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Johnson, Robert

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Interviewers: Mark Naison, Brian Purnell, Natasha
Lightfoot, Claude Magnum, Maxine Gordon, and
Peter Derek

Interviewee: Robert Johnson

June 14, 2005

Mark Naison (MN): This is the 116th interview of the Bronx African American History Project. It's June 14, 2005 at Fordham University and we're interviewing Bronx District Attorney Robert Johnson. With us today are Mark Naison, Brian Purnell, Natasha Lightfoot, Claude Magnum, Maxine Gordon, and Peter Derek. To begin with Mr. Johnson, when did you first move to the Bronx?

Robert Johnson (RJ): Well, I actually was born here but that was only a month stay. My parents were living at Jackson Avenue at the time and we moved to Manhattan when I was a month old and came back in 1964 when I was just turning 16.

MN: Where were you living in Manhattan?

RJ: In the Amsterdam Houses, which is a housing authority development. It's located now across the street from Lincoln Center, at the time there were tenements there.

Lincoln Center was just under construction when we moved out.

Natasha Lightfoot (NL): What year was this?

RJ: I lived there from - - I was born in '48, February of '48 here in the Bronx.

MN: What sort of work did your parents do?

RJ: My father initially was a clerk in the United States Post Office and then moved over to the court system as a Court Officer, Court Clerk. He retired in '86 as the Assistant

Deputy Executive Officer for the New York City courts, which was the number three non-judicial post in New York City Criminal Court. My mother, at the time when we were growing up, the only work she did initially was school crossing guard. She was home with us - - so she was a school crossing guard but later she became a clerk in the Empire Mutual Insurance company which is no longer on Broadway, now Tower Records is there at about 67th St or so, which was also in a neighborhood and convenient. She then went on to government jobs. She had a supervisory post in the State Department of Motor Vehicles and she retired, I forget what year she retired - - but she retired from the New York State Insurance fund as a senior [Inaudible].

MN: Where did your father originally come from?

RJ: Both of my parents originally came from New York, New York, Harlem. They were both born in New York and lived in New York all of their lives.

MN: Before that were they from the South or the Caribbean?

RJ: You mean their ancestors?

MN: Yes.

RJ: A little of each. My mother's parents were both from Barbados, my father's parents - - his father was from Williamsport, Pennsylvania which is a unique location I guess, and my paternal grandmother was from Hampton, Virginia.

MN: Now when you were growing up, did you ever visit relatives in other parts of the country or were most of the relatives were in New York City?

RJ: Mostly New York City. I remember at least one, probably a few visits to a farm in Williamsport. I guess it was my grandfather's sister still lived on a farm in Williamsport.

MN: In Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

RJ: Yes.

MN: I don't know much about farming, but what did they grow?

RJ: I don't know what they grew, I just remember taking flight when they cut off the heads of the chickens and the chickens were flying around without their heads.

[Laughter]

MN: It sounds like your parents both were very ambitious. Was there a lot of political discussion in your house? Did that set the stage for what you ultimately did? Was this a household where politics was in the air?

RJ: I honestly can't say that it was. I guess as my brother and I got older it probably took on more of a life. But my parents were both very smart people, but sort of reserved and quiet. My father to this day is constantly reading and doing crossword puzzles, but you got to kind of pull the information out of him I guess.

MN: What religion were you brought up in? Did you go to a particular church growing up?

RJ: Yes. Initially my father was Catholic and my mother was Episcopalian. I was originally baptized in an Episcopalian church, but as we approached school age we went to the local Catholic school and mother converted to Catholicism and my brother and I were raised in the Catholic Church. We attended St. Paul the Apostle church which is just across the street from Fordham at Lincoln Center, which was not there when we were growing up either. And now, both of my parents have attended Episcopal churches, I'm not so big on attending churches since the 60's.

MN: When you were living in the Amsterdam houses was it a racially mixed environment or was it pretty homogenous?

RJ: Extremely mixed. I probably didn't take note of it at the time, but some of my best friends were Latinos and Italian Americans, you know there were African Americans. There was only one child who I clearly knew his mother was Caribbean American. She had the lilt when she called him out the window every day. Other than that, I don't remember a lot of Caribbean. I mean, there probably were people with Caribbean roots but as a child you don't take that much note of ethnicity.

MN: Did you attend Catholic school in elementary school or public school?

RJ: Both. I started at PS 141, which was in the west 50's, but I only was there through kindergarten and first grade and then transferred to St. Paul the Apostle, where I stayed until 8th grade, graduated. High school, I started at Power Memorial, which was a Catholic school in that neighborhood, right on the corner of 61st St and Amsterdam Avenue, and started in I guess September '61. Managed to take three years to complete the first two years and in the third year we had moved and I had some issues with one of the brothers and while we were in the Bronx I transferred to Monroe, in the Bronx.

Claude Mangum (CM): I was asked to ask you about your role as a manager at Power Memorial.

RJ: OK. At Power Memorial I tried to get involved in athletics. Basketball is my love, I'm not good at it but I tell my wife that when my jump shot develops I'm going to the NBA still. [Laughter] So I tried out for the basketball team and this was - - you have to put it in perspective - - this was the number one high school basketball team in the country.

MN: Oh I come from Brooklyn; I'm a basketball guy so I know Power Memorial.

[Laughter]

RJ: And I'm like a hacker at basketball, I decided to try out for the basketball team. And I befriended a guy named Norwood Tidewin who turned out to be one of the starting forwards on the team and there weren't that many African Americans at Power, so Tide had probably been recruited there, he knew he was going to make the team, so during try outs he kept feeding me the ball and I kept scoring lay ups, but nobody was fooled.

[Laughter] The track coach pulled me off the court and asked me to join the track team, which I did, but I did also sit as student manager with the number one basketball team in the country so that I was there for all the games, kept score, gave out towels, picked up their warm ups, and traveled with them. I traveled with the team, Kareem Abdul Jabaar was then Lua Sindore, was the star of the team, and I was there the night that they suffered their only loss at the Dematha Catholic High School down in Washington DC, which I have to state for the record: but the refs were hometown refs no question about it.

[Laughter] There was at least one guy standing at Kareem's feet and one pulling at his shorts at all times, but they won the game by a couple of points. It was quite an experience just being there. In the gym, things happened like the Globe Trotters wondered in one afternoon or some of the Knicks would go in and out. When Michigan was going to play Princeton at the Garden, Casey Russell and Michigan practiced there that day. I remember Oscar Robinson and the Cincinnati Royals were coming in. Oscar Robinson called me over and asked me to hold his watch while he practiced, which as it turned out was an NCAAP watch - - that was one of the most amazing events of my entire life, just wearing Oscar's watch while they practiced. [Laughter]

MN: What was the school like academically?

RJ: It was one of the top schools - - Catholic schools have a co-op examine to get in. It wasn't as high as Regis for example, but I think next to Regis it was one of the best Catholic high schools in the city. A lot of very bright students, which was interesting for me since in my elementary school I was surely in the top ten, and when I got to Power, it was a real eye opener to see that everybody was of this same academic level.

MN: This is in the early 60's?

RJ: I started in Power in '61 and stayed there until about '64 or '65.

MN: Was the civil rights movement at all having an impact in the classrooms at Power? Was this something that the teacher's talked about or encouraged people to talk about?

RJ: I don't remember a lot of talk about the Civil Rights Movement in class at all. I think some of us spoke about it or were aware of it. I know Lewis Mal Kareem was very interested - - I mean history is his forte. I'm sure what was going on was impacting on him and then also on his decisions about where he was going to go to school - - at one point there was some tension between him and the coach. I don't know if it was racially motivated, but people were aware of the racial issues and what was going on at the time.

MN: Was this something that your parents talked about?

RJ: I really don't recall. It may have been, but I really don't recall it. I guess - - I'm trying to think of when I really became aware of it. I know that when I went into the Navy, which was much later - - not much later, it was 1968 by that time - - I was certainly aware of it and what was going in the different schools and around the city and in the south. In fact, the year I went into the navy is when Dr. King was killed, shortly after that.

MN: When your family moved to the Bronx were they very excited about the apartment they got? Was this something that - -

RJ: It was big. It was a brand new building, two bedroom apartment with a terrace, and it was definitely a step up from the housing authority development which was a low-income development - - I think actually it was - - this was another quirk of history also because originally, they had signed on to rent an apartment in the Dikemen Houses in upper Manhattan and that building was under construction and it was being constructed on a big rock; they had to blast out rock to construct that building. And the construction fell behind and as the construction fell behind I think my parents felt that I was hanging out too much with the wrong people - -

MN: In your neighborhood?

RJ: In Amsterdam. And they were concerned about that - -

MN: What did they mean by the wrong people?

RJ: Well some of my friends had criminal histories, substance abusers, you know people - - I remember seeing marijuana for the first time in the 60's. It was a shock when I saw someone who was high on marijuana and he was a friend of mine. So my father became concerned as things went on there in Amsterdam Houses and plans changed and we ended up moving to Lafayette Morrison in the Bronx instead.

MN: That's interesting your mentioning in the early 60's as things changing because when I did interviews with some people in the Patterson Houses, they also mention that in the 50's this was a great place to grow up where everyone looked out for each other, but in the early 60's there were signs that things were falling apart, particularly drugs. Was there any sign of heroin use in the Amsterdam Houses?

RJ: Yes. You would see the addicts, you know we would call them junkies at the time - - coming through and selling goods that fell off a truck or whatever. And you saw people nodding off - - the beginnings of it, the very beginnings. I actually was familiar with some of the Bronx housing developments at the time also. I had cousins in Melrose and in Highbridge and my godparents were in Patterson, so I saw a little bit of what was going on. In fact, one of the things that I think got my fathers attention was that a group of my friends went up to the Bronx, met some girls from Patterson and or Melrose and some of the guys in Patterson took exception to that and my friend came back with his nose altered, took a beating and really had a severe injury to his nose, so those kind of things were starting to happen, it was a little bit more negative element in some of the developments as the 60's came along.

MN: You mentioned being into sports and also liking music, what sort of music did you grow up with; did you like all the doo-wop and rock n' roll and rhythm and blues? What were some of the artists?

RJ: Definitely - - I still remember the first 78 that I bought; I'm trying to figure out what it was. It might have been - - I mean I liked Elvis, but then as time went on I got into Stevie Wonder and Martha the Vendellas, the Marvelets, the Shirelles were really my favorite. So all of the Motown sound, the Phil Spector sound - - just whatever came. And even as we approached high school a lot more into jazz. I remember my parents listening to Cannonball Adory and I remember Kareem was very into Charles Minguez.

MN: Did you ever go to live music?

RJ: I think more after I moved to the Bronx. I got my father to take me to the Apollo once, we saw I think Ruby and the Romantics at the Apollo - - but I did a lot of concerts

probably more after I moved to the Bronx - - Randall's Island, the Copa Cabana, the Apollo - - I'm probably missing a lot of things. Central Park had live jazz concerts at Roman Rink - - I can't even think of all the things.

MN: When you moved from Power Memorial to Monroe what was that like, other than the fact that there were girls? What were some of the differences?

RJ: Well that was one of the interesting differences and I think that was a benefit - - not the normal benefits that you would think [Laughter] but I think it made the boys act more mature being around girls. I think boys that don't have girls around can be a little bit more idiotic and really caught up a lot more. I was actually surprised to see that I felt that the behavior was more mature at Monroe than at Power. That and I guess the building was bigger, trying to find my way around. I remember the first few days between looking for classrooms and looking at the girls I was totally not getting to where I had to get as quickly as I should. But it was - - and Monroe was doing good things at the time. It may not have been on the same academic level, but there certainly were a lot of good students there and I felt that the students who weren't committed and involved in the education just didn't come in the building and it wasn't like a large percentage of them, but they just stayed outside. So what was going on in the building was still good - -

MN: Was Monroe a racially mixed school at that time?

RJ: Yes. Definitely so; a lot of Jewish - - I think the neighborhood was still pretty heavily Jewish in the early 60's - - Italian's also.

NL: I was wondering about how your parents went about finding the apartment at Lafayette and Morrison, were they able to - - was that a co-op building or a rental building?

RJ: It was and still is a metro [Inaudible] rental and actually what happen was my grandparents lived at 905 Jackson Avenue when I was born at some point, I don't remember the exact year, probably in the 50's - - moved up to Fitolie Avenue and all of my life, first 16-18 years at least we spent practically every Saturday at my grandparents house.

MN: Was this a private house?

RJ: Both private houses, Jackson and Fitolie. Fitolie between 174th and 172nd I think to 1300 block. So both the house on Jackson Avenue was a private house and the house on Fitolie and my grandparents had six daughters and a son and all of them but one had children so there were about 15 or 16 of us cousins.

MN: This is your paternal grandparents?

RJ: Maternal grandparents. And we spent almost every Saturday at their house. So literally, we would come up Bruckner Blvd and when Lafayette was being constructed - - I remember this clearly, I don't remember a lot of things, but I remember this - - there was a sign on Bruckner Blvd that said "If you lived here you'd be home now," where Lafayette was being constructed. [Laughter] So we saw that sign almost every Saturday and so I guess at some point they decided to take a look.

NL: They wanted to be home now. [Laughter]

RJ: And it was closer to my grandparents.

CM: I had a question, you were talking about school culture; were there street gangs either in the Amsterdam Houses - - you mentioned the young men at Melrose and Patterson - - were they territorial because of their housing complex or were they part of organized street gangs?

RJ: I think the gangs that I saw were probably for the most part - - I saw more of that when I was in Amsterdam than here in the Bronx - - the gangs that I saw were probably for the most part kind of “wanna-be’s”. We have this gang activity that’s taking place in the Bronx now and some of it is real organized, dangerous gangs and a lot of it is youngsters who just want to show that they belong to something and wearing colors and walking the walk. I think I saw more of that, I mean there were some gangs in Amsterdam Houses, my friends formed a group called the Saxton Lords which - - as soon as the parents too exception to the name sounding like such a terrible gang, the name was changed to the Conservative Jets. [Laughter] But it was just wanna-be’s.

NL: I had a question about the summers you spent at your grandparent’s house because you were saying that your maternal grandparents were from Barbados. Did they play certain types of music from the island; cook certain types of food, that kind of thing? Did you kind of feel a cultural shift when you went to your grandparents?

RJ: Well I wouldn’t call it a cultural shift. I think from my perspective, I think most people tend to identify more with their maternal grandparents, there’s something about our society that people drift to the mother’s mother and that’s where we were almost every Saturday so I didn’t see it as a cultural shift, I saw it as a part of my life. If you ask me how I identify as a Bajin as opposed to my paternal grandparents.

MN: What were some of the foods they had there that were particularly Bajin foods?

RJ: They cooked cacao with what they called work, which was porkchops or cacao and codfish.

MN: What is cacao?

RJ: Cacao is a cornmeal and oakra base which I have cooked on at least one occasion, probably more than one occasion - - I'm probably the only grandchild who - - only one of my aunts, my grandmother and one of my aunts used to cook these dishes and I stood with my grandmother and wrote down a number of recipes of hers but they were hard to write down because there was no measuring spoons or measuring cups. I wrote down "6 circles of salt" as she spun the salt around the pot I remember [Laughter]. But she did cacao, they did blood pudding, or black pudding, which I just read about a restaurant - - the Village Voice this week they have a hundred inexpensive restaurants in New York and one of them is a Bajin restaurant in Brooklyn and they expressed amazement at blood pudding stuffed with yams, which is the way we did it, yams and all kinds of spices. We did coconut bread, sweet potato [Inaudible] those are the ones that I remember. I actually made coconut bread within the last six months - - for some reason they always just struck me, I don't know I ate pigs feet at the same time or not, but it just struck me to make coconut bread.

NL: And were your grandparents involved in a Bajin community that was in the Bronx or some sort of Caribbean community that you knew of?

RJ: Not an organization - - I think their friends and family - - I just came from last week they had a memorial service for my grandmothers sister-in-law, the wife of - - her first husband was my granduncle - - and she was an amazing figure that you might actually want to look at at some point, she just died in Pittsburgh, Mada Springer-Camp and she was involved in the labor movement - -she's Panamanian by the way and she married my granduncle who was Bajin and she got involved in Africa and doing all kinds of interesting things.

NL: Just another question about your grandparents, do you know what their migration story was? How they ended up in the United States at all?

RJ: No, I'm starting to get some information, in fact, Professor Mangum's brother has gotten very much into his families history and he's looked up some things for me. I just found out about my great grandmother had - - I don't know if it was a second husband or paramour, but there was a man living in the house that I had never heard mention of and he found the entry for when my grandmother and her brother came to live with them and that was the names of the people who were in the house. Maybe it was a census actually, it wasn't in the [Inaudible] and who was in the household so I was able to ask my mother, I never heard of this person and my mom said oh yes, we lived with him, and she talked about that.

MN: Did they listen to distinctive Caribbean music, was that part of that experience?

RJ: Some yes. I remember Cliff or Harry Belefonte is the one that stands out, other than that I don't really recall.

MN: Now when you were at Monroe High School, were there any teachers who made a big impression on you?

RJ: I was only at Monroe for a year and a half - - I can't remember them. I had an accounting teacher who maybe perhaps made too good of an impression because I became an accounting major when I got to college and I found out by the time I got to third semester of college that I wasn't cut out to be an accountant.

MN: Did you participate in any teams or student activities?

RJ: At Monroe? No.

CM: Did Monroe have a rich athletic tradition? I know Eddie Cranepool - -

RJ: I think Cranepool had just left the year before I got there. The baseball team continues to be one of the top baseball teams.

MN: The Chiffons went there - - did people talk about that when you were there?

RJ: I remember hearing about the Chiffons being from Bronx River Houses but I don't know when and where I first heard it, it's just something that seems has always been in my consciousness.

MN: When you applied to City College, did you ever think of going to school out of town?

RJ: I applied to a couple of colleges. City University, I think I applied to Catholic University in DC and probably St. John's. But I really didn't have a clue as to what I was doing.

MN: Were there high school guidance counselors that people spoke to or were you pretty much on your own?

RJ: I believe I was pretty much on my own in picking colleges - - I just kind of randomly found out about colleges.

MN: Were you the oldest in your family?

RJ: Just my brother and I, my brother is two years younger.

MN: So you were the first one to do this. Did you go to City College right away after Monroe?

RJ: Right from Monroe I went to actually Baruc which was part of City College at the time, it was Baruc School of Business and Public Administration as an accounting major and it was down on 23rd St. I spent about a year and a half there and as I said, my grades started to suffer because I really wasn't as good at cost and intermediate accounting as I

was at basic. So I felt that I had to withdraw. I was on the City College track team during that time.

MN: What distance did you run?

RJ: Basically 60 meters - - well actually it was 60 yards.

MN: You were a sprinter.

RJ: Yes. I had to be talked into a quarter mile to get into the mile relay - - only the mile relay went on the trips, that was the incentive to make me torture myself and run a quarter mile.

CM: Certainly as you said you had initial plans of becoming an accountant and things had changed, can you recall any civil rights issues or justice issues during the high school years that perhaps now in hindsight would give you some direction perspective?

RJ: My high school years and even pre-high school, I visited the courts with my father and I just became interested - - I became fascinated in the little things about criminal justice, just a domestic dispute or two drunks getting involved in a fight or an assault - - in other words, fascinated me and wondering how people were led into these situations. I recall probably in my high school years, visiting my father in Manhattan Supreme Court where H. Rap Brown was on trial, not for a so-called revolutionary crime, but for a robbery. And I remember thinking of H. Rap Brown as this black liberation icon and seeing him sitting there on trial for robbery and seeing how human he was, that was an interesting experience for me.

MN: Now when you were in Baruc, was the Vietnam War going on or it hadn't really escalated yet?

RJ: No, it was going on. In fact, when I knew that I had to withdraw, I knew that I was most likely going to be drafted into the military, so I made that decision at the time to enlist in the Navy rather than take my chances being a ground troop in the Army, so I enlisted in the Navy.

MN: Now, did you have any friends who went to anti-war demonstrations or were very political, or that wasn't part of your crowd?

RJ: Not part of my crowd that I could say, I don't know what year this was - - you could probably tell me. I did personally go to an Attica demonstration, a demonstration at the Attica.

MN: That was in 1970/'71.

RJ: OK. But I don't remember my friends participating in any anti-war demonstrations.

NL: At the time when you graduated high school, was college an option for many African Americans [Inaudible]

RJ: It was an option. I don't know - - I'm trying to think of others who graduated at the time. One of my best friends who is now my Deputy Administrator and Chief of the Office, left Monroe the same year, went to Bronx Community and then City College. Another one of his friends from Bronx Community was from the Monroe Projects, my cousins who graduated around the same time, one from Monroe and one in Queens, did not go to college. There was a guy named Teddy Hage I remember, he used to run basketball tournaments in I think Soundview Projects I think - - graduated with us, he became a superintendent of schools down in Florida somewhere I've heard, I haven't seen him in a long time. So there were - - it was a mix.

NL: Right, a mix between people who went straight to work and then people who went to college. Did a lot of people enlist in the armed forces right away too?

RJ: My cousins went to the Air Force both of them, my friend Charlie [Inaudible] went into the Army, my other friend Tony Means who lived in Lafayette, he went to college. He went to Lincoln and Missouri.

MN: What made you choose the Navy, other than the fact that it might get you out of being a front line soldier in the Vietnam?

RJ: That was basically it. I tried to do a little logic exercise, I figured that on ships you had hot meals and on clean sheets and that if I had to go, I tried to pick - - [Laughter]

MN: What was the Navy experience like; did that change you in any significant way?

RJ: Yes. A few things happened in the Navy - -

Brian Purnell (BP): I'm curious, what was your job?

RJ: I was an enlisted person, I went through boot camp and they gave us aptitude tests to see what we could do. In fact, you were supposed to get seven choices of what you wanted to do and they told me that if I wanted to do intelligence that I could have extra choices and they said they would train me - - I thought it would be interesting to be trained as a Russian Interpreter even though I could never possibly do that [Laughter] so I put down these three intelligence ratings and I think I got my ninth choice which was Quarter Master, which is navigation. So they sent me off to school and I did boot camp in Great Lakes in Illinois. They sent me off to a school in Rhode Island where the Quarter Master School was. I actually went - - another one of my best friends there who was in the Signal Mans school but lived in the same barracks - - he's still my friend today - - and I was trained in navigation, I did well at it, and we got orders out of there and I was

assigned to an admiral staff, the commander of Carrier Division Two, I went off of Virginia. They were actually in Vietnam when I got assigned. I wanted to go over because they were an air craft carrier I thought they would be safe, I felt that I would make combat pay, I felt that I would see an interesting part of the world, but they were on their way back so they made me wait for them to come back. I was on the staff from late '68 until I got out in 1970. Went to the Mediterranean with the Admiral Staff in '69 but during this time in the Navy was really - - I think that was a time when I really awoke to the whole black liberation and African American rights and was very concerned about the treatment of blacks in the Navy. I was the only black on the Admiral Staff. I would go on different ships because we didn't have much staff and the culture was different on different ships. On some ships, the African American sailors it seemed like they were afraid to even look at each other; if two or three of them met that they were being accused of something. My friend that I mentioned was actually in the middle of a race riot on a Mic Boat, the one that takes the sailors back to shore, it was taking them back to shore - - so there was a bit of racial tension. I began to wear my hair in an afro hair cut which was not so well understood in the United States Navy, I wore a red, black, and green pin on my work jacket, and we began to have some differences. So it was a combination of that, I think that was one of the real awakening experiences. It wasn't my professor, it was one of my teammates on the track teams, one of his professors, told me that if you go into the navy, you're going to be working for people who aren't as smart as you are, you're going to have to do what they tell you to do. And some of them really didn't make a whole lot of sense, and I found that out. Not all of them - - some of them. And it was some difficulty but I think it allowed me to mature and at the same time, my brother who

was then at Fordham at Lincoln Center sent me a copy of a Bosborrow reprint called [Inaudible] which I didn't even realize until a few years ago, I kept looking for it and couldn't find it again, its actually a segment of Plato's Republic and I read that and it really drew me in, this whole dialogue about justice and what is right and what is fair, and I just was fascinated by it. That's what actually had me come back - - when I came back out of the Navy, I had the choice of either going to Baruc or City because they had split, they were two separate colleges now and because I was at Baruc they gave me the choice of going to either so I went to City Uptown as a philosophy major.

CM: We've talked around but not to, you've been to public schools, private schools, selective schools, have come to associate with the Catholic and Episcopalian churches, you talked about a private rental complex, low-income housing - - did you have any sense or appear to have any sense of class within the African American community? Was there a separation between those who lived in the public housing and those who lived in the private housing? Was there certain things assumed about those who went to parochial schools as opposed to public schools?

RJ: I certainly didn't have that sense of - - having experienced both and lived both I don't think you could feel that way. Yes, I had a sense that people wanted the economic and more comfortable place to live, our whole point behind this movement to Lafayette was not only to get me out of harms way, but to get in a more comfortable, clean surrounding which I think everybody wants. But by no means do I think that separated me from the people who lived in housing developments; I still maintained contact with a number of friends in Amsterdam Houses. I made friends in Bronx River, Classy Point, Bronxdale, Monroe, and Soundview. I don't think there was that kind of separation. And

I think maybe at that time the lines were not as clear as they are not. I think people in the housing authority projects were not living that differently than the people in the

[Inaudible] now I think things are a little bit more different.

MN: Now you came out of the Navy after two years, so you're at City College in 1970, which has got to be a hot bed of political activism.

RJ: Well, I think I missed it, I just missed it. It was over and done. So I wasn't there for that.

MN: What was City College like in the early 70's for you?

RJ: It was college. I was settling down trying to work, I met my first wife there in the new African American history program, it was brand new - - she was a student in the same class as I was. It was just college life. There was the track team, I was a commuter student - -

MN: You were commuting and you were on the track team.

RJ: Right. In the beginning I actually tried to work where my mother worked at Empire Mutual Insurance Company, but that, school, and track became too much and I ended up giving up the job and staying with the track team.

MN: Were you on the track team your entire career at City College?

RJ: Yes.

MN: Then you must have been a pretty good runner.

RJ: Well - - relatively good. My best year actually was the year I left for the Navy - - was when I was really starting to peak, and I never got back to the form, but I ran at least one race that I think may have put me on the edge of getting towards the national level,

but I never did anything again like that. I tied the City College record for 60 yards at the time.

MN: What was that?

RJ: A 6.5.

MN: That's a good time.

RJ: My best time in the 100 was 10.1 although I think it was mistimed because I was catching a guy who ran like a 9.7/9.8.

MN: Now when did you start thinking you were going to end up going to law school? Was that something that happened at City or did you have that interest when you were in the Navy?

RJ: No, I didn't have the interest when I was in the Navy. I was interested actually in law, all my life. I was interested in being a court officer like my father perhaps. When I graduated from Monroe, I took the test for the police department and passed the test for the police department so when I got accepted to college I had to choose between the police department and college and chose college. But law school I really didn't think about until the last semester at City when I was about to get a degree in philosophy - - maybe the next to last semester - - and what do you do with a degree in philosophy? Do you go on and get graduate degrees and teach? What are you going to do with it? So that's when I decided let me take the law boards and see what happens.

MN: Now NYU Law School is one of the best law schools in the country. Did you go directly there from City College?

RJ: I did but that was actually part of I think a part of Affirmative Action that was at NYU. I did not apply to NYU, I knew I was accepted to Fordham, I can't remember

where else I applied; I put down a deposit at Fordham. And NYU and Michigan asked me to submit applications based on my LSAT scores. NYU was not quite at the level it is now, but it was pretty highly ranked school. I decided to go there as opposed to Fordham simply because of the reason that I was interested in New York City Government and NYU offered more courses in the New York City Government. As it turned out, I only took one because I was afraid not to be prepared for the Bar Exam, so I tried to take a little bit of everything that was going to be on the bar exam.

MN: Were you involved in any clubs or student activities when you were at City College?

RJ: At City College, only the track team.

MN: What about local political clubs, did you get involved in your local political clubs at Soundview?

RJ: I really didn't get involved in community until after I graduated from law school. I was a marginal student - - well, not in elementary school, but after elementary school I was either at times a bad student or a marginal student - - well except - - my last two years at City when I came out of the Navy I did make the Deans List, those were my best years as a student. So I had to work and be a student, and I tried to concentrate on that. So really wasn't involved in the law school community, there were groups like BLSA, the Black Law Students Association. I just would get on the subway and go back home and read. To me, it was an overwhelming amount of reading and I wasn't used to the language and the whole mind set of a lawyer, so it took some doing.

CM: Coming out of the Navy, did you benefit from the GI Bill of Rights? Did you see others who actually turned to college and went to college for the first time?

RJ: Great benefit. I was under the GI Bill for the last two years of college and for 2 or 2 ½ years in the three years of law school until the GI Bill ran out so that because I went to City College and tuition was I think \$4 - 3,000 a semester at its peak when I was there, I ended up coming out of school with no debt - - I think I brought \$5,000 for law school. My wife - - we got married after the first semester, she was working, and somehow we managed to do it without encouraging debt. The last semester when the GI Bill ran out I had \$.50 a day and for lunch I would either eat French fries or yogurt and that was the only two choices I had. [Laughter]

MN: Is your wife from the Bronx?

RJ: My ex or my current? Actually they're both from the Bronx - and both of Caribbean descent. My ex wife's parents were Jamaican born, my current wife - - her mother's still alive, her father's not - - but both of them were from Granada. They both lived in the Bronx all of their lives.

NL: Where in the Bronx was your first wife from?

RJ: She lived on Grant Avenue in the 160's; she went to Taft High School.

MN: Oh OK. With Luther Vandross. [Laughter]

RJ: That's the first time I've heard that that he went there. And my current wife lived between Barnes and Bronxwood; the 200's she went to Mount St. Ursula's, she went to Catholic high school.

MN: When did you start positioning yourself for a life in public service? Is that something that you always wanted or is that something that came to you by accident or by circumstance?

RJ: Both I guess. I wanted it in the sense that I felt - - like I said I was interested in city government - - I felt that for instance, at a young age, college and before that, being mayor of city of New York was one of the most fascinating jobs in the world, most challenging job, and that perhaps I would like to do that one day. But I also used to talk to my friends about the fact that I would not run for office unless I had four party endorsement. [Laughter] So I kind of was conflicted about that.

MN: So you were actually involved - -

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

RJ: - - society, I decided I wanted to be a judge and you have to be admitted ten years to be a judge, so I wanted to be five years in legal aid and perhaps five years as an assistant district attorney in order to show a balance when I came before the committees to be appointed to judge. After three years of legal aid I was invited to apply for a position as Assistant District Attorney and did so, because I figured they're asking me now, if I want this job I should take it now.

MN: So your first job as a lawyer was with the Legal Aid Society?

RJ: Correct.

MN: In which office?

RJ: In Bronx Criminal Defense - - who I actually interned with my two summers in law school.

MN: OK this is in the 70's?

RJ: Early 70's yes.

MN: This is a very rough time in the Bronx. What was it like being in Legal Aid Criminal Defense in the Bronx in the 70's?

RJ: I loved it. You had a sense of purpose; you're doing something for a client. You're confronted with somebody who's being charged for a crime and even if they were guilty of it, you have to make sure that the penalty wasn't too severe. If they were not guilty of it, or if they said they were not guilty of it, you certainly didn't know, you wanted to give them the best possible defense and I loved every second of it. To me, the criminal court is so alive and vibrant and I've had the opportunity to work - - one of my favorite places in the world is arraignments because its such a crucial point of the criminal justice system; whether or not somebody's going to be free throughout the proceeding is a major, major decision and I've gotten the opportunity to do that as a defense lawyer at the Criminal Arraignment Court which is 215 East 71st St now, I've stood in that court room as a defense lawyer, as an Assistant DA and sat on that bench as a judge.

CM: With this prospective and I guess experience, did you have any African American role models, attorney's, judges, [Inaudible]?

RJ: When I first came out I would see African American lawyers, I don't know if at that point I really considered any of them role models. There was a guy named Phil Lee who was one of the most senior guys at Legal Aid who is now deceased - - I'm not sure if he was the only African American - - there were a couple who came with me who were my contemporaries and we bonded and worked with each other. Al Morris was practicing here in the Bronx, Kenny Bruce who died in the last few years was practicing - - so I would see these private practitioners come in out of the court room and I would look up to them but I don't think I aspired to - -

MN: Was there a lot of esprit decorum from the Legal Aid lawyers?

RJ: No question.

MN: A lot of people felt like wow, this is great stuff.

RJ: Yes definitely.

MN: And did you guys go out to eat and drink afterwards? Was there a social life among the lawyers?

RJ: Too much social life. [Laughter] When our office moved from down by the old courts on 3rd Avenue, and 215 E. 71st St opened, the legal aid moved to a office on 168th and Grand Concourse. Right now there's a Golden Crust - - its not open, but the Barrister Lounge was there at the time and Legal Aids Office was right upstairs above the Barrister Lounge, so we spent a few hours in the Barrister eating and drinking.

MN: OK so you're on the front lines of the Criminal Court, are you very aware of what was going on in the neighborhoods with some of the fires and the disinvestment and the abandonment - - Did you get to see that or it was pretty much, when your in the courts you're just dealing with that - -

RJ: No, you'd get to see it some. I mean part of your job as a lawyer is to make contact with witnesses and to know your crime scene, so we would go out into the community. Sometimes it was easier to talk to somebody, some people you couldn't find and you had to go out looking for them. So and I lived here.

NL: I had some questions about that, two things: number one; was it really difficult for you to get people from the neighborhood to talk to you, did people have distrust at this time for the legal system or were they kind of willing to participate?

RJ: I think most people - - I don't know if it's always been true, but in my experience it's probably always been true - - people don't want to - - it's just a frightening process whether you're a victim or a witness, or a defender. I don't think people want to be

involved in anything if they don't have to, so you'd have to use persuasion to get to the people.

NL: Right. Did you find that you being black made things a little bit easier for you?

RJ: Perhaps. Perhaps.

NL: Where in the Bronx were you living at the time?

RJ: I was living on Grant Avenue actually. My in-laws owned the building with six apartments in it so we - -

MN: Grant between where and where?

RJ: Between 166th and McClout.

MN: My girlfriend had a sister who lived on Grant and 167th so I - - Did you have any contacts with radical political groups when you were a defense attorney?

RJ: Only one instance. One of my colleagues in Legal Aid was relatively close to Bill Conselor and they had worked, I forget the name of the project - - I forget the name of the center, and one Saturday she called me and told me that there were some Muslims just over at Highbridge that felt they were under siege from the police department and they needed some legal advice so I drove over, which was one of the more interesting things, you know if you don't know what you're going into, here there's people under police siege and you're going over to advise them. When I got there, things were relatively calm and we sat down and had a conversation and tried to advise them about - -

MN: Now, did you ever join a political club when you were doing this? Did you participate in or join any organizations?

RJ: When I became an Assistant DA I joined a political club for a short while and then I found out that Assistant DA's weren't really supposed to be part of political clubs so that

kind of stymied it for a while. I had joined the Chippewa Democratic Club for a short while.

MN: Where was that located?

RJ: That was located in the Westchester Square Area. By that time we had moved to Eastchester Rd, just across from Jacobe Hospital.

MN: This is you and - -

RJ: My first wife.

CM: Were a large number of the cases drug related at this time, was there an increase in drug related charges?

RJ: When I was in the DA's office?

CM: Yes.

RJ: I think sometime after I got to the DA's office it really became noticeable. I went to the DA's office in 1978 and by 1984, maybe '85 I was Chief of the Narcotics Group.

MN: Oh wow so that's exactly when crack hit.

RJ: It just hit about '83/'84, so it was an enormous ride. I was talking about something else - -

MN: The organizations.

RJ: Oh. The other thing that happened was Mr. Malloa, Mario Malloa who was the DA at the time, asked me to represent him in a meeting with two of the Bronx Urban League, so as it turned out I then continually went to [Inaudible] and at some point while I was there they asked me to join. He was on the board; they asked me to join the board also in addition to him.

MN: This is when you were in the DA's office?

RJ: I was Assistant District Attorney. And then in '84 when I was Chief of Narcotics, there was a demand for people from the DA's office to come out and speak in various neighborhoods about what was going on with crack epidemic, so it put me in touch with different people. I remember I met one that stands out is Assembly Member Gloria Davis, at rally's and different community events talking to people talking to people about what the DA's office was doing to calm down this epidemic. That was really my connection to community people.

Peter Derek (PD): Why did you switch from being a Defense Attorney to the court to the District Attorney's office?

RJ: A couple of reasons. One was the balance that I wanted so I could apply for a Criminal Court Judgeship, another was that I really didn't get as much trial experiences as I had hoped as a Defense Attorney. I tried only I think six jury trials and only three of them were felonies, and I wanted to get more jury trials. Now go back to [Inaudible] but in my first two years of felony work, my first year in the DA's office I wasn't doing felony trials but the next two years I was, I did about 25 felony trials and then - -

MN: In two years?

RJ: In two years. I did 16 one year and then in the two years after that, I got another 25 homicide trials.

MN: Jesus.

RJ: So the experience was really exactly what I wanted and the other point is the discretion that you have in the District Attorney's office - - I mean it was literally like being a kid in a candy store. I was a Legal Aid Attorney on Friday, an Assistant District Attorney on Monday morning and as a Legal Aid you're advocating either to an Assistant

DA or a judge or a jury for your client, as an Assistant DA very often you're the person who's making that discretionary call about who gets charged and what they get charged with. It was unbelievable the emphasis they placed on getting it right and being fair.

MN: Did you have as an Assistant DA more opportunity to do things in the Bronx than you would have had in other boroughs or this was the same thing in any Assistant DA of Criminal Defense in New York City?

RJ: I can't compare it, it's hard to say. I feel that my experience was very unique. There were a number of us in the office who all felt we were Mario Malloa's special person - - I think I was smart enough to know I wasn't his very special person, but certainly he treated me very well and once I got through to him - - I mean because I was in Legal Aid at some point I think I was considered junior to some people who I wasn't junior to because I had three years of experience, but once I got that message through to him - - and he did listen to me. There came a time when I had been there for about five or six years that he was appointing supervisors and he was appointing people who were in the DA's office longer than I was but not practicing law longer than I was or perhaps I had more trial experience. So I sat down and I spoke to him about a position that he had open and he said you know, I had somebody else in mind for that position - - and I just kept talking and talking and talking and he ultimately gave me the position and he gave me the opportunity - - he trusted me enough to let me go out in the community and represent him. And I think that's due to him, that he felt comfortable enough with me, I don't know if that would have happened with some other District Attorney, I can't say.

CM: Has that shaped your own philosophy in employing your staff and how you treat them and responsibility - -

RJ: I try to be aware of everybody's place in seniority, everybody's contributions, when we do promotions and raises we go line by line, person by person. This person may think they're entitled, this person may think they're entitled, which one gets it? We spend a lot of time doing that.

NL: I had a question about the entire period when you were working as Chief of Narcotics, what exactly was the game plan that the district attorney's office had for educating the community about what was going on with increase in drug use in the neighborhood?

RJ: Well at that time it was probably more just of a law enforcement concern. It was that "Are you getting these people off my corner?" It was really a community concern. It still to a great extent is the concern of every member in this county but it was mostly that it wasn't as much the rehabilitation. In fact, when I became Chief of Narcotics, the narcotics was taking different forms. The long term investigations were sometimes in the bureau, sometimes in a separate bureau, and at that time we split it and the long term investigations were done by the Investigations Division and I was doing most of the street crime.

CM: If its not politically sensitive or incorrect, how did the Rocefeller Laws impact the Bronx?

RJ: I think ultimately, the Rocefeller Laws were probably very beneficial. The negative side of it is there. There's some people who are charged with eight felonies who don't have a long history, that got sentences that are too long. But with the street level sellers, and I say ultimately because maybe this wasn't true originally, but once we began doing more and more diversion, more and more rehabilitation, the Rocefeller Laws were the

mechanism by which we got people to acknowledge their problem and go into treatment, so I really think that it was beneficial in the long run. And I think that one of the things that people overlook when they talk about judicial discretion is that most of our judges don't even live in the Bronx and most of our judges don't have the same community contact that the DA's office has. I have representatives on all 12 Precinct Councils to hear what all the community concerns are. I go to the councils myself very often. I go to homeowners and tax payers associations so I know they want both. I know they want the guy off the street but they don't want to send him away for the rest of his life, so I think the Rodefeller Laws enable us to do that balance. Yes, does it depend on who the DA is? Yes. But that's an office that you go for every four years as opposed to Supreme Court Judge which is every 14 years, Criminal Court Judge which is a 10 year appointment, Quarter Clans which is every 9 years. So, it's a more visible office, everything I say and do is scrutinized, so I think actually it's a fair way to do it, to accomplish it if you trust your District Attorney. And I believe our community trusts me.

MN: How did crack differ from other drugs in terms of its impact on the neighborhoods?

In the 70's there was a definite heroin issue - how was this different, or was it different?

RJ: I think because the impurities were burned off and it was more concentrated and it went further and more and more people and it was also more addictive than powdered cocaine, so more and more people were just - - and I don't know what the relative highs are, but I think it had probably a different kind of high and it was very inviting to a whole host of people. And I think it was at a time also where you know, the housing stopped, the job opportunities were not what they needed to be, so it was just like everything [inaudible] happening at once and it was a mistake.

PD: Why do you think [Inaudible] but there - -

RJ: I think there's so many factors and part of it may be the Rockefeller Drug Laws and a lot of people went to jail, a lot of people got rehabilitation, people more and more have started paying attention to prevention; the DA's office, my office, is very involved working with students, trying to help them find a better way. The economy got good, police strategies got better, just a lot of factors came together.

PD: Some people say it's the nature of the drug itself, so many people got burned out and people's peers saw what happened to them and they just - -

RJ: Perhaps. But I mean, I think young people are making a lot of better decisions about drugs, about school, I mean it just has to be. If crime's going down it's not all because the police are placed on the right corner, it's because young people decided not to do these things.

MN: When you were in the District Attorney's Office your long term goal was to become a judge?

RJ: Right.

MN: So whose idea was it for you to run for an elected office? How did that come about?

RJ: OK. That came about - - I guess I'll go from 1986. 1986 I made my ten years as an Admitted Attorney so I was eligible to become a judge. Actually, the end of '85 just before I made the ten years, there was an add in the law journal about Mercot seeking qualified judges, I think he wanted to be the first to fly the bench, so I submitted my application actually just before I became admitted ten years. I became admitted ten years in January of '86 and I went through the interview process, all the screening committees

and Cotcher appointed me a judge in August of '86. In '87 Judge Ivan Warner, who I'm glad I came to him now because I shouldn't do this interview without talking about him, who was one of the icons of blacks in law in the Bronx. He was the first African American to run for borough president, he may have been the first State Senator; certainly he was the first to preside over State Senator assessing over State Senate. He was at the time, the longest sitting Supreme Court Justice in the Bronx. After he got elected to what he knew would be his last term, he got more involved with the young African American lawyers. He started the Black Bar Association of Bronx County along with Judge Albert Hingston and I think there was another judge involved who escapes my mind right now. So he really got people to come together and I should as an aside say that out of our association a number of people became judges, the first woman and the first African American sheriff of the city of New York came out of that.

MN: And it was called the Black - -

RJ: Black Bar Association of Bronx County, it's still in existence.

MN: And what year was it founded?

RJ: I would say in the early 80's.

MN: Where did you meet?

RJ: Judge - - well he was presiding over cases of Bronx Supreme Court so he had seen more of us come through the court room - -

MN: And where would you have the formal meetings, do you remember?

RJ: Probably either in a court room or judges chambers.

MN: What neighborhood did Ivan Warner come out of?

RJ: He came out of the Jackson Democratic Club Boston Rd, he went to Trinity Episcopal Church which was on the [Crosstalk] Morris High School, and in fact, at one point we started talking about the first African American - - I'm going to come back to where you had me going in a second - - but we started talking about the first African American Assistant DA's and recently I had a personnel look it up, and it looked like there was a succession of one after another, almost like there was one slot for the Jackson Democratic Club, that Walter Gladwin, who later became a judge who became an Assistant District Attorney, and when he left Newton Poyer came almost immediately there after and when he left James Austin, who now runs McCaw's Bronxwood Funeral Home, became an Assistant District Attorney. So it looked like there was probably one Jackson Democrat - - that's just a [Inaudible] on my part. But going back to '87 after the Black Bar Association had begun and there were a few of us who had become judges, Alexander Hunter and myself - -

LD: You were a criminal court judge?

RJ: Criminal Court Judge. I served as an Active Supreme - - Judge Warner came to me and said do you want to become a Supreme Court Judge? And he told me the people I needed to speak to. And I went and I spoke to Dick Idron and George Freedman who was then the Democratic County Leader. I actually went around and spoke to all the Democratic District Leaders in the county, met a lot of people, and George Freedman was going to support me and Judge Burton Hat, for supreme court judgeship in the Judicial Convention of September '87 - -

MN: And this was elected office of Supreme Court Judge?

RJ: Elected office but it comes out of a Judicial Convention held right after the primary in September of '87. And the night before the convention, because I had the democratic leaders backing, people were saying the heck that I wouldn't get the nomination. But as I could see things evolving, there was some ethnic politics going on, and the way I looked at it, it couldn't be done without a Latino in the equation, so that George would have had to choose one of us and he's a loyal guy, he stuck with the two of us. Bert Hector was his mentor - - he stuck with the two of us and at the convention was - - the only convention perhaps where the Democratic County Leader was not even able to speak. The convention was taken over by the other fraction of democrats who had sufficient delegates and they put in nomination George Frank Torres and Ted Martin, Judge Ted Martin - - and my name was placed in nomination and I told them if I went before the convention that I would withdraw my name, so they let me go before the convention and I gave this long speech about everything I'd done and how I would continue to do it but for the sake of unity I would withdraw my name and I made a lot of friends that night. But in October of '87 Mario Malloa died so then it was up for - - the governor had to appoint somebody - - he got re-elected in November, he died the week before the election and was re-elected in November and the governor had to appoint somebody to fill out so another election could be held the following November and I read a quote from Governor Clomo who said that if he could find a qualified African American he thought it might be time to appoint an African American District Attorney, so I submitted my name, went through the interview process, and came in second from what I hear, he decided to appoint the Chief Assistant, Paul Gentile and it became a whole controversy. There were three other candidates beside Paul, there may have been four at one point, and it was a

very controversial race beginning to evolve from the time Paul was appointed in December of '87 to the time petitions went out in June of '88 and I had - - while I was doing that I was trying to get support to see if people were in support of me. Some people asked me to run, a judge would have had to resign, I didn't think it was enough to go against the county organization was just part of the demographic factor. Ironically, some of the people who were in support of me were the same people who didn't support me in the convention in September and I decided not to run. But then when it became controversial I got a call on June 22nd, I was just looking through some things last night, and the democratic leader told me that he and the Bronx Conservative, Republican, and Liberal Leaders would like to support me.

MN: Who was the Bronx Democratic Leader?

RJ: George Freedman was the democratic leader, Bill Newmark was the conservative leader, Guy Valell was the republican leader, and Ray Harding was a liberal leader.

George told me that all four of them wanted to support me. So I resigned my position as judge that afternoon and the next day I stood on the steps of the courthouse and announced my candidacy.

MN: Wow.

[Crosstalk] [Laughter]

RJ: But I still had to run in the Democratic Primary, there still was a primary.

MN: And was that a close election in the Democratic Primary?

RJ: I think I won by 11 points over - - it was a four way race I won by 11 points over the nearest - -

MN: So this support stuff built through all your trips around the borough?

RJ: And in the judicial convention withdrawing my name.

MN: And this was all without being an actual member of a political club?

RJ: Right.

MN: So you didn't have to climb up through being a District Leader - -

RJ: No.

MN: This was all from within your particular position.

RD: How did you meet - - George Freedman was an Assembly Member - -

RJ: Right but he was already County Leader when I first met him.

RD: OK so you had met him somewhere in this process.

RJ: I actually met him when the possibility of my becoming a Supreme Court Judge became discussed and I went to sit down and pitch myself to him.

MN: When you're running a campaign for District Attorney, this is 1988?

RJ: Yes.

MN: What are the issues you campaigned on?

RJ: I campaigned on being fair but actually dealing with crime. I campaigned on this whole issue of the drug problem, I campaigned on gun violence which I have always felt was a particular problem that the courts didn't deal with seriously enough and I think you can't wait until people use guns, you really have to deal with it. I'm trying to think what was the other - - the gun - - our position on gun cases and on selling drugs near schools were the two things that changed at the moment I became DA, those were issues I campaigned on and our policy got tougher on those things as I became DA.

MN: So if you were going to think about how you were perceived by the grassroots level, what do you think you got across to the people if you were talking at a church and

talking a PTA or talking at a Precinct Counsel - - what were they getting from you that you thought made them have confidence in you?

RJ: I think experience and that experience was balanced, it wasn't only in the District Attorney's Office, and I think that's important to a lot of people, that I had been a judge, I had been a defense lawyer, and I had spent eight years in the District Attorney's Office - - and I had been a [Inaudible]. So think that experience is what I tried to sell. I tried to send the same message to every community I went. One of my proudest moments was the night that I went down to DC 37 and told them my qualifications, very influential labor union, and the same night left there and went to the Bronx Conservative Party and told them my qualifications and didn't lie to anybody, just told them this is who I am, this is what I'm going to do, and was able to get support about those groups.

NL: Did you feel that over the course of your career you remained kind of widely supported by all political parties?

RJ: Yes. I had one election where I lost the republican support in - - in 1995 I lost the conservative partner support, and over the whole issue of the death penalty and my stating that I did not intend to use the death penalty when Governor Petaki signed the law, so that was the year that I was running for re-election I think I said that. I said I think in April when the bill was signed and I had to stand election in November, and I lost the conservative party line that year and in 1996 when the confrontation between Petaki and I occurred on the particular case of the death of Walter Sigelesky where he demanded that I use the death penalty so that in 1999 when I had to run I lost the republican vote, but interestingly enough I got the conservative line back that year because during that time I continued to go to conservative party, they asked me to come

and speak and I would go, even though I didn't have their endorsement in '95, and explain the things that we've done to help make the Bronx safer and deal with criminals in the Bronx, and they understood that there was a lot that we were doing that they wanted us to do. So ultimately, in 2003 - - actually that was - - in 2003 I got the vote.

CM: [Inaudible] your position on the death penalty and Governor Petaki and perhaps the options that other District Attorney's had throughout New York State, the origin and evolution of this.

RJ: OK. The death penalty some years ago, I forget the exact date, probably the 60's, had been declared unconstitutional and Governor Petaki ran in 1994 on the platform of reinstating the death penalty and was able to do that in early 1995. The bill that the legislature passed even according to one of the sponsors indicated that there was no obligation on any District Attorney to ever use it. The bill clearly said the discretion was the District Attorney's discretion. The bill for the first time in the history of New York State offered the alternative life without the possibility of parole, so when the governor signed the bill, I felt there was the wiser course of action rather to wait until somebody was dead and there was a controversial case, to state my position and just say don't ever count on me using this bill, I believe its unnecessary for a host of reasons, and I think we can do what the law enforcement needs to do without the use of death penalty and there might be a slight chance but don't expect that I would ever use the death penalty.

MN: Is this a position that you held for a long time?

RJ: It was a position that I really hadn't spoken about. I felt that the debate was the legislatures province, I know at least one of my colleagues had spoken out against joining debates, and I felt they're the elected representatives, let them do what they feel is best

and I'll see what they ultimately do, and then I'll work within that law, that what they did was give me that discretion. All 62 of us in our individual counties gave us our discretion so I indicated that the way I was going to proceed.

PD: After you were elected in 1988 you said you wanted to focus on gun violence and selling drugs near schools, what do you do to do that? Do you get all the assistant DA's to focus on those two activities?

RJ: Yes. You know what since that time a law has passed that gives more severe penalties for selling drugs near schools, but I understood that we weren't giving the most severe penalty for drug sales anyway, we were often reducing the charges, so - - and once there's an indictment, unless the indictment's insufficient, it can't be reduced without the consent of the District Attorney, so I made our policy not to reduce unless there were extenuating circumstances if the sale was near school.

PD: And what about the gun violence?

RJ: And the gun violence, we just made better records. The judges - - the law says that you get at least a year for an illegal loaded gun unless there's evidence for unduly harsh mitigating circumstances. I felt the judges were just making it up and the exception became the rule so I just wanted our assistants to advocate harder, and challenge them, which we did. We took some appeals, we won one, I think we lost about four appeals. The [Inaudible] division kept saying that it's within judicial discretion to do that, my [Inaudible] chief said that the only way we're going to get their attention is if the DA himself goes to argue an appeal. I went down to the [Inaudible] division and argued one of the appeals myself and we lost that one also. I got their attention, they said I made a good argument, but they all still felt that it was really judicial discretion to give whatever

they want. So now I've got a little bit better handle on it because under Mayor Bloomberg they instituted gun policy, so that all the cases go to one judge who has a better understanding a more balanced perspective, not to say that he doesn't accept and doesn't give less than a year, but he gives a year more often than what was happening before.

NL: Are there any other instances of your being - - of your policy, the kind of position you take on some of the issues being at odds with that of the larger city wide or state wide legal structure?

RJ: I think the death penalty. I think I differ with most of our elected officials here in the Bronx on Rocefeller. I think that they didn't sucker out and distinguish the different issues in Rocefeller, they tried to lump everything together and I felt that it was important to say place trust the District Attorney rather than take the chance where a lot of judges are going to - - and people don't even know. You [Inaudible] by now, I mean if any one of you could name three I think that would be a lot.

MN: How closely when you're a District Attorney do you coordinate with the police and how is that relationship evolved?

RJ: We do a number of things with the police. We now do some joint training, I lecture the new recruits when they come in, we send people down to the academy - - One of the things they told me when I lectured and I spoke to police there that their old cause was that you come to speak to us but we don't get to speak to Assistant DA, so I instituted the PBA getting the opportunity to speak to all of our new assistant DA's, we offer our assistants a ride-along program where they see what the police are doing, we've brought in all the precinct directors for breakfast - - Last week my community affairs director

brought in all the community affairs officers for our luncheon. There are a host of things that we do - - Oh, my executive, two of my executive assistants spend a great deal of their day just communicating back and forth with the precinct directors in the borough command about issues whether it be what can we do to smooth the process for the right to arrest to arraignment, what can we do to get our officers here when they're needed for trial, what can we do to make sure we're aware of the cases - - for instance if somebody is a problem in the neighborhood that we know about it before a decision is made so that we can communicate that information to the judges. We have people as I indicated - - we have representatives at all 12 precinct counsels so we hear what they're hearing from the community, so they're pretty good [Inaudible]

NL: How did the Diago shooting affect your position as District Attorney and also the relationship between the District Attorney's office and the police force?

RJ: I think there was perhaps some unhappiness initially, but my experience is that people, they get beyond the issue. I've never felt any discomfort or tension talking to police officers; I always feel that they're respected. When I first announced that this is not a police issue but a community issue, I first announced my position on the death penalty I was scheduled to speak either the next night or two nights later in one of the more conservative neighborhoods in the county, and I went and shared my views - -

NL: What neighborhood was that?

[Crosstalk] [Laughter]

RJ: Everybody was very respectful actually, it was a good exchange. They heard my view, I heard what people had to say, and it was totally respectful, no belligerence, no

animosity. I mean I always felt that I've been treated by respect by people who either agree with me or disagree with me.

MN: How has the pool of people applying for Assistant District Attorney Positions changed from the late 80's until now? Is there any difference in the number or background of the people applying for your office?

RJ: I think the economy changes the number from year to year. If there are jobs available in the private sector, we get less applications. I think the major change has been in the law school population and in the applicant pool for us, the number of women - - I think that's been an amazing change. We're still struggling to get lawyers of color. We've hovered at around 33% lawyers of color for quite some time now. Women were at about probably 56%, but it's very, very difficult in particular, for us to get African American males - - and Latino males - - but African American males more so.

CM: I wanted to ask; certainly in your accomplishments during your tenure as DA have been outstanding, yet I'm sure that a number of situations that have really impacted you. Certainly you've had to deal with instances of child abuse, severe abuse, child abuse cases - - Happy Land stands out in my mind as a real tragedy; can you tell us about some of these cases that you've had to deal with and their impact on you and the Bronx?

RJ: Well, I'll start with Happy Land. It was I think 1990, the largest mass murder in the history of this country at the time, it was prior to Oklahoma City and prior to the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center. 87 people died in a fire set by Julio Gonzalez, and it was - -

MN: Was he trying to kill all those people?

RJ: He was - - he had a dispute with his girlfriend who was the coat-check person who survived the fire, she was in the coat-check right near the [Inaudible] where he set the fire. She got out, 87 people died, and it was one of the few crime scenes that I've actually have gone to since I've been District Dttorney. When I was assistant I did my time on homicide duty and having to respond to crime scenes - now for the most part, the assistants handle it and confer with me if need be. But I did go and walk through 87 bodies and it was - - it's hard to describe, it was kind of surreal in that it was not like gun violence and knife violence, which is mostly what I have seen. But it was people, who clearly seemed alive, almost like manikins just piled up on the floor, and just stopped breathing because of the toxicity from what was on the walls; there wasn't any trauma to the bodies. So that was a devastating case and we tried that case the following year and convicted Gonzalez.

CM: Did any changes come about in terms of fire protection or codes?

RJ: I'm not sure. It certainly brought it to attention and I think there's been more stepped up inspections, immediately after or soon after I'm sure there were stepped up inspections of those types of clubs operating the tax payer's bills. In terms of child abuse, I have a great deal of respect for the people in our office, our Child Abuse and Crimes Bureau, and our Crime Victims Advocates; to hear the stories that they have to hear day in and day out, some very, very horrible things. To see some of the pictures - - we tried a very controversial case of a young lady named Tabitha Waldwin who's son starved to death and people's reaction to that was that she was being punished because she opted to breast feed rather than bottle feed her child, and people never really got into that case enough to know what that was all about. But it was clear to us, particularly

seeing the photos of this young boy, that she knew over time that he was starving and did not seek help. The pictures were admitted as evidence into the trial, the emergency room doctors testified, the medical examiner - - the emergency room doctor testified that that's the way the boy looked when he was brought to the emergency room. The medical examiner was the one who had actually worked with the actual babies to take care of the starvation of [inaudible] in Africa and she said that she had never seen anything like this in a child and it was a tough thing to do but we felt right about it. The pictures I think just told the whole story of the event that took place. But they deal with cases - - shaken babies, all kinds of horrible injuries, burn injuries, drowning - -

PD: You get thousands of criminal cases every year but in the end only 200 go to jury and you have to flea bargain. How do you make a decision as to what cases are not going to be flea bargained down, what's that process?

RJ: Well we evaluate cases at different stages. We pay a great deal of screening and in the first instance of the arrest, we require more complainants to come to our complaint room or to be interviewed from the precinct over a video hook-up than a lot of other counties because to me, we want to get it right in the beginning, we don't want to charge people if it's not appropriate. So we screen then, we screen again if they're held in custody we have to indict within 6 days, so we'll screen again at that time because its not only to make sure that we really want to put it into the grand jury, after the grand jury verdict, we'll screen again to come to a consensus - - you know, different people around the table about what we think the appropriate sentence should be. And then it's up to the defense to convince us that there's a reason to change that. And we try to tell them, we give you an offer before you get indicted that don't expect less after you've been

indicted, number one, and that unless you have showed us a deficiency in the case or the cooperation of your client or something really unusual and merit towards your client, we're going to stick to what we set, and then its up to them to make a decision. Our dismissal rate - -

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

RJ: - - and only about 6% of the defendants go to trial, so that means that most of the defendants are [Inaudible]

RD: So the decision process for example, would focus on bringing, trying these cases, making sure that they get stronger effort on the court [Inaudible]

RJ: Well the nature of the case is one of the factors. There are a number of factors, but the background of the defendant, the criminal history of the defendant, the nature of the case, but even in some cases where the injury is severe, we have to be somewhat pragmatic and think about whether or not we have good evidence; so we have to make those decisions. [Inaudible] targeting is not necessarily a bad thing, we try to make it not the rule. And we try to make it for good reason, for cases more wide that deviate from what [Inaudible]

NL: What are your thoughts on navigating ethnic politics in the Bronx? Because you mentioned before about knowing that at least in previous years when you were, you know - - I guess it was at the primary you had to withdraw your name - -

RJ: The judicial convention.

NL: Right. So I'm wondering if, in light of that and just over the course of your time as an elected official, what's it been like?

RJ: Well, I don't support candidates, DA's and judges don't support candidates, but I observe what's going on and ethnicity has played a role, sometimes it doesn't play the major role. I think you have to build coalitions, you have to - - I think for instance, with my election when I ran in the primary for District Attorney, there were two white candidates and a Latino candidate and African Americans certainly weren't a plurality of this [Inaudible], not a majority or a plurality, and people supported me from every community. And I may not have finished first, but I think I finished at least second in every neighborhood. And the supporters were white, black, Latino, so I think people don't always just stick to ethnic lines. I think ethnic pride is something special; if you find a quality person from your own ethnic group, it's a natural tendency to want to raise them and support them.

MN: Do you think how you grew up in a multi-racial neighborhood and school helped prepare you to reach out to all these different communities? Is there a connection between how you grew up and how you've been able to function as an official?

RJ: Probably. And in addition to that, my feeling is that everybody wants me to get the job done. So when I first became District Attorney, because of the number of Latino's in this county, I thought it might be appropriate to have a Latino chief assistant. But I did interviews, and my ultimate judgment was I need a person who is going to best be able to help me run this office. My chief assistant is and has been for the 16 ½ years, Jewish. We were able over time to bring a Latina in as one of my executive assistants, another Latina is my director of legal improvement, but I did it patiently and waited for the person to be qualified and I'm able to say I'm providing a service and when we're recruiting everybody, so it's worked out.

MN: Now, in looking at your career, what are the things you're proudest of in terms of what you've been able to accomplish in the Bronx?

RJ: Well, the thing I'm most proud of is that we've always communicated with everybody. I think I've always paid attention to what people's concerns are, I may not always do what you tell me to do, but I'm going to hear you out. When you have civilian complaints in cases, it's our judgment ultimately to decide how to handle the case, but I want to hear what your feelings are on the case. When we have conditions in neighborhoods, I want to get that - - I think that's one of the things that I'm most proud of. I'm proud of the fact that during this time from just two years after I became DA to now, from 1990 - 2004, crime has been reduced drastically here in the Bronx. The [Inaudible] rates is down 70%, homicide and grand larceny auto are down 81% in that time period - - yes it's largely due to the police department but I believe they couldn't have done it without us. We've backed them up, we've done the appropriate balance of punishment, rehabilitation, and prevention - - so I think those are the things most proud of. I think with respect to the death penalty, I don't like disagreeing with people, but very infrequently in life do you get to stand up about something major and say what you honestly believe even if there are people opposing you, and to me - - you know, people thought that was a time of trauma for me, a time of trouble, but to me, that was a good thing that I was able to stand up and say what I believe. And then the added bonus is that it's worked out in the end that the murder rate was going down before the bill was signed in '95, we went from 653 in 1990 to 125 in 2004 and I believe 2004 is the eighth year in a row the Bronx has been under 200 homicides. So we've accomplished what we needed to accomplish.

MN: What do you think the biggest challenge is that the Bronx faces in terms of law enforcement in the next lets say ten years?

RJ: I think we need to keep the resources, you know, we've had some budget problems come 2001, I think we need to continue to build the economy - - it always makes me feel good when I see a new office building being built, a new housing stop, I honestly believe when neighborhoods look good people act better. The whole Broken Windows Theory, I believe that's true. Our streets have been cleaner, more buildings are being built; we need to maintain that momentum. We need to keep to it. I think one of the things about the Bronx - - we spoke about ethnic politics, but we lack real ethnic tensions. We have had so few hate crimes here in the Bronx - - I mean knock on wood - - they occur but it's not part of our history, its not part of who we are. And people really are respectful; I think we need to maintain that. We need to continue to talk to each other. One of the things that I was proudest of is when there was a reported hate crime - - and I don't even know if it actually was a hate crime, we never brought charges, we couldn't prove that it was - - but there was a protest by people from outside the community and they walked through one of our white neighborhoods, it was mostly people of color protesting, and they were lines they ignored, they just said let them walk through and it was over. In other communities, people have thrown watermelons at people or something like that - - that's not the Bronx that I know. And that's a good thing.

MN: OK - -

CM: I guess one final question - -

MN: [Laughs] OK everybody gets a shot.

CM: I was going to say, if you had the opportunity, how would you write the history of the Bronx from the 1960's to the present? What trends do you see, what significant moments have occurred?

RJ: Well, the significant moments were negatively the burning and the crack epidemic, and positively, is that we've really rebounded. I think there's a lot of damage done actually maybe before the 60's - - maybe in the 60's - - actually the other significant things of course are the Cross Bronx Expressway and Co-Op City - - the evacuation of the Grand Concourse - - that destroyed neighborhoods. We've gotten over that and people are now starting to think about coming back here and spending money and living in the antique district of Bruckner and I think that's going to continue to build, and now hopefully on the verge within a week of having the Yankee Stadium renovation announced, I believe that in conjunction with that we'll get something else; whether it be schools, hotels, recreational facilities - - I'm sure that the city's aware that it has to be more than just the new Yankee Stadium. And they announced they want to do Shea Stadium, and the reports I see that Yankee Stadium, within a week they're going to announce it.

MN: Any other? OK, well I want to thank you for this extremely enlightening and important interview which we managed to get in, in exactly two hours.

RJ: Did we get enough of the childhood and Caribbean experience?

NL: Yes, oh yes.

MN: So thank you again and this is a great moment for our project.

RJ: Well thank you, I enjoyed doing it, thank you for asking.

[END INTERVIEW]