup>rd</sup> Street, and then eventually moved to the Castle Hill area in 1977. And my father, his family's originally from North Carolina. I believe they moved up to Harlem - - I want to say in the '50s, and he moved to the Bronx - - he moved up by Co-op City - - I want to say in the early '70s.

MN: Did your parents meet when they were both in the Bronx?

DM: Yes they did. My dad was actually a police officer with the 43<sup>rd</sup> Street Precinct out of the Bronx, and they - - they met one day when he was patrolling the area.

NL: Oh wow, look at that, great story. So when were you born?

DM: I was born on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1978.

NL: And you were born in Castle Hill then?

DM: Yes, I well - - I was born, yes. That's where we were living at the time.

NL: Do you know how your mother came to choose that area of the Bronx to move into? Did your - - you know, did your mom and dad kind of, you know, how did they find their way to Jamie Towers?

DM: Okay my mom - - my mom was living there before she met my dad, so I believe the story is my mom has a sister who was already living in the Castle Hill area, while my mom was living up by 233<sup>rd</sup> with her other sister, and it was by word of mouth, you know, my aunt said, Naomi I have this great place, you need to come down. She saw it, fell in love with it, and she then rented an apartment.

MN: Did - - does your mother keep in close touch with her family in Jamaica?

DM: Absolutely, yes.

MN: And was that something that was part of your childhood?

DM: Yes, yes.

MN: Did you go, actually go back to Jamaica?

DM: Yes.

MN: Starting how - - what's your first memory of Jamaica?

DM: [Sighs] I believe my first memory of Jamaica I was probably five or six years old going to Montego Bay, seeing where my mom grew up, visiting my grandparents' grave sites, because I unfortunately didn't meet my grandparents. They were deceased before I was born. And traveling to see some relatives.

NL: And was it something that your mom did often to go back and forth as well?

DM: My mom - - not as much, but she made sure I went every, you know, four years or so.

NL: Okay, and - - [Coughs] excuse me. In the Bronx, did you feel like you were involved in a Jamaican community that was - - that was there, you know, whether it be through your family, or through other associates your mom had?

DM: My family - - my mother and I are the only two - - that lived in the Bronx. When she first - - when she moved to the Castle Hill area, my aunt that was living near us, she then moved to Long Island. Her sister then moved, that lived up by 233<sup>rd</sup>, moved to Queens, so the rest of our family really lived in, lived in Queens while I was growing up, so I didn't have them immediately around me, and in my area, there was a lack of West Indians, of - - of a large number of West Indians. It was mostly African Americans and Latinos.

MN: Did you have the same kind of connection with your father's family - -

DM: No.

MN: - - coming up?

DM: No I did not. Probably saw my father's family at - - growing up maybe a handful of times I - - that I can recall from - - maybe I saw them, well let's say from the age of zero to my current age, I might've seen them maybe about six or seven times.

MN: Was being West Indian a part of your identity - - self, you know, described identity coming up?

DM: Absolutely. My parents separated when I was about four years old, and it was just me and my mom. That's all I knew, and her family is who I identified myself with, so that's all I knew growing up, so yes, that's how I identified myself.

MN: Was there, you know, a cultural component to being West Indian in terms of music or food, or it was more - - how did that manifest itself?

DM: Yes. Growing up - - exposed to Reggae music, exposed to traditional West Indian foods that involved a lot of curry, involved a lot of jerk seasoning [MN and NL laugh], so it was absolutely - - but my mother - - my mother is an interesting woman in a sense that she, she always had a respect for all different types of cultures. She made sure that I was exposed and respected all different types of cultures, and just not our own, and embrace them.

NL: I was going to ask about your educational experience. What school did you attend? What schools did you attend in the Bronx, and how did, you know, how were your experiences in the schools?

DM: I went to St. John Vianney School from first grade to eighth grade.

MN: Where was that located?

DM: That's on the corner of Castle Hill and Seward Avenue. It's right up the block from where I lived.

MN: So it's - -

NL: I went there too.

MN: - - oh, it's very close to Jamie Towers?

DM: Yes.

NL: Yes, literally up the street. My mom would stand on the terrace and watch me walk up.

Damien's - - Damien's terrace faced the other way, [Laughs] but I'm sure if his mom's terrace faced that way, she would have watched him walk up the street too.

DM: Yes, she's later confessed that she used to run down and look at the back door and make sure I got to school, because [Crosstalk]

NL: Oh sure, yes. So, what do you think was the decision making process that your mom - - that kind of led your mom to choose Catholic schools over the various public schools in the area?

DM: Okay, I think it was a cultural thing. Not, not, not so much of Catholicism, because we're not Catholic, but more so - - my mom grew up in an environment where kids wore uniforms to school, and so that's what she was used to, and so I guess when she saw, you know, the Catholic school system, how they required uniforms, I think it just took her back to what she was used to, and I also - - I think from her standpoint she, she looked at public schools, and she said well, here's a school system where you don't pay anything, you know it's public, it's open to the public, where you have a private school slash Catholic school where you had to pay for it, so I think she just assumed that the education would be better in an institution where you had to pay for it.

MN: And what was the education like at - -

DM: At St. John Vianney?

MN: Yes.

DM: Wow, it's been a long time now. It - - it was good. It was a good education. I was a - - I was exposed to different people, different backgrounds, more - - mostly Latino and African American, as I mentioned before - - I think that the school lacked a real mathematical background. I think they were not strong in that area, but everything else was pretty good from my recollection.

NL: And what were the teachers like? Do you feel like the teachers pushed you into - -

DM: Oh, wow.

NL: - - excelling?

DM: You're really asking me to stretch. Let me see here. I - - there were, there were - - like all institutions, you have good teachers and you have okay teachers and you have bad teachers. I would say for the most part I had good teachers, you know. I do recall one or two teachers that

did - - did see that potential in me and did push me, but for the majority of them, I think they were just there to get a check and leave for the most part.

MN: Did you receive any harassment from the local public school kids? Was there any tension between public school and Catholic school kids in that community?

DM: In elementary and junior high school, yes, but I would say I experienced that more when I got to high school. Not so much junior high and elementary school, because I only lived a block away, so, you know, after school I would just walk down the block, I was already home. It's not like - -

MN: You didn't have a situation with the public school kids were waiting outside.

DM: No, no, no, no. Not, not in elementary and junior high school - - not that I recall.

MN: Now you're - - this is - - you were growing up in the late '70s, '80s?

DM: Right.

MN: Was there any awareness that drugs were making nearby areas dangerous, or was living in Jamie Towers in Castle Hill make you relatively insulated from those things?

DM: No, no. Growing up I was very aware of drug abuse, because it was something you would see. Just from having friends, you know, I had a few friends who unfortunately parents were drug addicts, strung out on drugs.

MN: And this is when you were even in elementary school?

DM: Absolutely. It was something you were very cognizant of, yes. From a very young age you knew about it.

MN: So this is through, you know, parent - - friends of par - - of kids you knew? Were there any visible, like visible concentrations of like drug dealers in the street, or it was more behind closed doors?

DM: It was a little bit of both. You - - you knew where you could walk for lack of a better term.

You knew where you could walk. You knew if you saw something that - - alright maybe I should cross the street, so situations like that - -

NL: You would hear - - you might hear shots at night coming from the Castle Hill projects.

DM: Exactly. I remember - - I remember a pretty interesting story. I guess I was maybe like, maybe nine or ten years old, and I had an aunt that ran the Castle Hill Daycare Center, on Randall and Castle Hill Avenue - -

MN: And that's in the Castle Hill Houses?

DM: Right, yes. She, she ran it for years, and so I was over there - - I used to go over there sometimes after school and spend some time with her - - and there was a basketball court right outside, and I remember, I was playing basketball and the guys I was playing basketball with left the court and they're the ones that had the ball. So there was a few guys playing, and they saw that I didn't have a ball, and so the guy was like - - you know, if I was ten years old, this guy must've been maybe seventeen, eighteen - - so he gave me the ball, and he said look kid, you know, make sure, you know, you don't lose this ball, and he said, you see this, and he lifted up his shirt and he had a gun in his pocket. So - - and there were other situations - - I remember another time I was at that park, and the guy wanted to borrow my ball. I actually had a ball this time. So, he said can I borrow your ball man, we want to play, so I said, okay, and again this guy must've been like eighteen years olden when I was ten, so I gave him my ball and he said, look, you want to borrow some of my bracelets, you know, to make sure I don't take your ball, and he had these - - I mean this guy was probably eighteen years old and he had big gold like bracelets going up his arm, so you knew it. You knew, and I knew what he did so.

MN: Now how far were the Castle Hill Houses from Jamie Towers?

DM: Across the street.

MN: So you lived - - Jamie Towers was across the street from public housing.

DM: Directly.

MN: And were these like two different worlds, or not - - it wasn't that blatant? Were there class cultural differences between families who lived in Jamie Towers and families who lived in Castle Hill Houses? Something that you could see right away and everybody understood.

DM: I would say as a - - as a child growing up, you did see a difference, but as an adult reflecting back and seeing where my friends that grew up in the projects, and my friends that grew up in, in Jamie Towers, no, I don't think there was much of a difference at all. Not, not really.

MN: So - - [Crosstalk]

DM: In terms of - - in terms of how everybody came out, you know [Crosstalk]

MN: So those who grew up in the Castle Hill Houses ended up pretty much in the same place?

DM: Right, right, right.

NL: Yes, people still had - - I feel like the neighborhood in general was a neighborhood of people determined to succeed in some way or another, you know, so, I don't know - - I mean, I don't know what your - - what your particular circle of friends - - how they turned out - - like you know whether or not you felt like - -

DM: Maybe, maybe I - - you know I've heard this before. It's different - - maybe it could be different for guys and girls growing up? I've heard that before.

NL: I would say.

DM: And before, I used to disagree with that, but I think that's somewhat true, because just looking back, you know, when you're kids, most of your friends are the same gender as yourself

right, children, and, and I'd say that for all my male friends, you know, me being twenty-eight now from the guys who lived in the projects, to the guys that lived in Jamie Towers, I can count on a hand those that actually turned out to be something. I think most of them are either in prison, or involved in illegal activities.

MN: And this is true of the Jamie Towers people as well?

DM: Absolutely, absolutely.

NL: And a lot of the girls I knew from Jamie Towers, they all ended up doing very well, very well, you know.

MN: So you're more, so your path is fairly exceptional from your cohort?

DM: Yes.

MN: Would you have predicted that ten or fifteen years ago?

DM: Yes, I would have. I didn't have a choice with my mother.

NL: I was about to - - I was about to ask that question. I wanted to ask, speaking of your mother, what exactly were the boundaries that she laid out for you in terms of, you know, school work, socializing, et cetera.

DM: I - - my mom was - - was a strict mom growing up. I can remember at different age points in my life, you know I had different curfews, and, and she was very strict about it. You know, if I was in a minute late, you know, I knew what was coming. But my mom also, and I don't know if she brilliantly did this, she instilled, at the time I saw that as fear, but now as an adult looking back, it was more so a respect that I mean - - and where I'm going with this - - a person's going to do whatever they want to do eventually. Right. If you want to do something, you're going to do it. The reason why I didn't get involved with certain things that my friends were doing, that, that you know, for lack of a better term, that were bad was because I didn't want to hurt my

mom. I did not want to be in a position to let her down, and I think that was the main difference between myself and my friends growing up because I used to see my friends doing things before, before I did it, or to pardon it. I didn't think about the consequences for myself, I thought about man, how that hurt and embarrass my mom with all the work she's done as a single parent, feel that it would really hurt her.

MN: Did your mother, like, take you places or do things with you that other parents in the neighborhood didn't do?

DM: I would say yes. Every summer my mother would take me on vacation.

NL: What kinds of places did you go to?

DM: Oh gosh. Anywhere from Disney World to the Caribbean my mother took me to, so I had a real understanding of - - that the world was much bigger than the Bronx from a very young age, and she made sure she instilled that.

MN: What about things like trips to museums- - was that part of it also? Or it was more the vacations?

DM: That came later on in life, as my mother changed careers at one point. She was exposed to people of a much higher economic, rather much higher economic [Crosstalk] than we were [Crosstalk].

NL: So what did your mom do? Sorry to interrupt. What did your mom do for a living when you were younger, and what career did she change to?

DM: Well she was always in the nursing field, so when I was really young she was just - - she was a nurse on the ward in Bellevue Hospital as a nurse's aid. She worked very long hours. It was very hard, and she was extremely underpaid. And then, as years went by, I want to say I think when I turned maybe about nine, she was tapped on the shoulder - - she would go to school

to become an OR technician, so she worked in the operating room for a number of years, and she did a good job there, then she moved on to work for two doctors in the OB/GYN that had their own practice on the Upper West Side, and that's where my mom really started to get exposed to, I guess, upper echelon experiences.

NL: And then she in turn exposed you to - -

DM: Exactly, exactly, exactly. She started hearing about what I guess wealthy people would do for their kids and their teenagers, and then she would then try to get me in those activities.

MN: Now did any of those - - [Crosstalk]

NL: Like what types, oh sorry - - I was wondering what kinds of activities would you say?

DM: Okay, well there's a number. There was Monica Mae Acting School. My mom put me in that for a little bit. We did that, but I think after a while it got too expensive, but I had the opportunity to be in a music video for Tracie Spencer when I was like ten years old. [Laughter]

NL: I remember Tracie Spencer. [Laughs]

DM: What else. I got involved with SEO, Sponsors for Educational Opportunities. My mom found - - found that out from people she worked with and I did that through high school and through that I was able to go away and live in Ecuador for a summer, and we got to live in the Galapagos Islands in the Amazon basin. I also got involved in the Presidential Classroom, and that's when I was a senior in high school. They took us down to DC and I got to meet state representatives and I got to meet the director of the CIA and the director of the FBI. And I also attended the Air Force Academy Prep School, and my mom heard of that school while - - through - - I think she heard of it through Barbara Walters. Barbara Walters was one of her patients, and she talked about the Air Force Academy Prep School, so, yes, so it was definitely beneficial.

NL: It was a whole different kind of exposure.

DM: Yes, exactly. Definitely beneficial.

MN: Now were you able to maintain - - while this was going on, maintain your ties to your friends in the neighborhood? Did you manage to figure out how to, how to do that?

DM: Yes.

NL: Was it tough to do it, or, you know, did you feel like, you know, you saw differences between you - -

DM: There was definitely differences, but it didn't interfere with my friendships with certain individuals.

MN: Was sports an important part of how you maintained that?

DM: Absolutely.

NL: What kind of sports did you play?

DM: I really - - I played basketball. All the time, all the time, so that's how me and my friends - - I guess that was the bonding, you know, between my friends and I, most of my friends.

MN: Now did you have to develop two languages? One for your friends and one for the other world?

DM: Yes. [Laughter]

MN: Was it very explicit, like, or more subtle?

DM: Explicit.

MN: Could you give us an example? Can you back into that, since you have some acting training? [Laughter] You know, your fifteen year old street like - -

DM: And then - - it would be - - okay, if I were to go to my mom's job, and meet the OB/GYN doctor or coworkers, I would go in there, shake their hands, say, hello sir, how are you today, my

name is Damien McCreath. So my friend that I grew up with, back on the block I would say, yo, so what's up? What's good? What's going on? You know, so, it definitely was explicit. It wasn't subtle at all. [Laughter]

MN: Now where did you end up going to high school?

DM: Mount Saint Michael Academy.

MN: Was - - did Mount have uniforms?

DM: Yes.

MN: Now you had mentioned that, that then in high school it became more of an issue in terms of public school kids and Catholic school kids - - how did that manifest itself?

DM: Because now, instead of just walking a block I had to take public transportation, and so there, there were times where, you know, we would clash with public school kids, you know, on subway platforms, or waiting by bus stops and things like that.

NL: Was it usually like a group-oriented thing, or were you singled out? Do you feel like - -

DM: No, it was a group-oriented thing.

NL: And where did you find yourself in - - finding - - what were the trouble spots?

DM: The 2 train.

NL: The 2 train.

DM: The 2 train at - - what stop was it? Well, the 2 train on all stops I would have to say [MN laughs] and what was it - - the 16 bus stop, by what was it 238<sup>th</sup> Street? I think it was.

NL: And I was going to ask, what was it like then being exposed, spending most of every - - all your time between first to eighth grade being in the Castle Hill area for the most part. What was it like traveling to Mount Saint Michael which was way up in the northeast section of the Bronx?

What did you - - how did you compare the two neighborhoods?

DM: Totally two different neighborhoods in the sense of one just - - just I guess the aesthetics of it. Coming from Castle Hill it was a lot of buildings and houses, and go up there there's - - first there no buildings. It's just all houses. It was a very - - it was a really heavily populated West Indian area up by 233<sup>rd</sup>, 238<sup>th</sup> Street where in my neighborhood it was just me and a handful of other families, so - -

NL: Right. Just like us. [Laughs]

DM: Yes, yes, so it was very different.

MN: What were the kind of relations like in Castle Hill between Latinos and blacks? Was it easy? Was it tense? Was - -

DM: Now this is where it's interesting for me because I actually - - someone asked me that not too long ago, and I had to think about it, and in my situation - - my situation was a bit different then if you speak to another African American male for the fact of my complexion. There were times growing up where I was mistaken for Latino, and even - - even to this day I get mistaken for a Dominican or Puerto Rican all the time, and so, you know, initially, you know, the Puerto Rican kids or the Dominican kids would want to hang out with me and then when they realized I wasn't Dominican or Puerto Rican when I didn't understand any Spanish - - I'd be like no, you know, I'm actually black, then, then the black kids, you know, I would try to float to the black kids, of you know a culture that I was - - that was of my own, and I was rejected, when I was younger, because of the color of my skin. And now I have to say that happened from maybe, you know, first grade to at least to like, fifth or sixth grade.

MN: Now was your cohort more Latino than black coming up or - - were very, a little of both, if you - - when you're thinking about your male friends.

DM: It was, it was, it was, it was definitely both. It was definitely both, definitely both, definitely both.

DM: But for a while I would have to say it was probably Latino, and I think the reason for that, when I was really young, when I was five, six, seven years old is because a Puerto Rican family helped raise me when I was younger, so when my mom worked long hours, it was a - - there was a family - - the Vasquez and the Nevalle family that lived maybe two blocks away from us - - they used to baby-sit me, and so I - - I, you know, spent a great amount of years growing up in their household, being exposed to that culture, so - -

NL: Eating their food - -

DM: Yes, exactly.

NL: - - getting used to [Crosstalk] - -

MN: Now did you learn to speak Spanish at all?

DM: You know they spoke to me in Spanish as a child when I was really young, you know, three, four, five, six years old, and I was [Phone rings] I remember responding back to them in English, but no, I am not fluent these days, so - - I should've kept it up.

NL: [Laughs] So, I wanted to ask you a bit about your music influences growing up because you mentioned that you, you know, were exposed to Reggae music from a young age. What other kinds of music did you listen to growing up?

DM: Definitely rap music.

NL: And what kind of effect did that have on, you know, your upbringing and stuff?

DM: What was the effect of rap music? I think it influenced me more in dress, but I went to Catholic school, so we had uniforms, but I [Laughs] - - [Crosstalk]

NL: During the weekdays [Laughs]

DM: [Crosstalk] on weekends I had to - - you know, I begged my mom for Adidas, and I - - I didn't wear shoelaces in them, because I wanted to look like Run-DMC but [NL laughs] I think - - I think it - - hip hop, rap music definitely had an effect somewhat on my attitude. You asked me a question before about distinguishing myself between when I, you know, my friends on the block, and if I were to meet my mom's boss, and I think hip hop for the most part had that influence with me where when I got around my block, I had to for lack of a better term, keep it real. You know, remember where you came from.

NL: You had to have a swagger.

DM: Exactly, so that's what - - that kept it there definitely.

NL: So who did you listen to growing up?

DM: Oh God, who didn't I listen to? LL, Run-D.M.C, Rakim - - Kool Moe Dee - - who else was there? I mean I had a whole bunch - - A Tribe Called Quest. We could sit here for, for hours and hours, and I'd go through all the old albums I have.

MN: Did you see any live, you know, jams - - outdoor stuff - -

DM: When I was young?

MN: Yes.

DM: When I was younger, no. No, this was all by cassette tape.

MN: This was all by cassettes.

DM: Yes.

NL: Did you listen to radio shows?

DM: Yes, yes I did.

NL: Who did you listen to on the radio?

DM: Who was it back in the day? It wasn't HOT 97. It was like - - it was 98 back then.

NL: Yes, it was KISS - -

DM: Yes, it was KISS.

NL: 98.7 KISS definitely.

DM: Yes, it was 98.7.

NL: And they had - - I remember Red Alert. I used to listen to the Red Alert show a lot. Did you listen to Red Alert?

DM: Yes I did.

NL: Yes.

DM: Oh I forgot to mention NWA because they changed a lot for me - -

NL: [Laughs] How did they - - wait - -

DM: - - and Public Enemy, oh my gosh. How did they? How did they change me. I think for, for number one, as a young person, I was shocked to hear how aggressive they were with their rhymes. You know, how vocal they were, because, I mean Run-DMC wasn't like that and - - and you know, LL as a younger guy, he wasn't like that at all. And when I first put on that - - when I first heard an NWA tape, I was like oh my gosh, he sounds angry [NL laughs] but it was very real to me, and I was like, you know, these are - - these are definitely things that we experience in our neighborhoods.

NL: How did your mom react to your - - passion for hip hop?

DM: She really didn't know until one day she found - - I think she, she turned on the radio, and I think I had my - - I think I had an NWA tape in - - probably the worst thing I could have had in there, and she was very upset that I was listening to that, yeah. She wasn't very open to that. [Laughter] but I also listened to a lot of R&B growing up, so, yes.

NL: So it kind of toned you down a bit.

DM: Yes.

MN: Did you ever try to, you know, DJ or emcee or write your own stuff or - -?

NL: Breakdance?

MN: There was never a performance part of it?

DM: I - - I used to love breakdancing as a kid, and I used to always do it. I wasn't very good at it [Laughter], but I used to love - - I used to love trying.

MN: Did you try to break dance at the Air Force Academy?

DM: No, no. I didn't try to - - I grew out of it by that time, but when I was younger in elementary - -

NL: You were ripping apart cardboard boxes.

DM: Oh yes. Oh yes. Milk and Giz? Do you remember that?

NL: Oh man. [Laughs]

DM: Since I used to do backspins all over the place.

MN: Where did they set up the - - the cardboard? Were there special spots in your neighborhood?

DM: Oh we used to - -

NL: In front of Seward Manor.

DM: Yes, Seward Manor - -

NL: There was a building across the street from us - - Seward Manor, that to me operated a bit like a project, even though it wasn't a project. I don't know. You probably knew better because you were friends with - - with Christian was it?

DM: Yes, we're still very good friends.

NL: Yes? Oh wow okay. But yes, I remember he used to be friends with Christian and his family. So I know he spent time in Seward Manor, and I remember the guys out in front of Seward Manor were always breakdancing in front of it. And I would go home and try to do what I saw, and bust my behind on the heavy coffee table we had, but anyway it's your interview so - - [Laughs]

DM: No.

NL: - - I was going to say, so you know, so, did you feel like, you know, did your mom try to suppress, you know, your - -

DM: I'm trying to remember. You're really making me go back into the data base here. [NL laughs] I remember she sat me down and she was like, you know, this is, this is not, this is not good, you know, she was saying this is the type of stuff why white America looks at black young men the way they do, and she sat me down and really explained that to me because my mom was very big on - - instilling a self of pride in me as a young black man, and as an adult now, she sits me down and explains why she did certain things. I remember in the car as a child driving - - my mom would point out - - she'd say, you see those kids on the corner, what do you think of that, you know, where do you think they're going to end up. You know, do you think they're doing their school work. Just simple things like that, and she said Damien, this is not what it takes to be successful, and so when she heard that tape, I think that she saw it as a - - I don't want to say a slap in the face, because I think that's a bit too strong, but I think in her mind she saw it as a setback, what am I messing up, and why does my son feel like he needs to listen to, you know, these vulgar lyrics, you know, when I was younger, so that was it.

NL: And what did you think in the meanwhile?

DM: I thought she was overreacting. I was like, it's just music, you know.

NL: It was just music, but then you did say too that you felt like it was going on in your neighborhoods too - -

DM: Right, right, right, exactly.

NL: - - so, did you feel like you were in your neighborhood, but not of it?

DM: Yes. Yes, definitely, definitely.

MN: I mean, it's interesting, because, like, driving through Castle Hill - - it's hard for me to look at it as the hood.

DM: You know, a lot of people say that - -

NL: Yes, that's true.

DM: - - and it's interesting because even when I, to this day, when I go home, I say, you know, that's a pretty nice neighborhood. The grounds at Jamie Towers are just beautiful.

NL: Oh yes, the grounds at Jamie Towers are gorgeous.

DM: Beautiful.

NL: I loved that place growing up.

DM: It's, it's - - for the most part I don't ever remember it being dirty.

NL: No, it was always maintained well.

DM: I think that's the trick to it. I think it's - - that's a disguise because, and then I base that on look at, you know, the kids that I grew with, and what they're doing today, and I'm saying, you know, this was, this was definitely the hood. When I talk to people from work, or when I was at the Air Force Academy and I asked them about their friends, and people they grew up with, it's like - - it's a totally different experience.

MN: And that's an interesting question. Well, how do you explain that because when I was talking to your mother she was saying, you know, you had all these really hard-working parents

there and why did - - and it looks like there's a gender difference. Why did so many of the guys not follow in the path of - -

DM: I think - - I think, well, first of all, with my mother's point, she was definitely talking about the kids, because I did mention there was a handful of kids that did make it out, just like you know, Natasha and myself, so Natasha's mother and my mother are very close, so I think my mother was talking about those people that she had those certain relationships with, because I think people of the same needs, especially when it comes to their children, who are bringing up their children the same way tend to, you know, clique together, so she was referring to those people. What do I - - why do - - why did people end up that way - - I think, I think a big part of it - - I think it's two things. I think the drug - - the whole crack epidemic really destroyed families in my neighborhood and a lot of my friends had parents who were very young - - had mothers who were young that I recall, so I, you know, and they would have four and five siblings, so I think, just from the stand point where you had a single parent, who couldn't you know, efficiently give the right amount of time to each kid, I think that that eventually back-fired for them, so - -

MN: Now when you're talking about the impact of the crack epidemic, are you talking more on the parents, or the kids, or both?

DM: Well it would be both, because, I mean the - - and I had a lot of friends whose parents were drug addicts, and that directly affected children. I remember one individual who I grew up with whose mom - - he, this guy, he had - - he lived with his mom, two uncles, an aunt, and his sister, and maybe like two nieces and nephews all in maybe like a two bedroom house. His mom was a drug addict. His aunt was a - - still is a real bad alcoholic, and so I remember days - - this kid grew up across the street in Seward Manor, and I remember times where we, you know, hanging

out at Christian's house that he would come to the door asking for bread, asking for food. I remember there were times where, you know, Christian and I would look out the window and this kid used to come, run up to the window, and Christian lived on the sixth floor, so we're looking down on the park, and he'd be like, throw me something. The kid was hungry. And to this day, this guy now packs bags at the Key Food in the area. He didn't amount to anything, so, you know, and you can see how that directly influenced his life. That he's uneducated, I think he dropped out of school maybe in the tenth or ninth grade, and just [Crosstalk] - -

MN: Now your nearest public high school was Stevenson?

DM: Yes, public high school.

MN: And it - - was Stevenson considered a rough school? Back in the time you were coming up?

DM: Yes, yes, yes.

NL: Definitely.

DM: Yes, definitely. You, you were - - I know I've heard stories of students fighting teachers, and that type of thing.

MN: So - -

NL: And there were gangs in Stevenson too, like there was a whole crew of people from, you know, Bronx River Houses, or something - -

DM: What was it? The Decepticons or something like that?

NL: Yes, I didn't know the names of the gangs like that. I think guys would be more aware of who was who, but I just know there was like - - it was real like okay, Monroe people were one gang, the Bronx River Houses were another, Castle Hill Houses had another. You know what I mean?

DM: And Soundview.

NL: Soundview, you know, and there was always big rivalries and a lot of times it would be also like, you know, hip hop would play into that too, because there were certain emcees who were kind of - - and DJs who were known to be big in certain areas, so that would always promote rivalry too. [Coughs]

MN: Now were you involved when Natasha was in the Kips Bay Boys and Girls Club?

DM: No, not, not to - - no.

NL: Were you - - what kind of neighborhood activities were you involved in with your family and - - I know your mom, you and your mom were members of a church. Right?

DM: Yes, right.

NL: Did - - which church did you go to?

DM: Fellowship Covenant Church. It's right there. It's right on Castle Hill Avenue.

MN: Now is - - what denomination is that?

DM: It's non-denominational.

MN: Would it be called, would you see it as like Pentecostal, or is it more, is it - - if you wanted to put it on sort of a theological spectrum - -

DM: I - - I would guess that it would be more towards Baptist, yes, yes.

NL: And what do you think that - - the effect of - - what do you think the effect of being a member of Fellowship Covenant had on your upbringing?

DM: [Sirens] It - - when I was young, I had this sense that I was always being watched, because members of the church lived right in the community.

NL: Yes, same here.

DM: And I remember times coming home, my mom was like - - okay, you know, where did you go today - - I don't want to talk about it, and I came back and she's like, well no, because such and such told me this, and that person would be from the church. There were times where the pastor from the church - - I remember one time I was fighting in the school yard, and he came across the street, and you know, you know kind of yelled at me, and broke it up now, so I had the feeling that I was always being watched, and it was somewhat a sense of community.

MN: Was it a relatively small church, or big?

DM: I think it's pretty big [Crosstalk] - -

MN: Like two hundred, three hundred?

DM: Maybe around four or five hundred people.

MN: Was there singing in the church?

DM: Absolutely.

MN: Did they have an organ and guitar and drums?

DM: Drums and organ, piano. [Cough]

MN: Did you sing in church at all?

DM: I think my mother had me in the choir, when I was maybe eight or nine, but that didn't last too long. [Laughter]

NL: You weren't - - you weren't musical? [Laughs]

MN: Do you think being in that church was something that helped kids in the neighborhood, or you know, do better than people who weren't?

DM: Yes, I think it helped some kids, and again it goes back to the family though, but yes, for the most part, I think the pastor of it does a real good job with reaching out to the kids there so.

MN: Now your, your mother sounds like an extraordinary person who was constantly educating herself, developing herself, you know, learning new things. Does she - - what does she attribute that drive for learning and success and self-improvement too.

DM: You know, I think it's a genetic thing. Because my - - I'm a big believer in genetics. My grandmother was an educator for some time, until she started having children, she started her family. My aunt has been an educator her whole life, my mother's sister. I said that was the woman that ran that daycare center. So, and then, and then my mother's a nurse, and I think nurses on a whole are just very caring individuals, so, yes, I think, just - - I think it's a matter of genetics, and my mother's own values and beliefs.

NL: I was going to say, would you relate some of that too to kind of an immigrant ethic as well?

DM: Absolutely. Absolutely. You know, you come here, you develop yourself and you make a life for yourself.

NL: Right, you have to do better than when you were on the island.

DM: Like West Indians are really never content with anything. [Laughter] They're always striving.

NL: You can say that again.

DM: Here's Natasha, you know, getting her PhD. [Laughter]

NL: You can say that again. [Crosstalk]

DM: So, none of them are really content. Always pushing forward. That's why we die, that's why we die at young ages. [Laughter]

MN: Was that part of - - was that part of your like - - the identity of the West Indians, like you know - -

NL: Oh yes, without a doubt. You worked, you saved, and you strived. That was without a doubt, and I think, you know, I don't know if this, if your mom was like this, but I know my mom was very particular in saying to me, and this might sound a little bigoted, but - -

DM: I know what - - exactly what you're going to say.

NL: - - you know, you are not American, you are not an American child, and they weigh their kids differently here. Like when I would go home, I was going into Antigua. I don't know if that was for you too - - [Crosstalk] - - you were walking right into Jamaica, right, when you walked into [Crosstalk] - -

MN: And it was very self-conscious, we have different standards, don't be pulled down to that level?

NL: Oh yes.

DM: Oh God, oh God.

MN: How many time - - this is like almost - -

DM: To this day my mother would say that.

NL: And it was very particular like African Americans were usually the kind of like standard against which [Crosstalk] - -

MN: Was that explicit that there was African Americans, and you're here, and we're not them -  
-

DM: Right.

NL: Yes.

MN: - - and we don't want you to become them.

DM: Right, because I, and Natasha, I'm sure you can vouch for this as well. My mother said when she first got to this country, she had a hard time with African Americans.

NL: Yes, my mom said the same thing.

DM: They gave her a real hard time with how she spoke, how she carried herself and, you know, how she - - although African Americans had a hard time in this country, how my mother had an attitude where, well that's not going to stop me, from becoming an OR technician. That's not going to stop me from working on the Upper West Side, so - -

NL: And then you know you might, and you'll hear stuff like, oh, well you know, maybe these people are coming to take our jobs that kind of thing. There's was always a kind of a tense competition underlying the forming of communities between African Americans and West Indians.

DM: It's a completely different mindset. You know, just talking about how my mother thought - - her view on life and her view of success, compared to those of my African American friends and their parents or their mothers, their views.

MN: Was your mother a figure in the neighborhood, as well as in your household, or did she, you know, keep it pretty low key?

DM: She was a figure in the neighborhood. I would say for the most part all of Jamie Towers knows my mother. [MN laughs] All the kids know her.

NL: I'd say.

DM: My mother is the type of person, you know, she'd walk up to a kid who was smoking a cigarette and say, son, put that out, you know, [MN laughs] you know, just do that. You know, so she's that type of person. Heavily involved in the church, so everybody in the church knows my mother. So you know my mom is definitely a figure in the neighborhood.

MN: And did kids put the cigarette out when she asked them to?

DM: Yes, my mother didn't come off in a - - let me back up. My mom knows how to communicate with people very well, and I think she's really effective with that, so she would come off more as a caring and motherly type to say, son, you don't have to do that, you know, that's going to harm you, and then, for the most part people - - kids respected that, because I think they were so used to people coming down on them and saying, put that damn cigarette out and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. My mother totally took it from a different approach, and they respected her, and most of the time, I guess in addition to that, these were, these were people that knew me, and so they knew that with my mom, so I guess they were saying, well we're not going to disrespect Damien's mom, so they didn't.

MN: Now, how did this - - this application to the Air Force Academy what was the genesis of that, and was this something that started in your junior year in high school, or even earlier?

DM: Oh God, I don't remember. I want to say towards the end of my junior year is when it started.

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

DM: Back on?

NL & MN: Yes.

DM: And it was a long process, and I believe it began at the end of my junior year. I had to get a congressman approval. I had a real - - I had a very comprehensive application process. I believe it started in my - - at the end of junior year.

MN: Now was your school very supportive?

DM: Yes. There were certain teachers who didn't think I had a chance in hell to get in, but there was one or two people that were very supportive.

MN: Now were you an academic superstar at, in high school?

DM: Superstar, no, and it's because, I think, I'm not a genius or anything, but, you know, school was something that I never really had to work really hard at to do well, and I think I just became bored a lot of times, so I would say I graduated from high school, with a - - I don't know, maybe an eighty-eight average, maybe an eighty-seven average, something like that.

MN: But you didn't learn under pressure to make like ninety-fives, ninety-sixes.

DM: You mean by my mom?

MN: Yes.

DM: She wanted me to, but of course - -

NL: But you were a boy too, that's the difference.

DM: Yes, exactly so.

NL: That makes a difference.

DM: I was just like, you know, I'd rather play basketball. This looks easy, you know, so, I think that was my mindset.

MN: And was - - was anybody saying, you know, if you got a ninety-five, or ninety-six, you could go to Harvard, and that's where you should go?

DM: No.

MN: No one was saying - -

DM: I didn't have that, in school.

MN: The teachers weren't telling you that, and - -

DM: No, no, no, no. At my school we had a guidance counselor who, who wasn't very responsive to the African Americans - - not at all, not at all.

NL: And this person was white?

DM: Yes.

NL: Okay, okay.

MN: So this, nobody grabbed you in [Crosstalk] sophomore year and said you know, you should be a ninety-five student, not an eighty-eight, we could get you into Harvard.

DM: No, no, no.

NL: Wow.

MN: Wow, so it was really - - they let you slide.

DM: They let me slide. And I know, I mean I had two teachers that again saw that potential in me and pushed me, but out of those two.

MN: Would you have responded if somebody grabbed you and said I'm taking you by the, you know, and I'm going to make you a ninety-six student, and we're going to fly to the moon.

DM: Absolutely, especially, you know this is funny, especially, you know if it was a male teacher, I think I'd of definitely responded. Yes, yes, as opposed - - because one of the two was a female teacher and she just pushed it but - - and I had my mom already, and I was getting it at home all the time - - so it would've been different if it was a male teacher that took an interest in me.

MN: Now were - - what are - - did you play sports at Mount?

DM: No I didn't. I played sports outside of school. I - - I made the football team and quit the same day. I was just - -

NL: [Laughs] Why, what happened?

DM: You know, I was - - I was an arrogant - - I was very arrogant when I was younger, and I was like, I'm too good for them. I don't want to be bothered. I just - - I wanted to chase girls around, you know, after school. And being that Mount was all boys, I figured out I had to work

twice as hard to actually, you know, [NL laughs] get some girls to come around because I didn't want football to tie that up.

NL: [Laughs] Mount guys were always roaming in packs to other schools. There were always groups of Mount boys at the Spellman High School campus, because Spellman was down the street.

MN: Oh really?

NL: Oh yes, you'd see, like Mount guys pop up - -

DM: We were at the corner religiously.

NL: - - right there. Soon as school let out, and then they were also - - some of them would take you know, a little longer pilgrimages to Catherine's, or Ursula, some of the other all girl schools in the area.

MN: Do you think the African American guys at Mount were like systematically under achieving academically? And just let - - and that was a pattern that like this guidance counselor sort of encouraged?

DM: Generally speaking, yes. Although, you know, I do have African American friends from Mount - - from Mount Saint Michael who did extremely well, and ended up getting into Ivy League schools, but I would say the majority of African Americans, yes, were definitely under achievers. Unfortunately.

MN: Now - - when you got into Air Force, was that like a great moment? Was it very exciting?

DM: It was extremely exciting. Extremely exciting. [Sirens] And it, you know, looking back, even though I was excited when I was, when I was seventeen - - but I did not realize how great [Tapping] of an accomplishment that was at the time, when I look back as an adult.

MN: And what about getting there? What was, you know, what was that experience like?

DM: I was excited to leave.

MN: Leave the Bronx?

DM: Oh God, I was - - I was too happy. And the transition was rather smooth because earlier I mentioned I had an opportunity to live in Ecuador, and it was through this program called the World Learning Experience, and while I was in Ecuador - - I think it was twenty-three kids throughout the US who were, who were selected to go - - who were selected to go to Ecuador, and I met a young lady there, who lived in Colorado, who lived five minutes away from the Academy, and we became friends, and we're still friends to this very day. And so, before I applied, I got to stay with her and her family and visit them and - - see the campus and everything, and then each Cadet gets a host family in the area, so I already had mine already, so the transition went smooth, very smooth.

MN: And why did you end up staying for only a year?

DM: Why did I end up staying for only a year. Well, my whole life I wanted to be a fighter pilot. Oh God, that's all I ever wanted to do, and I remember seeing a - - a Blue Angels air show when I was like fifteen, and I was hooked. Prior to me getting into the Academy, I did not know that fighter pilots had to give ten years to the military, you know, upon graduation from flight school. So that was one thing. I was like, you know, I don't want to do anything else in the military but fly. Then, this seems kind of crazy, right, you know, you have a kid, whole life wants to be a fighter pilot, a fighter pilot, and it never occurred to me until I got out there, and actually met fighter pilots, met, you know, ex-Vietnam - - Vietnam veterans and so forth that I may be in a situation where I would have to kill somebody one day. Kill innocent people one day. So I would say it really came to light while I was out there. And, I guess, third thing, I was way too immature for the Air Force, way too immature, in the sense that I - - I, you know, my

colleagues are there - - it was just - - I don't why that is. Just it was on a whole different maturity level. I mean, they knew how to separate partying and hanging out and doing your work, where I struggled. I did well, but I was a slacker, you know, I want to party, I want to go out. Forget walking in line and, you know, doing positions, and cleaning the barracks. I wanted to go have fun so - - I think that was - - it was just a combination [Crosstalk] - -

NL: So what was the year like in Colorado? You mentioned before we started taping some folks who had reactions to you, seeing that you were from the Bronx. Just, you know, if you want to recount that kind of culture shock let's say.

DM: Let me see. Let's see. This was the first time in my life that I had been exposed to - - no. Let me back up. This was the first time in my life I felt like a true minority. You know, growing up, although I went to Catholic school, pretty much my whole life, you know, these schools - - the majority of these school were black and Latino, so was Mount Saint Michael. Going out there, and being in classes where, you know, it was like forty, forty kids, thirty something kids, and I was the only black person, I was like, wow, this is really for real. But for the most part, it was very positive because when you grew up in, in African American communities, right, you grew up learning two things as a, as a man anyway: that black men are the most - - sexually gifted individuals, right, and two that all white people are racist. Those are two things growing up as a man [NL laughs] right. And, and that we're just athletic gods, right. So it's three things you learn growing up in the African American community. When I got out there, I realized, no, not all white people are racist. I met white people who had never met a black person before, and it wasn't that they were racist, it was because they did not know, and so having common experiences with them, and I realized, well, that's a demon. We're just going off of the stuff we see on TV. And I realized they weren't racist. They were more curious as I were - - as I was to

them, but there was a, you know, I remember there was this individual from Alabama who was -  
- oh God, this kid - - I don't know what he's doing today, but this kid was a complete jerk. I  
mean there were times where he openly spoke about the KKK, and how his family supported it  
where he was. And I remember there was another individual, because when I got out there I had  
to get surgery within the first two or three weeks - - I had developed a hernia and they fixed it.  
Got back, you know, and I was away from my unit for - - you know, maybe like a week or  
something, so when I got back, I was excited to see them. They sent us to the movies, so I went  
there, you know, joking around with my friends and you know, I guess we were being a little  
obnoxious, and this kid in front of me turns around and he said, why don't you keep it down,  
you're not in a ghetto anymore, so I found that as - -

NL: Wow.

DM: - - Yes, that was like a kick to the cheek. I said, yes, I was like, you know, wow. So just  
because I'm black I'm from the ghetto. Is that what you equate it with, so. But for the most part  
it was definitely positive.

MN: Now did you immediately when you left go to Stony Brook? Was that your - -

DM: When I left the Air Force Academy, no. I actually went - - came back and I went to  
Dowling College because I was still going after being a pilot, and Downing College out on Long  
Island had a great aeronautical school, so I went for a year, but what I didn't realize then, until  
later on - - it was that I wasn't living my own - - I wasn't living for myself. I was actually living  
for my mom, because she wanted me to be the pilot, where I think deep down I didn't want it at  
all, and earlier I said a big part of me growing up and things that I did was I never wanted to let  
my mother down, so I think for a long time, I got caught up in that, and I was living her dream. I  
had to follow what I wanted to do.

MN: So you went to Dowling for a year, and then you transferred to Stony Brook?

DM: Stony Brook. Then I transferred to Stony Brook.

MN: Now, you know, at, when we spoke before you mentioned, you know, you took three classes with Leslie Owens.

DM: Yes.

MN: What was - - describe Leslie Owens - -

NL: Leslie Owens, yes.

MN: - - impact on you, and kind of how it started, because, you know, I've - - I know him pretty well, and on the face of it, he's this little kind of soft spoken - -

DM: Soft spoken.

MN: - - guy.

DM: How did it start. I'll tell you a true story, but don't tell him this. He might get mad.

[Laughter] I had a - - I had a friend at Stony Brook who, who was kind of like Professor Owens' mentee. This kid attended a whole bunch of classes with him, and he told me about him when I first got to the school, and he said, Damien, you got to take this class. You've got to take one of his classes. I said, alright, I was too late to register. Kid forges his signature to get me into the class, so I got in this class, right. And I had to say Professor Owens, as soft spoken as he, as he is, it's just, you look at him, and you say well here's this wise individual, who just has, it's just like a vat of knowledge. I look at him like Yoda or something like that, you know from Star Wars. And he was extremely helpful with my development there because he was, not only just a professor, but he, you know, he had an open door policy in a sense where if you were having trouble, or had issues and concerns, you could always go to him.

MN: Right, so when did - - where is the first occasion you took advantage of that?

DM: It was actually - - I went to him the first time - - he may not remember this, but I went to him when I was struggling choosing a major. I said, you know, Professor Owens, you know, I like just about everything, and I've always been like that since I was three, and, you know, he helped me out and so that was like my first interaction with him on a more personal level.

MN: And what did you end up majoring in?

DM: I ended up majoring in Sociology and Business.

NL: And did he help you come to that decision?

DM: Well he helped me soul search. You know, he said well, you got to figure out what you're good at first, and then you've got to take it from there, instead of trying to say, you know, what do I want to major in, what do I want to do. You got to figure out what you're good at. So that's where I started.

MN: Was Stony Brook a different academic experience than anything you had before? Was it a continuum or something new?

DM: No - - the academic part wasn't different, you know, it was school. You know, you go into class, you give your attendance, you get your syllabus, you got home study, take your test, whatever, but the atmosphere was something completely different. Something that I'd never experienced before in terms of - - number one, prior to this, Dowling was my - - was the first educational institution that I had ever been in that I didn't have to wear a uniform, aside from Kindergarten, I don't remember. [Laughter] First time I didn't have to wear a uniform. And so, you know, I go to Stony Brook, I didn't have to wear a uniform number one. Number two, it was just the size of the campus, I think - - don't quote me on this, but I think Stony Brook is an 1100 acre campus or something like that so it was just the mere size, the number of students. It

was just unbelievable. I had, and the number from - - the ratio from guys to girls was unbelievable, of girls to guys I should say unbelievable. So I had a good time.

MN: More girls?

DM: More girls. Much more girls than guys. I had a great time. [Laughter] Great college experience. Unlike anything else, but people talking about their college experiences say they didn't have a good one - - I can't, I can't relate to that. I can't fathom that. [NL laughs]

Because I had a great time in school. [MN laughs] Yes.

NL: Wow. So how did you end up after Stony Brook finding your way to investment banking?

DM: Good question. As I mentioned before, I struggled a lot trying to figure out what I wanted to do, and I think a big part of that is what I mentioned before trying to live for my mom. So at first - - here's a story. At first, you know, I was an undeclared major, then I took on sociology. I graduated in three years, right. Graduated in 2001, alright. Get out, it was in the middle of a recession, alright. Middle of the recession, couldn't get a job, September 11<sup>th</sup> happens. Alright, September 11<sup>th</sup> happens, then the economy really tanks, so I was kind of doing, you know, temp jobs, here and there, you know, December rolls around, I'm like, you know what, I need to figure something out, and I'm not - - I wasn't ready to go pursue a master's in something at the time, because I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. So, I went back to school. When I was an undergrad in Sociology, I had started business classes, but that - - I didn't finish it. So I said, let me go back and finish this business degree. Went back, pursued business. It took me a year and a half to graduate with my business degree.

MN: This is an undergraduate business - -

DM: This is still undergraduate at Stony Brook.

MN: At Stony - - [Crosstalk] so you went back?

DM: So I graduated and went back to finish the business degree, because it - - what my mom said was, instead of me, you know, wasting time here, working tech jobs here and there, the economy is totally tanking. I said let me go back and educate myself, and I wasn't ready to get a master's degree, because in my, my standpoint, it didn't make sense for me to go get a master's degree - - especially something like business, where I had no experience, so I said let me go educate myself some more, so I went back to Stony Brook, took me a year and a half to graduate with my business degree, and while I was there - - how does the story go. I didn't really know much about investment banking. I'd worked at Paine Webber in high school, but remember I was so focused on being a fighter pilot, I didn't take the time to really learn anything while I was at Paine Webber, which was definitely my fault, but when I got back to Stony Brook - - Stony Brook wasn't a school that was highly recruited for banking jobs. It was mostly IT and engineering and healthcare, or the health sciences, so - - so we would have these job fairs where banks would come in but they were recruiting for IT positions. So I went to this lady one day. I think it was Lehman Brothers. I said look, hey I'm not IT, I'm not interested in IT, but I would like to - - I'm interested in your firm, can you give me some, can you give me some literature that I can read about it. She threw a bunch of pamphlets at me. I went through it that night - - saw that there was a - - in all banks they have these heritage networks, networks, so it's like African heritage network, Hispanic heritage, and Asian, and so forth, and it had the woman that ran it globally, her email address, so I emailed her. I said, hi, my name is Damien, this is my story this is what I'm interested in, can you hook me up with somebody, because I - - initially, I wanted to do marketing. A trader contacted me, and long story really short, he became my mentor, helped me get an internship there on the trading desk. I worked there for ten weeks, had a great experience, learned about investment banking while I was there. They made me a job

offer at Lehman and I turned it down, because I didn't, because trading was somewhat siloed, you know, a trader only knows how to trade, and I wanted the experience - - I wanted to just gain the experience of - - a broader experience of financial services. While I was there, I learned about Citigroup, that was the largest investment bank in the world, you know, upon entering back, entering into school, before my final semester I applied to Citigroup, got into - - got interviewed, made it and that was it.

NL: What is the experience like at Citigroup as some - - a person of color, as a black man from the Bronx. What do you think of the environment there? How well can they - - has it been to you?

DM: Alright - - say that question again.

NL: I'm saying what do you think of your experience at Citibank as a black man, as someone from the Bronx. Has the Citibank environment been welcoming to you?

DM: Yes. Yes, I would say on a whole the environment has been welcoming, more so than Lehman Brothers I can tell you.

NL: Every bank has a different culture.

DM: Oh my God. Clear difference. And I think part of that is because Citibank is so big, and it's the most international bank there is, so they, they have to have kind of like this open-minded culture about themselves - - so, yes, it has been pretty open, but I definitely ran into certain instances where people - - with people who were definitely close-minded.

NL: Give us an example.

DM: Okay. I could give you a few. [Laughter] Alright, this one time, this one co-worker of mine, I go into his office one day, and we start talking, and I think it was kind of dumb of him because he didn't know if I was Muslim, Christian, or whatever, and he says to me, he goes, you

know what Damien, you notice anywhere where Muslims located there's a lot of violence, they're just a violent religion. So I say to myself, are you kidding me. [NL laughs] Are you serious - - so I'm looking at him, so I said, you know, there's two ways I can handle this, you know, I - - one, you know, kind of pass by, you know, two, kind of educate him. I said you know what, I would tend to disagree. I said, you know, being that I'm Christian and I think Christians are responsible for the same amount of violence, if not more - - it being that, you know, we supported the slave trade - - I think - - I believe Hitler was Catholic. He was either - - [Laughter] - - I think he was Catholic or Protestant, and I said, we all remember what he did, but, so I said, you know, let's not go pointing fingers here, and I said Muslims, Islam is the largest religion in the world and I said, let's say, let's say conservatively, what, there's twenty million Muslims, alright, and that's being very conservative. You take one percent of that, what's that, two hundred thousand? So you take, I looked at him, and I was like, are you seriously trying to tell my you're two hundred thousand - - you believe two hundred thousand people are ready to kill themselves and innocent people? I think that's kind of going overboard. So, he kind of looked at me and was like, alright. Another situation where I was on a flight with the same individual going to a client meeting down in North Carolina - - we're leaving from LaGuardia Airport. We're flying over Rikers Island. We both look out the window and look at it, and he asks me if I've ever been there. [NL laughs] And I said, I said, excuse me, ever been where? And he said to Rikers Island. I was like are you serious, or are you joking? And he goes, Damien, aren't you from the Bronx? I know you've been there before.

MN: How old is this person?

DM: Probably thirty-four.

MN: Okay, so he's not an old, you know - - [Crosstalk]

DM: No, no. Not at all. And he's just, he's just an interesting individual - - very interesting. I guess with his views he's just not very open-minded at all. And the thing about it - - it's because he's not - - he wasn't exposed - - basically. But not at all - -

NL: Well I was wondering, well just as a final kind of statement, - - first of all, well, you know, do you like living in the Bronx now? Do you plan to stay there?

DM: Yes actually - - I was actually looking - - I'm actually looking to buy an apartment by 161<sup>st</sup> Street in the Bronx.

NL: Really?

DM: Yes, by Walton Avenue.

MN: Oh, okay, Walton right, so that's right near the stadium.

DM: Right. Right near the stadium. [Crosstalk]

MN: There's - - in one of these art deco buildings?

DM: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

NL: Wow, look at that.

DM: Yes, I looked at one - - was it this week, and I'm going to look at it again Sunday, and put a bid on it.

NL: Congratulations. So what - -

MN: There goes the neighborhood. [Laughter]

NL: So what makes you want to stay in the Bronx, after, you know, you were saying at seventeen you were so happy to go.

DM: Right. It's what I know. It's what I know. It's what I'm comfortable with. This new location, where I'm planning on moving I hope is going to be a new up and coming rebirth of the Bronx. It seems like there's a lot of good things going on there. They're building a new Yankee

Stadium. And they're going to be building a, you know, like a Target around there - - Home Depot I heard, so it's coming up. And it's perfect location in terms of the Major Deegan's right there, the Cross Bronx is there, Triborough Bridge, [Crosstalk] you got the 161<sup>st</sup> Street Bridge, the Macombs Bridge - - all that stuff right there.

MN: Do you keep a car?

DM: No, I don't have a car. But I'm only talking about in terms if people visited me.

MN: Now are there, like new bars and cafes opening up in the area?

DM: Not that I'm aware of, but I'm sure there - -

NL: That will probably follow. [Crosstalk]

DM: That will follow, yes.

NL: Well, it's good to see that you're, you know, that you've come full circle, and that now you want to stay.

DM: Yes, it's - - I'm excited about it.

MN: Are there any things in conclusion that you'd like to say? Okay, thank you. [Crosstalk]

NL: Thank you very much Damien.

DM: Keep on going.

NL: You want to keep going?

DM: I mean we have time.

NL: Oh okay.

DM: I still have time. I still have plenty of time.

NL: Oh well, let's see where we - -

DM: I have plenty of time.

NL: [Laughs] Okay, anything - - is there anything - - [Crosstalk]

MN: Anything else that you know - - do you ever, you know, have contact - - do you still have contact with some of your friends who got in trouble?

DM: Yes.

MN: And what is that like, you know?

DM: That's where you see the complete difference. It's kind of hard communicating with each other, which, which is disappointing to me, because, you know, I'm talking about one individual, you know, we've known each other for years, and, you know, grew up right across the street from each other. Good family, you know, he had good family. His mom wasn't, you know, strung out on drugs, and - - but our communication is totally off. Things that are important to him, I could care less about. Things that are important to me, he could care less about. We're just two totally different people. And I think the only thing that's keeping us somewhat connected is our history, you know, our childhood, just growing up with each other.

NL: What happened to him? What was his trajectory over high school, college, beyond?

DM: Got kicked out of high school, managed to - - I don't think, I don't even think he got his GED which somehow he got into a junior college. I don't know - - God knows how he did that. He left there, got into trouble, left there, and excuse me, ever since then, he's just been doing a little bit of this and a little bit of that just to get by. Yes. Got himself in a lot, a lot of, in extreme, in extremely - - I can't - - I'm not saying what I'm trying to say. He got himself in a lot of debt so he's in a real bad position. Recently he had a baby, so he's just doing a little bit of this and a little bit of that to get by so. It's real unfortunate, but - - yes, he's not a, he's not a dumb person, by no means.

MN: Can he see his way out? Or it's not even, like, about that? It's like he's so in - -

DM: Alright, throughout this interview, I mentioned that my mom - - I think the genius to my mom is that she knew she had a young black kid in the Bronx, a young black man in the Bronx, and I guess she looked at in a sense that she said, you know what, the way I'm going to get this kid out of there, or get him to be something, get him to strive to be something is to get him exposed. Alright. To get him to Ecuador, to get him to the Caribbean every summer, to get him into the Air Force Academy, alright. For him to live in Colorado for a year. These subtle things opened my mind, so I knew from a very young age, there a lot of things in this world, aside from the Bronx, besides the Bronx. This kid didn't have that. So his reality is the Bronx, right now he resides in Harlem, so his, his reality is just New York City, just a little insignificant land mass, you know, relative to the rest of the world. That's his reality, so to him, he doesn't see it as getting out, or you know moving above. In his mind, his reality, he couldn't see himself working a banking job. It's just not realistic to him, which is unfortunate, you know, and I think it's just a matter of not being exposed. Because his mom wasn't a drug addict, right, so that wasn't a problem. He had a good mom. He was - - he went to good schools, you know, he went to St. John Vianney just like you and I, so that's not the issue, and I think the issue is just he wasn't exposed like a lot of other individuals that we both grew up with. [Airplane noise]

MN: So he can't - - he doesn't have different roles he can play? He can't like shut down the street side - -

DM: No, because he - - in his mind, he says, well, you know, I'm twenty-eight, I'm in over fifty thousand dollars worth of debt, I have, I have, I've been in jail, so I have a record, and after 2001, you know, the companies and institutions have become very stringent on doing background checks, so he can't hold - - I mean he can get a job, but then he'll - -

NL: Can he keep it?

DM: - - lose it, you know, in a matter of a week or two after the - - the checks come in. He's - - he - - I guess he sees his future as pretty dim, you know, and he's just trying to survive.

MN: So he's pretty - - he's pessimistic.

DM: Extremely.

MN: It's not like I'm proud that I'm street and I don't want to do anything else.

DM: No, because that's not what he wanted for himself because, like, we were eighteen or seventeen years old, this kid actually jumped on a bus and went to California and lived out there for four or five months. He always wanted to leave, but I think his problem again was one, that he wasn't exposed as a kid. Two was that, you know, as children, I can recall this, as children, you know, he always wanted stuff, but he, he suffered from impatience, so he wanted it now, and I think having that mindset, he got himself in a lot of trouble growing up. So - - and I guess, when he has time to, to himself and reflects, he thinks, well, I screwed myself over so much that - - you know, he doesn't see an out. I don't think he sees a bright future.

NL: And do you feel like that's more the story that's coming out of Castle Hill than yours or mine?

DM: Yes. When I see - - you know, when I - - when we were younger, we would see the neighborhood little kids and you see them with their moms and dads, and you're like, oh that's going to be a good kid, and as we get - - as, you know, we both get older, we look at those kids now, and they're like, you know, what twenty maybe now, twenty, twenty-one. We see what they turn out to, and it's like why do they do it? This is not reality, you know, hanging out on the corner, you know, hustling and having guns in your pants, and aspiring to go to jail is not reality, you know it's not real.

MN: Now, now this is a, you know, there are all these people who say, okay, rap or hip hop is part of this, is encouraging this, is a discourse that allows people to be comfortable with this. Do you think that it has any - - that has anything to do with it?

DM: Yes, to a certain degree. I wouldn't say the music itself. I think more so the rappers, and the type of - - because in reality when we - - when we talk about NWA alright, I mean, those brothers were pretty negative right, back in the day, and I loved NWA growing up, and I didn't turn out anyway right, but then again rap music was not as popular then as it is now. It's not as - - seen on TV as it is now. I think when you have certain celebrities, hip hop celebrities that conduct themselves certain ways, knowing that their fan base is of a particular demographic, and you know, a particular age and so forth, I think it does a lot of damage. I think it does - - I think it does much more damage than it does good, so I mean if you want to talk about examples, I think, I think Puffy's a great example of how - - I think Puffy does much more damage than he does good for the community, absolutely. That's my opinion.

MN: Because of his materialism?

DM: I think, yes, because of his materialism, his flamboyancy, which is fine. I mean, you, you - - the guy's obviously a success - - and I'm not saying there's anything wrong with making money, and there's nothing wrong with having nice things, but you, when you know your fan base is of a particular age group, and a particular background, I think it's - - it's your responsibility to be cognizant of that, and conduct yourself in a certain way when you get on national TV. You know, you know, [NL coughs] I think it does a lot of damage. I remember one time I was watching - - I don't know MTV or something like that and I think Puffy has a, has a basketball team at the Rucker and, I don't know if this was before the game or after the game - - now Puffy - - Puffy knows that when his team goes to the Rucker there's going to be a bunch of

kids waiting to see him. He's well aware of that. Now when I saw this interview, this guy had all types of chains on and just all flamboyant and to me, I'm just saying to myself, you know a bunch of nine-year-olds and ten-year-olds are coming to see you, would it hurt you just to put on a pair of sweatpants and sneakers and just look regular, because I think when kids see that, they're going to think that's what makes them successful. When he knows, and his children will know that's not what you need to do to be successful, you know. [NL coughs] He knows, he knows damn well when he was a young man - -

NL: When he was at Mount - - [Laughter]

DM: When he was at Mount and when he was working for Andre - - Andre - -

NL: Harrell.

DM: Harrell. He wasn't going in his office saying, you know, what's up, you know let me get a job. You know he did it in the right way. [MN coughs] He had a shirt and tie and shook his hand, and knew what to tell. And I think when kids see him and other rappers out there, you know, I think they get a false sense of reality. So I think it's damaging. My opinion. I have a lot of people that disagree with me, but most of those people are adults, and you got to remember we're adults, so we know it's a show, we know it's not - -

NL: Right, but you can't separate - - you, they, you know, when you're like seventeen or fifteen, you can't make that separation as much between art and life. [MN coughs]

DM: Exactly.

NL: I wanted to ask if you think you'd raise your family in the Bronx, or in New York City proper even. Because I've had this conversation [Phone ringing] with many friends - -

MN: Is this me?

NL: This might - - yes.

MN: It could be Liz, one second.

NL: Uh oh.

[Tape stops and restarts]

NL: What I was asking - - I've had this conversation with a couple of other friends of mine from the Bronx, and you know, kind of, you know, just wondering, throwing it out there to you, would you raise a family here?

DM: Probably not.

NL: Why not?

DM: And I made that decision when I was eleven years old.

NL: Really?

DM: Yes. I saw a situation - - I was walking - - me and my best friend, at the time, we were walking - - either we were walking to school or we were coming back. I don't remember. I think we were walking to school. And then, you know, we were eleven, and there was this kid - - he was probably seventeen, eighteen, and he was walking towards us, and he had a nice pair of sneakers on, and I remember me and my friend were staring at his sneakers as he walked by - - [Whispers] oh wow that's cool. This kid turned around to us and said, what the "f" you guys looking at? And he was, was coming at us as if he wanted to attack us. So, you know, I got scared, and my friend was just like, you know, we're just looking at your sneakers man, you know, no big deal. And so the kid, you know, put his hand in his pocket, and I don't know if he had a box cutter or what, but the kid ended up leaving us alone and kept on walking, and I said right there. I would not want to raise my kids in an environment where if somebody is admiring your shoes and your jacket, you want to turn around and hurt them. I would like to raise my kids in the environment where, you know, when, when someone is admiring them, if they're admiring

somebody that person is going to turn around and say, you know, oh you like my sneakers, well,

I got them at VIM. [Crosstalk and laughter] You know, I see the environment changing though.

I - - I don't know.

NL: That's what I was about to say. That's the Bronx of the '80s. I think it's different now. I

can remember in the '80s my mom telling me no you cannot have a leather jacket, and no you

cannot have the sneakers that were - -

DM: Or the Eight Ball jackets.

NL: - - in style because you could get killed for them.

DM: Remember the Eight Ball jackets?

NL: I remember those.

DM: I wanted one.

NL: Oh my God. I - - I, I - - I mean, and people died for those things. People, you know, would

be sitting on trains, and like their necks would get hurt because people were grabbing chains off

of them. That's so not the case now.

DM: Somebody took my chain.

NL: Really?

DM: In Castle Hill, yes.

NL: I - - I you know what, I never, I never got robbed in the course of my life in Castle Hill, and

I feel like I was probably like one of like three people I know - -

DM: I got robbed at the pizza shop on Castle Hill.

NL: Really? Oh, you're kidding. [Crosstalk] But you know somebody tried - - somebody tried

to rob me. I remember when I was maybe about eight or nine I was riding a bike. I was riding

my bike and these two Puerto Rican kids came up to me and were like, oh nice bike. Two guys,

and it's a pink and white bike, but they're like, yeah, yeah, let me get your bike, and I'm like, no.

My mom would kill me - - again this is the mother figure thing. I'm like, my mom would kill me. She worked hard to get this bike. I literally remember myself saying that, because that's the stuff she would say to me. I'm like no, and I'm realizing only later on, because then they rode away and they called me whore, and I remember going home to my sister, and I was like, Michelle, what's a whore. I didn't know what it was at the time. It was like, oh - - she - - my sister was like don't worry about it. It's good that you didn't give them your bike.

DM: I guess that is the Bronx of the '80s.

NL: That was the Bronx of the '80s. That was.

DM: I remember these guys - - I remember these guys took my rope chain at the pizza shop. I was so angry - -

NL: Oh, man.

DM: My mom had just bought me that chain.

NL: See, yes, yes. That was - - but I don't think - - people - - I think people now are in a different - -

MN: How old were you - - at the time - -

DM: I think eleven.

MN: And he was what? Fourteen fifteen?

DM: Yes, something like that.

NL: People are different now, yes, I don't know. The Bronx is different now. I don't think it's as desperate as it was [DM laughs] fifteen years ago I would say.

DM: Desperate is a - -

NL: Desperate is the word.

DM: I think - - I really think the crack epidemic really messed up stuff. I think it just - - it just hurt the community so bad in all sections of the Bronx, but - -

NL: I was going to ask, do you remember this crack head named Frances that used to be around by Seward Manor? I keep wondering.

DM: What did this person look like?

NL: Frances, she was a short dark-skinned lady.

DM: That always had a big hat?

NL: Always had a big hat on. You remember her?

DM: Yes, she's still around there.

NL: She's still - - does she still walk everywhere?

DM: Yes.

NL: Oh my God.

DM: She's still around there. She - - she's definitely still around there.

NL: This woman - - I remember seeing her walking on 125<sup>th</sup> Street and I just knew she had - - she was just so cracked up that she could've just easily made the walk straight from Castle Hill probably.

DM: She - - she's still around there. I see her every once in a while. She'll go out somewhere with a big hat.

NL: Yes. With the big - -

DM: Always had the big hat. Yes, she's a - -

NL: Oh man, I just remember - - you remember Tamika that went to - - St. John Vianney? She always used to mess with her. Tamika was in my class. Faintly - - maybe my recollection - - she lived next door to me, and I just remember Tamika would always mess with Frances - - bother

her, hit her, because, you know, they were so strung out. Like Frances didn't know, you know, left from right, back from forward. She didn't know what she was doing, so.

DM: There's another crack head in Castle Hill, this guy, skinny black dude. He always had an afro, and those chopped sideburns.

NL: Oh. [Conveying understanding]

DM: You know who I'm talking about?

NL: Yes, faintly.

DM: Yes, he's still, he's still there.

NL: He's still there too.

DM: Still there.

MN: Now does your mother still feel comfortable in Jamie Towers?

DM: No. I think, but I think that's a matter of her just getting older, alone in the house now.

So, you know, she - - she's - - well my mother's occupation now. She - - she's only home on the weekend, so she's not even there, and when she comes home now, she's like oh, you know, I'm getting a little tired of this - - I want a house now, so I think that's her - - that's where she's coming from, but, yes. Anymore? Anymore questions? You guys can ask me anything.

NL: [Laughs] Well no. I think I pretty much covered all the stuff I was thinking about, you know.

MN: Yes, me too.

NL: I think this was pretty good.

MN: This was pretty interesting.

NL: This was really good.

DM: I hope I was helpful.

Interviewers: Mark Naison and Natasha Lightfoot

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NL: Oh, I think so. I think so. And you know, you should really encourage your mom to come in, because I'd love to hear her side of the story too. Yes.

DM: Definitely.

MN: Great.

NL: Alright. Thank you so - -

[END OF INTERVIEW]