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Hartfield, Regina

Bronx African American History Project
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Transcriber: Samantha Alfrey

Brian Purnell (BP): Today is March 12, 2009. We are at Fordham University with Regina Hartfield. Regina Hartfield recently won—I want to say this on the record—the Carl M. and Netty M. Memorial Award for the best reminiscence article in the Bronx County Historical Society Journal. Just preface to say that in an issue in the Bronx County Historical Society Journal, Regina interviewed her mother who was an alum of the Lincoln School of Nurses, and I read the article and that's how I came to first contact Regina, and we are very happy that she is here to participate in the Bronx African American History Project. So Regina, if we could start with you saying and spelling your first and last name.

Regina Hartfield (RH): Regina. R-E-G-I-N-A. Amedee. A-M-E-D-E-E. Hartfield. H-A-R-T-F-I-E-L-D.

BP: And I know we talked a bit about this—you may answer this as open to interpretation—but we often ask our participants their date of birth.

RH: So my sign is—

[Laughter]

RH: Well let's just say I grew up in the Bronx through the '60s and '70s.

BP: Okay. So the first kind of part in the interview, we will talk about biography: your family and your parents and your neighborhood and your schooling. So, who were your parents? What were their names? What were their occupations?

RH: My mother, Dell Amedee, was a nurse. As you mention she was at the Lincoln School of Nursing, and worked at Jacobi Hospital for her entire nursing professional career. And my step-father, Richard Amedee, had a couple of positions, but I think the two that he would most identify himself with—he's passed away—is cab driver and plumber, and also a framer. So he made frames for art and photos and pictures and what not. So those are probably the things that he would identify with.

BP: Do you know what their dates of births were?

RH: My mother is September of '35. And he—November of '25, probably? Something around there.

BP: Did they always live in the Bronx?

RH: No. He's from Haiti. So he was born in Haiti, lived there for many years, came to the United States as a young man, was married, had a son, and then divorced, met and married my mother. She had already had me. Then my brother was born, and my sister. So that's how my family became.

BP: When did they come to the Bronx? Did he come from Haiti to--?

RH: No, he came from Haiti, I'm not quite sure where exactly in the United States first. But I know that ultimately he lived in Brooklyn for a long time. And then his first wife was also in Brooklyn, and I believe in Queens for awhile. And then they, when my parents married my stepfather, my mother, when they married, it was in the '60s. And I think it was probably in '61. And we lived in the Bronx ever since.

BP: What neighborhoods?

RH: Fordham. Washington Avenue is where I grew up.

BP: That's where you were born?

RH: Exactly. And when I was very young we lived on Boston Road. So I lived with my mother on Boston Road. And that's where she grew up in the Bronx. Her family's from the South. After that we moved, she got married, we moved to Washington Avenue. That's the earliest memory I have of our family life like that. But I do remember before that living on Boston Road with my mother and my grandmother.

BP: Let's talk about your mother a bit. Where in the South did her family come from, where did she come from?

RH: Born in Orangeburg, South Carolina. So my grandmother was born and raised there. She—my grandmother—had several brothers. But my mother and her sister were the only children that she had. And they were there for probably—that's a good question—probably came up in the '40s, late '40s, early '50s. That's when they migrated and my grandmother actually followed her brothers who had moved to New York and settled in Harlem first, and then my grandmother came up and ultimately, she settled in the Bronx. So my mother has been in the Bronx most of her life, like 80 percent of her life.

BP: From the time she was a little girl?

RH: Yes. She was probably 10 or 11 years old when she came here.

BP: What was her maiden name before she married Richard Amedee?

RH: Harper.

BP: Harper. So let's say we'll talk about the Harpers. They lived—Boston Road, do you know where in the Bronx?

RH: I can take you there. [Laughs] Crotona and Boston Road. Right over there.

BP: Okay, so it's a little bit above 163rd street.

RH: Yes, and not too far from the park, so they could walk to the park. Crotona Park. And there was this great church across the street. I remember this, it had stairs going up on either side, and so of course all the kids would run up one side and down the other, and until we got in trouble that's what we did. [Laughs]

BP: So that's where your mother, that's where she spent most of her life?

RH: Exactly.

BP: And did you know what type of work your grandmother did when she was in the Bronx?

RH: I know of a couple of things that she did. The one that was most fascinating to me was she used to make umbrellas.

BP: Oh, wow.

RH: Yes. She worked at an umbrella factory. So she was mostly a factory worker. She was an amazing seamstress, amazing. So she could sew without patterns. She would make coats and dresses and pants and jackets and all of these things. So that was her main skill and that's what she supported the family on. But during that course, at one point, she was making umbrellas. And over the years, until they became so fancy, if you had a broken umbrella, you would just hand it over.

BP: And she could fix it?

RH: And she'd fix it right up and keep it moving. So you almost never had a new umbrella when we were growing up. [Laugh] Unless you lost it.

BP: Did your mother and her sister, did they grow up with a father in the house?

RH: They did. My grandfather died when they were very young. And so he had diabetes, he had come up north, and I can never remember where, for treatment, and left my grandmother and my mother and her sister. And then after awhile, he didn't get better, and my grandmother came up to be with him, so she left my mother and her sister with family in South Carolina, for a couple of years. She was back and forth, maybe two years. And then he passed away. In between that time, my grandmother, who had three brothers, they had all moved up to Harlem. So they had their wives and families and what not, so once he passed away, she went back, collected my mother and her sister, and then they moved to Harlem and then to the Bronx.

BP: Did you ever hear any stories as to why they moved to the Bronx? Why did they leave Harlem?

RH: No, I didn't. I don't exactly know why. From what I can tell, it was economics. It was just economics. It was a larger place, people were moving to the Bronx. The section of the Bronx they were in was closer to Harlem, just take the road around and jump on the train. So it wasn't that far. And the brothers never moved to the Bronx—it was just my grandmother. And only one

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stepbrother ultimately moved to the Bronx, but that was many, many years later. So most of our family—most of my grandmother's family—

BP: The Harpers.

RH: The Harpers, they were in Harlem, and the rest down South.

BP: Your grandmother was kind of a pioneer of sorts.

RH: She was definitely a pioneer, in many, many ways. My grandmother was amazing. Very strict. Very, very religious. There was nothing you could do, say, or try to get over that she didn't already know about before it happened. She had this uncanny ability to throw a slipper around corners. [Laughs]. It was just unbelievable. She could hear a pin drop—you were in there whispering, you were supposed to be sleeping, it was over. Slipper would come. But she was also from kind of a privileged family. So she grew up in the South where the lighter you were, the better you were, the good hair, the whole nine yards. And she was lighter, and she had good hair, a whole lot of it. Because, in our family, we also had some Native American background, Cherokee. And so that really showed itself in her. So she had hair all the way down her back, and it was a good hair, whatever that was. Very straight, very black, very, very thick. And she also was, from her time, one of the few people that went to college. So she went to college, back in the, I don't even know what. Probably in the teens.

BP: Wow.

RH: And so she went for two years. And her father would put her up—she also, you know. As far back as we traced our history, we have not traced it back to anyone who was enslaved. So that just means either we have not gone back as far, or from what we can tell, has not been enslaved, for generations, at that point. Some family members were share croppers, but my family, the Harpers, actually had their own land. So that was a really big commodity, and a big deal. That kind of put them on a different level. So that's the background that she came from. She was highly insulted to have to be working in factories and things like that. It was very difficult for her to make that adjustment. She had a very strong sense of class, and I mean that in the social sense, you know. And you could not associate, or be with, people who were not like you, in terms of that class. So it was very interesting to grow up with that kind of, I guess that emphasis.

BP: Did you grow up as a child, did you grow up spending a lot of time with her?

RH: Oh yes.

BP: What was her name again?

RH: Marie

BP: Marie Harper.

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RH: Yes. Nana, we called her Nana, was very much a part of her life, and we were very much a part of hers. We constantly, constantly refer to her all the time. What she would say—she would call you “old fool”—you know, just her mannerisms, things that she would be appalled. If she were really “shocked and appalled” that was her phrase, “shocked and appalled.” She would just go “Whaaaaaaat” [holds the word]. She would hold that, and the more appalled she was, the longer that was. [Laughs]. You could be sitting there for five minutes, “Whaaaaaaat” she would go on. [Laughs]. And she had this really embarrassing habit—she would see somebody wearing some crazy outfit, and she would stop and look them in the face, and watch them walk, “Whaaaaaaat.”

[Laughter]

RH: But she had a very strong work ethic, she had a very strong education ethic. She did not accept anything less than your doing your best about it, whatever it was. So you could come home with all “A”s and the “B” was as good as an “F”, forget it. I remember one time, when I was in elementary school, I would go to her house after school to wait until my mother came home. So in elementary school, you know how kids would fight after school, and then one time, this girl used to pick on me all the time. I would always mouth off, or whatever. But actually we got into this fight. And so, she was smaller than I was, which is a horror, I can’t even believe I’m talking about this [laughs]. But she was scrappy, you know, so she was going to fight me. So we started fighting, and it was pretty much going to be an easy fight, I mean she was really tiny. So you know, I probably could have knocked her over. But out of the corner of my eye, I saw my grandmother on the stoop, because you know, that’s all we had in the Bronx, were stoops. And I stopped fighting her, because I was like “Oh, she sees me fighting. I’m fighting in the street, what kind of low life—” I just heard the whole thing in my head. “Old fool out there, like an urchin in the street--” and I stopped fighting her. So of course, you know, she kept fighting me, and I’m like whatever. You know what, I’m more afraid of her than you. Of course, ultimately, I wasn’t fighting, and it was over, and of course everyone was like “oh, she beat you up.” And I’m like, whatever, I have to go to this woman. I got to my grandmother, and I was waiting for her to say, “I see that you didn’t fight her, you weren’t fighting.” She hit me with the head in the newspaper and said, “Old fool, you let that little child beat your tail in the street--” You can’t win. [Laughs]. But she had a very, very strong ethic like that. A lot about appearances, what you could and could not do. What you could and could not wear. How you could and could not behave in public, and all of those kinds of things. So she really instilled that in my mother and in myself—to speak properly, the whole thing. I do it too, I correct my kids when they were growing up, and they’re like “yes we know.” But everyone had to say it right, or else you just got corrected.

BP: Wow.

RH: Exactly.

BP: Well, if we could speak a bit more about Marie and Adelle. Did they grow up religious, church-going?

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RH: Very. The Harpers are Baptists. And all though my grandmother used to say things like, “The biggest devils are in the church.” But she was devout and very religious. And I would like to say that I learned about the Lord from her, because she would—anything you say or did, she would quote scripture, Bible chapter, and verse. She had this very strong ethic with her church and a very strong relationship, she would tie, she would do all the things that she was supposed to do. My mother and her sister, when they were younger, constantly in church. Constantly.

BP: Do you know where they went to church?

RH: I knew Tride Stone was one—that’s in the Bronx.

BP: Tride?

RH: Tride Stone. Tride Stone was one. That was when they were younger. Then, ultimately, it was Polite Boulevard—

BP: Is it a Baptist church?

RH: It is a Baptist church. Thessalonia.

BP: Thessalonia Baptist, yes.

RH: Ultimately she went to Thessalonia. She kind of settled there in her later years, and my mother is a member of Thessalonia now. And my Aunt actually ended up moving to Harlem—to Manhattan and then she settled in Harlem and became a member of the church in Harlem. Not Convent, what’s the other big one? I know this, it’s coming—anyway. Convent Avenue Baptist Church was one, and it’s the other one.

BP: Riverside?

RH: No, Advent Senia. That’s the one.

BP: [inaudible]

RH: Her main church was Convent, and Advent Senia was this special church she went to for special occasions, certainly when the reverend was speaking, and when every body would come visit. But also, she liked Advent Senia, so sometimes we would go. But for the most part, growing up in the Bronx—I was raised Catholic, though. But the rest of my family is Baptists.

BP: So did you go to Saint Anthony of Padua?

RH: No, I went to—oh my gosh. Wow, it went right out of my head, I haven’t thought about this in a long time. Our Savior.

BP: Our Savior?

RH: Our Savior, it's on Washington Avenue.

BP: So, you did not grow up going to Thessalonica.

RH: I went with them, I went with my grandmother. I went with my brother, my cousin, and later on my sister, a little bit—what we really did with my grandmother was to go to the revivals. So she went to a lot of the tent revivals. We went down to Harlem for a lot of those. There was a minister that she would follow around. Wow, I'm really dusting it off now. And he would be everywhere—I have to remember his name. I know she's probably like, "old fool, you can't even remember that?"

[Laughter]

RH: And I talk about him all the time—it will come to me. Reverend Ike. That was it. Reverend Ike. He was the man. [Laughs] And whatever Reverend Ike said, whatever you wanted, you send him money, you were supposed to get. I don't know, I didn't see it, I wanted a doll, I didn't get it. But my grandmother believed in Reverend Ike, until I don't know what he did, she never told us, but whatever he did, she excommunicated him after awhile. But for the most part—when he would appear downtown, down in Harlem, she would go and she'd take us. The whole laying out of hands thing, the speaking in tongues thing, the whole thing of the Holy Spirit, and of course if you didn't get the Holy Spirit, you were far gone. Eight, seven, six, five, and you were like "I didn't feel the Holy Spirit, I must be going to hell. I'm going to H-E-double toothpicks, its over for me."

[Laughter]

BP: So you were raised Catholic because of your stepfather, was he Catholic?

RH: Yes, as are a lot of Haitians, certainly at that time, Catholic. So he insisted. So we went to very nice, short, Catholic masses, done and over, forty five minutes. Everyone else is in church for hours. We were at home watching cartoons, reading the Sunday paper. [Laughs]

BP: So maybe we could use this as a time to talk about your childhood, growing up on Washington Avenue. Our Savior, that parish, was it a predominantly African American parish?

RH: Not at all. It was mostly Italian, and some Irish. Later years it became—it never became predominantly black, at all. It never became even heavy minority, black. So my brother, myself, and a handful of other people. There were a couple of other Haitian families that had moved into the neighborhood, and they went to—it was the only Catholic church in the immediate area. Arthur Avenue has their Catholic church there—we never, ever went there.

BP: To Mount Carmel.

RH: Mount Carmel. Never.

BP: So this was on Washington Avenue and--?

RH: Washington Avenue and 183rd street I believe—185th, 6th, that's where it was.

BP: And you lived--?

RH: We lived near 183rd.

BP: You lived on Washington and 183rd.

RH: Yes.

BP: What was it like to attend mass there?

RH: It was fine. My brother and I never experienced too many problems there. We actually would go by ourselves. And so, you know, we had to be back at a certain time. You know, back then you didn't worry so much about your kids going out to play. We went outside wherever. So my brother and I would get up, and my mother would make breakfast. But we couldn't have anything because we had to have communion, you can't eat. So she would send us off to church, and then we'd go to church, and then after that we'd go up the block, get the Sunday paper, go to the bakery, and come home. Sometimes we'd roam the neighborhood.

BP: This was with your brother?

RH: My younger brother.

BP: Your younger brother. You had a sister as well, you said?

RH: Yes, but she wasn't around yet. She wasn't around for a long time. So we'd go to church—I think what used to bother us more, about being in church, was that we, as some of the few black kids at the church, seem to get shushed a lot. And that used to drive us bananas. Because the other kids, the Italian kids would [talk a lot], but we would get shushed. When we said, look those kids are talking—shush! So we wondered what's up with that. But I don't think we really felt that we were “the black kids” in the church.

BP: Did you attend—did they have a school?

RH: They did; we did not go to the school. We went to the public school, but we had release time—

BP: Your sacraments.

RH: All of our sacraments through Our Savior. So on Wednesdays at 2 o'clock, you'd leave PS 59 and head over to Our Savior and have religious instruction.

BP: Were there any other African American kids in the--?

RH: Yes, there were more there.

BP: In the CCD program?

RH: Exactly. And probably because it pulled in kids from a wider area for CCD, for some reason, than it would at the masses on Sundays. And it probably was also divided by whatever mass you went to. So if there were 10 of us, some of us would go to the 10 o'clock mass, others would go to the 12, or whatever the times were, at the time. I did not feel—there were other instances in the neighborhood where I really felt like “the black kid” but not so much with the church.

BP: What were some of those? And this is around, we're talking about the 1960s?

RH: In the '60s, yes. So there were definitely neighborhoods you didn't cross over. You know the movie *The Bronx Tale*?

BP: Yes.

RH: From my experience, the streets were a little off. They talked about not crossing Park Avenue. It wasn't Park Avenue for us, it was Third Avenue. There's Washington, [Bathsford?], Bathgate, Third Avenue, you didn't go past that.

BP: You didn't go past Third Avenue?

RH: You did not go past Third Avenue. And we also didn't go past Webster Avenue, because we just couldn't. Not for any other reason except—if we found you on, somewhere else over there, it was a rap. But, you know, back in those days, everybody washed out for all the kids. So if you did or went anywhere you weren't supposed to be—before you got home your parents would know about it. Because other people were watching you, and other people would say, “your parents don't let you go over there, you can't, you're not supposed to be on that corner, or wherever.” For us it was going into the Arthur Avenue area, which was past St. Barnabus, past Third Avenue. Unless you went with your parents or for something specific, like a class trip, or somebody sent you to the store—which there was no reason for you to go to the store over there—you didn't go past that.

BP: Why?

RH: It was predominantly Italian neighborhood, and all though it never was, “you don't go to the white neighborhood,” you just don't go there. And interestingly, when I was—but you went to school with everybody. You went to school with everybody, and at the end of the day, everybody would go their way. So I remember one time walking home, there was a group of us walking home, and there was this girl who lived on the other side of Third Avenue. So we'd all walk each other home, and I don't know exactly why we ended up over there, because none of us—except for her—were supposed to be over there, but we were. And so she was going home, and I said, I'll walk over that way.

BP: Was she--?

RH: She was Italian. It was a group of us, mixed. You know, we were all in class together, so we were all mixed. So you know, we start out with 6 or 7 people, and this is way past my house. I should have been the first one of the group, but you know [laughs] it was an adventure. And so I walked and walked and walked with everybody. And it started out with 6 of us, 5, 4, 3, and then 2. She was the farthest. And I remember a group of us on the corner of Third Avenue and it was probably 185th or 186th street, anyway, and we were all talking for a long time, and she was going home, and then they were going to continue. But I didn't want to continue with them, because I had to turn back, so I was like, I'll walk you across the street and I'll go home. And that was the first time I got the "N-word." So she walked with me—we walked to her gate and I didn't think anything of it. We were just talking. I was 7, maybe 8 years old. And just before I left, she was like, "Thanks for walking with me." And I said, "Oh no problem" I didn't think anything of it, we were all walking. She said, "I hope you don't mind my saying so, you're the nicest nigger I've ever met." And I'm like—that's the first time I've ever been called that. It was probably the first time I had heard that. I didn't know what that meant, but I just stood there blinking. And I guess that maybe if she didn't say, "I hope you don't mind my saying that," because if somebody's giving you a compliment, they don't usually start it that way. So I was totally confused, I had no idea. I remember walking home thinking it over and over. And of course I told my mother what had happened, and then in the middle she's like, "Wait a minute, where did you go?" Okay, that was number one. I told her what happened and that was my first understanding of the "N-word" of what that meant and why people said it. And, I still didn't understand, why? Why's it bad? I didn't even know why it was bad, and so we talked about it. My mother talked and later on my grandmother who fussed, why were you over there in the first place. That was always the first thing—why were you over there in the first place. You know you can't go over there. And then it sort of served me right. But it was a different experience, it wasn't like I went over there and got accosted in some way. I didn't get jumped, I didn't have people—you know. It was a friendly thing, and that's why I was so confused by it. So that was one of those experiences.

BP: There wasn't ever really a reason as to why you don't go over there, it was just—

RH: It was implied

BP: --Understood that you don't go over there. What was implied? Was it implied that you don't belong over there?

RH: Yes.

BP: Because we're black? Or because--? It's not like Webster was different.

RH: Because you shouldn't be out of the neighborhood. I can't see you around the corner. But you don't go over there. It was because it was—not the neighborhood. And the interesting thing is, especially early on, our neighborhood was Italian, mostly Italians in the building we lived in. In fact we lived on one side of Washington Avenue in a private house that was owned by an Italian family, flanked by Italian families. We were really, really little, my brother was actually a

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baby at the time, and you know, they would cook food and share with us. It was really nice and we played in the backyard and they would have family over and I was always amazed at how many people in the family, because we had a small family, it was just the four of us. So I was always amazed at 12 brothers and sisters, wow, how do you remember their names? So that was surprising that you couldn't go over there. But it was because it was an Italian neighborhood, you were black, and you weren't supposed to be over there. And all though we would shop on Arthur Avenue, we would go to all the shops there on Saturday morning. You'd go shopping and if you needed meats or vegetables or whatever, you would go there, and then when you finished shopping, you wouldn't go there anymore. You'd go home and it's over.

BP: Did you ever hear any stories—it may be just that, a story—of violence towards African Americans in the Arthur Avenue/Belmont area?

RH: When I was very young, no. By the time I got older, certainly. Later years in the '70s, definitely, my brother got jumped.

BP: Really?

RH: Yes. He got hurt pretty badly by some guys who were out with baseball bats, who saw him and said, there's our target. So, definitely. But, if things happened, the adults didn't talk to the kids about it. First of all, if all the kids were together, you were seen and not heard—out out out. So they might have talked about it, there might have been things that happened—that wasn't shared with us. I don't recall, you know how sometimes things happen in a community, and as a child you don't know what it is, but you know something's wrong? I don't recall those kinds of things. But certainly yes, as late '60s and '70s, when more African Americans moved into the communities, when we started moving in Belmont and in and on and around Arthur Avenue shopping with A&P, you know you'd shop at the A&P over there on Arthur Avenue. And so the more you moved around and the more you moved into different areas, yes, definitely, there was some issues.

[Pause in tape]

BP: I wanted to talk a bit about where your family lived, and just a bit on the side—how many years between your brother and you?

RH: Three.

BP: And what is his name?

RH: Richard.

BP: So you lived in this private house—

RH: When we were very, very young. Very small. Like I said, he was a baby.

BP: You remember living there?

RH: Yes, definitely.

BP: Did you know how your parents got that apartment?

RH: Yeah, that's a good question. I never asked that question.

BP: Maybe we can ask your mom.

RH: Know what, I bet you, now that I think about it, I bet you—my stepfather was very handy. I bet he was doing some handiwork in the building, because it was 2 or 3 families. So it might have been, like he was the super. But it was a private house, almost like a brownstone than a single family home. So we lived in the bottom apartment, and then there were other families.

BP: And then after that you moved to Washington and 183rd?

RH: Well, we were on Washington, we moved across the street into an apartment building. The five story, six story walk up.

BP: And who were your neighbors when you lived there?

RH: In terms of ethnicity?

BP: Yes.

RH: Black and Italian, a couple of Irish. Mostly black and Italian. And then later, a little bit later, a couple of families from Puerto Rico.

BP: And this is the 1960s?

RH: Yes.

BP: So, blacks and Italians as neighbors on Washington Avenue at 183rd? What was that community like?

RH: I enjoyed my childhood, except for some serious family issues between my stepfather and I. So I didn't enjoy that part of it, but the things that I remember the most are the things outside. I had friends, and of course you went to school with some of the kids. So you had friends from all over. I had black friends, Italian friends, Puerto Rican friends—

BP: Is this the mid-60s? Late '60s?

RH: This was the mid-60s. I would say 64, 5, 6, around then. One of my best friends at the time, she was Italian, she had this huge family. And we ended up being friends even after they moved out of the neighborhood and would visit back and forth and spend the night at each other's houses and the whole bit. But I also had my core group of friends, the four of us that grew up

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together, were black, and became like each other's bridesmaids—the four of us grew up together. In later years we weren't as close as we were, but for a long, long time, even when they moved, we stayed very close. But they had Italian friends and Puerto Rican friends, because that was predominantly Latino community that was moving into that section of the Bronx.

BP: Are you a teenager, kind of like a 13 year old type?

RH: No I'm still little, I'm very little. At that time I was probably about 8, 9, 10, around then, elementary school.

BP: Okay, so let's talk a bit about where you went to school. What was your first public school?

RH: PS 59

BP: It might make more sense to talk about social relationships with other teenagers when you were in middle school and even in high school, but what were your earliest memories of your educational experience?

RH: I didn't go to Kindergarten. I remember being in first grade, I remember a lot of it. We had a lot of friends, a lot of people around. There were interesting teenagers, we had one black teacher, actually she was the librarian, Mrs. Rutledge. She was kind of my mentor. She didn't necessarily know it. She was very strict, and don't, don't be late with book, and don't write in it either. But she would really push you a little harder, make you think in different ways and what not. All though she was the librarian, for me, she taught me things, she taught me how to think and how to read. And I don't mean "Fun with Dick and Jane," because I hate to tell you, that was the books that we had. But—what did that mean? To think about it, critically. And she really helped me write better, she was very instrumental, she was your tutor, your kind of guardian angel in the school, for the black kids. And I didn't know it then, but in later years when you reflect, you realize she saw us and she pushed us. But for the most part, we had, as in most public schools, most of the teachers were not black and there were class full of noisy, rowdy schools, and I was one of them—I talked and talked, which is why this is perfect for me. [Laughs] Report card, "Regina's lovely but she won't stop talking."

BP: Did you have a positive—it sounds like with Ms. Rutledge—it sounded like a very positive, early influence in your early educational foundation. Did that translate in other areas, in other parts of your elementary school education?

RH: In terms of how teachers nurtured?

BP: In terms of you and your confidence in being in school. I would say one of the things that we hear sometimes with interviews is people who don't like school or don't do well in school, maybe it wasn't emphasized—it sounds like it was also reinforced in your home, big time. Sometimes people speak about negative experiences at a school.

RH: There were the usual fights, being teased about stuff or whatever. School is school. There were kids that I liked, didn't like, kids who liked me, didn't like me. It was just the usual stuff.

There were teachers who I felt more—that I liked more, and teachers who were very strict, I could picture a couple of them. There were teachers who were really very caring or devoted to their students in all kinds of ways. So, for me, elementary school, and then after awhile they truncated so it only went to the 5th grade. So my time there was from 1 to 5, was fine. I really did not feel that I was in a segregated area. Sometimes you felt like something happened, or a teacher would pull you aside a little bit more, but not really. I have other, more stronger experiences in junior high school and high school that kind of shaped my thinking and my sense of self and my confidence and all those other things. But elementary school probably gave me a foundation for being around a lot of different people, getting along with a lot of different people, because the people that we didn't like—because the people that I didn't like, I didn't like because I didn't like you. It wasn't because you were black or white or Italian or this or that. Maybe you dressed funny or walked—the stupid little things that kids don't like about each other—your pigtails, or whatever, or you were a bully or something like that. But it wasn't one way or the other.

BP: What type of games did you play as a girl?

RH: Double dutch, for sure. I was the worst double dutch player. I could jump but I can't turn—so they didn't want me to play.

BP: Do you remember any of the--?

RH: The songs? Oh, gosh, I'll have to think about that. We did hand games of course, jacks—constantly, and I actually liked jumping rope by myself, because I was double handed. So I jumped by myself. And I loved running, so any—tag, relay, all that kind of stuff.

BP: As a girl, did you play with boys?

RH: Yes.

BP: Girls only? Or boys?

RH: Well back then, boys weren't supposed to play girl things, and girls weren't supposed to play boy things. But we got away with playing tag. We would play stoop ball, but never softball. Stick ball, no. You can't do it. You're a girl, get out of here. But we would play hand ball—my friends and I, all the girls, we all played handball. The boys could play handball with us. Sometimes we would make one of the boys, if he was out there by himself, turn the rope. He didn't like that. Yeah, it was bad, but don't let his friends come outside—"what are you doing?"—so we did play those kind of things. Most of it, just typical. The ice cream stick in the middle—did you know about this? You would eat ice cream on the stick, right, then you'd put the stick in the middle of the sidewalk on the line—not a crack, on the line—and then you had to hit the stick as many times. It would be two of us and here's the stick, and then I'd try to hit it and you'd catch it, and you'd hit it and I'd catch it. Those kinds of things. We played a lot of games.

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BP: Similar to, it sounds like, the cohort of girls you played with was—whoever lived in the neighborhood. Was it the same with the boys?

RH: Pretty much. After awhile there was the migration, so a lot of the Italian families started to move out of the neighborhood, and so probably by the time I was 11, yeah, 11 or 12. Just before then, the latter part, maybe 5th grade, it became more black and more Latinos from Puerto Rico, a couple of Cuban families, a few more Caribbean families, from Jamaica mostly, and like I said we had a couple of Haitian families, and Honduras. So, after awhile the building changed, so our neighbors went from being Italian, Italian, Irish, black, just kind of thinking of the floor and the floors above and below us, to Honduras, black, Puerto Rico, yes. As a child, its just new friends, so it didn't mean anything except we have new friends and some of the friends, like I said, there was one family we were pretty close to that lived above us that were Italian that we stayed friends with for years afterwards.

BP: Is this the girl that you visited?

RH: Yes.

BP: As you move into Junior high school—10, 11—you said the middle of 5th grade. You said you begin to see these changes. Now looking back, you notice these changes. Who was the Italian girl you stayed friends with?

RH: Her name was Donna, and there were five kids and then the parents.

BP: Where did she move?

RH: They moved to Fordham and Valentine.

BP: So right over--?

RH: Exactly. So they'd come over and play, because they still had some friends in the neighborhood, too, and so they'd come over and play or we'd go over there and play. Sometimes we would have sleepovers, so we did that for a couple of years; probably it wasn't more than two years. Then every once in awhile over the course of the next decade or so, we'd run into each other or we'd run into the family. The father passed away and we went to the funeral and after awhile the mother passed away, those kinds of things. So we would run into them and it was always really nice. But then we lost touch.

BP: So she stayed in the Bronx for the duration of your youth?

RH: Yes, they stayed in the Bronx for awhile.

BP: That's interesting. As a child you say it was just getting new friends. Were there any other changes that you noticed with the change in the ethnicity and race of the people? Did you notice different food, different music, and different smells?

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RH: I was raised in a Southern, Caribbean household, so it was always different smells and foods and stuff like that. So the things that we ate, other people, my friends who were mostly—the core group of us, like I said there were four of us—they were mostly from the South. Their families were mostly from the South. If I wanted—I didn't—but if I wanted chittlins I would go to their house [laughs] but I didn't. But then my stepfather, for awhile, his mother was living with us. So she didn't speak any English and she was very traditional, Haitian homemaker. So she would make these dishes, different stews, ways of making chicken, you know. Again, as an adult, I realize there were things that she was improvising because you can go to any supermarket now and buy ingredients, and cook a dish from anywhere, at Stop & Shop. You can go there and get haecito or akko or you can get candules.

BP: Then—no.

RH: No way, no way. Also for Southern blacks, you couldn't buy the products that people were used to eating. So if you wanted black eyed peas, if you wanted—forget collard greens—you got on the bus, or you got on the Third Avenue el, and you went to 125th street, and you bought all of your Southern, traditional dish ingredients, and you brought them home. You wanted chitlins, you went to 125th street and bought it and then you brought home. Because you certainly were not going to buy that on Arthur Avenue. All though, they probably had it, but we didn't know that. And you weren't going to get it in the A&P either.

BP: Where was the A&P?

RH: The A&P was on—the one I remember the most—was on Third Avenue behind St. Barnabas. But I believe there was one closer to us, but I can't remember it off hand. But then the one I remember going to the most was behind St. Barnabas.

BP: I want to get into Middle School soon, because that's kind of where it's moving. But I also want to talk more about what you noticed in terms of the changes, with new people moving into the neighborhood and the building. Did you notice any changes--?

RH: Intentions? I think what I noticed—the things that I noticed were not necessarily negative; they were different. Or, actually, they were similar but just with different people. So when we first moved to the neighborhood, there were—like I said, it was mostly Italian—some blacks, another Haitian family—that was a little bit later, and Irish. So people were out on the stoops, people had their lawn chairs, and in the evenings everybody was outside and the kids were playing and running up and down. That was what happened in the summertime in this neighborhood. Everybody went to work—well, I should say, mostly the men went to work. My mother was a nurse. She was one of the few women that went to work. So she would go to work every day. But then after awhile, people still sat on the stoop, people still pulled out their lawn chairs, kids were still running up and down the block, but they were not Italian. They weren't Irish. They were Haitian. They were Puerto Rican. We were Honduran. And still some Italian, yes. And Jamaican.

BP: One moment, you heard Italian, people might have been speaking Italian. The next moment, did you hear more Spanish?

RH: We heard, actually—that's a good question.

BP: Did music change?

RH: Yes, music totally changed, that's a whole different thing. But I remember hearing accents. Accents changed. So it was Italian accents, then it was Southern accents, then it was Spanish accents, and then it was Caribbean accents. And I heard that because in my house, my stepfather's Haitian, my mother's Southern—all though she doesn't have a drawl at all. But, you know, my family, the Harper side, some of them do. So I think I was maybe more attuned to it. So I didn't see it as—that's how I heard it—in terms of accents. And then music. There were—growing up, when I was very young—probably more, certainly Frank Sinatra. Though I have to say, that never changed. In the community, it was always Frank Sinatra. It didn't matter what ethnicity was predominant. Frank Sinatra kind of went through. [Laughs]. But Frank Sinatra, and then there were a lot more Italian music, in the language. And then there was a lot of—for me—Caribbean music and calypso. And then with the calypso music, started the Latin music. For me, and my musical awakening, that was it. That was it. I don't know what it was. Maybe it was, because it was partly Caribbean it was very familiar to me. But I think I mentioned to you once before, and a lot of this has to do with the summertime, because that's when your windows open, that's when you're outside, that's when everybody's outside. But at night we would go to sleep and I remember my brother and I shared a room, we had bunk beds, and I was on the top because I was the oldest. And the windows were open. And I would hear these Latino drummers playing in the schoolyard. And they would play and play, and that's how I went to sleep. This music wafting in the air. And that was so powerful for me; music was always very, very important in my household. It became something that I identified with. You were talking about the experience in elementary school, one of the things that was one of the great equalizers was sports, of course, and music. So you had chorus, and you learned how to play an instrument. You were always in a group of, either singing or playing or playing, some kind of group. I think that's also where people got a certain amount of respect and acceptance and things like that. Because you were either really good at sports, or maybe you weren't and they all teased you, or you were really good at sports, or really good—we used to play the recorder. Everyone had to play the recorder. Or you were in the chorus, and that's with the little red tie and little white shirt. That's what you did. So, you had these identities, and music became very important to me. And that's again what—the line that I would draw for my life. The commonality would be music.

BP: Were you in chorus?

RH: I was in chorus, I played the recorder horribly, but I always have been involved as a singer, throughout my whole life actually. And that's where it started. And of course it was a time when there were musicals and things like that—music was around—

BP: This was moving a bit forward, I'm going to assume, but as a teenager, did you learn to dance? Dance Latin?

RH: I did. We had—again—growing up in this kind of bicultural family, which I never thought of it that way, it was just my family. We'd go to parties in Brooklyn, so my mother and father

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would get all dressed up, and we'd take this long, long drive to Brooklyn. We'd have these afternoons and outings with other Caribbean families. Mostly Haitian but not just, but mostly, because those were his friends and extended family members, and as people came in, so yes. You'd learn how to dance. After awhile—you know it's only a short hop, skip and a jump to dancing Latin, you know. I'm not great at it, but I can move. So yes, yes, there definitely was the dance part of it.

BP: Where did you go to Junior High School?

RH: I went to—it was my cultural shock—I ended up being, I guess chosen or picked, because of my grades or what not, to be bussed out of the neighborhood.

BP: You did well.

RH: Yes, I did pretty well, and I had like a scholarship. I don't know what scholarships you get in 5th grade, but whatever [laughs]. I had the opportunity to go to school outside of the neighborhood. So I went—that's where I learned about Kingsbridge. That was my introduction to Jewish community. So everyday I would get on the bus, the regular bus, the 29, the 12 or the 20, and I'd go to PS 122. And I only went there for 6th grade, because we didn't have a 6th grade. But that enabled me to then go to the Junior High School that the elementary school fed into, over there, also. In that Kingsbridge area.

BP: Where exactly is it?

RH: This is Kingsbridge and Bailey Avenue, just by the highway.

BP: Okay, down by the Deagan?

RH: By the Deagan, right there on the corner. That's where 122, I think, still is. Then I went to 143

BP: For Junior High School?

RH: For Junior High School, and that is over by the reservoir, still in Kingsbridge area, but a little closer to the reservoir. So that was a whole different introduction to a whole other culture. That was very different and very interesting, very interesting.

BP: Are you able to keep talking?

[Pauses tape]

BP: How is this a different cultural experience?

RH: Because of the cultures that I was used to growing up, I did not have—there were some Jewish families, but we didn't have a lot of interaction. It was not a predominantly—it was not even within the scope of the neighborhood and the boundaries that you couldn't go past for one

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reason or another. There was some Jews who owned shops and stores, the cleaners, who worked in the A&P, but that was an episodic interaction. You took your clothes to the cleaners—you left. You picked them up, you left. You go to the A&P, you shop, you pay, you leave. Then of course there were the supers. So this was probably—I'm sure there was a couple of others—but that was what I knew of Jewish community. And that wasn't even really a community, it was more like, people. When I left, well we didn't move but I was bussed, and I always laugh about saying that, because there was no bus that came and get me. I got a bus pass. I got on the bus, the public transportation. And it was a long ride for someone who had walked to school for their entire school life. I was about 10 years old really, so I was also young, and that was a big difference. So I came to the school that was predominantly Jewish, in an accelerated class. To my surprise—well everything was a surprise, I can't even pick one—but it was all a surprise. There was one other black girl.

BP: In your class?

RH: In my class. Interestingly, four young black men. So there was six of us in a class of 30.

BP: And the rest was mostly Jewish?

RH: Yes, mostly Jewish.

BP: Not even Italian?

RH: I'm sure there were maybe a couple of Italians. I don't even recall anyone Irish. But it was mostly Jewish. And it was also upper-class Jewish. It was the Riverdale Jews. And so it was a very different—when I think about it, the culture shock was more of class, and culture too, but it was mostly class. Because this was a whole different group. This was, in my experience everybody got dressed on Sundays. So Sunday you wore your Sunday best, Easter you wore your Sunday best. Your best clothes were in September because you got all these new clothes for school. Those are the kinds of clothing milestones I was used to. This was Sunday best every day. Every day somebody had, you know, groovy patent leather shoes. They wore tights in all kinds of colors, and mini skirts, and—what is this? These coats called chubbies, which were these little fur coats.

BP: What were you used to wearing to school?

RH: A coat, cloth, three buttons, don't lose one. [Laughs] I had a green, some crazy lime green scarf. I do remember this horror—but you couldn't pull it away from me. And this crazy hat that had like a ski thing, that my handy-dandy grandmother had sewed this lining, this silk lining in it, so it would keep my hair from getting caught, so it would grow, like hers. It didn't happen. But this thing was longer than any hair I ever had, and it kept slipping. [Laughs]

BP: So you dressed like a kid?

RH: I dressed like a kid.

BP: Jeans? Did you wear jeans? People that wear jeans to school--

RH: You didn't wear jeans. There were sneakers. You went to gym, you brought your sneakers for gym.

BP: You wore shoes to school?

RH: Shoes, everyday. Oxfords. There were no jeans, no sneakers, nothing. Bell bottoms. Mini skirts were risqué, but that's what they wore. Jewelry—rings, patent leather purses. Oh my God. I was—I didn't know what to do with it—I didn't know how to be, you know what I mean? So it was the first time I felt totally not one of any—even in my upbringing and my experience in PS 59, every body was the same. So you could be black or white or Puerto Rican, but guess what—everybody was the same, probably, socio-economically. So we all wore the same kinds of clothes, and again, on your special days—Easter Sunday, this and that, or when you went to church—you pulled out the special clothing. This was new to me. Monday through Friday. Oh my God—what do you wear on Sunday? Then I had to learn it wasn't about Sunday for this group, it was Saturday. So I had this whole introduction to—then, the other great equalizers would be things like lunch. Again, I grew up, PS 59 every body had lunch. You got your tray, and you walked down—

BP: In the school?

RH: In the school you got that hot milk—it was horrible—and that was lunch. Here, they brought lunch in these little lunchboxes, with thermoses. I had to get a lunch box—mom, I have to have a lunch box, you have to buy a lunch box for me. And it had to be The Beatles or The Monkeys or something—it had to be the cool lunchbox. Spiderman, something—I couldn't carry Spiderman, I was a girl. But you know what I mean, you had to have a cool lunch box. And I didn't know anything about lunch boxes. After the first week—look, I need some lunch boxes, I need some lunch. I need a fur coat. I remember coming home saying, I need these things for school. My mother's like, "You get your number 2 pencils. I can get a lunch box but that will be next week on pay day." You know what I mean? It was just a whole—parents picked them up in cars. Parents picked you up? Lets start there! We all went home, and mothers were home. Parents picked you up? I didn't know anything about that—I got on the bus. I thought about that all the way home. Parents picked them up. It was just a very different class, you know. Then it was the whole introduction to diet—I didn't know about keeping kosher. Dairy—what do you mean you can't have a cheeseburger? I didn't understand that at all. All of those kind of things. And you have to remember, 10 and 11 years old. So this was, I would come home, and my mother, who worked in Jacobi Hospital with a lot of nurses and doctors who were Jewish, so she knew all about this. So I would come home, and she would tell me, this is why, this is how. She would explain it and I would go back and I would at least understand. But then, there were some teasings and there were some you know—but again, it still just wasn't so much about being black, it was a class thing. It was a [inaudible] that kind of stuff. It was just unbelievable. And then of course—the other black girl that was there besides myself, we're friends to this day. The guys—we all kind of grew up. We stayed in touch with each other for decades, for a long time.

BP: Did you find that—this is junior high school?

RH: This is sixth grade. This is only sixth grade.

BP: Sixth grade. Did you find that your experience up to fifth grade—you had your core group of the four other black girls that you lived with—

RH: Right, they were in the building next to ours, so we—

BP: But it sounds like your peer group was very mixed. Did your peer group in the sixth grade now kind of almost only become this core group of other black students there?

RH: No, no. I was the new kid. So those black students all came from Marble Hill. So they knew each other from when they were little. So I didn't belong anywhere. I didn't belong in this culture. I didn't belong with that group of black kids. I didn't belong anywhere. I was totally new. Washington? There's another side past Lowmans?—Alexanders, that's where it was. So for some of the kids in the class, it was—there's life past Lowmans on Fordham Road? And for the rest of it, past Alexanders? People live over there?

BP: Where was Alexanders?

RH: Alexanders was on the Concourse and Fordham. And Lowmans was just before that, if you're coming back toward Riverdale—its just like two blocks. Fordham and Jerome. That was the original Lowmans. So one group of students only knew Fordham and Jerome, and then the rest knew Alexanders and Sears. They did know Sears.

BP: That was up—

RH: That was down now by Third and Webster. That's it. You live past that? Oh, that's Orchard Beach—you know what I mean? Straight over to the beach. [Laughs] There was a total difference, so I had to get used to a whole totally foreign group of people. And not only that—Marble Hill was the projects. But it wasn't—at that point it wasn't the negativity of the projects that came about in the '70s. It was just the projects, that's it. We live in Kingsbridge, we live in the Marblehead projects, it was nothing to it. But I didn't know what that was. So when I went, my friends, my best friend her name was Dorean. So I went to Dorean's house, there were all these high rises, you know, and everybody had their center courtyard. You had your own playground—get out of here, this is amazing. You could walk around and you know all of these people? And you could play over there? Wow. It was just totally different. And I was surrounded by this very Jewish community. And so I'm pretty sure there were all kinds of tensions, but again, you had your own little microcosm of tensions. And it was also a class thing.

BP: So that's how it manifested for you in the sixth grade.

RH: And then you also have to remember there was this kind of hippie time.

BP: Late '60s?

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RH: Late '60s, '68, '69, '70, around there. So this was the beginning of that kind of hippie time. So, for example, even among the Jewish community, you had the very kind of conservative, and then you had the hippie. So, me being me, my friends were the hippies. [Laughs]. And them being them, you know, because it's just like, we're all one under the sun. So they could have a black friend, and I could have just another friend, you know what I mean? So that was very interesting, because it was that whole hippie thing. So then after awhile, you kind of, what's the word, the same, I guess, footing that everyone fell on, was this kind of hippie thing. So you did do the bellbottomy thing, and you did do the headband around the hair thing. I didn't have an afro yet—that was later [laughs] oh yes. So there was that whole thing. It was their own struggle within the Jewish community of the hippier, more free and open, and this conservative Jewish group. So the girls there were still doing the Bar and, the guys, of course, the Bat Mitzvahs. And, you know, we had a party. Played records. Exactly. We sat on the floor, cross legged, talked about Native Americans, and what Americas done to the world, all of those kinds of things. And it was very, very different. Then there my Marblehead friends. Then it was the whole—along with the hippie thing came the whole advent of black power—and that whole struggle. So, you know, you still got the thing wrapped around your head, but we're having a different kind of conversation. You're talking about—it became more of a black-white conversation. Whereas in the other ones, it was a class conversation—those people. "They're so snooty" this was with the Jewish hippie friends. "The rest of them are so snooty." But with the other group, it was more like, everybody, over there, would be white. White kids over there. And we would be here. And it would be the struggle. Meanwhile, though, we all hung out. You know, you had your white friends and after awhile, you might have had, again, the predominant Latino migration was from Puerto Rico at that point, so you had your Puerto Rican friends. A couple of Cubans. So again I found myself in an environment that there were just a whole lot of different people. So I have these memories of other cultures that I share with different people, and they are like, what do you know about Lomans? Arthur Avenue? I remember having a coworker—she's Italian—and we talked about having grown up in the Bronx. She was talking about her life, and what she did—we are about the same age, give or take a couple of years. So what she was doing, growing up on the Arthur Avenue, and I grew up on the Third Avenue, on the Washington Avenue side of Arthur Avenue. So anyway we were talking about going to Arthur Avenue on Saturdays. And it was very interesting because it was the same kind of experience—you got the shopping cart, and everybody went to the bathroom before they left the house. Make sure you have your nickel, or your dime, or whatever little spending money you have. Okay, get the shopping list. Same exact thing. What my whole experience has been is that there are similarities. A lot of people look and they see differences. What I learned is that there were more similarities than differences. So she talking about that and I was saying, "really? You too?" I said I remember going to Arthur Avenue and there were these wooden steps outside of all the stores. The stores are level with the ground now—the sidewalk. That was not the case when I was little. There were wooden steps, usually two. You step up, walk, step up, walk, saw dust. You went in the store and there was saw dust everywhere. She said no there wasn't, I said yes there was, no there wasn't. "There was no saw dust, I don't know where you were." I'm like, yes. "I grew up in Arthur Avenue, I'm telling you there was no saw dust." I'm like, there was saw dust, I remember it. You know, you trace it with your foot in the ground, you're bored, you're standing there waiting for your mother. You push it with your foot and you mound it, you do all kinds of stupid things while you're standing there. So we had this discussion—she was like, "no, you don't know what you're talking about."

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The next day, she came back, she said, “I owe you an apology. I went home and I was telling my mother what you said. And I said, ‘This is ridiculous, she’s talking about saw dust.

She’s like, ‘Idiot. There was saw dust everywhere. She’s right. You go and apologize.’” I always think about that as, again, you have this collective experience from two different perspectives. So it was very traditional, Italian perspective. Mine is very—traditional, as it was—black perspective. And we experienced Arthur Avenue in mostly similar ways. You know, you picked up groceries—“I’m going, do you need anything?” Same thing. So, again, by the time we got to, by the time I was in the sixth grade. Here was another totally foreign group of people, black and white, that I, ultimately, found the commonalities then. I equated, like, your Bar Mitzvahs, Bat Mitzvahs, similar to the First Holy Communion, you know, that I experienced. So there was that—okay, so it was a right of passage for you, too. It’s a very important religious right of passage—so was this—oh really, what do you do? So you share it. And then of course, this was also the UNICEF-y days. What’s the other one? People were going into core—what was it called? The Peace Corps. So you also had that common discussion about the world, and poor people, and countries that needed our help, and all of those kinds of things. So we were just kind of this microcosm of the world. That was all part of our collective. You did trick-or-treat for UNICEF, and that’s what you did, and there was all these kids on the boxes from all the different countries. And also, Asian. That was the other group in my class. I had not been around Asians, except when we went to the Chinese restaurant. And so there were two girls who again became friends for many years through Junior High School who were both Chinese. So there were 6 African Americans, 2 Chinese, and I think they may have been one or two Latinos, and predominantly Jewish.

BP: So this is actually—we could stop here. Would you like to do another one?

RH: Sure, sure. That would be great.

BP: Yes?

RH: Because you know, like in three hours we did four years. [Laughs] So that would be fine.

BP: Well I just want to know—where did you go to High School?

RH: I went to Music and Art.

BP: In Manhattan?

RH: Yes, in Harlem. On 135th Street. Before it moved.

BP: And when did you—in the earlier conversation, you also raised your children in the Bronx. Did you ever move out of the Bronx, and came back?

RH: No, I never moved and came back. I just moved. So now—

BP: In the Bronx?

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RH: Well we moved within the Bronx, and then after awhile I just moved out of the Bronx.

BP: What year was that?

RH: That was '99

BP: Wow. You were in the Bronx—

RH: Yes. I'm a Bronx baby, my whole life.

BP: Did you attend college as well?

RH: Lehman.

BP: Lehman, in the '70s?

RH: No, actually. Actually I just got my undergraduate degree, about two years ago. So I went back and finished my education.

BP: Wow. So you know what, I'll pause here. We'll come back next week, and in a month, and we will pick up kind of at this 6th grade point where there's commonalities, but the commonalities seem like they're shaping in, seems like its shaping in separate groups. All other groups, do you cross over?

RH: Yes. I think, for me, and I'll just kind of leave you with this. What ended up happening is that I learned a lot about the cultures and the people that I was meeting. And there was this—because we were there, I think also in kind of an accelerated class—you kind of focus on academics a lot more. And then for me, music was always a big part of it. So, for me, the competition in everything kind of evened out with the academic part of it. And so once you gained acceptance for something, then you were okay. Plus I was like the talkative, sort of funny one, and then that kind of made it a little easier because people felt more comfortable, and it was my way of making myself feel more comfortable. But there were definitely, definitely things I remember—I'll tell you this last one and I'll let you go. There was this issue during Black History Month.

BP: In the sixth grade?

RH: In the sixth grade. And there was this one girl—she was white—and she was talking about, “well, you know, that's why it's February, it's a short month, you guys didn't accomplish much.” And I remember going—“Oh no she didn't.” And I said, I made some comment, “Well we could talk about George Washington Carver who invented peanut butter for your matzahs.” And the teacher's like [noise]. Then everybody cracked up, we all cracked up, end of story. It's like, we shook hands, and we ultimately became friends. It's kind of like when you have that fight with that one person, and I think it was something that had to be done. It was brewing, little snarky remarks, and then boomed it happen, and okay, it's out. And that was one think I remember. Yes, it was deep. And she was like the little ring leader. There was always one who would say the

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snarkest remark, then you were toast for the rest of the year. But I was like, okay, [laughs]. Then we were fine—became friends. That was the end of that nonsense. But there were little things that would happen like that along the way.

BP: Do you remember any others? The only reason I ask is because that's so—well I can tell you when we're done. Do you remember any others?

RH: I remember my own sense of feeling inadequate, because, like I said, it was mostly a class thing. And it was just, I don't understand.

BP: The four young black men, and the one other black girls, they also had lunch boxes?

RH: Yes. They had lunch boxes. I didn't have one. [Laughs]. I was hungry for the first week, because I didn't even know to bring lunch. They didn't tell my mother that. And of course you got the lunch wars. So, when I even got the lunch box, I didn't have the right lunch. It was just awful for a month.

BP: What lunch did you have?

RH: I had like peanut butter and cheese, or whatever, and they had—well they would have tuna. Or they would have ham and cheese, or spiced ham, because that was the meat of the day. Spiced ham and cheese. Peanut butter [laughs] or cheese. So I had the wrong lunch. And then they had Hostess, all those kinds of things. It was just not in my—not that we didn't have them—but you didn't always have a quarter or a dime for it, or you got it on Sunday, you know what I mean? This was—stacks of them in their house—and I'm making lunch, naturally, and you put in a Hostess cupcake, and some juice, and we had our thermoses. So it was very much a sense of competition.

BP: And you felt—?

RH: I felt totally inadequate. I didn't dress like them, I didn't eat like anybody.

BP: But it doesn't seem like it affected your academics.

RH: No.

BP: How did you deal?

RH: I think I dealt with humor, I really do. After awhile—it was, some of my own little snarky retorts like that one. After awhile. You know what else, too? Because I was taller and bigger than most people—most of the kids my age. So there was this, you know, we don't know what to make of this person. She could beat us to the ground. And I was so not like the beat-up kind of person. But that was the first impression, and then she seems to be okay. And then, oh she's funny. Oh she's nice, whatever. As you reveal yourself, as they get more comfortable. But I think those were things that made people not able to figure me out. And I don't think I'm an easy person to figure out, anyway. So then it becomes my responsibility to make somebody feel

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comfortable. And I think that's also part of the role that I took on. So again, I was not readily accepted in the six blacks that were there, or the rest of the class, either. It was a road. It was definitely a road. But what I learned from that was just to be myself, and to be very much, pay attention to my own principles, do things my way, because some of the people I met I didn't really like because they weren't themselves, they were trying to fit in, they were trying to be other people, and all of those things. So that, I think, really cemented the individual that I became where I was—I don't want to do this, and I'm not going to, I don't really care if you all are doing it. I can still hang with you. We can go and have fun, do whatever you want to do, we can all hang out together. But if I don't want to do that, I'm fine with saying I don't want to do that. And after awhile, people who are usually threatened by people who do that, it didn't matter. Consequently, people would—you know. I learned to move comfortably and just to be comfortable the way it was when I was growing up, so that, I think those are the things that kind of shaped me. I think sixth grade really shaped who I was, and what I was going to be, in terms of my own personal ethics and comfort zones. But it was always a struggle. After awhile it still became a struggle. And then the more, the more the black power movement and that whole thing came about, the more interesting I think times became and you find yourself having to almost take sides and for those of us that had friends from all over—you know, everybody, every culture—it was interesting because, could you still be friends? You know, some people abandoned their friends, some people we didn't. If we were friends—we are friends, to this day. If we are friends, we are friends. And if we're not going to be friends, we aren't going to be friends because of something somebody said or did, not because of who you are. So, I think that also helped me in the Junior High School years, which for me were the most difficult. At home and at school.

BP: This is a good place we could pick up later.