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Harris, Claire

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Transcriber: Samantha Alfrey

Mark Naison: [Tape starts late] --2006, and we are interviewing Claire Harris, a university administrator and educator who grew up in the Morrisania section of the Bronx and has been a member of Saint Augustine [inaudible] parish, in that community. Here with us today doing the interview are Dr. Mark Naison and Charles Olsen, and Brian Purnell is on camera. So, is it Dr. Harris?

Claire Harris: Just Mrs. Harris.

MN: Tell us a little about your family and where they're from and how they came to New York City.

CH: My parents, both my parents were born in St. Croix in the Virgin Islands. I'm one of five daughters. My parents--I have to say my mother is 101 years old. She was born in 1904. I'm not quite exactly sure when they came to New York, but my father was here first. My father came to New York first, my mother came later on. That's when they met. They met here after they came to New York. Married. Had five daughters. I'm the youngest of the five. When they first lived in New York, they lived in Harlem, 110th Street, near Park Avenue, was where they lived for a long time. Then they moved to the Bronx, they lived on Union Avenue, 900 Union Avenue. I don't know why I remember that but I do. 900 Union Avenue. They also lived on Boston Street, but I think when I was born they lived on Union Avenue and lived there until I was about six months old. From there they moved to 168th Street, between Boston Road and Clifton Avenue, which is where I lived for, until I was about 15 or 16 years old. From there we moved to the Northeast Bronx. I attended St. Augustine Catholic School, the elementary school. I have very many happy memories of living there, 168th Street. The neighborhood--I still attend Saint Augustine Church, so I am in the neighborhood all the time. Where I live now, with my family, is 166th Street, in a landmarks historic district. I am a Bronx person. I am a Bronx person and I can't imagine living anywhere else at this point.

MN: What sort of work did your father do?

CH: My father initially worked for the post office and then went to school in the evening and ultimately got his Bachelor's degree and began working for the Department of Welfare. That's what it was called at the time, Department of Social Services. Case worker. My mother actually did a lot of housework and did go to school. She ultimately became, got her license as a hairdresser. She went to school and she became a licensed practical nurse, which is what she did until she retired. She worked at [inaudible--Go--?] Memorial Hospital, on, what's now Roosevelt Island, then it was called Welfare Island, I think. She worked there and from there, she then worked at a community program in the Bronx, right around the corner from where we lived, on 168th Street, teaching nurse aides, people studying to be nurse's aides. She also worked as a nurse at [inaudible] house for boys and girls, at the time, as a nurse. And when she retired, before she retired, as my sisters and I got married and had children, she was the one who took care of our kids.

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MN: Now when your mother was doing cleaning work, was she working doing day work or was she working for particular families?

CH: She worked for particular families. She worked out on Long Island. When she came here, before she came here, she had worked with a doctor in a doctor's office in St. Croix. He actually came up to Maryland, I think he worked for a [inaudible], and still remained contact with my mother. I guess he was impressed with how she worked. He was the one who encouraged her to come to New York and ultimately still kept in contact with her which really encouraged her to go into nursing

MN: Were your parents Catholics in St. Croix?

CH: Yes they were.

MN: They were each Catholic when they were there, and they met--did they meet in the church in Harlem?

CH: I don't know if they met at a church in Harlem. I think they met through other people. [Inaudible] Kind of a close community of people would come from certain areas from the Caribbean, who lived in certain places, and they kind of stayed together. For example, when we lived on 168th Street, where I lived for 15 or 16 years of my life, we lived in a four story walk-up, two apartments per floor. And the woman who was next door to us was somebody who was a childhood friend of my mother's, when they lived in St. Croix. I think it might have been through her that she and my father met.

MN: Did your parents participate in any West Indian fraternal or social organizations in New York City?

CH: Not that I can remember.

MN: So you didn't grow up going to West Indian dances?

CH: We went to dances. Well, actually, my other sisters went to dances, but not necessarily any kind of particular Caribbean organizations. No, but we did go to dances.

MN: What Catholic parish did your parents belong to when they were in Manhattan?

CH: I don't know.

MN: But they--when they moved to the Bronx it was--?

CH: They actually were part of St. Anthony's. St. Anthony's on Prospect Avenue

MN: When they first moved to--?

CH: Yes, when they came to the Bronx.

MN: And then when they moved to 168th Street switched to St. Augustine?

CH: St. Augustine, which is right around the corner from me.

MN: Were your parents at all involved in politics, or was this a house where there was a lot of political discussion growing up?

CH: Not really, no. It was more focused on family and education, that kind of thing. Political, no, we were not a political family.

MN: Did all of your siblings go to college eventually?

CH: No, they did not. My oldest sister, who is now deceased, she died of pancreatic cancer. She had been married to somebody who was in the Air Force, so she traveled around a lot, ultimately settled in California, went into nursing, got her degree, but decided that she wanted to become a lawyer, so at the age of 55 she went to law school, and didn't complete it, because of what happened.

MN: What are your earliest recollections of the Bronx, growing up?

CH: I can remember being outside, playing with friends with jacks on the stoop. I can remember playing all the street games, [inaudible, listing street games] things like that.

MN: What giant steps? We haven't heard that one.

CH: Okay, it's--I can remember the name of it--it's like a "mother May I"--somebody is in the front. Then it's a group of us. And you say, "Can I take a baby step? Can I take a giant step?" And the person who's at the front decides what you can take--

[Crosstalk]

MN: Was Union Avenue--was there a stoop culture on Union Avenue?

CH: Union Avenue I do not remember, because I was six months old.

MN: Okay, so you're basically talking about 168th Street.

CH: That's right.

MN: Now was the block you lived on multiracial when you lived there? Or was it almost all African Americans?

CH: It was most all African American. I think I vaguely remember one or two white people living there.

MN: Was that true of the neighborhood, in general in that area?

CH: It was true in the neighborhood in general. There was some Hispanic, but very, very few.

Brian Purnell (?): My mother's from Barbados, and her family they lived on 1412 Prospect, they actually moved to St. Anthony of Padua's parish. She had stories of living in a very strict household. They weren't allowed to play cards, listen to the radio--as she tells it. Did you find your home life, your home environment had some of the more formalized West Indian traditions?

CH: To a degree. We were allowed to play cards, listen to the radio, etc. But it was a strict--you had to be in the house before it gets dark. You can't stay out in the street after it gets dark. We had television, I remember, but we did not watch television a lot. We were allowed to go to parties. There is a difference of seven years between my youngest older sister and myself.

MN: You're the youngest in the family?

CH: I'm the youngest in the family. They were maybe one or two years between each of my older sisters.

MN: And how much older than you was your oldest sister?

CH: I think she was sixteen when I was born. Maybe about 15 or 14.

MN: Did your sisters look after you growing up?

CH: They thought I was a little brat.

[Laughter]

CH: They didn't want me around. I can remember my mother saying--"Okay, you want to go? Take Claire with you." You know when somebody wants to go someplace with their boyfriend--to the beach, to the movie, whatever-- "Take Claire with you."

MN: Was St. Augustine's your first elementary school?

CH: Yes.

MN: And what was that like going to school for the first time?

CH: I enjoyed it. I shouldn't say that--I did go to kindergarten--I went to kindergarten at 63, which is around the corner--

MN: At P.S. 63?

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CH: So all my memories are at St. Augustine's. It was a good time. It was really a good time, I enjoyed it, I was smart in school. I skipped the third grade. I was really liked by my teachers and I liked my teachers. I liked school. I loved to read then, as I still do now. So I was a good student. Eighth grade, that was the highlight of my elementary school career. I had won the spelling bee for the school and for the district and one of two from New York City, and we went to Washington D.C.--

MN: That was Catholic, public and private all together?

CH: Yes it was.

MN: Wow. You represented New York in the Spelling Bee.

CH: Yes.

MN: Do you have pictures of that?

CH: My mother does, yes.

[Crosstalk]

CH: Nixon--who was then Vice President--there's a picture of us on the steps. Yes.

MN: So this is during the Eisenhower administration?

CH: Yes.

MN: What was the neighborhood like when you were growing up? Did it feel like a safe, nurturing neighborhood or were there rough edges?

CH: It was, you know, my block. This is where I live, and at the time, we were fine. I didn't know that we were necessarily not--I didn't know we were poor. This is just where we live. In terms of safety, or anything like that, I don't think it was ever an issue. There was one time when our apartment was robbed, and I know one of my sisters was gone away on vacation, and we always thought it was somebody who knew that she was going to go away. In terms of anything else, no. In terms of drugs, we might be able to point out somebody, some young person who might have been connected with drugs, and you just stayed away from them

MN: What about alcohol issues--was that something that was visible in the community to you?

CH: Not that I can remember, no. I'm trying to think of people who lived in our building, but no.

MN: In the 50s--it was sort of the heyday of Doo Wop--was there a lot of music around? Were people dancing on the street corners?

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CH: Not on the street corners, as much as you hear now, but people did that. I think people would just go to people's houses. But yeah, there was music. There was music.

MN: And what sort of music did your parents listen to?

CH: We had some music, some albums. We listened to the radio. I remember a lot of a lot of the radio stuff was news, and when I would come home from lunch my mother would listen to--it might have been Guiding Light or when Guiding Light came on--

MN: This is radio soap opera?

CH: This is radio soap opera, right. And when I would come home for lunch--

MN: Now did they have lunch for kids who did not--in the school?

CH: They did.

MN: Were boys and girls in the same classes in St. Augustine?

CH: Never in the same class. We were in the same building, first through fourth grade. When boys went to fifth grade, they were actually in a, another building, on Brooklyn (?) Avenue.

MN: So there was a boy's St. Augustine and a girl's once they reached fourth grade.

CH: Fifth grade, yes.

MN: Fifth grade. How big was the school? How many people were in the classes?

CH: I remember that there were between 28 and 30 girls in my class. I'm pretty sure between eighth grade this is a pretty standard number. In eighth grade, when we were tested to go to the Catholic high schools, just about ninety percent of the girls in my class went to Cathedral (?). And that's where I wanted to go, and my mother in eighth grade--no she's not accepted to St. James', she's going to [inaudible] high school anymore.

MN: Were most of the teachers sisters in the school?

CH: At the time, yes. At the time they were. The lay teachers that I remember--there was an art teacher, and a music teacher, and there was a second grade teacher who was a lay teacher, but all the rest of them were nuns. Or brothers.

MN: And did they live in the surrounding neighborhoods?

CH: In the convent.

MN: Which was--?

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CH: The convent was actually right next to where the school is. Now it's a spiritual life center, Sunday school is over there.

MN: Was the composition of the school comparable to that in the neighborhood? Was it a predominantly African-American school population?

CH: Actually, it seemed like almost half of the population was white. So it was probably 48% African-American, 2% being Hispanic. So the white people came from out of the neighborhood.

MN: What was the parish like? Was it a very big parish at that time? How many people would be at mass on a Sunday?

CH: I couldn't give numbers, but it was always filled. I know that at 9 o'clock was the children's mass. I'm not sure if it was an 8 o'clock service and 10 for adults. But 9 o'clock mass was the children's mass. I distinctly remember that.

MN: How did the masses then at St. Augustine differ from the masses today?

CH: First of all they were in Latin. The set up that was typical--the interior of St Augustine's is totally different from the way it is now. I don't know if you've seen old pictures of it (inaudible). It was very traditional, very conservative, and of course at the time, that was all I knew. It was not an inclusive type of religious situation, and the priest, for example, would never have come down from the pulpit to preach a sermon. It wasn't inclusive, it was more of a person at the altar or the pulpit telling the congregation something.

MN: How did the experience of growing up Catholic differ for you from other young people you met on your block? What was that experience like for you?

BP: This has to deal with this a little bit--did you receive first communion and confirmation through your elementary school or was there a CCD program at St. Augustine's for the children?

CH: It was through St. Augustine's Elementary School.

BP: Were there children who came from public schools?

CH: Yes. They did. We had religious time (?) on Tuesday's, since we got out at 1 o'clock. (Crosstalk) Public school kids would come in to receive religious instruction. Yes, we all received [inaudible] together.

MN: Did this experience mark you off from other people in the community who were not Catholic?

CH: I don't think so, No, no it didn't. Because when we were playing outside, you were kids playing outside. The fact that they were going to P.S. 63 and I was going to St. Augustine's, didn't make a difference.

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Date: (Unknown) 2006

MN: Do you think you got a better education than the students who were at 63?

CH: If I were to answer that now, dealing with Catholic school education now and public school education, I would say yes. Then, I don't know if there was a great difference.

BP: Did students at 63 look at you differently? I was growing up in Brooklyn, and there was the Catholic school kids and the public school kids.

CH: Yes. That got to be more of an issue after going to the high school. I went to an all-girl's Catholic high school. They thought, oh, she went to an all-girl's Catholic high school. Everybody else, all those kids who went to public school basically in Morris (?) were going to a public school. But I can't figure out if I was treated worse but I might have been looked at a little differently.

MN: What was Boston Road like in the '50s?

CH: Boston Road, right around the corner from me, was the Tower Theater, where we went just about every Saturday, for 25 cents, feature films, cowboy movie, news reel, cartoon. It was fun, it was fun. When I got older, I didn't really get into bars or anything (inaudible). It was basically visiting with friends. As far as anything recreational, things on Boston Road, the Tower was big.

MN: What about the Morrisania library? Did you make use of that?

CH: All the time, it was right near 63. I was always in the library picking up books.

MN: Were librarians a force in your life? When you went to the library, was this something a fairly individualized experience? You get your library card, you found your own books?

CH: Pretty much, yes.

BP: Did we ask you your date of birth?

CH: No.

BP: Will you please share your date of birth?

CH: Sure it's May 29, 1943.

MN: Were there any particular teachers that you had in elementary school that made a big impression on you?

CH: Yes, one of them, Sister Christopher, she was our fifth grade teacher who everybody really liked because she was, first of all she was young. The other nuns were old (laughs). She really spoke to us, kind of respected us as people. The other person was the eighth grade nun who was really my coach and tutor and mentor and friend for the spelling bee. I still communicate with her to this day.

MN: Is she in the Bronx still?

CH: She's living on the campus (inaudible).

MN: Wow.

BP: What's her name?

CH: I would say Sister Maria Carmo (?) because that was her name when she was that part of the order. (Inaudible name- "Dimilla"?).

MN: I know her! She was at Fordham.

CH: That's right. She was at Fordham. Very active.

MN: Oh my God, she's a wonderful person. I have to take a deep breath, I knew her very well. Wow. Were you in the newspapers with this spelling bee? That's a big deal.

CH: Yes. The newspapers that sponsored the spelling bee for the city was the World Telegram (inaudible) and I know that there's a picture.

BP: What was the championship word that you spelled correctly?

CH: I don't remember but I do remember the one I spelled correctly in Washington, that was grosgrain.

BP: Grosgrain?

CH: G-r-o-s-g-r-a-i-n. It's a type of ribbon. Grosgrain ribbon is a texture of ribbon. It will stay that forever.

BP: You made it there.

MN: Was Sister--what was her name in those days?

CH: Sister Maria Carmo.

MN: Sister Maria Carmo. Was she talking to you about potentially going to college when you were in eighth grade? Or did people not look that far ahead?

CH: Well first of all I think she was very influential in my going to St. James (?) because she thought academically it was right for me. I'm sure that college came up because I'm sure that's what she was looking towards.

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Date: (Unknown) 2006

MN: Were your parents talking college when you were in elementary school? So the family had you targeted in that way?

CH: Yes.

MN: Was this part of why your sisters looked at you as spoiled? Did your parents have a different trajectory for you than they had for them?

CH: No, no. I think it's just because I was just in the way. I can remember my mother and sisters saying that--my mother saying, "We don't have enough meat so we'll let Claire have it" kind of thing. I remember that, not having enough food. It's where we were from.

MN: When your family went shopping for food, where did they go?

CH: We went to Safeway, which was right around the corner of Boston Road for us. For some reason we didn't go to the A&P, around the corner the other way. We went to Safeway, and my mother used to go to the market down on Third Avenue.

MN: Did you ever go with her to the markets there?

CH: Yes.

MN: What would your mother buy down there?

CH: She would buy fish. She would buy vegetables. She would buy fresh ginger--my mother used ginger a lot. Things of that nature. I remember going with her and carrying the bags.

MN: And it was uphill, you would carry it.

CH: Yes, that's right, 168th street.

MN: Did you or your family have any experiences of racism when you were growing up that made an impression on you?

CH: Um, none that I can think of, but an interesting, now that you mention it, was the spelling bee. The way it was recorded in the World Telegram-- the person who came with me for the spelling bee--she was actually was in second place and I was in first. But the way it was recorded in the news was the other way around. She was a Jewish girl from Brooklyn. Sister Carmo didn't like that, my mother didn't like that, and they wondered if there was something to that. As far as other things, I really can't say that I experienced anything.

MN: Were you aware of civil rights movement in the South when it was going on?

CH: I was, I was in school. (Inaudible- "I went to Jersey after high school"?) And I knew people who had gone South, left and participated, but I didn't.

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BP: A quick question from before-- what was the relationships between African-Americans on 168th street and people from the Caribbean? Were differences noted and remarked upon or did everybody see each other as just getting along?

CH: I think that most of the people that I knew, most of my friends' parents, were from the Caribbean. Everybody was kind of together, I don't remember any distinctions. I think that the Jones family might be from the South, but we were all friends, and I went to school with them when we grew up. So I can't really say that.

MN: Your family were birth (?) Catholics, on both sides?

CH: Yes.

MN: Were there any people in St. Augustine's you knew who were converts?

CH: Not that I can remember.

MN: Were you aware of any evangelizing activity by the church in the community?

CH: No. Can I just correct you? St Augustine's (pronounced: "teen") is St Augustine's Presbyterian Church--

MN: Augustine's (pronounced: "tin"). Okay.

(Crosstalk)

MN: Did you ever to St. Augustine's ("teen")?

CH: Never. Catholics never went into another church.

MN: There was never any sort of collaboration.

CH: Oh, no.

BP: I'm curious. I grew up post-Vatican II so to mention that as a child you went to mass-- celebrated the mass in Latin--is interesting to me. What was the mass like for a child in Latin? Did the priest give a homily in English?

CH: Yes he did, in English. Everything else, all the prayers--I'm sorry, the gospel obviously was done in English--but the prayers, the rituals for that was in Latin. Even the hymns that were sung were basically in Latin. So we memorized Latin hymns in school, not that we knew what we were studying, but that's what we had to do.

MN: Was there much singing in your elementary school?

CH: Yes, there was a lot of singing. Any kind of play or what not there was singing.

MN: When you went to high school--what public transportation line did you take to get there?

CH: I took a bus--because at this point we were living in the North Bronx--so I took a bus to get to the number 2 line on Gunhill Road and that took me down to 86th and--

MN: Did your parents buy a house in the Northeast Bronx?

CH: No, we rented an apartment.

MN: And where was it located?

CH: It was on Union Avenue, 1313 Union Avenue--north of White Plains Road.

MN: What was it in the Williamsbridge section or over towards Baychester?

CH: Baychester, because it was 216th Street.

MN: Now, why did they decide to move to the North Bronx?

CH: Probably living conditions--we were a four story walkup. They moved to a two family house, second floor of that apartment, a larger apartment. Just basically for comfort. It just seemed like there would be more trees around

BP: What year was the move?

CH: We moved--I think it was--my junior year in high school--58.

BP: Were there any African-American or Caribbean families living in this new section of the Bronx?

CH: Yes there was. Not as many as now, but I say it might have been almost half and half.

MN: Did you still attend church in St. Augustine's?

CH: I did when I was in high school for a little while, but then we attended St. James because it was closer. It was like three blocks away from where we were staying.

MN: Did you remain in touch with friends from the old neighborhood?

CH: I still do. One of my best friends is somebody who grew up on 168th street. We still--we went to the same elementary school. We're still friends, yes.

MN: So when did you reconnect with St. Augustine's Parish?

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CH: After college--after--probably after I got married, which was in '69. We were living in Parkchester where St. Raymond's was the neighborhood Catholic church, and I just didn't feel any connection to St. Raymond's. And I went back to St. Augustine's and was really affected by what I saw and heard.

MN: So this is the early 70s?

CH: This was in the early 70s, yes.

MN: What was St. Augustine's in the early '70s like compared to St. Augustine's in the '50s?

CH: Very different in terms of mass in English. The hymns, the psalms we were doing were different. They weren't in Latin. They [inaudible]--

MN: So African-American culture elements began to enter the mass?

CH: The typical structure of the church changed dramatically.

MN: In what way?

CH: There had been a long center aisle--traditionally with the pews set up on the side--but now the altar is in the center with pews all facing that, so there's a sense of community.

BP: I'm wondering if there was any tension in the community, sort of integrating all those African-American traditional--

CH: I couldn't say that because I wasn't attending there--I wasn't really part of it at that point, part of St Augustine's like I am now. I didn't belong to any ministries, I wasn't a lecturer, a congregator, [inaudible]. There might have been, but I liked it, personally, and I'm sure younger people like myself at the time, were in favor of it. I could imagine resistance by the older people, but I don't know.

MN: Did you go through a kind of political awakening when you were in college in the '60s? Or was it very gradual?

CH: I should probably say "Yes I did."

[Laughter]

CH: But I didn't, I didn't. I was having fun. Some studying went on as well. But not while I was in college, no.

BP: Kind of a backtrack question-- you had four sisters. What was your parent's policy on boys and dating when you were younger? I hope that's not too personal of question.

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CH: Well, you know. You want to make sure you can trust a boy, that kind of thing, because the boys are often the ones doing things like that. I should say that my parents separated when I was little, and so it was basically my mother who was raising us. But as far as boys, she kind of kept a strict hold on who were seeing. I shouldn't say we. Because they were seeing--I was a little girl. It was kind of a strict thing. My mother worked--I think it was called--the shift, the shift from 11 at night to 7 in the morning, or 12 to 8.

MN: This was she was an OPN?

CH: This was when she was an OPN, so that if anybody was going to a party, they had to be home before she left for work. That means you have to be home at 11 o'clock from a party. [Laughs] They didn't look too kindly on that.

MN: Were parties mostly house parties?

CH: Yes.

MN: Were they chaperoned by parents?

CH: Somebody was in the house all the time, yes.

MN: When you were becoming an adolescent, were there particularly songs or artists that made a big impression on you?

CH: I know Frankie Lyman stood out, The Shirelles, The Chantelles. I can remember groups--groups that were really big at the time. I don't remember anybody else.

MN: Was Latin music part of your upbringing?

CH: We knew how to do the mambo. We knew how to do calypso. It was a small part. Basically if it was something different from the Doo Wop, it would have been Caribbean.

MN: Did you go to any live musical events in the Bronx? Concerts or performances?

CH: Not that I can recall, no. I'm sure I did. I don't really remember that.

MN: Did the church hold dances?

CH: There were dances--CYO. Catholic Youth Organization. CYO had dances.

MN: They would be at St. Augustine's?

CH: Yes.

MN: Charles did you have any questions?

Charles Olsen: Yes, were the Sisters the Sisters of Charity?

CH: Yes.

CO: Were the Brothers and Fathers, were they Franciscan?

CH: The Brothers were Christian Brothers.

CO: Oh, Christian brothers. Do remember ever as a young woman in elementary school, did the Sisters ever encourage you to enter the religious life?

CH: They would talk about it, but it was never a big encouragement to do so.

CO: So there was no one in your class who [inaudible] become a sister?

CH: No, but interestingly enough, in high school that was the case. In fact, I ran into one of my high school mates down at [inaudible] Maria Academy where my children attended school--she's a nun. She became a nun.

CO: I'm wondering, I talked to someone last Sunday, and they said the majority of the persons who come from St. Augustine come from out of the neighborhood.

CH: Yes.

CO: So why is it that you come back to the church?

CH: Because I have a connection. St. Augustine's to me is home. Also, by car, it's less than 5 minutes from where I live. So it is a connection, where I could probably go to St. Anthony's which is closer, or I think St. Anselm's is closer to me as well. I just feel that St. Augustine's is home, and it's where I should be.

MN: Is St. Augustine's as a parish more organically connected to African-American cultural traditions than other parishes in the Bronx?

CH: We think so, yes we do. We have a very strong gospel choir--

MN: Which I heard--

CH: Which you heard. And that's been there since the early 80s. It's very different from a Catholic Church, guitar and drums and trumpet sometimes. It's kind of non-traditional from a Catholic Church. But yes it is connected to African-American culture.

MN: Were there any particular people who made that transition, who were leaders in developing this cultural orientation?

CH: Probably some of the gospel choirs now. I remember one of the people who was really

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instrumental--actually a white guy [inaudible- Phil?] who had been a Franciscan brother, who's no longer that. He was very close to the church and thought that since the majority of the people at the time were African-American, that they should be infused into it, as well as the sense of community, the physical placement of the altar.

MN: On your first recollections of the neighborhood near St. Augustine's starting to deteriorate-- or was that something you were aware of?

CH: Not deteriorate, but, personally it was a matter of we can move to a nicer looking place. We can move to a larger place where we could be more comfortable.

MN: So you didn't feel pushed out by crime or drugs or anything? It was a decision made to find a better place to live?

CH: Exactly.

MN: Was there any point in which you became aware that portions of the Bronx were burning?

CH: That came later, I think once we had moved. Where I live now--people call it [inaudible-Fort Apache?] that's the precinct I live in. There was a lot of that going on, but that was later, that was much later.

CO: It seems to me a lot of people in the parish, they use the formality of calling each other Mr. and Mrs. I noticed that a lot of people call each other those things, traditional. I wonder if you could say something about that---

CH: I think it's probably just a traditional thing among older people. Because I'll call Mrs. Banks, Mrs. Banks or I'll say Janet, either one. As far as the younger people doing it to the older people, obviously it's a sign of respect, but as far as doing it to each other, it's just something, how I grew up. I can remember my mother calling people, Mrs., even to contemporaries.

MN: You describe having a theater a block away and two supermarkets. Supermarkets and theaters are things that are not in neighborhoods the same way they used to be. What do you think is different about your upbringing than somebody who is growing up in Morrisania today? Comparing yourself in the '50s to the 21st century.

CH: I think we played more with each other, we were outside. Even though there was television, we weren't slaves to it like kids are now. We just did a lot of things together outside. We played games in the street, we went to the pool. In the summers, we always went to the pool.

MN: What sort of group did the kids walk together to the pool? Without an adult?

CH: Yes we did, yes.

MN: At what age?

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CH: We probably were 11 or 12 years of age. It wasn't a matter of our parents taking us places, we did a lot of things on our own. We didn't even have to cross the street to get to the movie theater.

MN: Did you feel like--when you were playing in the street--that you were being watched by adults?

CH: By somebody. I would drive through the block that I lived on when my children were little and I said, "That's the building I lived in, and on the second floor that's where the Williamses lived, and there was always somebody looking out of that window." And as we drove through one time, there was somebody looking out.

MN: But you knew that people were out the window--were there fire escapes on your block?

CH: There were fire escapes, yes.

MN: Did people use them in the summer?

CH: The fire escapes were on the backs of the buildings--

MN: Not the front?

CH: Right.

MN: What about the roof? Were roofs of these apartment buildings used?

CH: They were. It wasn't someplace--you were told not to go on the roof. That was dangerous, you don't go up to the roof, might fall off, something like that. We used the fire escapes. I was on the fourth floor, my friend was on the third, and she and I would do that.

MN: Did your family go to any beaches during the summer?

CH: Orchard beach, we went to Orchard beach.

MN: And how did you get there?

CH: We took a bus. We didn't have a car so we took a bus.

MN: At what point, when you went to Syracuse, what was your professional goal at that point?

CH: Well, before I graduated I wanted to teach Russian to elementary, junior high school kids. When I did my student teaching--I realized that's not what I wanted to do. I don't want to teach kids. But I had gone all the way, I only had one more semester before graduation. Then I thought I might have been an interpreter down at the U.N. because I had majored in Russian Language and Literature, but it was suggested strongly that I should do some traveling in the country, and I

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wasn't quite ready to go that far from home. So I worked for social services for awhile, got married and had my first child. I went into adult education on a part-time basis and really liked it.

MN: Where did you first start teaching adult education?

CH: It was part of [inaudible] program on 107th St between Lexington and Park.

MN: When was the first time you took Russian?

CH: In college.

MN: What made you decide to do that?

CH: I liked languages and Russian seemed to be a challenge because it was different.

MN: Were you exposed to foreign language in elementary school?

CH: Not elementary school besides learning parts of Latin, in high school I took French and had Latin as well.

CO: I was wondering--this is a present day question-- with the sex abuse scandals in the church, how has that affected your faith as a Catholic, or how do you think its affected the people attending St. Augustine's?

CH: It hasn't affected my faith, because people should not put their faith in people, in priests for religion. But in terms of financial contribution, I think that contributions have been less because people are opposed that their money is going towards individuals rather than the church. But as far as affecting my faith, no, it has not. It's disgusting, it's embarrassing, it's a tragedy [inaudible--exposed?] penalize what they've done.

MN: Were you aware with the church's role in rebuilding the South Bronx after the fires?

CH: No, no. There were community programs that were involved in, but not the church's role.

MN: What made you decide to come back Morrisania/Hunts Point around 156th street after living in the North Bronx?

CH: We were living in Parkchester, we were married, had two children, a boy and a girl, and we used to live in a two-bedroom apartment. We first started looking for a co-op because I was working in Westchester, and I said well, we'll look in Westchester. It didn't work out and somebody who lived on 156th street, in fact her grandparents had owned a house that she currently lives in, knew we were looking, and knew that somebody in the neighborhood was selling. She said why not. And that's how we got our house.

MN: What year was this?

CH: This was 1985.

MN: Is your husband a Bronx person?

CH: He was born in East Harlem.

MN: Neither of you had hesitations about moving back to the South Bronx in the middle of the '80s?

CH: I did. Not so much the South Bronx in the middle of the '80s, but why not move somewhere with lots of grass and trees. But we came to realize we couldn't afford that, you know, we couldn't afford Westchester. And this house really made a lot of sense, very well maintained. We moved in and really didn't have to do anything. It was a good move. As far as the moving back there in the 80s, I know that first-time home buyers we got a lot of breaks [inaudible].

MN: How old were your children when you moved back?

CH: They were, my daughter was 5th grade. She was probably 11. And my son would have been 14.

MN: Did you immediately reconnect with St. Augustine's?

CH: I think I started going back before then. I did. When we were in Parkchester I wasn't, I didn't like St. Raymond's

MN: Are other people in the parish people who chose St. Augustine's because of the cultural richness of the service?

CH: Probably, and probably because of tradition. People said their parents were married in the church, this is where they went to school, so this is where they should be. Of course, the cultural tradition is certainly a big plus. [Inaudible]

MN: Now St. Augustine's school is not slated for closing.

CH: No.

MN: What accounts for the vitality of that school as an institution?

CH: I think it's changed somewhat. At one time it was called St. Augustine's School of the Arts. They had a lot of celebrity sponsors. I think that the principal now is trying to bring back to that point.

MN: Do most of the students in the school come from the surrounding neighborhood, or --?

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CH: I think they come from the surrounding neighborhood. I do also know that a good majority of the children are not Catholic, which has hurt a lot. And of course the teacher's are not nuns, they're lay teachers.

MN: Now when you were going to St. Augustine's school, were most of the students Catholic?

CH: Yes. I would say all of them but I'm sure there were exceptions.

MN: Andrew do you have any questions?

Andrew: If you don't mind going back a little bit--you were born in the Bronx?

CH: Yes I was.

A: Whereabout?

CH: I was born at the Old Wind--(inaudible) Hospital. That was somewhere near Clifton Boulevard (?) the building doesn't exist now. When I was born my family lived on Union Avenue in the Bronx I was there for the first 6 months of my life and then we moved to 168th street where I was for most of my childhood and early adolescent.

A: Are you a first generation New Yorker? Did your family come from New York?

CH: My parents were born in the Virgin Islands, St. Croix.

MN: Did you remember a family called the Paris family, from St. Augustine's? I think they were there in the 1940.

CH: Paris? No.

MN: What do you think about what's happening now with these parish consolidations and closings. You were quoted in the New York Times. Do you think that something is going to persevere to hold the community together?

CH: I certainly hope so. I'm part of the committee of [inaudible] at St. Augustine's. When we first heard about this, the process of church closings and things of that nature, we got together and said, "We can't have this. There's too much tradition and too much history." We consider our identity at St. Augustine's to be an African-American identity. People of the Bronx, we've been called that, so the four of us--

MN: What does the [inaudible] cathedral of the Bronx mean to you?

CH: This was the center. This was that church on the hill. This is where everybody could come. St. Augustine's, I don't know what year, this is before I went back, but we actually gave birth to seven area churches. From St. Augustine's they actually built St. [inaudible], St. John's

MN: So it was an original church.

CH: Yes. So what I think about now, this consolidation, as far as St. Augustine's is concerned I feel that we do have that uniqueness, that we should still be that center where African-American Catholics come to worship and we can look at that as our own. Our designation is going to be at the chapel. I don't know what that means. We're kind of waiting to meet with the representative of the Archdiocese so that he can explain that to us.

MN: Has the church been successful in bringing in any of the recent African immigrants into this community, into the parish?

CH: Yes. We have a large [inaudible] population. I'd say going back six or seven years, we've always had a priest from Africa who will say the [inaudible]. Generally, because he's [inaudible] in education. He's part of the culture now.

MN: So the parish was evolving with the changing composition--

CH: Yes. I think so. We also have a large Spanish population. We have Spanish mass on Sundays

CO: With the spirituality center, when did that come about? When did they start the spirituality center?

CH: There probably was a dwindling of nuns, so there was no need to keep this building for one or two months. I don't know where the nuns went. But the Franciscan fathers came in, and they lived there. So now we don't have the Franciscan fathers, they've left, and we used to take retreats for Sunday school for other meetings.

CO: How do you think that has an affect the sense of community, of building a community in the parish at the spirituality centers?

CH: I think it's a good thing, they do have Sunday chats, where people can come in and somebody leading the group is talking about Bible stuff and other parts of the religion [inaudible]. And I think it's a good thing because we encourage everybody to come. Yes we like you to be a member of the church, but if you're just looking for answers it's a place where you might come as well. I think it's a really important part of the community.

MN: If you had a sort of vision of what could be done to preserve and revitalize the parish, what would be your plan for the next ten years?

CH: Oh God.

MN: If you could go to the Archdiocese and say this is our plan, this is what we need to do in the next ten years and we can do it.

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CH: Well first of all at our level we would have to do a very strong evangelization effort because we have to bring up our membership. The other thing, we are responsive to the community now, I think we can do more. We do have a food pantry that feeds something like 200 people a week. We distribute food to them, we don't serve. But I think we can do other things to meet the community's need. I think we can do things with [inaudible] in terms of preparing young people for the work world. We do have an Alcoholics Anonymous group that meets but I think we can do more in terms of health education, general education, for the people in the community. I'd like to have the resources as well as the facilities to do that. There's a shelter a block away probably do more ministry there. Sometimes people from the shelter do come to church but they don't continue.

MN: Do you see a role for people at Fordham or in the Bronx African American History Project in relation to this vision?

CH: Well first of all I'm happy to hear you say that you want to do the history of St. Augustine's church because I think that's something [inaudible] brings people together, the interviews, everything. I don't know what else. I have to really think about that because I know that there is opportunity and a need for as many organizations as possible to get behind us, I just don't know right now.

MN: You are someone who's lived in the Bronx all your life, and clearly you have had opportunities to move elsewhere. What is the thing that connects you to the Bronx that gives you a sense of pride and location for a lifetime in the borough?

CH: I think St. Augustine's is a big part of it, my first connection to the Bronx. I've visited other places but I don't really see myself living somewhere else. We have friends in the area, longtime friends in the area. It's hard to really say why you've been living some place. 'Cause you are.

MN: Are you optimistic about the future in the way the Bronx is heading?

CH: I am. I really am. Just in terms of physically, you see the housing going up, postage stamp size of land there's a building going up. The Bronx is growing and I think that more and more people will probably be encouraged to come, especially in my area in the Bronx, because we're pretty much right over the Willis Avenue bridge. A lot of people don't really [inaudible] area, because of the World Trade Center tragedy. They're moving further west into Harlem and Harlem is becoming extremely expensive. So we can see families moving in now in terms of [inaudible]

MN: Do you see young professional families moving into your area?

CH: Renting right now. I see that. I know a teacher, this is up at school a block away, renting an apartment in a brownstone. I think that we will see more and more of that because it's probably financially realistic for them to do that.

MN: I think I asked all of my questions. Okay, well thank you very much. It was a pleasure to have you here.