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## Jackson, Jack

Bronx African American History Project  
*Fordham University*

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Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Jack Jackson

Mark Naison (MN): [Welcome to the] 118<sup>th</sup> interview of the Bronx African American History Project. We are at Fordham University. It's June 22<sup>nd</sup> 2005 and we are here with Jack Jackson who is a senior attorney at Proskauer and Rose and who was a student at Fordham University in the middle 1970s and that point in time was living in the Bronx. We are going to focus on your Bronx experience and Fordham experience. When did your family first move to the Bronx?

Jack Johnson (JJ): August 1966.

MN: How did they get to the Bronx? Where were they living before that time?

JJ: We were living in Harlem on 127<sup>th</sup> Street off of Madison Avenue and we had clearly both outgrown our apartments. And you will recall back then that some of the – action in the civil rights movement had begun to manifest itself, violently in spots and obviously 125<sup>th</sup> street was a major focal point. For both faith reasons and those reasons, we thought the Bronx became a more attractive environment.

MN: Right. Where in the Bronx did your family move to?

JJ: We moved to, I remember exactly, 440 East 156<sup>th</sup> Street, which is two blocks from Melrose Avenue and one block from Third Avenue, where they use to have to good old L train.

MN: Was this a private dwelling or a public housing?

JJ: An apartment house, so it sort of fits in there. Six story.

MN: Was it a walk up or did it have an elevator?

JJ: We always wished it had an elevator but it was a walk up. [JJ laughs]

MN: What school did you attend when you were there?

JJ: Initially, I attended what was then PS 3 and it morphed somehow into PS 29.

MN: And was your family originally from the South or the Caribbean?

JJ: Caribbean. My mother from Saint Kits and my father from St. Croix

MN: How many people were in the family?

JJ: I have a total of three brothers, including me, and three sisters. So that's six kids and my mother. My mother and father separated shortly after I was born.

MN: So this was your mother and six children who moved to 156<sup>th</sup> Street?

JJ: Yes.

MN: And did your mother work?

JJ: No she did not.

MN: What was your perceived difference between the Bronx and Harlem as an eight year old?  
What sort of things did you notice?

JJ: To be honest, as an eight year old, not much. There were other little kids. That's all that I needed to make me happy. I guess the biggest perception is having to meet new kids as opposed to being in your old neighborhood where we were entrenched.

MN: Were you always a good student? Was this something that always came easily to you?

JJ: I am not saying it came easily but I was always a good student. It was always expected and nothing less was, quite honestly, tolerated.

MN: Was this expectation placed on all of your siblings?

JJ: The answer is yes, to different degrees. I think you recognize early on that people have different abilities but everybody was expected to do well in school.

MN: What grade did you move into in the Bronx in elementary school?

JJ: I came into the third grade.

MN: Now were the schools in the Bronx tracked at that time? Did they test you and put you in a certain class?

JJ: No. You came in and it was pretty much just where you were and you went to class based on which class was open. I don't think that happened until –. I didn't run into them until my junior high school years.

MN: Right. Was the school you went to racially mixed?

JJ: No. At the time, it was probably predominately black. But there were actually more, if you can believe it, whites than Hispanics.

MN: In your school, there were more whites than Hispanics. And this was located on 156<sup>th</sup> street?

JJ: Yes.

MN: And were the whites mostly Italians?

JJ: From what I can remember, my friend Joey was. But at eight years old, you don't get into ethnic things. But it was very strange because certainly by the time we tracked out – or at least the time I got up to the sixth grade, the metamorphosis had already changed. As I mentioned, my buddy Joey was about the only white family left in the neighborhood.

MN: And was that true of your building? Was your building virtually all African American?

JJ: Predominately. It had a few senior citizens that were white. Again, it was strange, in that, when you look at the demographics now, but there was not, at the time we moved in, a significant Hispanic population, but certainly by the time we moved out that had changed.

MN: Was the neighborhood pretty safe when you were growing up or were there things you were aware of related to drugs or gangs or police activity that put your antenna up that told you that you had to watch out?

JJ: Initially, again, as I was first saying, drugs were something you were aware of from growing up in Harlem. I would say the drug situation when I first got up here was not, really not as noticeable as it was in Harlem but that was an unfortunate thing that caught up very quickly. Crime – you have to lock your doors and what have you. But, sort of the first real crime element that anyone had seen was the advent of gangs towards to the turn of the decade. 1970, 1971, 1972.

MN: What were some of the gangs that were around at the time that you became very aware of?

JJ: The Black Spades were the principle ones who were in. They were not really strong, I mean as individual members in the neighborhood, but not as strong as they were say in places like [the 170s]. I would consider their dominant strength in the 170s [unclear]. I can't remember but there was another one that was sort of the primary competitor, and then there were many different no-name games.

MN: Did you live near any public housing?

JJ: Sure. Yes.

MN: Which ones were you nearest to?

JJ: Melrose and Jackson Houses

MN: What were their reputations at that time? Were they considered dangerous places or not particularly?

JJ: There reputation [unclear]. That was where you aspired to live.

MN: Okay, so public housing was the goal?

JJ: Yeah. Oh, yeah (JJ laughs).

MN: So those were the better apartments, they were cleaner, they were better kept?

JJ: Definitely.

MN: And did you family achieve that goal?

JJ: No, we never did. I don't know why, but we never did.

MN: So how long did your family remain in that building? And what's the address again?

JJ: 440 East 156<sup>th</sup> Street.

MN: Is it still there?

JJ: No it's not. I forgot what is there, but it's not. During different times, I have taken my kids to see where I grew up and I remember going back there with a full expectation that the building was going to be there but it's not and neither is the place where we grew up in Harlem anymore. When we left, it had to be around 1972-73 and we were in one place for a very, very short time – the hospital on 173<sup>rd</sup> street and the Grand Concourse –

MN: Mount Hope?

JJ: Yes, that area.

MN: It's Bronx-Lebanon.

JJ: Bronx-Lebanon – we were there but it was a very short period—I forget. I think it was actually. It just wasn't a great move and I can't remember why but we went to what we thought again was a substantial upgrade. We moved into the upstairs of a private house on Teabaud Avenue off of 180<sup>th</sup>-181<sup>st</sup>, a couple blocks off of the Grand Concourse. Unfortunately, that did not – nice apartment but we had terrible trouble with the land lady. I mean just terrible trouble to the point where we needed to move. But again, when we did move, it was the perception that – the proverbial upgrade. We went to – I should remember this address – I used to like that apartment. It was right across, directly across the street from All Hallas [unclear] on 164<sup>th</sup> and Walton Avenue. 1005 Walton Avenue.

MN: Okay. Which is close to the Courthouse?

JJ: About three blocks from the Courthouse.

MN: So then, when you were going to Fordham that was where you were living?

JJ: No. When I started going to Fordham, yes. When I finished going to Fordham, we moved yet again to an apartment right off, one block off of University Avenue. I can't remember.

MN: Was it Morris Heights or closer to NYU [unclear]?

JJ: It was right down the street from Bronx Community College.

MN: And how long did you stay there?

JJ: We stayed there from – I say we moved halfway between my time here at Fordham. So 1977-78. When I graduated from Fordham, I moved myself. Actually, my first year, I commuted in Law school, so I was still there. Then, in 1980, I moved to Riverside Drive. But we stayed until 1990, when we were finally able to buy my mother a house on Saxon Avenue, in the Van Courtland section of the Bronx.

MN: So you went from 156<sup>th</sup> Street to Mount Hope to Tebaud to Walton Avenue to University Heights.

JJ: Yes.

MN: So it was from the South Bronx to the West Bronx and various venues in between.

JJ: Yes.

MN: Right. Did you have a pretty positive elementary school experience? Were there any teachers that made an impression on you?

JJ: I would say it was pretty positive. Like I said, I did well in school so I did well academically. Some of my teachers would say I was the class comedian. That didn't always go over well but I think I was always able, whatever behavioral issues I had, to overcome them by the fact that I did well.

MN: Where did you go to junior high school?

JJ: Junior high school was when I picked up. I started to go to Junior High School (JHS) 38. In fact, I don't even know if JHS 38 is still around. It was off of –deep in the south Bronx—not too far from Morris High School. I went there and it was strange because I can't fix on it because my brother, one of my brothers had went there but there was something – that I didn't like but I can't remember which teacher it was. But somebody said – and it was right – 'you could do better'. At the time, my father was living around 175<sup>th</sup> Street. Right down the street from him was JHS 116 Wade. He took me over there, they looked at my records and –I can't remember the actual sequence of events because they had to take the lead. My father – it just wasn't in his nature to of have inquired of a school person to change it. But they said, "He belongs in an SP class." And I think what was interesting is he didn't know what that meant and because he thought they were saying I – no offense – I needed help. And so he got, very indignant and raged. I said someone has to explain to him. Then when I heard the part about skipping eighth grade, I said, hey this place is for me. This is for me.

MN: And you were in the SP class so you did three years in two?

JJ: Right.

MN: What was that experience like? What was the school like? What were the kids like?

JJ: The school was different. There are a lot of differences because it's the primary change from elementary school to junior high where you start going around to all the different classrooms instead of being stationary in one classroom. I also had to actually work a little bit because [before] to be at the top of the class I use to just have to wake up in the morning and get out of bed. But this I actually had to work. I had to work a little bit so that was different. On the other



side, some of the other differences – the negatives – [were that] right in that area there were gangs. The gangs were pretty prevalent. And, like I said, that was a different experience.

MN: This is the late 1960s?

JJ: Early 1970s.

MN: How did you maneuver being a top student in an SP class in a gang ridden area?

JJ: It was a strange dynamic because the thing that you couldn't do is you couldn't act like a bookworm. And everybody used to – and this was a dumb thing on their part – they use to put it in the cafeteria, they would put it in the top place in the cafeteria so it was like target practice.

[MN and JJ laugh]. This was the first thing you needed to do and this was another different experience because my brothers had always either gone or preceded me out of school. I always would have some backing or protection but this time was I was on my own. The first thing you did was as soon as somebody started something, you let them know that this is not going to happen. It was not going to go over well. We should stop this. Then the difference was I did have a couple of – and I don't remember how they got up there –my friends from my old neighborhood on 156<sup>th</sup> street – who went up there who were a little bit rougher. And so, they went to hang, pal'in around. They didn't need any gangs and nobody bothered with them. But they were just pal'in around.

MN: Would you say you're fighting skills or social skills were more valuable to you in maneuvering this?

JJ: Both. As I said, in those little one off incidents, you had to make sure people understood that it wasn't a good idea or you weren't going to let them take your lunch money. But, it was much more important with the gang members. You had to let them know you weren't in one. You weren't saying they were right, weren't saying they were wrong. They weren't friends per say,

but I don't go there. Like I said, I can't remember what the alternative to the Black Spades were but the – and I don't even know how these two guys were in Junior High school. I mean these guys were both built like Mike Tyson. [MN laughs]. Both these guys were my friends, different gangs. I'd pal around, they'd pal around with the – doing their thing, [unclear]. My other buddy who was in the Black Spades and who eventually did fight Mike Tyson was Mitch Green.

MN: Mitch Green was huge. He was like 6 feet 5 inches tall, wasn't he?

JJ: He was 6 feet 5 inches tall in Junior High. But, anyway, I think Mitch had been in Junior High School for a number of years.

MN: Wasn't he the one who threatened Mike Tyson on 125<sup>th</sup> Street?

JJ: And Mike Tyson knocked him out! But Mitch – that was one of the ways he gained his skills and he was the leader of the Black Spades chapter up here. But, one of the kids – speaking of that – I forgot what James' last name was but he was buddies with Mitch. He introduced me to Mitch and Mitch was fine. [unclear]. Mitch in a sort of social study, if you will, he was fine. It was when he got around crowds and that thing he went in a different direction. But he was fine. Like I said, my first year was a little bit rough – but by the time I got to the ninth grade, it was fine.

MN: Did sports play a role in bonding? Did you play a lot of basketball at that time? Was that also an area where you could win some respect?

JJ: Yes. You played for the neighborhood team and people would see you. Like I said, the funny thing again with our particular SP class is that we had some guys who could actually play ball. And so we could hang. We did not win the title, but we certainly didn't get massacred any days and we played good. Matter of fact, the very best player – and he was the thing – a guy named Kelvin – I can't remember his last name but Kelvin had glasses like coke bottles and so he was the absolute last person that you would pick but he was a great player, a great player.

MN: Now one of the things it seems like these gangs were not shooting people.

JJ: Oh no, no.

MN: So you are not talking about life-threatening consequences to –

JJ: No, no. That would happen if you went a little too far. But, what would happen is you could get violent street fights, not with guns at that point but with baseball bats, sticks and those sorts of things you swing – or knives if you were doing the wrong thing. But, in the early part of the 1970's, people would think about – and the first thing you would think about is I want to hurt somebody. That would be your ultimate goal. A construct of being a design to kill somebody – that did not come until later.

MN: Right. Now, culturally, what was the music you were listening to in Junior High School?

JJ: In Junior High School, it was still Motown.

MN: Jackson Five?

JJ: Yes, Jackson Five.

MN: The Temptations?

JJ: Yes. The Jackson Five primarily because the Temptations at that time – I can't remember off the top of my head whether it was The Rolling Stones came out --

MN: That was 1973.

JJ: Okay. So they [Temptations] were on there, I don't want to say decline, but the hits were not rolling out as big. You had Earth, Wind and Fire, but the Jackson Five was a big. I remember back then everybody aspired to be Michael Jackson. If only we knew then – [MN laughs].

MN: What were the movies of those years in Junior High? Did you go to the movies or was that not a big thing?

JJ: No, it wasn't a big thing. It wasn't a big thing because of money.

MN: Right.

JJ: A lot of kids did, but we had to watch our dollars and cents and so it was not a big thing for us. I mean I saw most of movies on the Sunday night movies when things finally rolled around to television.

MN: Did you go to any afterschool centers or programs? If so, where were those programs located?

JJ: I went to the afterschool program at the Salvation Army on 159<sup>th</sup> street off of Melrose Avenue at PS 29 and JHS 38.

MN: They all had afterschool and night centers?

JJ: Not all. You would hang out at the Salvation Army one night, we'd go to PS 29 the other, and we could go to JHS 38 the other.

MN: A lot of supervised activities?

JJ: Oh yeah. I mean basketball was the only thing I was interested in but there were always things going on, I just didn't pay attention.

MN: Were there dances at parties?

JJ: Yes.

MN: And these were at people's houses or at the [community] centers?

JJ: Both. At that time, you had in the centers and in the [housing] projects, they had community rooms or building and you had parties there. You still had the advent, I guess in the 1970s, of basement parties too.

MN: Where did you end up going to high school?

JJ: Dewitt Clinton High School

MN: And what was [De Witt] Clinton like?

JJ: Again, it was a true different but a much easier fraternity. I mean it was all boys and a huge school. My older brother had gone there so I actually knew something about the school. At that time, a lot of my friends from junior high went there.

MN: Was the Junior High School mostly black and Latino or were there some white kids there?

JJ: There were some white kids. Particularly in our classes – the SP classes – that’s where most of the white kids were.

MN: What’s very interesting given what the Bronx is today is that it seems that your experience is more a black-white experience than a black-Latino experience.

JJ: Yes, I couldn’t say until I got to Clinton, that’s when. I mean there were white kids, but the school was just so big. The biggest group in the school was predominately black. The next biggest group was Hispanics and you had a small, small [group of white kids].

MN: Did you participate in any extracurricular activities at Clinton? Did you go out for any teams?

JJ: I went out for basketball, but I quickly realized that I needed to do something else because the guys were in a high school that’s 5,000 and just guys from the city quickly realized the true aspects of your skill level. When I look back in retrospect, I sometimes say did I give up too soon because some of the guys who went to Clinton – Nate Archibald, Ricky Stovers, Brooks Lee, Thomas Henderson – they all ended up playing in the NBA. It was not any shame not to – and certainly guys like Ricky and Nate were good, but guys like Brooks Lee, who eventually became Player of the Year in college and a first round draft pick. I’d say Brook’s was clearly not the best player on the team. I mean there was no way, shape or form he was the best player on the team. He was the one they decided to push because some of the others had, as we said, had “issues.” I think the best player at that time was a guy who nobody ever said anything about. A

guy that grew up in my old neighborhood named Alfred Newman. Could jump higher than any player that I have ever seen, and I am talking my entire years of life. Went to the University of Alabama but justice this proves that you cannot take the Ghetto out of the kid. Alfred did not like getting fouled. The very first game they played, he got fouled and the referee didn't make the call. Alfred proceeded to get a chair and go upside the head of the opposing player and such ended the career of one Alfred Newman. I always used to say Alfred was David Thompson before David Thompson. He just couldn't handle. Came back to the neighborhood and just drifted off into anonymity.

MN: During the early-mid 1970s, this is a period where sections of the Bronx are burning and buildings are being abandoned on mass. Were you aware that that was going on when you were in school, or were you in an area that was somewhat insulated from that?

JJ: No, because I used to go back to my 'core' friends, if you will, that were all from the neighborhood that I started out at in the Bronx at 155<sup>th</sup> Street and that became like a board up zone.

MN: What did it feel like to go back and see everything that you grew up with just vanish?

JJ: It was just like neighborhood change. You weren't always aware of it when someone would say, 'hey, let's go down to that place,' 'well, it ain't there no more.' 'what happened?' 'It burned down'.

MN: How did you end up going to Fordham?

JJ: To be quite honest, Fordham was, if you will, some design but a lot of accident and I will try to tell you what I mean by that. When I was in Clinton, they kept trying to get me to go to go to Andover for high school.

MN: Oh, for a better chance. They wanted to send you to prep school.

JJ: Yes, yes. And it's like – dumb me – it's 'and go away for high school, are you crazy?' I just turned it down. Every time they offered, I'd turn it down. The thing is they never actually contacted my mother. They would always ask me and I would always say no.

MN: Were there honors classes at Clinton? Was it very heavily tracked and were you in those?

JJ: There were not. Not until you got to 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade but there were teachers where you would go, and then you would eventually go onto the Regents high school program. Anybody who took those [classes], those were the special classes.

MN: So they tried to get you to go to Andover and those places and you said no, I want to stay in the Bronx.

JJ: Yes, I can remember it well because they switched it. They first said Andover, then Phillips Exeter because Exeter had a good basketball team and they knew I liked basketball. In the beginning, the guy said, if want to go, you just go, you don't pay anything. And I said, are you nuts. But, like I said, I didn't go and then college came around, I hope, I am not sure if it was much better than, but I had no concept of really different schools or which schools I could go to.

MN: Did anyone in your extended family go to college before you?

JJ: Yes. Before me, my older brother and my youngest sister both went to Bard.

MN: Okay. What were they telling you?

JJ: No, it wasn't that they had it. It was just that we weren't plugged into – just the concept of college. For college, anything would have done for us. When I say it was by accident, as crazy as it is to believe, I had not been on this campus until my – the last year – I had graduated and I had finished my high school coursework at Clinton at the half year and so I had graduated. That also hurt a little bit in the sense, because I had fallen out of the guidance and I thought I would have to do it on my own. The first time, that I was on Fordham's campus was the summer between

junior and senior year, and it was for the – I had a good friend who was in the Upward Bound program and he would come up here and this was like paradise. You walked off the street and you walked into this place where there were trees and all this stuff. This was like paradise! Just to show you, I heard of NYU and Columbia and my sister had gone to college and had just graduated. She told me to apply to these schools and I said, I'll do whatever you want, I don't care. Same day – the exact same day, I got three acceptances: Columbia, Fordham and NYU. I had no idea and get this – I said if this is the place, and that's where I live, I am going there. I had no construct – but anyway, that's how I got here.

MN: When you come in and you've seen the campus, and you are very excited about it, and start classes, what was that like?

JJ: It was different. It was again a step up in what you needed to do for the work but there was also the construct that there was a certain amount of freedom involved and that the teachers weren't on you, giving you homework. You were on your own to do it by yourself and that was a different concept. And then being around older people when I had started here, I had just turned seventeen, which of course I didn't want to fess up to anybody. Dealing with older people, people who quite honestly, people who, quite honestly where a lot did not come from a comparable environment. There wasn't anybody that I immediately gravitated to as being a person of comparable background.

MN: Did you see yourself as a Bronx working class –?

JJ: No. I knew exactly what I was. I was a poor black man from the Bronx. I knew exactly what I was. But what I saw was people who had come from working to middle class families and perhaps I tried to adopt some of my [unclear] from them.

MN: Right. That is also true of the African American students.



JJ: Most definitely.

MN: So you came from a poorer family than most of the black students did at Fordham?

JJ: Absolutely.

MN: Was this reflected your dress?

JJ: Well what was reflected in my dress was the fact that I sort of I didn't know. My dress was indicative of where I came from and I didn't know that maybe it didn't play a thing. It did have one good effect. It did stand out. It did have one good effect and some bad ones as well. It was definitely like I dressed with the other guys that I had come up with.

MN: And you entered Fordham in 1975?

JJ: Correct.

MN: I want to segue. This is about the time where DJ Kool Herk is starting to throw his parties up in your area. Were you aware of those?

JJ: Yes. A guy by the name of Pete DJ Jones – he used to play a lot in the Paterson Projects and on the weekends we use to go down there at night and watch him.

MN: We interviewed him for the project. He used to spin down at the Paterson Center.

JJ: Yeah! Outside.

MN: Outside – he used to do it outdoors?

JJ: Yeah! Big bass speakers, tables like this, a turn table and he would just go for it.

MN: Right. When you went, were people break dancing or more like people were there to listen?

JJ: Some. I wouldn't say break dancing and I wouldn't say listen either. They are dancing, but not break dancing.

MN: When you saw Pete DJ Jones, did you think of this as something new?

JJ: I didn't think of that as new. It wasn't until 1978 or 1979 that Rapper's Delight came that I thought of that style being new and different but I also saw passing craze.

MN: You just thought like this was something just floating through. When you had parties at Fordham, what kind of music would be played there?

JJ: Yeah. I tell you, still Motown, a lot of Earth Wind and Fire and disco. That would be pretty much it. As I said, what were the precursors of rap, not [really listened to]. As a said, we were toward the end and of my tenure here when we played something like Rapper's Delight; it was just sort of thrown in.

MN: When you had parties, was there a lot of Latin music at the parties?

JJ: No.

MN: This is interesting because people who grew up earlier and further South, the Latin music was very much part of their experience and not yours.

JJ: No.

MN: It was pretty much Soul music and R & B and Funk and Disco.

JJ: Yeah. By the time I got to the high school level, and you even saw this here at Fordham, what would happen, as small as it was, is that they would have their own parties and music. Parties where we started staying together, we would play one, *and I mean one*, Hispanic record. I mean if you get your one that was it. It wasn't coming around again.

MN: Was there any sort of culture shock at Fordham for you being in a predominately white institution?

JJ: Yeah! I knew that I had to sort of sit back. I actually had a little bit of an unfortunate incident when I first started at Fordham. Somebody invited me to go to a class with them in Keating Hall. The professor, who was a nice guy, an older gentlemen, but he was inviting the bait and talent.

And just think about that. We would go and have a good time and then go. I can't even remember what the subject matter was but I can't for the life of me. One of the white students went and told security. I guess and some of it had to do with the way I dressed.

MN: This is when you were in your red pants phase.

JJ: Yeah! It was a couple weeks into school. [unclear] The security guard came and I knew he thought I didn't go to the school. But I did [go to the school] so I thought that was going to be it. But, I actually had to go to the Dean. It was like – it kept on – I couldn't understand and then it just dawned on me that it was because they weren't used to seeing people like me. They didn't know how to react to me and then I said to myself, I have to adjust how I am or be cognoscente of the fact that I just can't do things the way I would.

MN: Did you dress differently by the time you graduated?

JJ: Yes, absolutely.

MN: Do you have any before and after pictures?

JJ: [JJ Laughs]. No I do not. My wife always asked those same questions. She hears about how I dressed.

MN: There are no pictures of you in that red outfit anywhere?

JJ: No. Mercifully, I think there is one friend who is now a judge, Mike Nelson, who claims he has pictures of me at that time and I told him if you ever do – [JJ Laughs]

MN: What organizations did you join at Fordham?

JJ: In a sense, the answer is none because we did not have at the time what I would call a black student group. Over that first year, I mean we needed a thing because we would get together in sort of a social setting, we sort of created one [an organization] and it was called The Society of African American Leadership. Initially, it was sort of just incorporating our fun. As we looked

around the campus a little bit, and seeing the things going on with the department—or at that time, the Institute—and other things that we were getting the short [end]. I shouldn't say short—we weren't getting any end and so we eventually metamorphed it [from] a merely social animal to a more active animal.

MN: Who were some of the people that helped found that organization?

JJ: Mike Matthews and Debra O'Canic(sp?), better known as 'I-Canic'. They were our first presidents of the organization. I followed them as president my last two years. The biggest thing for us was being able to build; we needed all of our numbers to be together. There were social groups, where you have athletes that would hang out together. The old dichotomy of students from Caribbean backgrounds, from people who were cities, or Southern backgrounds which was a lot more prevalent then than it is now.

MN: Did you think of yourself as Caribbean at that time?

JJ: I found myself in New York. [JJ Laughs]. I was from New York but because I was, or I am, it was easy to go speak to those [people] and say 'hey I know you guys got this, that but we are all in this'. And we had so much more in common that we did separately that it was an easy sell.

MN: Right. When you came to campus, was there is still that group running Unity House and talk a little bit about that.

JJ: There was this group of Rastafarians and I don't know exactly how they got it but there was basically what was supposed to have been a house built for black students. Somehow they had taken it over and began to run a school out of it. I do know how they got it, but to keep some affiliation, they would take one class in the urban studies program. Eventually, I can honestly believe that the administration was simply afraid of them.

MN: Yes. They didn't let any white people in the building. It was where now the security center, that building.

JJ: Yes.

MN: That was originally supposed to be a black student cultural center and it was taken over by this group who were mostly non-students.

JJ: I thought it was awful.

MN: And nobody could go in there.

JJ: Nobody could go in and so finally, I met the owner. I forgot his last name, but his first name was Surge. I guess I had gotten from you or from Claude some of the background when I said this was the thing. I said [to Surge], I see ya'll have this thing but we gotta share this thing. He said the right things but nothing was happening. Finally we – I got myself and some of the football players and we went over to have a little conversation with Surge just to tell him look, you may not understand what I said when I said share but share doesn't mean 100% for you and 0% for me. What it is is you all can have your thing here but we are going to use it on certain times and we are going to use it this next coming Saturday, we are going to have a party there. He [Surge] said fine, no problem. I'll never forget this; this is one of those things. Me and Ike, we went over to begin the set up. Surge is there to open up the place and we said fine, cool, no problem, how you doing, we have to get ready for the DJ, we just want to make sure everything is cool. We are starting to move tables and he said, just one thing. And [I said] what is just one thing. And for some odd reason it seemed so easy now, but it took me about two or three times to understand what he was saying. And, he kept saying this. He said, "You know, no people of European descent can't feel the vibes in here." And I am like moving stuff around and I'm saying – so he says it again. I look at Ike and Ike looks at me. I said wait, look, we are having a

party here, whoever wants to pay – I forgot whatever the price was – they are more than welcome. Because it dawned on me – I said are you trying to tell me that you are saying that no white people and he said yes. And I said, look, this is our party. Whatever you guys do during your time here is your time, but whatever we do here is our time. This is not your building. But, it was clear, it got to be a clear confrontation and so we are walking after this incident we saw Father McMahon walking on the campus. I said, Father McMahon—Father, we have a little problem. And, so Father McMahon got us, because we had not reservations, to move the party in a matter of hours to the Ramskeller and that's where we had it. But from that point on, we made it so that those guys [Surge and friends] had to go. That's what our mission in life became because they had to go. And so there is good news and bad news. The good news was that we helped to do the University's dirty work by getting them to shut the place down. The bad news was – the quid pro quo was supposed to be that now you turn it over to us and they didn't and they never did.

MN: They never did.

JJ: In a sense, I regret [doing it]. Other than the fact that I didn't like – I didn't like him personally, I didn't like some of the things that he was saying, I just didn't think what they were trying to do that this was the right place for it for a variety of reasons. I could look back on it and say I am okay with it but I did not like the result. I felt like we sort of got out maneuvered.

MN: Were you part of the group that formed the fraternity Alpha Kappa Xi?

JJ: Founding member.

MN: Talk a little about that and how that happened.

JJ: In 1978, Claude Mangum and I were talking about some of his experiences in school, and what would become a very positive experience on this campus would be for us to have a black

fraternity, something that we would never see in any way shape or form. He and Quentin Wilkes, who was another member, had offered to sponsor the chapter. I had no idea what it really was, so I said yeah, yeah, sure, why not and then a bunch of us said sure why not. The beginning of that second semester, because you had to qualify academically, I think 12 of us started out and ten of us finished.

MN: Was this your junior year?

JJ: Yes.

MN: What was the reaction of the administration?

JJ: The administration I don't think really sort of knew what they were getting into until it was too late. Since we had the sponsorship of Claude being the faculty advisor, I am sure they looked at it as a Kappa Alpha Tao or something else. I don't think they realized that this was a national black fraternity until it was too late.

MN: You were involved in Tao and Kappa Alpha Xi. Are there any other things you did on campus that you would see as memorable?

JJ: One thing that stood out on the upstairs of the Cafeteria (2<sup>nd</sup> Floor of Student Center), we had the Music Room. And for one year, I think it was my junior year, we weren't using it until everybody found out about it, and there was no legitimate reason why we couldn't [use it] and so we had our time. We had our Thursday [time]. A matter of fact I didn't know her, I don't even remember seeing her, but my wife tells me when she was on a break from Syracuse one time and she came down and she said "What kind of place is this where you have parties on Thursday afternoons? That was a fun thing. At some time, unfortunately, somebody stole the equipment and they shut the place down so that was unfortunate.

MN: There is no more music in the music room.

JJ: That's correct.

MN: Where there Kwanza celebrations on campus at that time? I am trying to remember.

JJ: In the department, there was a little something. My last year, we did a Kwanza celebration at one of the things.

MN: When you finally graduated from Fordham, did you finally feel very positive about your experience here or more ambivalent?

JJ: Ambivalent is a good word. I felt that college was too much of a struggle, and I do not mean academically. Academically, I did just fine. College was too much of a struggle in that we were always trying to get things that everybody else got with no problem and it was always a fight with the administration. The funny thing is that when I left, a person that I initially detested, we actually became best of friends Father Finely.

MN: The President.

JJ: Yeah. I remember the time he met my mother at one of the pre-graduation ceremonies and he said something to her which I realize that there was two ways to think of it. We're glad to of had your son here but we're really happy to see him go. It came in the context of me going to law school, I said you know, that could be [taken] two ways. Father Finely got me when he personally went to Joe Gallagher—Joe had this program going on, it was a scam, as it turns out—and told him to hire me [Jack]. And Joe did, and then it turned out to be a scam program. And I told Father Finely it was a scam and he was livid. It was one of these things that sounded great but Father said 'Jack, this is definitely up your ally.' Anyway, I look back on Fordham as I made some greats friends here. But, I hear from people I met in later years and their experiences as an undergraduate. It's not like life's a party, but they've really enjoyed the experience of going to school. I can't say with any candor that that's my same experience of going to Fordham.



MN: Now is that true of your friends, Ike and Moore?

JJ: Yes. There is a bit of a split. Take the football players. They will tell you that they enjoyed their experience but even that was soured because their last year they decided to instead of a going to a program to the next division up, they dropped back. All the work that they had done to upgrade the program on the athletic field got snatched. These guys had done a lot of work to make it a Division IA program and then the University decided they were going to put their eggs in the basketball basket and so they dropped it back. We have lifelong friendships out of it so you can't knock that. But, I also think one of the reasons we are all friends is that we had to struggle and fight so hard together it bonded us together.

MN: Patricia Wright is with us and Patricia was student leader at Fordham. Do you have any questions about this experience?

PW: What were some of the events that you organized when you were part of the Black Student's Organization?

JJ: Without being able to just point to anything in great detail, we did get a couple of black lecturers. I remember one time we got Julius Bond up here and that was another thing because we found out that there was a budget for groups to bring in speakers and of course when it came time for us to budget, they said oh, we lost the money. That was another fiasco, but doing things like that. At the time, setting up an organization that could respond or communicate to the administration and have the numbers behind us to make sure they had to listen to us.

PW: Were you also a support network for other black students on campus?

JJ: At that time, we were more of a commuter school. That was one of the toughest things because when you are a commuter school, people have other lives. It's hard to get them to put forth the effort for something they can leave easily at some point of the day so that was another

obstacle of the day to get people to look at this as hey, this can be your focal point here. You don't have to run away from the university here. But one of the reasons people would run away was they looked at it as not an environment that was very encouraging for them to stay around.

MN: If you are sort of thinking back at this time, do you sort of feel more powerfully identified with the Bronx or with Fordham?

PW: Good question.

JJ: [Pause] I said this often to a good friend of mine from Brooklyn. I am a Bronx boy through and through.

MN: And that did more to shape you?

JJ: Most definitely

MN: And you fall back on that?

JJ: Yes.

MN: One of the things I was thinking about was growing up as a smart kid in tough neighborhoods, what role did humor play in your persona?

JJ: Like I told you earlier, I was the class comic. You can get a lot out of people if you can bring a smile to their face and so I was always was a person of good cheer.

MN: Did you ever try doing stand-up comedy as a student?

JJ: I didn't. I had better comedy where you have to know my personality and then I'm more subtle and therefore in an audience that doesn't know you, where they have to have something of your personality, it doesn't work well.

MN: When you went to Columbia Law School, your first year you were living in the family apartment near University Avenue and then you moved out of the Bronx and never returned, except for your wedding.

JJ: That's correct.

MN: Did your wife grow up in the Bronx?

JJ: She grew up on 169<sup>th</sup> Street and then she moved right back here to Southern Boulevard.

MN: Okay. Where did the two of you meet?

JJ: Columbia Business School.

MN: Okay. So did you go to both Business School and Law School?

JJ: Correct.

MN: And she was in business school and law school?

JJ: No just business school.

MN: Was that a joint program that you entered?

JJ: Yes.

MN: How many years was that?

JJ: Four years.

MN: Right. And did you go directly into Proskauer and Rose?

JJ: No, I started out at Weil, Gotshal and Manges. I left there after eight and half years and then went to Proskauer and Rose in 1992.

MN: In looking back at all of this, is there anything that we didn't cover that you would like to reflect on?

JJ: I think we've certainly been thorough. I think the one thing would mentioned that I have seen in sort of, like I said, I have sort of gone full cycle and I saw it just this past weekend. A matter of fact Ike and his wife, me and my wife, Lawrence and his wife, we went to the Apollo this weekend and we went out to dinner on 125<sup>th</sup> street and we all remarked how the strange thing was that 125<sup>th</sup> street has become the melting pot of the world. Reflecting from my time in the

Bronx and Ike probably remembers it more from Queens how that changed so much actually in large pockets has been a desirable place to live in or alternatives to Manhattan for space or other reasons. I just thought it was nice it has become, things have become, things are becoming full circle in the boroughs.

MN: Have you driven around the old neighborhoods and seen how everything has been rebuilt?

JJ: Yes. As I said, I constantly do. I live in Scarsdale now but I do let my kids have some perspective so I always drive around and show them. When I show them some things now, they look pretty good though they don't have the same effect on them that they used to.

MN: Right. Okay, Patricia, do you have any more questions.

PW: No.

MN: Okay well thank you very much. You know, one of the things is that Jack and his friends are very largely responsible for the fact that we do have not only a Department of African and African American Studies, but this is the only Department of African and African American Studies at any private University in New York City. Columbia doesn't have one. NYU doesn't have one and so what you all helped to accomplish in the 1970s has grown and deepened and this project could not have happened without this Department

JJ: That's definitely right.

MN: Thank you very much.

JJ: Thank you.

[End]