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Murray, Elizabeth

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Mark Naison (MN): This is an interview for the Bronx African American History Project, we're here with Elizabeth Murray who recently retired from a long career at City Bank. When did your family move to the Bronx?

Elizabeth Murray (EM): In 1941.

MN: And where had they been living before?

EM: I think it was 46 Bradhurst Avenue in Manhattan - - in Harlem I should say.

MN: What church did they go to in Harlem?

EM: I don't know what church they went to in Harlem.

MN: Because there are a number of families that I met who came from Bradhurst Avenue and some of them were from Grace Congregational Church. What sort of work did your father do?

EM: My father was a Transit Worker, New York City Transit.

MN: Was he in the bus or the subway division?

EM: He was in the subway division.

MN: How did they find the Bronx?

EM: I'm not really sure. I know that my parents had I think a one bedroom apartment, maybe a two bedroom apartment, and they needed more room once I came along. I have an older brother and the two of us and my parents moved to the Bronx. We moved into a three family house with four bedrooms and at that time - -

MN: What street was that on?

EM: That was on Home Street.

MN: OK so that was a three family house on Home Street between - -

EM: Forest and Tinton Avenues. And during that time a lot of people had rooms - roomers - - and I had an uncle and his wife that lived with my parents. And so we all moved to Home Street.

MN: Now was this area eventually raised to make the Forest Houses or is it still there?

EM: The Forest Houses - -

MN: No your particular block, that house.

EM: Oh, are you saying the Forest Houses the Projects?

MN: The Projects.

EM: No, the Projects came after, many years after - - many years after.

MN: OK but was the house that you lived in on the current site?

EM: It burned down in - - there is a house on that current site with that same address, but the original house that I moved in, that I lived in, burned down in - -let me see - - I would say the late 60's or early 70's, somewhere around there.

MN: So they moved just after you were born?

EM: Yes, I was a year old when I moved to the Bronx.

MN: And what are your first memories of the neighborhood when I guess you were three, four, five?

EM: I'm trying to remember - - playing on the streets and we had three one family houses right next door to us and in fact, one of the owners of the house was a music teacher; Mrs. Backus and I took music lessons from her around when I was in the 6th grade. And just playing games on the street, stick ball, Ringalevio, - - just all sorts of games.

MN: So it was a very rich street life?

EM: Oh yes, we did - - one of the things that I remember was that all of the parents on the block more or less mothered all the children, you just didn't do things wrong in front of your neighbors. In fact, when I started music lessons, my music teacher felt that I should not chew gum because I would spoil my teeth, so to this day I never chew gum because I could never do it during the time. We were very, very close with everyone - everybody in and out of each others homes, it was just a very, very fun time.

MN: Was the block mostly black or was it multiracial when you were growing up?

EM: When I first moved there, it was basically German, Jewish, things like that, and then very fast it became all African American.

MN: So this was - - how old were you when it became an all African American block would you say?

EM: Maybe about - - by the time I was about five years old.

MN: OK so it was a very rapid - -

EM: Yes, it was pretty rapid.

MN: Did your parents know a lot of people from the neighborhood who had moved to the neighborhood from Harlem? Or was it mostly people they just met on the block?

EM: It was people they just met on the block. They didn't come up knowing anyone.

MN: As a girl, did girls and boys do the same thing in the street? Did you play stickball? So it wasn't completely segregated by gender?

EM: Well, maybe it was because I was a tomboy.

MN: OhOK.

EM: I was always athletically inclined, so I played - - in fact, my mother was a seamstress and she made all of my clothes. In fact, the slight jealousy that maybe children might of had at the time, because when I came from school, I changed into other lovely clothes, just to play in, but because my mother was able to make all these clothes for me. So it was something that - - everybody played together. I don't think we had - - I don't think the boys played Pick Up Sticks. Sometimes they played Jax or something, but they didn't have the dexterity.

MN: Now, did you do Double Dutch?

EM: Definitely. Definitely Double Dutch. And the boys did not jump Double Dutch. Once in a while they might try, but Double Dutch was one of the most - it was something that you did every day.

MN: Now they have Double Dutch tournaments and such; was this all informal at that time?

EM: Oh it was definitely informal. We didn't have - because everybody did it, so there was no tournaments or anything like that. That was what you did when you came home from school, that was one of those games.

MN: You mentioned your mother was a seamstress; did she do most of her work in the house?

EM: She did, yes. She was a homemaker; she did not work outside the house. And she baked cakes, she was very much known for her cake baking, which she would sell sometimes because people were always saying I want some of your cake. So she baked cakes and she also sewed for a lot of people. She wasn't considered a professional, she didn't have a business, this was more word of mouth - friends, relatives, things like that.

MN: What are your first recollections of PS 63? How long of a walk from your house was this?

EM: I'd say maybe about four to five blocks. PS 63 was also again, a lot of fun. There was a program that they had for school lunches. My parents being - - eventually, there were six children

and during that time while I was in elementary school, of course there weren't six because I'm fourteen years older than my youngest brother. But, we - - I did not get a chance to eat lunch in school because it cost too much to feed all of us. So I came home and once in a blue moon something would come up, I don't know what, I can't remember now what would cause us to get this free lunch or something like that, but it was enjoyable to stay in school because this time, when I had lunch in school, I had more time to play in between our lunch break, but when I went home, I used it all up. MN: OK. The PS 63 you went to is still there in McKinley Square, it's that big school?

EM: Yes, it is still there.

MN: And at that time was it a predominately an African American school?

EM: And Hispanic. And we also had Caucasian, there were Caucasians.

MN: Now, what was your recollection of the teachers; are there any teachers who made a big impression on you?

EM: Mrs. Levousy was my sixth grade teacher and I can't remember the name of the teacher - - she was a music teacher, I wish I could remember her name, but the one thing I remember, she had a - - I guess you would call it a uniform - - because she wore the same outfit every day and I'll never forget how she always had this - - it was a dark, blue with white collar, always clean and nice, but she was our music teacher.

MN: Were the classes in PS 63 tracked by ability level? Like 5-1, 5-2, 5-3 - - or that happened more in Junior High School?

EM: That happened more in Junior High School, yes. In elementary school it was just throwing everyone into the classes.

MN: Were your parents' active in the PTA or was that - - were they involved in the school?

EM: Well my mother came to every open school; she wasn't as active in the PTA because of the other children. I'm the eldest female in my family and I had two sisters and two brothers younger than me, so it took up a lot of her time, she couldn't actually get that involved.

MN: What were some of the recreational activities available at the school, or were there any? You just played with your friends in the school yard before and then you went to school and went home.

EM: That's just about what it was. They always had an afternoon - - no, they had an after school program. I don't recall going to that too much because my mother being a homemaker, I came home because most of the children that went to the after school program had both parents that worked, so they needed to have the supervision.

MN: Was education very emphasized in your household?

EM: Yes it was. My grandfather on my father's side was the principal of a school in Sumpter, South Carolina. My father was the only brother that did not go to college on that level, but on my mother's side - - well, all of them graduated from high school. A few of their sisters and brothers, of course there was thirteen of them, went to school.

MN: Was your mother's family also from South Carolina?

EM: My mother's family was from North Carolina.

MN: So your mother and father met in New York City?

EM: Yes they did. My mother came to New York City when she was about 19, she had an elder sister that lived here and she came and loved it and stayed. And I think maybe about three years after she moved to New York, she met my father, and they dated for a couple of years - - well, not that long, maybe a year or two, and then they got married.

MN: Did your family attend any church in the Bronx?

EM: My family attended Caldwell AME Zion Church.

MN: And where was that located, what street?

EM: And it still is, it is 1288 - - it used to be 1288 Stebbins Avenue and 1 - - maybe about ten years - - I'm not sure about the exact time, but they changed it to Reverend James A. Polite Avenue.

MN: So that was on Stedmens between where and where?

EM: Between 169th and Chism. We are opposite Thesolonia Baptist Church, we're down on the other end.

MN: OK and the church is still vital?

EM: Vital. I go to the church, I am very active in the church.

MN: Wow! You come from New Jersey to attend?

EM: I come from New Jersey to attend church because - - first of all, I just moved to New Jersey in July but I'm not giving up Caldwell because I started there in 1949.

MN: Wow. Who was the minister at that time?

EM: OK, the minister of record for Caldwell if you ask anyone in the Bronx was Reverend Carnes McKenney.

MN: And was he a major force in the community?

EM: He was. Very much so. Many people - - well, it's right around the corner from Lyman Place, and so Bob and Heady, all of them, they all know Caldwell AME Zion -One of the - - Caldwell AME Zion was one of the sites for the New York Missions Society. We had the Drum and Bugle Corps there, we had the Minisink Blue Bells come out of there, the Majorettes - -

MN: Tell me about the Minisink Blue Bells.

EM: OK the Minisink Blue Bells --

MN: Do you have any pictures of this?

EM: I could probably get some pictures, yes.

MN: All those things would be very helpful.

EM: Well, we were - - our leader was Mrs. Ernestine Seborn and we called her Se-B -everybody knows Se-B. Now that's where I went on my little afternoon programs. My aunt lived on Fox Street and she more or less discovered Caldwell AME Zion Church because we - - well, I wouldn't say we - - my parents, my mother and her family were AME Zion from North Carolina.

MN: What town in North Carolina?

EM: They were from Landis, North Carolina. A couple of miles - - maybe twelve miles from Salisbury, and maybe sixteen miles the opposite way from Charlotte.

MN: OK so it's in the western part of the state?

EM: Yes. So they came from an AME Zion Church and then my aunt said "Oh Meddy," which is my mother's name, "there's AME Zion Church over here." So we were going to little small churches where we walked to when we were much smaller and my mother didn't actually take us, she'd watch us out through the street when we'd go around the corner to a church, and then when we found this church, then everybody really started getting into --

MN: So the Minisink Blue Bells were Drum Majorettes?

EM: No, the Drum Majorettes were another group and the Drum and Bugle Corps was another group, the Majorettes went with the Drum and Bugle Corps. But the Minisink Blue Bells was another group. We did plays, we sang, we had just all sorts of community activities, we kept busy.

MN: So it was a club?

EM: It was a club, yes.

MN: And did you go to Camp Minisink?

EM: Would you believe I never went to Camp Minisink because the family was too large. And I went to North Carolina every summer, my brother and I went to North Carolina.

MN: What was it like going from the Bronx to North Carolina? Were you aware -Were you shielded from segregation or was it something that you experienced even as a child and could see?

EM: OK. When I went to North Carolina, and as you know, North Carolina was one of the more liberal states for segregation and all that kind of stuff, so I didn't see it like what I read about. I was down South when Emit Till got killed, and I was just as shocked and I guess it was like disbelief that something like this could happen because I was around a lot of what I call white people, white southerners, but my grandmother being a land owner - - my grandfather and my grandmother owned a lot of land - - and some of it when my grandfather died she kept, and they divided it among the sisters and brothers and some of it she sold to white people. So we lived back to back with them. And they always considered my grandmother Ms. Smitty and so we had carte blanche for a lot of things and then knowing that we came from the North, because we spoke so proper as they called it, we didn't really see a lot of that.

MN: So you would go to the general store in town and everybody would treat you very respectfully?

EM: Right.

MN: Nobody called adults boy or that sort of stuff?

EM: I don't recall hearing that. Maybe it happened - - I know that I had an aunt that was extremely respectful of white people, she would see someone and she would - - and she was very fair-skinned, and she could almost be mistaken for white. She was the only one that I ever saw have any kind of

reaction to that type of life - - but everyone else - - and the thing about it, is when I was down there I played all the time. I didn't have to get on a bus to go anywhere, so the back of the bus didn't mean anything, but one thing I did know, is that we had segregated movies. But then I didn't care for movies so I didn't go there that often either.

MN: Right, the blacks sat in the balcony?

EM: I guess so but I didn't go there. Actually, I think we had our own movie. I think we had our own movie because most of the people - - there were so many at Carver High School down in Jamestown, but it wasn't something that I went to. The one thing that I did miss when going down South was going to pool because there were no pools for blacks, there were no beaches, the nearest beach was Merdle Beach and we lived in North Carolina so that will give you an idea.

MN: Now in the Bronx, where did you go swimming?

EM: Crotona Park. That was when - - let me tell you. Most African American girls did not know how to swim. Why? Because we had to get our hair done and our hair had to be pressed, so if you got water on your hair, it went back to nappy and it had to be pressed again. So if you were close to getting your hair pressed, then you could go to the pool. But if you had just had your hair pressed, that was almost a no-no. So of course, the girls with what we used to call years ago, the "good hair," they would - - when they dried their hair, it came back to a decent, manageable state. So that was one of the things that - - we had certain times that we went to Crotona Pool, but it was just part of life.

MN: Did you also go to beaches, did your family ever go to Orchard Beach or Coney Island?

EM: No.

MN: So the swimming was at Crotona Pool. Did they give swimming lessons there?

EM: I didn't go that much.

MN: Did you learn to swim?

EM: No. [Laughter] Most of the time when you went to the pool the boys dumped you or - - things like - - it was just a fun thing. But you always wanted to go to Crotona Pool.

MN: I'm fascinated by Caldwell AME Zion because I think it's - - you know, we've emphasized a number of the churches and it sounds like this is an important neighborhood institution.

EM: It is. And I wanted - - because when I spoke with Jim Pruitt and he said that you were talking about St. Augustine's or Thesolonia, and I said well, there happen to be four churches that were very, very close and it was Thesolonia, and then you go over to St. Augustine's, and Victory Baptist was right around the corner from St. Augustine's and Caldwell, which was down the street. In fact, when we used to have the Christmas celebrations and the Thanksgiving celebrations, and the Easter celebrations, when they sang the Messiah they went from church to church. Those four churches were like the group.

MN: How many people do you think were in the congregation at Caldwell?

EM: We had a couple of hundred at that time. It's not as active right now because the neighborhood was blighted and then when they built it back up, a lot of Africans and - so they're of the Muslim faith - - and Hispanics, and they're more of the Catholic faith and so they all - - the neighborhood, the ethnic groups, changed. So now, most of the people that go to Caldwell come from outside of the neighborhood.

MN: So - - but this was filled with youth activities, it sounded like there was an incredible amount of things you could do.

EM: Oh sure. It was something that we did - - I think we did it on Tuesday and Thursday afternoon.

MN: This was the Blue Bells?

EM: Yes.

MN: Did you put on plays at the church?

EM: At the church, we also worked very closely with Reverend Hawkins and his family over at St. Augustine's.

MN: Oh OK so the two churches had a kind of an alliance.

EM: Right, because they was a time when something happened at Caldwell Church and we started having our meetings over at St. Augustine's, which is a much larger church than ours, but it's still a place where we did our concerts.

MN: Do you remember the names of any of the plays that you were in?

EM: No, we just had - - we always had plays for every season. I'll tell you, at one time I used to do the solo singing, I was Dorothy of Oz one time - - I'll never forget when I became older and I moved down to the Minisink Townhouse which is right down the street from City College, over on 145th and Convent, when I started working with that group, Thorny, who was the leader down there, had me sing the Five Gold Rings at Convent A venue Baptist Church and that was like a very special part. I talk about that all the time because that's like my claim to fame. [Laughs] But I don't sing anymore. I smoked shortly after that - - bad, bad habit; I got out of it, but it kind of developed - - I developed sinus troubles so I couldn't sing well.

MN: Right. Now, did you also play instruments?

EM: I played the violin and the piano. I started the piano in 1950.

MN: So that was when you were nine?

EM: Yes. And I started piano then, and I went to PS 40 when I was about 11 and is started taking up the violin.

MN: And you could take a violin home?

EM: Yes. We were able to take it home over the summer; it was a lottery type of thing. Eventually my parents bought me a violin, and then I felt very strongly - - my father played the piano by ear; my father was a semi-professional singer, my mom: also a singer.

MN: So music was part of your household.

EM: Right. And that's one of the reasons why I had to take piano lessons instead of dancing lessons, which I thought I was going to do. Well, my father told me I had to take the piano lessons and then I got very interested in it, and then I took the test for music and art and I passed.

MN: And this is for piano?

EM: Violin. Now one of the things about music and art, there were people who played the violin much better than I did, but it was the propensity towards being a musician; that's one of the reasons why I went to the High School of Music and Art. And of course I met a lot of wonderful people there, artists and musicians.

MN: There must have been so many talented people.

EM: Oh sure, you know Jimmy Castor I went to school with him - -

MN: You did! I've been playing his album over and over. Jimmy Castor went to Music and Art --

EM: Yes, yes. And so did Billy D. Williams and Paula Kelley - - I don't remember, Paula Kelley was behind me, Jimmy Castor was one year behind me, Billy D. Williams was two grades ahead. Who else? There were a lot of people - - even from the neighborhood; Donald Eason, Charles Oregio,

Bobby Capers who played with Mongo Santamaria - - they were all right out of Prospect Avenue, all up in that area.

MN: They were the music and art contingent from Prospect Avenue.

EM: Yes. Freddy Owens, he was right there from Stebbins Avenue, he was an artist. Who else was from that area - -

MN: The 168th 8t kids, Joe Orange and Jimmy Owens --

EM: Right and Freddy Orange - - well he was a dancer, Freddy is Joe's brother.

MN: Did you ever get into the doo-wop singing stuff?

EM: Well, I watched all the doo-wop singers. Because Arthur Crier lived around the comer from me, Lillian Leach was on Forest Avenue - - he was on Tinton Avenue - - so I was surrounded by it, all of the singing. In fact, I wanted to mention that - - I lived on Home Street and right on the comer was Isabel Sanford from the Jefferson's, in fact, I think she used to be a social worker because I used to see her walking down the street all the time, and then the next thing you know she's on television. And also, on the same block that I lived on but around the corner, was Diana Sands who was in the first Raisin in the Sun.

MN: Did she grow up in the neighborhood, Diana Sands?

EM: Yes but she died very young. She grew up right around the comer there. I wouldn't say I knew her well, I knew more of her, because she lived right around the corner.

MN: So this was - - now when you say you knew - - were people literally singing in the street?

EM: Oh yes. Definitely. They sang on the comers, when I went to Music and Art, you know, Jimmy Castor, he had the Frankie Lyman - - it was - - In the Still of the Night - everybody sang to the songs, but I wasn't in a group or anything like that. A lot of times when I get excited I can't

remember the names of all the groups and right now, I can't remember the names of them.

MN: Right. Well, one of them was the Chords.

EM: Oh yes, the Chords. And that was in fact, one of Arlene - - what is her last name?

MN: Arlene Smith? Not from the Chantelles --

EM: No, Arlene is a teacher here in the Bronx, but she was very close with all of the groups.

MN: Arlene Patterson?

EM: Patterson. I was trying to think of her maiden name but I can't - - it was Foote!

MN: And her brother Billy Foote was this guy - - they set up this race with an Olympic runner and he beat him?

EM: Yes, right. And so she was very close and I know you're going to do an interview with her, well, if you haven't done it already - -

MN: I haven't done it yet.

EM: But she's - - she has everything and she could tell you about all the doo-wop groups, she was very close, I think she was involved with one of the - - he wrote music and he wrote some of the doo-wop songs. She's a good person to get.

MN: Yes, she teaches right around the corner here, so I have to - - Were you aware of the gangs that were starting to develop in the late 40's and 50's or that wasn't a big issue?

EM: They had gangs, but I was always involved in community type programs and I never - -

MN: You never felt fearful?

EM: No. Except on Halloween.

MN: What was Halloween like?

EM: Well, Halloween my mother had to walk out with us, and we'd dress up or whatever, and then

all of a sudden you see a group of about - - it seemed like hundreds, probably it was about 60 or 70 guys, coming down with bags of flour and stockings and things like that - - but you know, you just ran. You didn't want to get hit by flour and you never knew what was in there. Even with a parent. So we would go a certain distance with our parents and then we would call it a night. [Laughs] But there were gangs, thankfully my brother who is 17 months older than me, when he was in the fifth grade he went down South to live with my grandparents, with my grandmother and her sister. Like I said, she was well to do, and she would - - since there were so many of us, she offered to take care of my brother down there and in turn, they had a male around the house to help them do some things. And he stayed down there for about five years and he came back to New York. So when he came back, he was in the 10th grade, but he too just dealt with a group of people at the Forest House.

MN: At the Forest Neighborhood House.

EM: Right, it was called the Council House many years ago because that's where I went to kindergarten. But then after that, there was no schooling there, they just had programs, and he went around to the Forest House and they always stayed out of trouble, he never go into gangs or anything.

MN: So there were a lot of programs in the community between Forest House and the churches and the after school centers in the school.

EM: Right. And then PS 99 had the - - when we got older into high school, we had the PS 99 on Tuesday nights.

MN: Did you used to go there?

EM: I went to PS 99.

MN: Did you go to any of the talent shows?

EM: Yes, I went to the talent shows and I went to the dances.

MN: Somebody called them the "grind 'em up" dances?

EM: Oh yes, well those were everywhere. You had those throughout the neighborhood, you know - - it was a basement situation. They'd hand you a card, and it had a little rhyme on there, you know "Come on down, the girls are fine! Come on and have a good time." Something like that, and then they'd have the address or whatever, and then we'd go. You pay whatever you had to pay and we'd go and it was clean fun, even though it was called grind 'em ups, which was a very provocative dance, it wasn't something where you wound up getting raped or anything - - nothing negative came out of it because that was what was going on.

MN: Was there usually a parent chaperone there?

EM: Usually there wasn't a parent chaperone. Especially when- - when we were in high school there wasn't a parent chaperone, although, there were dances where there were.

MN: Did you have any friend male or female who was seriously assaulted or raped or anything of those things?

EM: Never. I never - - Oh I knew - - I had heard of people, but they weren't my friends.

MN: So there wasn't this sense of danger?

EM: No.

MN: As a young woman, was college pushed or were young women expected to get married fairly young in your generation?

EM: Well, I don't think college was pushed, it was just education and - - because there were so many kids in the family, my father really didn't have the money to send us, even to go to college - - I mean the car fare, that's where the problem came. So he never really emphasized that it was something that

I always felt that I was going to do. I always - - I guess my mother gave me a certain sense of pride, and upward mobility was the way to go - - I don't remember any specific mandates that you're going to go to college like I gave my sons: you're going to college or you're working, I don't take care of grown men. I don't recall hearing anything like that, but I always felt maybe a cut above, that I was going to college. I was always pretty good in my subjects in school, so why not?

MN: Were you at PS 40 in the 1 and the 2 classes?

EM: Yes. I was in the 7; it was 7-7, 8-7, and 9-7 and I think the other class was a 2 -one was a music class and one was an art class - - no it was - - either way, I was in the other - - there were two music classes and one art class, and I went 7-7, 7-8, 7-9 -

MN: Did you have to audition to get into the music class?

EM: No. We took - - we filled out a form and because I wrote down that my parents were musicians and that I would like to play the drums or something or whatever - because I didn't know what I wanted to play at the time, they felt that I had the background. Oh no - - at that time, I was playing the piano already, so they put me into a music class and then that's when they asked me what instrument do you want to play? And I said the drums and they said oh, you'll play the violin. And I said OK, fine, because you couldn't take piano lessons there.

MN: When you were 13, 14, 15, did you and your girlfriends talk about getting married? Was this a big thing for young girls, the idea? Was that like the rainbow?

EM: I don't recall talking about marriage or anything like that. I did eventually get married young, but I was 16 my whole senior year.

MN: Right, so you graduated fairly young.

EM: I graduated at two months 17 and I was still a kid, so I didn't think about grown-up things in that

sense.

MN: Did a lot of your friends get married fairly young? Was that somewhat typical or there was a lot of variation?

EM: Some. I was actually three years out of high school when I got married, but you know, in your early 20's - - you know, 19, I wasn't a teenage mother. But the very early 20's, I would say a few of them, now there are some people going a little longer, my grandchildren are 23 and thank goodness they're not thinking about marriage or having children because they don't take care of themselves that well.

[Laughs] It's difficult.

MN: Yes it's a different time.

EM: But they're just struggling through college and things like that -- but I really wanted to go to school and my father was telling me - - well, first of all, my father had a car accident, he got hit by a cab about six months before I graduated and when I did graduate I was going on to college - - I got excepted at City, however, there was no money to send me - - no car fare. I couldn't go. So I was told that I needed to go to work and because he had - - was hit by a cab, he had a case pending in court, we had to go on welfare because he was the only one working and they made us sign an affidavit that my father would pay back all the money with a 2% interest. So, being so young, I figured I could work, save my money, and go on to college. And so, the welfare sent me a little budget where all the money that I was making was going into the household - - they deducted it from what they were giving me - - into the household, except for the \$5 or something, so I had to go to work and my brother had to go to work. And one of the good things about that is that my mother taught us how to budget money because she said she was not going to take our paychecks from us, that she would show us how to pay the different bills and she would manage the money that we got from the welfare. And then of course, when my father got

well and went back to work and we came back off and he got whatever difference - - you know, paid the money back and go the difference or whatever, and he eventually bought a car, that was in 1957.

MN: Were you still on Home Street at this point?

EM: Yes. Still on Home Street - - because I didn't leave there until 1960.

MN: What year did you start - - you started working at City Bank in 1961?

EM: Yes.

MN: And what was it called then?

EM: It was called First National City Bank.

MN: How did you get that position?

EM: Well, I had decided that I needed to work in the evenings and I was looking for a job. By that time I had my son, and I needed a job where I didn't go to work at 9 o'clock in the morning, because I had gotten married, moved a distance from my mother - - I moved down to Trinity Avenue at around 156th St and it was very awkward to even get to public transportation, so I had to walk to her house and she was my baby sitter, so I needed a job - - whatever job I could get - - working from 2 in the afternoon to 10 at night.

MN: Were you living in public housing?

EM: No, I lived in a tenement house. And so I took my son over to my mother and my husband picked him up, and that's how we did that - - he worked normal hours and I worked the off hours. But I was only going to do that for a short length of time because we were going to my ex-husband, because I didn't stay with him, he was going to retire at the age of 40 and we had all these great ideas or whatever, they didn't come to fruition, but they did - - I continued to grow and to flourish. And when I left him, I stayed at City Bank and eventually, I did my 38 years with them.

MN: When you were of age, were there any clubs in the Bronx you went to? Any night clubs or places to hear live music?

EM: OK I'll tell you; straight up the street from me on Boston Rd was Sylvia's but my father [Laughs] I was young and all the other kids might pop by some of the places but my father - - and there was Freddy's and there was another one - -

MN: Goodson's.

EM: Goodson's, right. And there was another bar - - before you got to Goodson's, it was on Boston Rd, so I could never go into any of those places because my father might go in. He wasn't a - - you know, my father wore Florsheim Shoes and he worked for transit, and when he came home, he put on his white shirt and his suit and he went out - I couldn't - - I just wasn't allowed to go to those places, so I didn't go to clubs. However, there was a group of young ladies when I went to PS 99; all of those ladies that lived right there on Home St between Prospect and Stebbins Avenue, that was my crew, my little group.

MN: Did you have a name?

EM: No, we didn't have a name, it was just our little group of girls, and it was you know, it was Lulu - -

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

EM: - - And we would go to any of the dances they would have throughout the city. Sometimes they would have it downtown in Manhattan Center, at the Rockland Palace, St. Nicholas Arena, Hunte's Point Palace, any time they had dances and stuff like that, we kind of went as a group.

MN: Did you learn to do Latin dance?

EM: Yes. [Laughs] And let me tell you, right now my brother and I - - people are just amazed at the way we dance, we are really good. And the way I learned - - my ex-husband was a member of, they called the Latin Preps? The Latin something's - anyway, and they danced, in fact, they would be on little cable television or whatever - it wasn't I don't know if they called it cable at that time, but it wasn't a regular television show. They were on television a couple of times dancing.

MN: Was he Latino?

EM: No, he's African American.

MN: But these were guys who danced Latin?

EM: Right. And so he would - - and we would go down to 99 - - he would dance with all the other people because they could dance and I couldn't dance as well and I was determined I was going to learn, and so eventually I did. And then I got a chance to practice with my brother, so' Latin is very, very dear to my heart.

MN: Who were some of your favorite musicians?

EM: Oh, Tito Rodriguez, Puente of course, Charlie Pomery, oh gosh the Taranga - - oh gosh, this is what happens to me when I start thinking, I start getting excited - - I start thinking of so many names - - and then also at that time, were a lot of West Indian dances, you know Fat Serene and the Calypso's - -

MN: OK this is something that I haven't gotten that much of, who were some of the Calypso artists who performed at the Hunte's Point Palace in those days?

EM: I can't think of - - you know what? I'm going to have to get back to you on that because right now I'm getting a block.

[BREAK IN TAPE]

MN: Now, when we were talking over lunch - - oh by the way, this interview is taking place Monday, November 29th at Fordham University - - you were saying that your family and others around you were poor but it didn't feel like you were poor, so perhaps you could elaborate on that?

EM: Well, my father was the only one working in the family, there were six children, my mother was a homemaker, and we would wait for my father on Thursday nights to get paid and we would go over to a place called the Silver Mountain Ice Cream Company, which was black-owned, and we would get a quart of eggnog and a quart of chocolate ice cream, and that would be our treat for the week, we would wait for that.

MN: What street was that on?

EM: The Silver Mountain was on Prospect Avenue between 163rd and 165th St and that was a little ways away from where we lived on Home St, but it was part of what we had in our life.

MN: Do you remember if the family who ran that were southern or West Indian?

EM: I don't recall. But I do know it was black-owned.

MN: Now you mentioned how in those days, before television, the movie theaters were a form of baby sitting. Perhaps you could tell us a little bit about that.

EM: Well I lived on Home St and straight up the street right next to Sylvia's, where Nancy Wilson was discovered, that there was a movie called the Tower and the Tower, on Saturday's, would have 10 cartoons, maybe two cowboy pictures, and a mystery picture, and a load of advertisements, and you would cash in your bottles, and get the money and go to the movies, and stay there all day long. And so on Saturday's, that's where most of the kids would be in the neighborhood. Sunday's, of course, we went to church and you know, did a lot of little church activities, so that was some of the things that we did in the neighborhood, other than the other programs that they had at the Forest

House and at the schools, the community centers and the church programs.

MN: We also were talking a little bit about your experiences with racism and you had said that it wasn't something that really made a big impression on you as a child in your neighborhood.

EM: Right, because in my neighborhood, we were predominately black and Hispanic and we thought of everybody as - - we got along very well in school. When I was in elementary school we had a few Caucasian students, but basically it was play time, we enjoyed each other, and that was it. We just didn't run into racism. We - - my biggest - well, I would say my first introduction to a white person was Mr. Diamond and Mr. Diamond sold everything. He walked down the street and he would have pictures of things, of items, and he would sell you a stereo system, he would sell you clothes, he would sell you towels and draperies for the windows, and it was a dollar down and a dollar a week.

MN: Wow.

EM: That's how we bought a lot of things.

MN: And how did he arrange for delivery, did he have a truck?

EM: He would walk around - - no. He would be bringing -

MN: Did he bring it himself?

EM: Yes. He would bring things. Once you ordered things - - he had a book - - and you would order certain things from a book and he would bring it. No one ever - - I never heard of anyone robbing him or anything like that, he would just walk down the street. And a lot of times when you didn't have the dollar, someone would say "Mr. Diamond's coming!" and everyone would just disappear. And he'd just walk on down the street, he'd knock on the door, and if you didn't answer the doorbell, that was it. And he'd just come back the next week and then sometimes you would get the dollar or

sometimes they would make it up and give you two dollars, but that was his business and he ran it - - everybody participated in that business.

MN: That's fascinating. Did the stores also give credit at that time?

EM: At that time, we had an account at the grocery store. I forgot the guy's name - most of the stores were African American-owned, we had a couple of Caucasian store owners also, but we would go to this particular one and we would get whatever we needed. If we had the money, we would give it to him, if not, we would just say put it on our bill. And he'd have this little - - some ledger, something and he'd turn the page -

MN: So there were black-owned groceries in the neighborhood.

EM: Yes.

MN: This is interesting because it sounds like there were a significant number of black- owned businesses in the area.

EM: Oh definitely; the cleaners, the candy store - - we only had one white-owned grocery store and the one that we went to was directly across the street from him and that's where we did our credit. When we went to the white-owned grocery store we paid cash because we didn't - - I'm sure that there were other black families that had credit with him, but you didn't have credit at all the stores, you just had credit at one. We were very humble people but very happy. We didn't know of anything else other than what we grew up with, so you dealt with it and we didn't think of being - - I guess I would say we knew we were poor because our buying power was very limited but it didn't affect us in any way, we were just as happy.

MN: Was there a sense that parents were confident that their children would do better than them?

EM: Yes. They always told us that every generation was going to grow weaker and wiser and they

wanted to prepare us for having more than what they had. MN: So you would say there was a sense of optimism you think?

EM: Yes, very much so. We didn't feel like there was no hope, that we weren't going to get anywhere; that really never even crossed our minds because we knew that there were opportunities - - we knew that they weren't the type of opportunities that Caucasian people had, but we knew that if we worked - - there was a work ethic - - if we worked hard for certain things, certain things would come to us. And plus, African Americans are highly religious people, and the faith and dealing with your spiritualism and everything, you knew that you were going to arrive, there was no doubt about it. My parents went to church, when the children were younger - - my mother, by the time she got the older children out to Sunday School and the other kids, she just didn't have enough energy to go to church but we always went to Sunday School. And as the children got older, than they would go with us. And then when she got to a point where she could make it out to church, then they started back in church and both my parents sang in the choirs and we were always - - everybody was active in church. We didn't stay in church all day long like some of the Baptist churches, they did a morning service and afternoon programs or whatever - - we didn't do that, but we went to church every Sunday. So that's where we had a good foundation, we knew what was right from wrong and we knew what we had to do in life.

MN: Looking back, the neighborhood you were in suffered some terrible blows in the late 60's and 70's. What was it like to go back there and see houses burning, and buildings being abandoned; how did you feel personally? Because you were always back having gone a member of Caldwell and I'm sure near there, there were blocks that -

EM: Well, even the block that I lived on, while my parents were living on Home St, there was, I

guess there was an electrical fire or whatever, because they were all houses that were connected and they were wood frame houses and it was a house maybe about five or six houses away from us and you could smell it burning and somebody says oh I think it's moving and then all of a sudden somebody says get out because it's moving up. So it took out that whole block.

MN: Wow, what year was that?

EM: It had to be in the late 60's.

MN: Yes, well that's when the fires started.

EM: And it took it out, so my parents then had to move in with a cousin and then they decided - - well, my father was working for the transit at the time, and he said well, whenever people have fires, then the projects - - maybe apply for an apartment because by that time, rents had started going up and you didn't have the kind of rooms that you needed or whatever, but if you got into the projects, which was better housing, it was safer housing because it was more fire-proofed than the tenement houses. So my father waited until he got on the list and then he went into the St. Mary Houses. Fortunately and unfortunately, he was making the type of money - - he was working for the city - - and he had to go into what they considered the high income, so he was only accepted in one project in the Bronx and that was the St. Mary Houses.

MN: That was a middle income, not the low income.

EM: It was more than the middle income, it was considered there high income because it was only the one and they said if we didn't go into St. Mary's then we had to go somewhere in Brooklyn, so we didn't want to go there and that's where my parents wound up, in the St. Mary Houses.

MN: Were they happy there?

EM: Yes, they were fairly happy there because by that time I had moved out, I had gotten married, my sisters had gone to college and they were in graduate school down in Atlanta and my brother had

gone into the service by then; so it was just my two brothers and my parents that moved down there and they had two bedrooms, so it was decent for them. We wanted to go into the Castlehill Projects but that was what they considered the middle income but he made too much money for that. So we went in - - but we all did very well, like I said, all the girls graduated from college. The boys, some of them went but they didn't graduate, but they all did very well. My brother worked for Transit and then he became a Transit Policeman; my other brother is a Transit, he's a Dispatcher, and my other brother is a photographer - - he doesn't like conformity, he just likes to be free. But within all of that, all of us did very well in life and we didn't reach these heavy professional terms like doctors and lawyers and everything, but we're very successful and very proud and happy people.

MN: What do you think you had that kids are missing today, especially kids growing up in a working class, urban neighborhood?

EM: Well, one of the things I think is very important and I think you see it in stories like Soul Food, the family type thing - - we came - - my father worked and when he came home, we all had to be near that house because when my mother sat the table, everybody sat down. When my father got ready to eat, everybody sat down as a family and we discussed things. We talked about what happened in school, any problems that - - any financial situations - I need money for a trip for school - - it was discussed at that time. Any report cards was discussed at that time, anything of interest; if we talked about any kind of current events, all of it was done at that table and now, kids - they come in, the parents might have eaten at one time, the kids eat at another time, somebody's heating it up, throwing it in the microwave, maybe the oven or eating it cold or grabbing something at the fast food restaurant; they miss those family ties. That grouping is so important. I remember just a couple of weeks ago, my sister was asking my brother; she said you know, I don't remember too much about your childhood, I don't remember you from your childhood and we said yes because she is ten years

younger than he is, and so during that time he was doing so many other things, you weren't around someone that was about two years your age, you were doing totally different things. And so she was asking him about his childhood and so he said "Yes, when you were coming up, I was living in the south for about five years and then I came home and then I went into the service, so that's why you don't know me." So it is important to be around your family, you can talk, and learn each other.

MN: Any other reflections that you want to share before we wind things up?

EM: Well, I was telling you about the cute little thing that we used to do and I think a lot of people might remember this; how being poor wasn't something you thought of as a negative, it was just who you were. And I remember how when you wore your shoes out, you just couldn't always get your shoes half sole, which people don't even think about doing now, so when you had the hole in your shoe, you used to take a piece of cardboard and fold it up so it would fit and you'd put that in your shoe. And if it rained, then you had to get another piece for the rest of the day. [Laughter] But it was things like that that everybody did, and it was common place. Being poor, I think we learned how to survive and that's why I think we were able to strive and get so much, and do with so little, because that was how we were brought up.

MN: OK well thank you so much for this very enlightening interview.

[END INTERVIEW]

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Elizabeth Murray

Date: November 29, 2005

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