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Morris, Paula

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Transcriber: Connor Murphy

Mark Naison (MN): The 102 interview of the Bronx African-American History Project.

We're at Fordham University on February 3, 2005, and we're here with Paula Morris, who is a registered nurse who lives in the Morrisania section of the Bronx in the house she was born in, and whose mother was the great jazz singer, Maxine Sullivan. We're also joined by community researcher Leroi Archibald. What are your earliest memories of the Bronx?

Paula Morris (PM): Well first of all, Ritter Place, where I live, is one block long, so we had a sense of community. There were a lot of children on the block, and I - - that's what I remember. I just remember that because it was only one block long we knew everybody. Just playing - -

MN: Was the block multiracial when you grew up or was it predominantly African - -

PM: No, it was predominantly African-American. And I know that we had at least one Puerto Rican family.

MN: Do you have any idea the sort of work that the people did on the block?

PM: Yes. Most of them had civil service jobs. I know one woman was a school crossing guard but she worked in the civil service. We had domestics on the street. There was one chauffer. Next door to me there was a policeman who lived in there. And there might have been a couple of teachers who taught at 40.

MN: P.S. 40 was the school right across the street? Junior high school.

PM: Junior High School 40 was actually on the corner, and its main entrance was on Prospect Avenue.

MN: Do you recall this as being a safe neighborhood to grow up in?

PM: Oh absolutely, yes.

MN: Everybody looked out for everyone?

PM: Everybody looked out. It was always a parent or someone. As a matter of fact, my grandmother used to sit at the window everyday because she had had a stroke before I was born so she was disabled, but she kept an eye out on everybody.

Leroi Archibald (LA): She was the block lady, right? [Laughter]

MN: Was she your grandmother on your mother's side?

PM: Yes. Yes.

MN: Was your - - where - - What part of the country did your parents come from?

PM: My father came from Texas, Seguin, Texas, and my mother came from Homestead, Pennsylvania.

MN: What kind of work did your father do?

PM: Well he had been a policeman early in life and then he became a photographer later on.

MN: Were you aware growing up that your mother was a famous musician?

PM: Yes, yes.

MN: So this was something that - - how was - - how did - - was this because there was always music in the house or because everybody talked about it?

PM: Everybody talked about it. Everybody on the block knew who she was and there was always music in the house. But I didn't feel any different than anyone else growing up. You still had the same rules and regulations as anyone growing up.

MN: Was academics stressed in your family?

PM: Yes, yes. Actually my mother was a Mensa.

MN: So she was a member of the genius society?

PM: The genius society, but then she gave back her membership because that's all people did was talk about how smart they were [Laughter]. She was. She was very community-minded, she was involved with community work, and she had - - was interested in the children mainly. In 1955 she started a project called the Ritter Place Experiment. And what it was is to try to get everybody to know everybody and the goal was to find out what the census of the block was. So we as children went around to the homes because there were a couple of two-family homes, three-family homes, and two apartment buildings, and we went and found out how many people it was. And we found out - - we counted three hundred people on the street. And then we had a block party - - actually a party in our backyard, and then there was a man in one of the apartment buildings used to have a block party every year for us.

MN: When you were growing up, was your mother's primary source of income as being a nurse or as being a musician?

PM: Well first as a musician, and then when she took the time out she was a nurse.

MN: Had she gone to nursing school before?

PM: Yes.

MN: So she had the nursing training?

PM: Yes.

MN: What elementary school did you go to?

PM: P.S. 54.

MN: And where was that located?

PM: That's located, was located on Intervale Avenue between Freeman and Chisholm Streets.

MN: Did your family attend a church in the neighborhood?

PM: Early on I went to Forest - - actually I forgot this - - it was on Forest Avenue - -

MN: Was that Forest Neighborhood House or - -

PM: Well, that was - - not the house but there was a church there. And then I went to Convent Avenue Baptist Church, and that's where my mother and I were both baptized.

MN: Now that's in Harlem?

PM: Yes, 145th Street and Convent Avenue. And then she joined Caldwell AME Zion because she wanted to be closer to the neighborhood, in the neighborhood.

MN: What about you? Did you ever go to Caldwell Zion church?

PM: Yes, I did. But Convent was the church that I actually belonged to. But I did go to Caldwell because I had friends in the neighborhood who went there.

MN: What was P.S. 54 like as a school?

PM: It was great. I mean, as I said before, it was a sense of community. Parents took their children to school, and at lunch time they picked us up until we were old enough to go back and forth on our own. The parents knew who you were and who your mother was, and the teachers were very much involved with us. When you asked me before about stressing education, I was always in the top class. You know like 1-1, 2-1, 3-1, and so on. And it was a challenge in academics for you.

MN: They didn't have school lunch in school?

PM: Yes they did, but I came home from - - I came home for lunch, but they did have lunch at school.

MN: Was 54 a predominantly African-American school?

PM: No, no.

MN: That was multiracial?

PM: It was multiracial, yes. Because there were still Jewish people in the neighborhood around Intervale Avenue and Wilkins Avenue and that area. And then there was a growing Hispanic population in there. And there were some Italians too.

MN: Did you - - when you were going to school, did you make friends from other blocks than your block?

PM: Yes.

MN: And did you go visit and play?

PM: Yes I did. Fox - - well when you talk about did you go to other neighborhoods in - - it's all relative. Nowadays you go miles away, but to go two blocks away was out of the neighborhood in those days. But yes, I had friends on Fox Street, 169th. And that was considered a long way. [Laughter] Even Boston Road going toward Herman Ritter Junior High was out of the neighborhood.

MN: So there was definitely a sense, you know, your block was very important and everybody - - there was a lot of identification with place.

PM: Yes.

MN: Do you have any recollections of particular stores in the neighborhood that were important to you, like a candy store?

PM: Yes. Well there was Jean's Candy Store. That was on Prospect Avenue near Freeman Street. And also, Irving's was the grocery store. And it's strange because most people did shopping in the grocery store as opposed to the supermarket. Because although there was

an A&P - - then there was another candy store at the end of the block at Ritter Place. As a matter of fact, at the site where Reverend Folk's church is now. Right there at the end of the corner. It was called - - I mean, Mr. Sessums had it - - I forgot who had that before him - - Mr. Lions, Mr. Lions.

MN: Were any of these stores owned by African-American families?

PM: Yes, well Jean's was, Irving was - - it was actually called Arnie's first; he was Jewish. Mr. Lions and Mr. Sessums, they were African-American. Then up the street there was another candy store where a lot of the teachers used to go and get things for lunch. Ms. Davis, and as a matter of fact her daughter was in school with me.

MN: Did you have - - were there any African-American teachers in P.S. 54?

PM: Yes. Ms. Peterson, who later became Mrs. Anderson, she was - - I think she taught math. Actually she was a member of Convent too, the church I went to, and she lived on Jennings Street, which was one block over. So she lived in the neighborhood and taught in the neighborhood. Ms. Jeffries was the glee club teacher, music teacher. Ms. Smith, Edna Smith, was the orchestra teacher.

MN: And this is in 54?

PM: No, this was in 40.

MN: In 40, right.

PM: In 54 we had Ms. Owens. That was my kindergarten teacher. And that's the only African-American teacher I had, but there were some others, a couple of others.

MN: Now in terms of recreation, did you go to any after school centers, or mostly you played on the block?

PM: Mostly I played on the block, but I went to - - I was in the Girl Scouts.

MN: And where was the Girl Scout troupe?

PM: In Harlem, I went to the Girl Scouts in Harlem. And also I belonged to the choir.

And in the summer I went to bible school.

MN: What sort of street games did you play when you were growing up?

PM: We played potsie, and red-light green-light one two three [Laughs], hide and seek of course [Laughter], and of course my house was always a favorite place to hide behind.

MN: Did boys and girls play together or it was kind of sep - -

PM: Well you know a lot of the communications we - - there were two apartment buildings, as I said, and you'd always sit on the stoop. And some of the boys would always tell scary stories to frighten you [Laughter]. But skating, yes, we skated together. But mainly but the boys were - - and the girls had their games and the boys had their games.

MN: Now did you ever do double-dutch?

PM: Yes, sure. Yes, we did that even in school, during lunch time, especially when I went to P.S. 40. After lunch you'd play games until the bell rang, and double-dutch was definitely one of them.

MN: Going back to your mother's music, when you were growing up was she still performing in, when you were in elementary school?

PM: Yes, yes.

MN: Where were some - - did she mainly perform in Manhattan or did she also perform in the Bronx?

PM: Mainly in Manhattan, in the Village Vanguard. There was one, the Rue Ban Blue - - I don't think that's any. But before actually, I think when I was born, by that time, 52nd

Street was phasing out as the famous jazz street, but she had started at the Onyx Club there.

MN: Were there ever performances at your house, or did people ever come to jam?

PM: Yes, sure.

MN: Who were some of the musicians who came to your house?

PM: Well, Jesus, there are so many. I'm going to leave somebody out. But Sonny Green, who was the drummer for Duke Ellington, he was con - - he was a regular - - he just - - they'd come over just to hang. A British pianist, Bill Jones. Oh goodness, so many, so many. I lot of musicians came over just to visit. Tyrie Glen, Jimmy Russian, who was with - -

MN: He's a great singer.

PM: Yes, yes. Tryie Glen, as I said. Victor Moan, I remember early he came to the house. Moms Mabley, Jackie Mabley [Crosstalk]. Yes, they were friends. She used to be a chorus girl too before that.

MN: Moms Mabley used to be a chorus girl? That's crazy.

PM: Yes, she was.

MN: Did you ever hear people talking about different clubs or music places in the Bronx? Did anybody mention Club 845?

PM: Oh, 845 Club, that was right there. As a matter of fact, and I'm almost positive of this, Specs Powell, the great drummer, lived at 845 Club, over the 845 Club. It was an apartment building.

MN: Is that - -

PM: Right there at Prospect Avenue station.

MN: So he lived right above that?

PM: Yes.

MN: Did you ever go to 845?

PM: No, by the time - - [Laughter] [Crosstalk] I was too little.

MN: You just heard people talk about it.

PM: [Laughter] I passed on the bus, but I never went there.

MN: What was your elementary school - - at elementary school, they didn't have extra curricular activities; it was pretty much straight academic?

PM: Yes, it was pretty much straight academics, except for recess or your gym period.

MN: When you went to Junior High School 40, were you involved in music or arts in any respect?

PM: Yes. I was in a music class, and I played the cello. I was in the orchestra, and then I auditioned for the Bronx borough-wide orchestra and was accepted. I was in the Bronx borough-wide orchestra for two years.

MN: Did you take private cello lessons?

PM: No. I did it all in school.

MN: And did they let you take the cello home?

PM: Yes, on weekends to practice.

MN: [Crosstalk] That is - - so you carried - -

PM: Carried the cello home and on Saturday mornings when we had Bronx Orchestra rehearsal I carried it on the bus up to P.S. 135 and P.S. 127.

MN: And where were the places where the orchestra rehearsals were?

PM: At P.S. 135 - -

MN: On what street was that?

PM: That was in, I think on Allerton Avenue and 127, right off Tremont Avenue. Purty Street.

MN: So you're taking a cello on the bus with you?

PM: Oh yes. With one of my classmates who took the tuba with him. He carried the tuba.

MN: I'd love to see pictures of that.

PM: Yes, you know, which is now - - there was also one of my friends played the bass, but they supplied basses [Laughter].

MN: Would you - - how much practice time would they give you at school?

PM: We had probably two periods a day.

MN: So if you were in the music class you would have two periods a day to practice?

PM: Yes.

MN: And would you have - - how would somebody instruct you when they had a big class, in, like, the cello?

PM: Well, first of all, you're doing it over a period of time. So you had the instruments, like you'd have string class. So you'd have all the strings, violin, viola, cello, and bass. And you'd have music and you'd practice. So first of all they taught you how to read scales. I knew how to read music anyway before I went in. And then, in seventh grade - - then that's basically the basics of music at the seventh grade, and the eight grade - - I'm not too sure if we were into the orchestra then, but by ninth grade you were in the orchestra. And by the way, 40 had a very good music program.

MN: Did the orchestra perform publicly?

PM: We had a recital, or what do you call it, music festival, music recital at the end of the year. And then at the assemblies we did.

MN: When you were in the Bronx-wide orchestra were you in junior high school or high school?

PM: In junior high school.

MN: In junior high school. And where would they perform?

PM: We performed at James Monroe High School, Theodore Roosevelt High School, and we did performance at Hunter College. That was mainly - - and then of course during the year, as we progressed, we would have the - - they would have the parents come up to have the children - - see how we were progressing and see what they were doing, what we were doing up there. And we played some heavy music, March Lav [SP], and Beethoven's Fifth.

MN: Did you see yourself - - did you want to become a professional musician?

PM: No, no.

MN: So this was just something to really be part of?

PM: Oh, I love music, I loved it. But I never contemplated music at all. It's a rough, it's a rough [Crosstalk] - -

MN: That's interesting. What did your mother tell you about the music business that made you not glamorize it?

PM: That gigs are few and far between.

MN: So that, even for someone like your mother, who was very famous, this was not an easy way to make a living?

PM: Yes. She was very fortunate. She used to say signers are a dime a dozen. Of course she'd say good signers are a dime a dozen.

MN: When you were getting older, in junior high and high school, did you go hear live music performances, and where are the places you would go?

PM: Well first of all, when I got into high school, then you start getting interested in a lot of things. You meet boys and you - - and plus being in the Bronx Orchestra, a lot of the musicians there went on to Music and Art High School. And they used to have concerts at Saint Augustine's Church.

MN: Somebody told me - - it was you who must have told me about that, because Reverend Hawkins' daughter went to Music and Art.

PM: That's what I told - - I didn't know her really, because I think she was older than I was by maybe a couple of years, but they used to have these jams sessions, and it was very good because it was a place, especially when you're a teenager, to go and enjoy each other and stay out of trouble, but learn something, very good music.

MN: Did you know Jimmy Owens?

PM: Yes.

MN: Did you know Joe Orange?

PM: I didn't know Joe Orange.

MN: But you knew Jimmy growing up?

PM: Yes. I knew he was two years older than I was, and I knew who he was.

MN: Did people think of him as being talented then?

PM: Oh yes - -

MN: So you could see - -

PM: From the very beginning.

MN: From the very beginning?

PM: Yes.

MN: You saw that - -

PM: There was another trumpeter too, I think he was older than Jimmy, named Harry Hall. He grew up on Boston Road. I think, I'm not sure, but I know he was also one of these people in the neighborhood that you knew were good. There were quite a few good musicians, but you knew the Jimmy Owens had talent.

MN: Were there other jazz musicians who lived in the neighborhood who would come to your house and you knew about?

PM: Yes. I'm trying to get his name - - as a matter of fact, I can still see his window. He used to get a Cadillac every year. Trumpet player, Henry Red Allen.

MN: Henry Red Allen. So he had a new Cadillac every year?

PM: Yes, every year. And it always had his initials on the license plate.

MN: Now what was his favorite - - what was his color for Cadillacs?

PM: I know he had a white one.

MN: He had a white Cadillac? [Laughs]

PM: And from what I understand, on Freeman Street, there was a club called the Band Box.

Unknown (UK): On the corner.

PM: Right on the corner.

MN: Freeman and where?

PM: [Crosstalk] Freeman and Prospect.

MN: Really, and it was called the Band Box? How long did that last?

PM: Years.

LA: It lasted up until - - they just demolished it maybe - - [Crosstalk]

MN: What kind of music did they usually - - was it a jazz club?

PM: It was really a bar, I know - - it was really a bar. But from what I understand, my mother told me this, and it may or may not be true, but when Henry Red Allen died - - because he used to go there, because he had his own mug hanging up there, and he would come in.

MN: So it was a place - - it was more a bar than a music venue.

PM: Yes, but what I understand, when he passed away, there was a sort of a memorial, and what I heard was Frank Sinatra came up there.

MN: To that bar to pay tribute to him?

PM: Yes. It probably was after midnight or something like that. That's what my mother told me.

MN: What about the clubs on Boston Road? Was that something - - you know Goodson's and - -

PM: Goodson's, oh yes Goodson's. I knew where they were, but I didn't go there, I was too young to go there.

MN: Sylvia's, Blue - -

PM: Sylvia's, Blue Morocco, yes.

MN: Were there gangs in the neighborhood when you were growing up, or was that something more boys would be aware of?

PM: I know there were gangs. I wasn't involved in knowing who was in the gangs, but I forgot the - -

MN: No one tried to recruit you to a female auxiliary.

PM: No, never.

MN: [Laughs]. You didn't - - was there ever a gang fight on Ritter Place or nothing like that?

PM: No. But I remember - - I'm trying to think of the name of the gang. I know there was the one gang - - you would hear these stories in school, like the Fordham Baldies, or the Sportsmen.

MN: The Sportsmen.

PM: The Sportsmen, that was the gang. [Crosstalk] That's what I heard.

MN: You heard about that. Did you use Crotona Park a lot; did you go there often?

PM: Sure, yes.

MN: What were some of the activities you did in Crotona Park?

PM: Well it seems that Crotona Park was so far away in those days. It just appeared, walking up to Crotona Park. It seemed like that was really out of the neighborhood. But we went to the pool there all the time, and up to the lake, and just to go up and play, to play. Because some of the older girls on the block would baby-sit us. And there was a sense of trust, with the parents trusting these - - trusting us with them.

MN: What about movies? What were some of the movie theatres you went to?

PM: There was the Freeman.

MN: Where was that located?

PM: That was on Southern Boulevard and Freeman Street. And there was the Burland, the Lowe's Burland, and the Lowe's - - and the RKO Franklin. And there was one - - there was a movie theatre, it was called the King, and it was up on Boston Road. Recently, - - they just recently tore that down.

LA: Just tore it down.

PM: But my mother said that Count Basie used to perform there, and Helen Humes. Because my mother, I think she went there.

MN: At the King Theatre.

PM: Yes, the King - - [Crosstalk] right there on Boston Road. They just tore it down.

MN: [Crosstalk] So they have live music at some of these theatres?

PM: Yes. Well at that one they did.

MN: And this was in what, the forties or - -

PM: No, in the fifties, because I remember - - I don't - - it might have been in the early fifties. I went to the King. I can remember going to that movie maybe once or twice before it closed down. But, what I was told, they had live music.

MN: Did your mother know Billie Holiday?

PM: Yes, she did know her, not well, but she did know her.

MN: Was she someone in your mother's circle or - -

PM: No, they did not hang out in the same circles.

MN: When you were at Junior High School 40, what was your academic goal at that time? Did you know you wanted to be a nurse?

PM: Well, yes, not at first. My mother said you got to start thinking what you want to do in life, and she would give me certain vocational books to read, books, encyclopedias.

World Book Encyclopedias had editions what are you going to do in the future kind of thing. And I was a volunteer at Lincoln Hospital while I was in junior high.

MN: While you were in junior high?

PM: Yes. So you could get some experience. That's what you did.

MN: How many siblings did you have?

PM: I have one brother.

MN: Older or younger?

PM: Older.

MN: Where did he go - - did he also go to 40?

PM: No. He grew up in Pennsylvania, but he went to Clinton. He went to Clinton High School.

MN: Then did he stay in the house that you were living in with you?

PM: For awhile, yes.

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

PM: Evander Childs.

MN: What was Evander like in the fifties? Was it a good school?

PM: Sixties, I was in the sixties. It was a very good school. What happened, see, prior to that time, the only high school available to go to was Morris, or vocational high schools such as Grace Dodge or Jane Adams. By the time I suppose the population of the area was getting so big, there was no room just in Morris, so they opened up Roosevelt High School and Evander Childs as high schools that you could choose from.

MN: Were those considered better academically than Morris?

PM: Yes.

MN: Was Morris considered a tough school in the early sixties?

PM: It was, but I'll tell you something. This is true. I know - - we had friends in Harlem. My mother had friends, and her son wanted to go Morris when he was coming up, and gave our address so he could go there. So I think this was around the time that Colin Powell - - during that time.

MN: Yes, in the fifties.

PM: Actually yes, the late forties.

MN: When you were going to Evander, was it still predominantly Italian or it was more mixed?

PM: It was - - I guess I don't know. I know it was Italian and there were Jewish people there. There were a growing African-American population who had moved up that way.

MN: What was your academic experience there? Did you find it a strong academic environment?

PM: Oh, very strong. It was challenging. I will say this though, it was - - it wasn't as easy as I thought it would be after coming out of junior high and have always been in the top classes. So it was - - you had to work a little harder. It was not easy.

MN: Did you go to college right after high school, or - -

PM: No, I worked one year as a messenger at Equitable Life Insurance Society.

MN: In Manhattan?

PM: In Manhattan. I became - - after that, proof reader. But I knew I was going into nursing school. But the population, the census in nursing school is very small, so the class had closed, so I went the next year.

MN: Which nursing school did you - -

PM: King's County Hospital Center in Brooklyn.

MN: So you went all the way out to Brooklyn?

PM: All the way out to Brooklyn. I think I might have been the first [Laughter], with the exception of going to Coney Island.

MN: And you did this every day?

PM: No, I stayed there, you had to.

MN: Oh, it was a residential program.

PM: Yes, you had to stay there.

MN: Was it a three year program?

PM: Yes.

MN: And this is a three year RN program?

PM: Yes.

MN: And then when you finished the program, did you come back to the Bronx?

PM: Yes.

MN: At one point did you notice that the neighborhood was changing from the sort of supportive, nurturing - -

PM: Yes. Because a lot of people moved out the area. For instance, on my street, in particular, the people on the other side had to move out at the end of the fifties because they were building on, - - building a new school there. So that took away all that population there and also the population on Jennings Street on that side. So a lot of leaders left the area.

MN: And the people who were displaced were homeowners and a lot of them - -

PM: On Ritter Place, I believe on Jennings Street it was mainly apartments. And then on Freeman Street had between Prospect and on down to about 7th Avenue were private houses. Then they built another school on Bristol Street so people had to move out there. And these are people who had a stake in the community.

MN: When did you become aware that drugs were something to be concerned about? Or was your particular block never an area that got hit very hard?

PM: No, we never were an area that was hit. Our area was never hit.

MN: So Ritter Place was always a stable block?

PM: Yes.

MN: So it was stuff - - so you were able to feel fairly secure there all the way through?

PM: Yes, and plus with your parents and the people on the block, it was always watching. You didn't have time - - people didn't have time to get into trouble, or - - because everyone was looking. I'm not saying it was completely - - there were some things going on.

MN: Did you ever get involved in local politics, or anybody in your family?

PM: Well my mother - - yes my mother became - - she was on the school board. She was a member of District 12. She worked in the public school for awhile. I never really - - when I was at Einstein Nursing I became involved in nursing politics, through health and welfare. And got involved with the New York State Nurses Association, and that was about it.

MN: Was anybody in your family involved with organizations like the NAACP or civil rights groups?

PM: Well my mother was a member of the NAACP, but she wasn't on the board or anything like that.

MN: Now, before Arch mentioned something, there was a House that Jazz Built - -

LA: - - House that Jazz Built.

MN: House that Jazz Built. Talk - - where was that located?

PM: That was located at 1312 Stebbins Avenue. And the goal was to teach children how - - about music. What we found out was that they'd not - - you couldn't teach them music because they didn't know how to read.

MN: What year was this created?

PM: About 1975.

MN: Oh so this was in the middle seventies?

PM: Yes.

MN: And the idea - - and so who were the people who were involved in this program?

PM: Well my mother was the founder of it. I was the fiscal officer. And then we had - - it's a non-profit organization. And we applied and received small amount of funds. I mean, the dues were five dollars a year. We applied and got some small funds from Bronx Council of the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, and it was wonderful. And not only that, but a lot of the parents - - you know there's a cycle sometimes when things go bad. The children don't know because the parents weren't as aware. So we were able to work with the children and the parents. We had them watching the children and also learning and participating in the program. And also, one of the events we used to have to raise money was, quarterly, we would have a jazz concert.

MN: And where would the concert be located?

PM: Various venues. We had one - - for instance, we'd have it maybe in the church.

Reverend Foster's church.

MN: The community church.

PM: Yes the community - -

LA: - - Christ Church

PM: - - Christ Church, yes.

MN: Christ Church.

PM: And we had Lehman, a very big one at Lehman. The Boys Club.

MN: Where was the Boys Club?

PM: Over on - -

UK: - - Southern Boulevard

PM: - - [Crosstalk] Southern Boulevard, behind - - right - - on Southern Boulevard, yes.

The Boys Club - -

MN: - - Is that still there?

PM: Its, is it back on - -

LA: - - [Crosstalk] it's gone, but they moved it up on Hoe Avenue.

PM: Yes, Hoe Avenue, exactly. NYU had one.

MN: Who were some of the people who performed at these?

PM: Frank Foster performed. Quite a few. And also she would showcase some of the children.

MN: How long did the organization last?

PM: Until she died.

MN: Which was in the - -

PM: 1987.

MN: Did you, by any chance, save the records of the organization somewhere?

PM: We did, but we also - - I know we have a lot of, plethora of newsletters that she sent out and things. But some of it was given to Rutgers University.

MN: Right, right. Because the Bronx County Historical Society would be interested in any things like that that are still around. So her papers are at Rutgers?

PM: Not all, some. A lot of them are.

MN: So there is a Maxine Sullivan collection at Rutgers University?

PM: [Laughs] So there's a Maxine - -

MN: So have you been down there to look at them?

PM: I haven't seen them but I know my brother had to as a part of getting it together and sending them over there.

MN: You said something that the biggest problem was the general literacy of the young people.

PM: Yes, that's right.

MN: How did - - what do you think accounted for the difference between the children brought up in the seventies and the children brought up in the fifties?

PM: Basically, the parenting. The parenting, that was very important. As I said, there was this - - first of all, you have a population that didn't know, that didn't know. And there was no one to teach them. So now when the children - - now they have children, the children don't know how to read. That was it. Mainly you had - - and the caring of the parents, the involvement of the parents. My mother was PTA president, PA president for awhile.

MN: Of Junior High School 40 or - -

PM: Well at that time it was 136, this was the new school. [Crosstalk] So you have meetings and you have to get the parents out. Now, later on - - and you have to care for the children, you have to give them a chance, you know. And so she did. Another thing I was told by one of the students, that when they heard that Maxine Sullivan - - because she was going by her real name, Marietta Williams - - but everybody knew it was Maxine Sullivan, that when she had a meeting, everybody came, they had a hundred percent attendance.

LA: They wanted to see her.

PM: They wanted to see her. [Laughter]

MN: Is 1312 Stebbins still there?

PM: The building is still there. [Crosstalk]

MN: - - The building is still there right.

PM: - - But we don't own it anymore

MN: The - - do you think there was a difference in terms of social background between the families who moved to Morrisania in the forties and the families who moved in when people were moving - - you know, moved in - -

PM: I think basically - - no. I think basically they're the same, with the exception of their lack of information and lack of knowledge. But basically it was a working class neighborhood. People tried to better themselves.

MN: So how do you explain the lack of knowledge and - -

PM: Lack of leadership. Lack of neighborhood leadership.

MN: So you - - who were the neighborhood leaders of the early period that weren't there in the late sixties and seventies? Or is it that the leaders moved out and weren't replaced?

PM: Yes. That's one reason. I mean, there's many factors. But, from my point of view that's what I saw. See when the people who lived there had jobs - - when you go out to your job you expand your vision. But if you don't have any - - if you wind up being provincial and right staying in that neighborhood, you don't see anything else.

MN: Are there more people who are not employed or - -

PM: At the moment, I think its coming back around. I know when, you go out in the morning you can see at the bus stops and at the subway stations, some of these people are working. So that's good to see. Plus a lot of the building were abandoned, there wasn't nobody there. You know that whole line of buildings on Prospect Avenue were abandoned.

MN: How did you explain to yourself the fires and the abandonment that hit - -

PM: The way I explained it was people were just abandoning - - owners of the buildings abandoned them. And probably, you know, you always heard it. They want it for the insurance.

MN: Did you ever see fires or - -

PM: See I moved out of the Bronx for awhile in '69.

MN: So you moved out of the Bronx in '69. Where did you go to?

PM: Riverdale [Laughter]. See, I'm one of them. [Laughter]

MN: So you moved to Riverdale. Now was that - - did you get married?

PM: Yes.

MN: Ok, you got married, moved to Riverdale. Then when did you end up coming back to Ritter Place?

PM: After I got divorced I came back. [Laughs].

MN: Did you have children?

PM: No.

MN: Ok, so you came back to Ritter Place in what year?

PM: '82.

MN: Ok, so you were working with your mother from Riverdale with the House that Jazz Built?

PM: Yes.

MN: You were coming down.

PM: Yes.

MN: So you missed the whole period of the fires and the abandonment - -

PM: Well I knew about them, but I didn't - - I'll tell you, when I came - - when I would come down to Ritter Place, it was depressing. It was depressing. You would walk up and down Prospect Avenue and see these burnt out houses. It just - - you'd get these flashbacks. How did this happen? I can remember walking up Prospect Avenue, and a man who had also grown up in the area, he says, can you believe this. And it's hard to believe.

MN: Yes. There must have - - its like history being erased before your eyes.

PM: Yes. I know I heard some people say - - I - - as a matter of fact, one of the doctors I worked with - - well naturally he didn't live in Morrisania. But I think he did some

consultation. I remember him saying, when he came through the South Bronx, he says it looked like Dresden after World War II.

MN: Now what was your specialty in nursing?

PM: I started out in the operating room, and I was head nurse of open-heart surgery in the operating room.

MN: Wow, in Einstein?

PM: At Einstein.

MN: Wow, and then where did you move from there?

PM: Then I stayed there for about fifteen years, and then I went into homecare, and at the moment I do occupational health.

MN: So is that where you work with people individually?

PM: Yes, yes. In homecare I did. In occupational health, you work in an institution and they come in and you see them there.

MN: Is being an operating room head nurse very stressful?

PM: Very stressful. The New York Times had an article once, and I read it. They said - - because you're constantly thinking of the worst case scenario. And they were saying it was one of the most stressful type jobs one could have.

MN: Right, because that - - obviously - -

PM: - - Impending doom I think is how they explained it.

MN: So at a certain point you needed to get out of there?

PM: Yes. But it was great. What I loved - - what I enjoyed is what you call teamwork.

You can't have a weak link at all. You have to know it at a certain discipline. And you're working with the same people. You begin to think - -

UK: - - alike.

PM: You have to think. You have to know what's going - - what you need to give the surgeon next. Before - - and he doesn't have it, so he can have it. So he doesn't have to ask for it. And plus some of the cases, in those days, lasted a long time. Seven, eight hours. You don't really want to break the chain.

MN: So you need a lot of stamina too? [PM Laughs] When you moved back to Ritter Place, so you were - - what were some of the organizations you were involved in in the nursing profession?

PM: New York State Nurses Association, Cardiac Nurses Association, those kind of things.

MN: When you moved back to Ritter Place, did you get involved in local organizations?

PM: No, just the House that Jazz Built.

MN: And when that closed, you pretty much remained involved in nursing?

PM: Yes.

MN: At what point - - did you ever get so pessimistic about the neighborhood that you were tempted to sell the house?

PM: I never did.

MN: That's great.

PM: I don't know, I never did.

MN: And when did you start to feel that things were really turning around?

PM: Well you started seeing things. I know, in, probably in the middle eighties - - but I tell you in the nineties, when you started seeing new houses going up, and the interest in the neighborhood - - see what happened, see in those days, when they said South Bronx,

you know, it was like a label. So if you said you lived in the South Bronx, yes, but it wasn't as - - you thought of all bad things. That's what happened, that was that label place. Nobody - - they didn't live there, they didn't know or have the background that I had.

MN: That's interesting. So from 1945 to the present you've lived in the same house in the heart of the South Bronx.

PM: Yes. In the heart of the South - - the South Bronx keeps moving north every week.

[Laughter]

LA: Every week, yes.

PM: No this is going to be South Bronx in a minute.

LA: Started off 138 Street.

PM: That's right, that's right, exactly right.

LA: 161st.

PM: Yes.

LA: No, 149 Street.

PM: That's right, 149 - -

LA: [Unintelligible]

PM: [Laughs] That's right, that's right.

MN: When you moved back to Ritter Place, did you do most of your shopping in the neighborhood, or did you do it all over the place?

PM: I did it all over the place because by this time I was driving. But I do remember - - I remember growing up, we used to go down to Jennings Street, and they had that market there, right at Wilkins Avenue. And that's what you knew. That was your area. They had

the A&P up on Boston Road and 169th Street. And then there was - - I forgot the name of it. As a matter of fact, the building is still there, right there on Boston Road near Prospect when you cross the street. There was a farmer's - - [Crosstalk] there was a bar there next to it.

LA: The [Unintelligible].

PM: And then next to it there was - -

LA: - - the butcher. We was talking about that the other day.

PM: Yes, I forgot about that.

LA: All the meat - -

PM: All the meat - - that's right. And you went to the butcher to get meat.

MN: Yes. The butcher at the intersection of Boston Road and Prospect?

PM: No, that was a supermarket.

LA: Supermarket.

PM: I forgot what the name of it is. But I - - that was like - -

LA: Was it Fine Foods?

PM: Yes.

LA: Yes, Fine Foods.

PM: And we used to go up there to shop.

LA: Next to Kenny's.

PM: Yes, that's what I was trying to think of, Kenny's Bar. Right.

MN: When you were growing up, were there good restaurant in the neighborhood or most people - -

PM: We didn't go out to eat that much.

MN: Most people cooked at home.

PM: We cooked mainly at home, right. We ate mainly at home.

MN: Did your mother cook, or - -

PM: Yes. She cooked, she cooked. When I was younger we did have a woman who cooked for us. But she cooked, my mother cooked.

MN: Did your mother have somebody come in and clean the house for her?

PM: Yes we did. In the early - - in my early years.

MN: Now, your mother was back performing pretty regularly in the seventies and eighties?

PM: Very much.

MN: And did you go to a lot of her performances?

PM: Yes, yes. I went - - when she came back, I remember it was before I got married, but she was working with the World's Greatest Jazz Band, and they performed at the Riverboat, which was down at 34th Street. And then another club that was owned by the same - - by Longchamps. Oh, the Downbeat, which was on 42nd and Lexington. She had started back in D.C. at a place called Blues Alley, but that was about the time - - which was a small club there, nice club, I went there. Then, when she traveled overseas, I went to France with her and other places and around the country. She worked - - she did a lot of work at Fat Tuesday's, down on 3rd Avenue. She liked that place. Yes.

MN: When you started the House of Jazz, those are the years when hip-hop was beginning in the Bronx.

PM: Not really, it started a little after that. We were there before. But actually, yes, hip-hop - - but you know when you talk about rap - - see, oh, I'll tell you one thing that she

had when we were younger was called the Good Words Club. And we were children there, and we would have meetings in the attic of our house, and one of the things - -

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

PM: - - at the Good Words Club, we would have - - she'd read drama, play games of course. And there were some things, some poems that we read that had to be read in rhythm. So that was before rap as we know it.

MN: So in rhythm. Can you remember a poem?

PM: Yes. I remember one, vaguely, not the whole thing. [Taps a beat, begins reciting in rhythm] 'Twas a dark and stormy night, when my lover went away, I'll never will forget it to my dieing day, she was just sixteen, the village queen, dat at dat at dat at dat at dat at dat dat.

MN: [Laughs] Wow. And then you could - -

PM: But you remember those things.

MN: And you actually created a rhythmic background to it.

PM: Yes.

MN: So when you first started hearing rapping it was - -

PM: - - It connected immediately, immediately.

MN: Did you ever see any of the school yard stuff going on in the neighborhood when you were - - in those years?

PM: Like what?

MN: Outdoor, you know, them connecting up the turntables to - -

PM: Only on block parties. Because when I was coming up, you know - -

MN: So were their block parties where people would take out turntables and - -

PM: I'm trying to remember. I remember when we - - because when we had block parties I was younger. Oh, on Freeman Street I see that they do that now.

MN: They have DJs out there.

PM: They have DJs out there, sure. I have seen that. But I don't remember quite what, how we did it. I'm sure somebody had a record player. [LA Laughs]

MN: When you started hear - - now you have this background - -

PM: - - with needles. [Laughter]

MN: You have this background in jazz and classical music. When you first started hearing rap, what did you think? Are you one of the folks who thought that this was destroying the tradition of great music?

PM: No, I didn't look at it that way because I wanted to listen to see what the young people were listening to. You got to have an open mind. Like Thelonious Monk said I like all kinds of music. And when somebody asked him did you like country and western he said I guess you didn't hear me. [Laughter] And I remember that and it always runs through my head. I had a godson who was listening to Grandmaster Flash and Furious Five, and so I bought it to listen to it. Some of it I like.

MN: Now did Thelonious - - was your mother friendly with Thelonious Monk or they weren't in the same circle?

PM: No. Not that I know of. I don't ever remember him coming to the house, but I knew who he was.

MN: And what about Elmo Hope who lived on - -

PM: Oh yes. I didn't realized that until you told me because I did years later - - then you realize that's who that was.

MN: So he would drop by?

PM: I think so; I'm not sure. But I do remember who he was.

MN: And his wife, Bertha Hope - -

PM: Bertha! I was trying to get her name. As a matter of fact, the last time I saw her was about ten years ago on a jazz cruise when she played.

MN: Oh she was playing. Yes, she's coming up in two weeks to be interviewed and she has - - yes, so she was playing on a jazz cruise?

PM: I think she was a passenger and [INAUDIBLE]

LA: Somebody recognized her.

PM: Yes - - they you know - - it was a big - - everybody was on this cruise so they knew who she was. So she sat in, if you will.

MN: In looking back at this sort of overall neighborhood experience, what are the kinds of things that most come through; the things that are most important to think about in going over this whole Morrisania experience you've had?

PM: What I think what I remember most is you had a sense of security, and you had a sense of going forward. I wouldn't say you had a sense of hope because we didn't ever have not a sense of hope, but you felt that you could make a difference. And there was - - everybody had goals. You didn't think you were just going to just live, you weren't going to just exist, you had goals and that's what I think mainly of.

MN: Do you think that- -

PM: - - A sense of making a difference.

MN: Do you think that kids had - - it was easier growing up then than it is now?

PM: I think so. I do think so. There are so many stresses on young people now, drugs, and violence, and many of them don't have anybody to turn to, to talk to, to express themselves. We could talk to someone, and then people were watching. There is a certain discipline too that goes with growing up and becoming something, and we had that. If someone told you don't do something you didn't do it.

MN: So you have a lot of parents, you had a lot of mentors, you had a lot of role - -

PM: Yes, mentors. Even those people who did not have children lived on the block.

LA: The village thing was a real thing back then.

MN: Everybody was involved with raising everyone's children.

PM: Yes. And telling your parents if you didn't.

MN: Are there residues of that today? Do you see any of that in your block now with the parents?

PM: Yes, oh yes.

MN: So people are trying to do that?

PM: Yes. I do it.

MN: So you're in charge of the block?

PM: No. [Laughter] No.

MN: No, because - -

PM: I did have - - I had in my backyard, about four years ago, I had - - my neighbor and I collaborated and we had a reunion of people who grew up on Ritter Place. And we had quite a turnout, we had quite a turnout. And it went by word of mouth.

MN: If you saw something on the block that you didn't like, would you now feel confident in going and confronting the people or would you call the police?

PM: I have, both, both.

MN: And you still go out and say you shouldn't be doing that on my street?

PM: Yes, I remember someone had a radio loud, and I went out and I told them to turn it down. But you have to be - - a lot of times people don't realize what they're doing. You can't just jump on someone. I'm surprised - - if you approach some children, and you tell them that, for the most part they listen. If they don't, then you go to step two.

MN: So you - - if there were some kids sitting on your stoop.

PM: Not if, always. [Laughter] Always.

MN: How do you handle that?

PM: Please don't sit on the stoop. Because I think, I think, I'm convinced that they think that's a public building. I have seen people bring their children with baby carriages and sit on the steps. I have seen this. This is all the time. I catch it - -

MN: - - have you ever said - -

PM: - - but they always did. Listen, when I was growing up, every - - all the kids ran up on the building, on the house. I did it.

MN: Do people ever get in your face when you tell them this?

PM: No.

MN: Well that's impressive. So it sounds like - -

PM: I ask them please don't sit on my - -

MN: So there's still an amount of civility and respect left?

PM: Yes.

MN: It's not like, oh this respect is going out the window.

PM: No, no, no. I ask them. They bring [INAUDIBLE] - -

MN: Do you still have block parties on Ritter Place?

PM: No. No because we didn't have that many people left. As I said I had the reunion in my backyard, and - -

MN: But the population now is much less than it was.

PM: It's much less. I think it's going to grow because the apartment building had been renovated and people are beginning to move back in, and I'm sure they're going to have children.

MN: Are you starting to see more people from other parts of the world move into the neighborhood?

PM: Yes, yes.

MN: Are there any people from West African, or mostly from Latin America - -

PM: I've seen a few from Africa - - yes there are some. I have seen that. I have seen that. I see an Indian population moving in. A larger Hispanic population.

MN: Have you started to see anything like what happened in Harlem, where sort of young professionals are starting to see this as an up and coming neighborhood and buying - - that hasn't happened yet?

PM: No, that hasn't happened. I haven't - - I don't know if it has, it might be, but I haven't seen that. But I do know some people are coming back to the neighborhood for a lot of reasons. It's unbelievable, you have transportation right there. I don't want to tell everybody this [Laughter] [Crosstalk] [INAUDIBLE] and the price goes up. But you know, you have great transportation, they're building new homes - -

MN: - - I tell my students, if you're looking for a housing bargain, this is the neighborhood to go.

PM: That's the place to go.

MN: Any new restaurants open up in your neighborhood?

PM: Yes, but just like every other place they close just as fast. But I haven't - - I know I was talking with my neighbor, and we did say that's one thing we wish that we would see, some family restaurants, or restaurants where you can go and take - - if you don't want to cook tonight you can have a nice meal, sit down, rather than fast food. As opposed to some place like Parkchester or farther up.

MN: Arch, are there any questions you want to ask that I didn't ask?

LA: No, he's hitting them all. [PM Laughs] [INAUDIBLE]

MN: What about you Rheanna, do you have anything you're curious about?

RE: No, but I was interested in your organization with the kids and literacy and teaching them music.

PM: Yes. That happened - - it was very good, it was very, very good. What happened - - she worked very hard - - we had a great board - -

MN: - - Who was your board of directors?

PM: We had - - some of them were in the entertainment business, friends that we knew. We used to - - Saint Peter's Church down on Lexington Avenue, they call it jazz church. And she would be down there, so a lot of knowledge that she got and information of how to do this, she got from Reverend Ginsel, some of the board members of the church, and they supported her. Wilma Dobbie, who was a very good friend of hers is a journalist and so all this information - - by the way, Doc Cheatam was one other name I forgot, left out, who used to come to the house, but - -

MN: What instrument was he?

PM: Trumpet. So we got that - - we had - - and then people who she met. She had a following, and she would, when she did gigs, she would tell these people give them a membership card, they send five dollars, some could afford more, and they were very supportive.

MN: Did you work on general literacy as well as musical literacy?

PM: Had to, had to do it, they didn't know how to read. So what she did was - - it was very interesting because she did a lot of reading, she read everything. And one of the musicians' - - like the union paper, Allegro, or International Musicians, they would have ads in them. And I never forget, she got - - there was an ad of teaching children how to read through music. And so it had it, she got that, she bought up every volume, and funny thing is because she also had - - also these books for piano that say like Christmas carols with a jazz background, or classical background, all these different music books. Or music minus one, and I remember one of the people who put out the publication called her, he wanted to know who is this that wanted to buy all these books, he hadn't sold anything, and now somebody wanted all volumes. But that's what she did, and these things work. Everything helps.

MN: Did you have instrument that you let the young people take home?

PM: No, not take home, but to use it, no, no. [INAUDIBLE] used to get instruments, Clark - - well she didn't - - she didn't used to have a - - Clark Terry gave her a flugelhorn. Milt Hinton gave us an electric bass. We had, we - -

MN: So they played the instruments in the facility?

PM: In the facility. And mainly you start off with rhythm instruments, clavier, bongo drums, maracas.

MN: Really, so you did all that stuff?

PM: Yes, you do that. That's what you start - - like Tito Puente said if you don't have any claviers you ain't got no music.

MN: Did your mother know Tito Puente?

PM: Yes, and Machito.

MN: Really?

PM: Yes.

MN: Did they ever come over to the house?

PM: Machito used to - - I never - - for years, we used to get cards from Machito.

MN: Cars?

PM: Cards.

MN: Oh [Laughs].

PM: Christmas cards

MN: Christmas cards.

PM: Because I believe he lived over in the Bronx, he lived in the Bronx. But I never realized it was Machito, and because his would be Fran Grillo, that was his name. And Tito - - I - - she knew him, but I met him at one of the Grammy Awards in California. He had just come back from the record company, Concord, up there. And we were talking, he said yes, he said we were just talking about your mother this afternoon with the owner up there. So I met Tito, but you met these people.

MN: Did you grow up listening to Latin music?

PM: Yes, sure.

MN: Did you dance Latin?

PM: Yes, absolutely, absolutely [Laughter]. Of course, you know you weren't in

[Crosstalk]- -

MN: Ok, so if you were in the Bronx you would - -

PM: Pacheco, Eddie and Charlie Palmieri.

MN: Did you ever go to the Hunts Point Palace?

PM: I went there once. I was really too young. See, I didn't - - by the time - - it was phasing out. But I do remember going to the Hunts Point palace over on 163rd - -

LA: Southern Boulevard.

PM: Southern Boulevard, yes. I do remember at least once going there. That was a big thing.

MN: Did you ever go to live Latin dances and if so - -

PM: - - Oh yes.

MN: - - where were some - -

PM: The Palladium. That was the thing by the time in high school. I had to probably beg my mother because I was too - - I was a teenager, but my teenage friends in school, that's where they went on Sundays.

MN: Ok, to the Palladium?

PM: To the Palladium, yes.

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

PM: Yes, sure.

MN: Did you have any friends who were - - who sang?

PM: I didn't, but I loved - - I remember going to the Apollo as a young teenager.

Definitely liked that.

MN: Did you know any of the Morrisania people who were Doo-wop singers?

PM: I'm not sure, like who?

MN: Like the Chords, the Feaster Brothers.

PM: Oh, the Feasters, I know who they were. I didn't know them personally. I didn't realize Chords came from the Bronx.

MN: The Chantells?

PM: Oh yes, of course, Chantells. Because what's her name lived on Jennings Street, and her brother - -

MN: Not Arlene?

PM: No, not Arlene. She passed away. Landry, Jackie Landry.

MN: Right, so she was from Jennings Street?

PM: Yes. And there was another one - - I forgot the name. They weren't as popular or as a big name as them that lived in that same building, another group.

MN: Of guys or women?

PM: They were girls, it was a girl group.

MN: What about - - did you ever go to the talent shows at P.S. 99 or the - -

PM: Yes, I forgot all about that, that's right, that's right.

MN: Somebody told me they had what they called grind them up dances at - - [Laughter]

PM: Who told you that? [Laughter]

MN: Tell me about the ground them up dances.

PM: Yes, that's true.

LA: No lights.

PM: No lights. Or the red lights, or the red lights.

MN: They had red lights?

PM: Or they - - and then earlier than that they were called sets. You remember when they were called sets?

LA: Yes.

MN: So this is in a public school, they'd have dances - -

PM: And all - - Yes, 99 - - and also - - and in the church too. What was it, Victory - -

MN: Victory Baptist. [Crosstalk]

PM: Or Trinity, it was Trinity.

MN: Trinity Episcopal?

PM: Yes, Trinity.

MN: You'd have dances?

PM: Yes, that was - -

MN: And they turned - - put on red lights?

PM: Well I don't know, I think they kept the lights on then, but they had - -

LA: There was somebody looking out.

PM: Right, P.S. 63 had them, yes, that's right, I forgot about that.

MN: So you had dances at these - -

PM: Yes.

MN: What about the talent shows? What are your recollections of those?

PM: I don't really - - I had forgotten all about that. I remember it, but it was a big thing.

See that's another thing we had. You didn't have to be that good. I remember, though, I went to one place - - you know you do certain things when you're young, crazy. Marian Cowings - - I don't know if you - - Marian Cowings is a friend of Jimmy Owens. He

went to Music and Art also, and he's a singer, and we were - - there was a party or something and we sang, we actually sang. It was a talent show.

MN: So you sang occasionally?

PM: Not occasionally. That was one time, you know you do these things once [Laughter].

MN: What about - - were there a lot of house parties in the neighborhood?

PM: Yes, my mother didn't really like me going to house parties when she didn't know the people and things like that.

MN: And were they chaperoned usually or - -

PM: Yes, there was definitely somebody there. Now, whether they were physically in the room all night, yes.

LA: Folks lead them in the corner and give them a beer - - [Crosstalk] [INAUDIBLE]

PM: That's right, that's the truth.

MN: So these were like red light, green light, blue light parties?

PM: Blue light, right. Sure.

MN: So the lights would be down dim?

PM: Yes.

MN: This leads me to another subject. Was there much teen pregnancy in the neighborhood? Was that something you were aware of?

PM: There were, but I don't know about a lot. But there were, there were.

MN: Did you know people you had grown up with?

PM: None of my friends that I [INAUDIBLE]. We knew of some people, but it was shunned upon. Nowadays, its almost - - doesn't matter.

LA: It was a thing back then, mark, that some of your parents would tell you that if a boy touch you, you was pregnant.

PM: Oh yes. That's right, they did tell us that.

LA: Girls wouldn't even let a guy get close to them.

MN: Did you grow up expecting to get married? Was that seen as a goal growing up, or was the profession put ahead of getting married in your house - -

PM: The profession was put ahead, the profession. You figured you would, but getting self - - being able to sustain yourself on your own.

MN: And that was an important value in your family?

PM: Yes, yes.

MN: Anything else - - because we keep - -

PM: New things come up, you know - -

LA: Was Reverend Wendell Foster ever involved as a board member?

PM: Yes, yes.

MN: He was a supporter of the house - -

PM: Yes, yes. And as I said, we had one of our - - a couple of our House that Jazz Built concerts at his house. It's hand in hand with being community.

MN: What about any other - - was the Bronx Borough President - -

PM: Oh yes. I had an exhibit, I also do photography, and one of my - - and what I do is jazz photography.

MN: You're a jazz photographer?

PM: Jazz photographer. Where - - and not so much taking pictures of people onstage, but backstage, like journalism. When people at ease. And so I had an exhibit at the rotunda of

the Bronx - - 161st Street. The Borough president at that time, Stanley Simon - - and he also was a supporting member, sort of a supporting - - I don't know if he could be that when he was in politics, but he - - I remember that he swore us in, of the board members, he swore us in as a ceremony when we - - one year.

MN: Was your goal to produce musicians or to produce healthier, more literate, more successful young people, or both with the House that Jazz Built?

PM: Well both, because we were just get young children - - and some of them, we had a couple of kids who went in music; I don't know how far they went. But to get them aware of things.

MN: Did the music programs that you had in the school, did those whither away?

PM: Yes, and it's too bad that it did. It was excellent - - you would go in the room and there would be twenty cellos lined up against - -

MN: In junior high school 40 - -

PM: In junior high - -

MN: They'd have twenty cellos.

PM: There'd be twenty cellos, the violins over here, horns in the band room. It's inconceivable that they don't have it now in the schools.

MN: See that's I think is something very important, because my wife's an elementary school principal in Brooklyn and they started music again and they found rotting instruments in the basement.

PM: Jeez [Laughs]. That's a sin. It's a sin, it's a sin.

MN: Do you know if there are - -

PM: - - And you learn how to tune instruments, you just didn't play, you learned how to tune the instruments. The teacher didn't tune it unless it was - -

MN: Are any people now involved in trying to bring music back into the schools the way you had when you were going?

PM: Not that I know of, not that I know of.

MN: You feel starting an organization?

PM: That would be great. [Laughter] Stop signing me up. [Laughter].

MN: Maybe we could have the Bronx put the music back in the schools committee.

PM: [Crosstalk] It needs to - -

MN: Because it sounds like - - the idea that you walk into a school in the middle of the South Bronx, which nobody thought of - - you have twenty cellos - -

PM: - - Basses over there, five or six basses. Because it's got to have enough for each person in the class.

MN: Drums, tubas - -

PM: - - Drums, tubas, clarinets, trombones.

LA: You'd stop a lot of this - - now the boys and the girls are hanging on the corners, because there's nothing for them - -

PM: And the girls, that's rights - - there's nothing for them to - - I was watching, last night, and it's cold, you know you'd figure the streets would be clear, and I was walking in my neighborhood and I saw the boys and girls just hanging there. And I said to myself, if they had something to do, they would at least be inside.

MN: So they don't have sports, they don't have music.

PM: And they're just hanging. There's no nourishing.

MN: And you could take those instruments home.

PM: On the weekend, Fridays you took the instruments home, brought it back on Monday, and everybody did. Nobody forgot or said - - nobody broke them.

MN: And you don't see kids taking cellos and basses and tubas on the bus now.

PM: No.

LA: No.

PM: I will say this, I think when - - if I'm on the train, and those who go to Laguardia - -

MN: Laguardia, yes. But not in the - - not up and down Prospect Avenue - -

PM: Not down Prospect Avenue, no - -

MN: There are not tubas on Boston Road.

PM: [Laughs] No tubas on Boston Road. And it would be great.

MN: Because this is also - -

PM: And it's a responsibility too.

MN: This - - I'm very serious that this would be something that [Crosstalk] might come out of this. Because Joe Orange and Jimmy Owens learned to play at Junior High School 40 and at Morris.

PM: I know, I know, he was - - I remember when I went into - - when I went into junior high he was a senior.

MN: And he was a star?

PM: And he was a star then. Because they had a jazz band. I'll never forget, my mother went to one of the recitals. Edna Smith was the bandleader, she had been in the Sweethearts of Rhythm, bassist. And - -

MN: She lead the jazzband - -

PM: Yes. She - -

LA: Its all female group, right?

PM: What, yes?

MN: Now this is the Sweethearts of Rhythm - -

PM: Yes, she had been the bassist, she was. But before that we - - there was - -

MN: - - and she was teaching in the Bronx public schools?

PM: She was teaching, she was teaching in 40. And before that, Mr. Lightener had taught, and I think he had the band before that, and the orche - - we had an excellent - - Lorraine Jeffries, who was the glee club director, had the best glee club in the Bronx, and that's simple as that. But anyway, so my mother goes to this concert, and she was so impressed by the jazz band. And she said they were playing flying home, you know Lionel Hampton's great tune. And for awhile there I played the piano in the jazz band.

MN: So you played piano as well as cello?

PM: Yes, but not that well. I think I probably wanted to be in there because the boys were [Laughter]. I can't believe I did that. Those are some of the things I remember, some of them with horror [Laughter]. I have the highest respect for anyone who gets up on the stage and earn a living.

MN: Anything else because we're - -

PM: - - on a role.

MN: We're on a role here. Rhenna, do you have any questions about this music stuff?

RE: Well, I actually used to play the tuba in high school, and - -

PM: I couldn't get a sound out of that.

RE: Oh.

PM: - - tuba.

RE: I was in marching band too, yes.

PM: Were you?

RE: Yes. And the fact that the music was there when you were growing up and it's not there now, it's just, it's like - - music is such a great thing to me in my life, and I'm sure it's affected a lot of people that the fact that it's not there - - [Crosstalk]

PM: Absolutely.

MN: Let me mention you, because you mentioned all the kids out in the street. Let me mention something that I notice in you neighborhood. It's just from not being there that much. I spend a lot of time at Johnson's Barbeque sitting in the front waiting for ribs - -

PM: I didn't even know that still was until you - - until I read the article. I didn't know it was still going.

MN: Oh man, it's - -

PM: So I went by there to make sure that you weren't telling - - that you were telling the truth.

MN: Well you ate the food.

RE: Yes.

PM: It's very soulful.

MN: But one of the things I notice is I almost never see a group of one or two boys alone, they almost always walk in larger packs.

PM: That's true.

MN: Maybe four or more or something - -

PM: - - That's right.

MN: - - and it seems like they don't feel safe walking by, they need to have that group.

PM: That's very interesting. I never - - it's true. I see it all the time, but it never registered, but they do - - because I think sometimes when you see them in packs there is a sense of fear, you know?

MN: I - - and these are not necessarily - -

PM: - - So I didn't look at it that way.

MN: These are not quote gangs - -

PM: No, right.

MN: They call them crews, but I still remember a young man that I coached in baseball who was very, very bright, but by the time he was in junior high, he feel his intelligence had to be pulling together a crew - -

PM: That's right.

MN: - - to protect him, rather than on his academics. So if you imagine trying to give activities to these young men or young women, it would make a big difference.

PM: Oh it would. Well when I look at them - - see when I see them, that's the - - I look at it that way - - you see a bunch of people - - I never looked at it they needed to be together for safety in numbers, but that's true.

MN: But anyway - -

PM: But by the way, getting back to games, stickball was a [Crosstalk] - -

MN: Oh, stickball. Now was that the boys played or some girls played?

PM: Yes, no. I never saw the girls play.

MN: There was no quote tomboy in your block?

PM: Oh yes, there was, there were. I know one, there was, there was a tomboy. There might have been more than one, but one vividly in my mind.

MN: When did you first meet Bunchy Fox? Did you know her growing up?

PM: No, I knew her sister, Inez, because we went to dancing school. And that's another thing, at the end of - - Ms. Gary lived on Union Avenue, and she had a garage, and she turned it into a dancing school.

MN: A dancing school?

PM: Yes, it was [INAUDIBLE] - - it's on Ritter Place.

MN: Like Union and Ritter?

PM: Yes.

MN: And when did this school open? When - -

PM: I had to be about six or seven years old.

MN: So you went to this school?

PM: Yes.

MN: And what did you learn? What sort of - -

PM: Tap, ballet, and acrobatics.

MN: Acrobatics?

PM: That's - - [Laughs]

MN: What were the acrobatics?

PM: You know, back bends and - -

MN: Did you do cartwheels?

PM: - - cartwheels, yes.

MN: Handstands.

PM: Headstands, that was my specialty.

LA: How to walk on your head.

PM: That's right.

MN: Did you ever become like a cheerleader?

PM: Oh yes. When I was in Evander I was a cheerleader.

MN: So you were a cheerleader?

PM: Yes, I was a cheerleader.

MN: So you did all those flips and stuff?

PM: Yes, we did that. Well, I came in at a great time. I was in the - - I came into Evander the year of the infamous fight between Evander and Clinton.

MN: You know we heard about that in Brooklyn.

PM: Really?

MN: They heard people were hanging people were hanging people off the Triboro Bridge by their ankles [Laughter]. That was - - what was that like?

PM: Well what happened was - - at that time I came in it was - - we were - - I was a booster. Because that's the first step to becoming a cheerleader. And we were playing Clinton and we lost twenty-one to nothing, and then supposedly the fight started at Gunhill Road station, at the station. And when we got to school Monday - - it was in the paper, it was front page news in the Saturday paper. And we came to school on Monday, Dr. Alpern went over the loudspeaker. He was ashamed of us, dada dada dada. I had nothing to do with this [Laughter]. Supposedly somebody was hiding bats someplace for this fight, supposedly, and he dismantled the football team.

MN: He took away - - he - -

PM: Just like that.

MN: So there was no more football?

PM: So there was no football. [Crosstalk] A long while, a very long while.

MN: Now they took away the football team - -

PM: And we - - and they had a stadium, right next to Evander. But what happened was we used the cheerleaders for the basketball team, we still had basketball.

MN: So all that gymnastics came in handy?

PM: Yes.

MN: I think of all these activities you had. You were going to Harlem to - - I guess you were in the choir.

PM: Yes.

MN: You were doing dance right around the corner, you had all this music - -

PM: Yes.

MN: - - you had programs at P.S. 99 after school - -

PM: Oh yes, they had that.

MN: - - Trinity Church, P.S. 63. Look at all the places you had to go.

PM: That's right, yes.

MN: Did you ever go to Forest Neighborhood House?

PM: Yes, my mother would - - yes, my mother - - yes. I'm trying - - as a matter of fact, I might have gone there first because she - - they had a dramatic workshop there.

MN: So you were in that too? [Laughs]

PM: No, I wasn't but my mother was. My mother was.

MN: Your mother was - - there was an adult dramatic workshop?

PM: Yes, and I'll tell you who came out of there.

MN: Yes?

PM: Diana Sands.

MN: Diana Sands came out of the adult - -

LA: - - have a school in here name there.

PM: Yes, right on Webster.

MN: And Diana Sands, what block was she from?

PM: I don't remember what block she was from.

MN: So your mother did drama? Well that's right, she acted.

PM: Yes, she acted.

MN: What were some of the movies she was in?

PM: There were two. It was called Going Places, with Louis Armstrong, and the other one I believe it's called St. Louis Blues.

MN: Did she sing in these movies?

PM: Yes, yes. And they would say the production number, but see there was a - - it was very important - - it was an African American - - I guess something similar to like Variety, it was called the Coordinating Council of Negro Performers, CCNP. And she belonged to that, and I'll tell you who was the president of it, because he became, he later became the first black president of Actors Equity was O'Neill. I can't get his first name now.

MN: Yes, I know who you're talking about.

PM: Not Eugene O'Neill. Anyways, he became the - - but they used to have meetings at my house, and so a lot of people came through.

MN: Of this Coordinating - -

PM: For the council of negro actors and actresses. And my mother had friends who were actors and actresses.

MN: Who ran the dramatics workshops at Forest House?

PM: I don't know. I don't remember.

MN: So this was a program of adult theater?

PM: Yes.

MN: What did you do at Forest House?

PM: Fred O'Neill was his name.

MN: Fred O'Neill. What did you do at Forest House?

PM: It was like after school arts and crafts, that kind of thing because I was young at that time. But the main thing is to keep you off the streets, keep you - - my mother never wanted - - she did not like to see kids bored.

MN: I sort of just want to - - this whole theme of what kids had then. Here you have - - let me ask you one other question. Did you ever go to summer camp?

PM: Yes.

MN: Did you go - - you didn't happen to go to Minisink?

PM: I didn't go to Minisink.

MN: Where did you go to summer - -

PM: I went to Brighton Rock. That was up in Ulster County. It was run by a minister from Harlem. And not only did I go to camp there, I went to their - - in the winter, I went to boarding school up there for one year. They housed children, and then you went to school in the area, Onteora Central School.

MN: And this was when you were in what grade?

PM: Third grade.

MN: You were boarded when you were in third grade?

PM: Yes [Laughs].

MN: What? You went to boarding school in third grade?

PM: That's right. My mother was doing a lot of traveling that year. I don't know, you don't know what you parents are thinking. You know, you just do what you're told.

[Laughs] You don't ask questions.

MN: But to go - - it sounds like the range of supervised activities you had was unbelievable, and cultural opportunities.

PM: Yes, sure.

MN: And along with people in your block who looked out for you. It was - -

PM: Yes. And people didn't have a lot of money.

MN: But just the range, the nurturing that you got is just amazing, and you know, which isn't there now.

LA: No.

PM: No.

MN: So, one of the things - - to me, this is one of the messages of this project. From - - that kids - - it shouldn't be that kids growing up in the fifties have much more than kids now.

PM: How about that.

MN: That doesn't - - that's not right. It's something to - -

Interviewer: Mark Naison, Leroi Archibald, Rheanna Tsakonas

Interviewee: Paula Morris

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PM: When you say this, I think of sometimes when you had - - let's say if city center was having the yearly Nutcracker, there'd be discounts, discounts, and you could get tickets.

When my mother had the House that Jazz Built, whatever year when the Cool Jazz Festival would be in there, she'd get in touch with George Wein or his office, and get ten or twenty tickets for the kids. And they would have jazz on the Staten Island Ferry. She'd take the kids there. She'd get in touch with Walter Shapp over at Columbia, and if they were having something, he gave - - you know they got some tickets. Some of them were discounted, and you can go there. And that was in the seventies, but it all petered out.

MN: Anything else before we go to lunch? [Laughter]

RE: I just ran out of tape.

PM: Just in time.

MN: Well thank you so much for this illuminating interview, and it also sounds like you have a treasure of materials in your house, in terms of as a documentary source, important to look into.

PM: It was my pleasure.

[END OF TAPE]