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Miller, Henry & Stephanie

Bronx African American History Project
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Transcriber: Laura Kelly

Mark Naison (MN): This is the 63rd interview of the Bronx African American History Project. We're here with Henry Miller who has been a writer, a producer, and a scholar in the area of theatre and with Stephanie Miller who is a retired New York City elementary school principal. And both grew up in the Morisannia section of the Bronx. So, I'd like to start first with you Stephanie. When did your family first move to the Bronx?

Stephanie Miller (SM): In the early '40's.

MN: Did they come from Harlem or did they come from directly from another part of the country?

SM: My father is Canadian, was Canadian so he - - this was probably his third New York address. My mother was born in Massachusetts.

MN: And where had they been living before they moved to the Bronx?

SM: My father had been in different areas of New York City and my mother had lived for a long time in the Bronx.

MN: Oh, okay. So your mother was living in the Bronx when she met your father?

SM: Umm, yes.

MN: What section?

SM: In the Morisannia section.

MN: Now what was - - when they were married, what was their first address?

SM: 787 Hewett Place.

MN: Now that's between where and where?

SM: Now let's see, that's just off Longwood Avenue, near Prospect Avenue.

MN: Okay. And what sort of work did your father do?

SM: My father was a waiter.

MN: Uh huh. In what section of the city?

SM: He was a waiter in a very posh restaurant in Manhattan [laughs].

MN: Oh okay. And did your mother work?

SM: Yes, my mother was mainly a clerk for the state insurance fund.

MN: Uh huh. And how long did they live - - was this an apartment or a house?

SM: It was an apartment.

MN: And how long did they live at that particular address?

SM: Oh, easily 35 years.

MN: Okay, so that was their long term residence. And Henry, when did your family move to the Bronx?

Henry Miller (HM): Well, let me begin - - they moved when I was 11 months old. So that would be 1944, probably May of 1944.

MN: And where did they move from?

HM: They came from Harlem. My grandfather found this apartment, this is some extended family, so my grandfather found this apartment in the Bronx and that's when they moved. But I'm trying to think. I think its 112th street, which may be off of Lenox Avenue, was where they had lived. So they moved from Harlem.

MN: And where did your grandfather find the apartment? What was the address?

HM: Oh this is the famous block in the Bronx in certain ways, the 800 block of Kelly Street.

MN: Oh okay.

HM: Which is the Isaac of a [inaudible] singer's block, and the [inaudible] before. And it's the block that there, probably that research has shown that there was an article in the New York Times that called it the epitome of an American black ghetto. So you see, it's that block. Eight forty seven Kelly Street.

MN: But when your family moved there it wasn't all African American was it?

HM: No, not at all. Not that whole block. And the next block over, Beck Street was totally Jewish because Kelly Street had been. This block was now [inaudible] and some Hispanics. But the whole area was definitely not. I mean I went to integrated schools [laughs].

MN: Now what about the block you moved on? Was it also racially mixed or was it predominantly black when you were growing up?

SM: When I was growing up it was predominantly black, yes.

MN: Now did your family come up from the South originally or from the West Indies?

HM: No, my grandfather came from Atlanta, they were from Atlanta. I think it's 1922 that he came to New York because my mother was born here. [inaudible] was two years old, in fact, so that would be 1923.

MN: And is your father also of Southern - -

HM: Yes he is. Yeah my father was born in Virginia and raised in Florida and came to New York - -

MN: And what sort of work did your grandfather do?

MN: My grandfather was, I think he got this apartment because I think he was initially the superintendent - -

MN: The superintendent.

HM: Yeah. I think that's what - -

MN: Yeah, okay. Which is a fairly common story.

HM: - - story, yeah.

MN: And what about your father? What sort of work did he - -

HM: My father was a merchant seaman.

MN: He was a merchant seaman?

HM: Yeah.

MN: Was he a member of the National Maritime Union?

HM: Oh yes, very [inaudible].

MN: Was he an active member?

HM: Very active member [laughs].

MN: So was he - - did you grow up in a politically conscious household? Was - -

HM: Very. But that was more from my grandfather then - - I mean it's a very strange thing. That was more from my grandfather than anybody. I mean he was sort of like the head of that. Because of that extended family kind of thing and these older people had all of these political discussions and forecast the civil rights movement about 25 days before it happened [laughs].

MN: Right. I know the National Maritime Union had an African American secretary treasurer Ferdinand Smith.

HM: Far before any - -

MN: Far before.

HM: I see.

MN: Yeah, and - -

HM: I didn't know that.

MN: See I know something about the history of that union just from my own other research.

HM: I see, I see.

MN: Now, what was your - - again, go back to Stephanie. What was your growing up experiences like on your block? I'm particularly interested in, you know, sort of a girls point of view. Were there a lot of street games or were you living in a fairly protective household?

SM: I had a kind of an interesting experience because it was a dual experience. My mother didn't want me to go to P.S. 39, which was our local school. So, we used my grandmother's address and she lived across the street from P.S. 62. So during the week I was on Fox Street, about 7 blocks away and on the weekends I was on Hewett Place. And in both instances, although the playmates were different ethnically, in both instances there was a lot of street play and a lot of inventive games and so forth.

MN: Now was it your experience that girls played separately in elementary school, you know, in separate groups they played? Or were they mixed gender playgroups?

SM: It depended on what the game was. If it was punch ball, it was mixed. But if it was -
- or if it was roller derby in the street it was mixed. But in other games it might be just
girls. If it was hop scotch it was just girls.

MN: And do you recall the block that you grew up on as being a safe one?

SM: Yes, we felt safe.

MN: Uh huh. Were parents very visible watching?

SM: They were invisible watching but there was always some old lady with her face in
the window. Usually someone large enough to fill the window, and she was the one
watching out. You couldn't do anything without someone telling your parents.

MN: Right, right. And your experience Henry? What was the street like?

HM: That was the same thing. The street life got to be dangerous in the late '50's and the
'60's. But of course, my time was before then. So from that period, and that's when the
whole drug period came in. But before that it was, was not. I mean it was really a kind of
a very close community and we had Miss Grier. I'll never forget this lady because she
lived on the ground floor and she used to tell my mother, because I was sort of a light
skinned kid, both my mother and father were, but she kind of told my mother everything
that I did and everything that went on [laughs], at that time. But I went to P.S. 39, the
school, and that school was predominantly becoming black at that point, I think. My
elementary school, that was the school that my wife escaped by going to Fox Street
which was more or less, it was in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood.

SM: Predominantly Jewish.

MN: Yeah. Now, I hate to ask this but were you in the one's and the two classes - -

SM: Yes.

MN: - - because everything was tracked?

HM: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MN: One of the jokes I made is we disproportionately interview people in the one and the two classes. Although I did get somebody who got in trouble and was in the eight or nine class.

HM: Yeah, yeah.

MN: So it was very tracked?

HM: Yeah, yeah.

MN: How would you characterize your elementary school education? Did you feel it was a good one? Start with you Stephanie.

SM: Oh yeah, it was so repressive, it had to have some redeeming quality.

MN: [laughs]

SM: The redeeming quality was we learned.

MN: When you - - as a principal, when you say repressive, elaborate for - -

SM: Oh, just all of the Dickensian injustices to children. Rule by fiat, rule by bullying. I think one of the reasons why I went into education is because my early education was so awful and I really wanted to make it better for some other kid down the line. It was stringent. There were standards and I rather liked that because I liked being treated as though I were actually smart and could do the work. And I discovered at the end of it when I met my friends in junior high school, I quickly saw how far ahead of them I was, even the ones who were in my class just by virtue of having gone to this particular

school. I might add that in P.S. 62 where I got my early education, on Yom Kippur, I was the only kid who showed up for school.

MN: Oh, so this was a virtually all Jewish school - -

SM: Except for me.

MN: - - except for you. Uh, huh.

SM: Yeah.

MN: Now what about you Henry? What was your elementary - -

HM: You know I was thinking as Stephanie was talking, P.S. 39 which was on the corner on the 800 block of Kelly Street, right off of Longwood, was then kind of disintegrating and I think it was a fairly bad elementary education except that we had some extraordinary teachers. I remember the principal, what was her name?

SM: Miss Nathan.

HM: Miss Nathan was a woman that was struggling with - - I mean, when I look back at it, she was really struggling with the whole cultural change that had happened and didn't - - I don't think she was quite able to deal with this population. But what was fortunate in some ways is that there still was some kind of wonderful teachers left over at P.S. 39. Mr. Gershwin is a man who comes to mind because he was, he was a man with a pot-marked face who really was quite handsome, but then he had a gimp in his [laughs], he had been in the second World War and something happened to his leg and he was an extraordinarily gifted teacher. So, those people stand out - -

MN: What grade was he in?

HM: This is 5th. That was the 5th grade.

MN: That was the 5th grade.

HM: And he was an extraordinarily gifted teacher. So you have people like that in that school. But I think that generally, 39 was not really considered a good - -

MN: Now did you have teachers that connected with you personally? That, you know, saw you had certain gifts and encouraged you? Or was it much more mechanical and impersonal?

SM: I'm sure in one respect, in one very important respect, my 6th grade teacher saw that I had some real ability in drama. And she made sure that I got auditioned for the junior high school drama program. And that led to my going to the only public finishing school in the United States, namely the School of Performing Arts, you know, 4 years later. So she saw that ability and she made sure that it was supported later on. But in terms of a personal connection, there was very little of that, for me anyway.

MN: What about you Henry.

HM: Well I can remember specifically in elementary school, as I said, Mr. Gershwin was the one that really comes to mind. But my thing started it at 52, Thomas Nolton, which was on [inaudible] Avenue where I really came into a number of teachers who were very supportive. Carmine Legnini comes to mind. I think that was my 7th or 9th grade teacher. And also, Miss Fisher was another one. That was her - - this is a black teacher in - - [inaudible] I'm getting this confused. Was Miss Fisher in junior high? Yes. She was in junior high school. That school was also Colin Powell's school, Thomas Nolton.

MN: Yeah. And a lot of famous Latin musicians too.

HM: Yeah, yeah, yeah, that school. And that was sort of like when my flower started to happen because - - there was another teacher, Mr. Pallack. He was the one to discover that I probably could write poetry. So he went through a lot of trouble to get a poem of mine published and then was told by I think it was National Scholastics at that point, no student who could have been in a black school could have wrote that poem. Mr. Pallack sort of had to fight that out.

MN: So this was in junior high school?

HM: That was junior high school, yes.

MN: Now did either of you have a black teacher in elementary school?

SM: No.

MN: Not at 62?

SM: 62, no.

MN: What about 39?

HM: No, not 39. I don't recall.

MN: Now did you experience any racism from teachers either overt or indirect in elementary school? Was it something that you know, you could remember - -

SM: No. I was so much a minority it didn't matter.

MN: Right.

SM: So I really didn't.

HM: Let me tell you a story about Miss Mallsman and me and Darlene Canada. I don't know whether Miss Mallsman just thought I was a dirty little boy. But she caught me kissing Darlene Canada who was another person from this era and who grew up in the

community. And I thought her outrage about this was a little overdone. It was sort of like I was a little nasty little black boy, you know? It was really - - but I'm not sure about that because when I think about it I think Miss Mallsman was, besides being white, was a spinster and never had [laughs] romantic [inaudible]. One of these women with a mustache and all of the rest of it. But I do - - I was, sensed about that at the time.

MN: What about in terms of playmates and that sort of thing? Was race a powerful factor in your childhood at the time?

SM: I had a kind of an interesting issue, and that is I didn't see race at all as an issue between myself and my white playmates in my grandmother's neighborhood. But being the lightest skinned child on the block gave me many many issues raised between my playmates and myself. And I often was the brunt of a lot of real racist remarks against me from other black children.

MN: Did this tend to come more from girls or boys or was it not - -

SM: Mostly girls.

MN: Mostly girls?

SM: Yeah.

MN: And was this something your parents prepared you for?

SM: No they didn't but they comforted me when it occurred. And I remember one thing my father said, and it took me a long time to realize what he was probably getting at, he said, you were no accident. You don't look the way you do by accident. And he was very, very stern about that. And he said, you have to understand that people have jealousies and this is one of them and that kind of thing.

MN: Right. And what about your experience in - - you know, was your block multi-racial? Or was by that time - -

HM: The 800 block of Kelly Street, that block itself was mostly black and Hispanic. No whites lived on that block.

MN: And this was even in the early '50's?

HM: This is in, yeah, I'm thinking, yeah, because - -

MN: What were the two cross blocks between them, in the 800 block.

HM: There's Longwood Avenue and back is Intervale Avenue.

MN: Okay, so it's Kelly between Longwood and Intervale Avenue.

HM: P.S. 39 was on the corner of this. So, no. Our whole interracial thing happened when I was in junior high school because that junior high school, Thomas Nolton pulled from the entire community. And the next block over from us, Beck Street, was still, I would say 90% Jewish.

MN: Now, in terms of your family, was intellect and culture promoted in the household so that you were coming to school with a lot of, you know, I guess today you call it social capital, to help you cope with school and stuff? You first Stephanie.

SM: Yeah, I remember my fourth grade teacher saying to the class, you know, Stephanie sometimes doesn't seem to know what's going on but she always knows the theatre section of the newspaper.

[laughter]

SM: And that wasn't the movies, that was the theatre section.

MN: So your family was oriented towards theatre?

SM: Yes.

MN: Is this where - -

SM: All the arts, not just theatre.

MN: Now what sort of music was in your home when you were growing up?

SM: When I was growing up it was mainly classical music and popular music on the radio. But music that they went out and purchased was classical music.

MN: And did they go to the theatre? Did they go to concerts?

SM: It was common knowledge - - it was a common experience in my household for me to encounter two kinds of print. One was an eviction notice for non-payment of rent - -

HM: [laughs]

SM: - - and the other was a theatre ticket stub.

[laughter]

SM: So my parents had their priorities straight.

[laughter]

MN: They had their prior [laughs]. That's so - - wow. Now what about you Henry?

HM: That was - - my grandfather would only go to the fifth grade into Atlanta but had this thing about - - he read most of the newspapers in New York.

MN: So [inaudible] full of newspapers.

HM: Yeah. So there was a whole thing about education and what you had to do. And then I had an uncle because I had early remedial reading problems and my uncle used to go crazy about this and all of this kind of thing. So its that whole thing about education was really, really, really [inaudible].

MN: Now were there political discussions in your house that you remember?

HM: Extraordinary [inaudible] - -

MN: What were some of the subjects you recall as - -

HM: I mean I think that they all centered around - - I can't say it was the civil rights movement because that hadn't happened yet. But that's what it was centered around, as I recall. And also religion a lot. You know, asking something - - really it turned out to be the great conversations about what god was and what all of this means and stuff.

MN: Now was your family church members?

SM: Yes.

MN: And did they attend church in the Bronx or - -

SM: Yes.

MN: What church?

SM: St. Margaret's Church.

MN: St. Margaret's. And that was Episcopal.

SM: Yes.

HM: Yeah.

MN: And what street was that on?

HM: Leggert Avenue isn't it?

SM: Uh huh. Leggert and Dawson.

HM: Leggert and Dawson.

MN: Okay. And had they been Episcopalians before they came to the Bronx?

SM: Oh yes.

MN: So this was a long-standing tradition. What about you Henry?

HM: Well that's where we met, in that church. But my parents, my mother was - - my father didn't bother at all, but what was he? [inaudible] That was her original - -

MN: She was originally in [inaudible] - -

HM: Yeah, but we moved to that neighborhood and she couldn't find a church and I had to go to church so then I ended up going to [laughs] the church and that's where we met.

MN: Now how old were you when the two of you met?

SM: The King and I. I was eleven.

HM: And I was 14.

SM: Yeah.

MN: So you've known each other that long?

SM: Yeah.

HM: Yeah.

MN: That's incredible.

[laughter]

SM: And we're still speaking.

[laughter]

MN: You might be the only couple in America. They should make statues of you.

HM: Yeah because St. Margaret's had a little theatre, little St. Margaret's little theatre run by, who was it? Marilyn Turistakis?

SM: Marilyn Turistakis, yeah.

HM: And that's how we met.

MN: So they had a theatre group - -

HM: A little theatre program. A little theatre - - yeah.

MN: And they actually had a little theatre that people would - -

HM: In the parish hall.

SM: Yes.

MN: In the parish hall.

HM: That's where we did The King and I.

MN: How long - - when did that program start? Was that there long before the two of you arrived? Or was it a relatively recent - -

HM & SM: No, not at all.

HM: It was - - the people who ran it were of course considerably older than us because, what, Marilyn Turistakis and Edith Duvow, and I think it was maybe, not long before, but it wasn't established there - -

MN: Now was this a multiracial congregation at the time?

HM: No, not at the time.

MN: It was a largely African American - -

SM: Yeah, largely West Indian.

MN: West Indian?

HM: Caribbean, Caribbean, yeah.

MN: That's what I thought. Because Joan Tyson Fortune who we interviewed was a part of that congregation.

HM: Well that's your background right, Caribbean, yeah.

MN: Oh so, I didn't - - oh, so your family originally is from what islands?

SM: My mother was born in Massachusetts but she was raised in Jamaica and didn't come to the United States again until she was 16.

MN: Right.

SM: And my father is one of four children, the youngest and oldest were born in Guyana, and the two middle ones were born in Canada. And he was raised in Canada. But the roots of the family would be Guyanese.

MN: Now, so you begin - - how old were you when you first began to see yourself as acting? Was this elementary school?

SM: Oh yes.

MN: were you somebody who was always doing this on your own in the house and you know, doing role playing and giving speeches, was it that kind of thing?

SM: Yeah. It was a form of insanity.

[laughter]

MN: Did any of it take the form of singing or was it mostly, you know, language?

SM: More language. I sing best alone and in private.

MN: Right, what about you Henry?

HM: Yeah I think that, yeah. It started very early with us and everybody in that area, as far as singing is concerned, you know, it's the doo wop period. And we had a group called the Radisian Chords. We even recorded a record at one point. But it didn't get released because it was around the time of the payola thing and - -

MN: Okay, so you became involved?

HM: We were always singing, yeah.

MN: I'll come back to that also. You never became the Chantels 2 or - -

SM: No.

[laughter]

MN: Now what junior high school did you go to?

SM: Junior high school 60.

MN: Now where was that located?

SM: That was on Steven's Avenue near Intervale and Prospect. It's like 5 streets coming together.

HM: Yeah, right.

MN: Because a lot of people I've spoken to went to junior high school 40 which is not too far from there. There must have been a lot of kids to have so many schools so close together.

HM: Yeah, it was.

SM: Oh yeah. In junior high school 60, when I started in the 7th grade, there were 21, 21 seventh grade classes.

MN: Wow. So these were - -

SM: All girls.

MN: All gir - - oh this was an all girl school?

HM: Yes. Thomas Nolton was all boys at that time too. Oh yeah, it was all boys. [sings song about Thomas Nolton]

MN: I didn't realize they were all - - right, right. Now did these schools have theatre and music programs? Because people who went to 40 said if you were in the band you could take home musical instruments. So at 60, what were the arts and culture programs like?

SM: Music, dance, drama, fine arts, and a lot of support. Huge, massive support in the form of a good bulk of the - - a good chunk of the school time was devoted to it. Kids got scholarships. I got a scholarship to study outside of school. My more talented singing classmates went to private lessons sponsored by the school.

MN: Okay. I hate to do this, but tell me all the things you had that children today don't have in these - - I mean, it was just a much better funded extra curricular activities - -

SM: Yeah, yeah. Okay, I'll go back to that 21 7th grade classes. Well if you were one of the chosen few in the 2, 1 and 2 classes, they did everything for you. They - - we were like Renaissance children. Looking back I see that that's how they treated us. And every time there was a possibility for an opportunity, we got it. Also I think it's important to point out that in say the sewing class, I never took sewing because I was always in the talent class. But the kids in the sewing class had wonderful training. They weren't just making aprons. They were making costumes for the annual plays. The kids who were good in art were creating a portfolio. But they were also doing scenery and designing sets. So in every area, the teachers were people of amazing talent. And there was real support for us.

MN: Now what about those kids in the 18, 20, and 21 classes? Were they lost and - - do you think? And neglected - -

SM: Yeah.

MN: - - in a way that might maybe wouldn't happen today?

SM: Oh, they were lost and neglected in exactly the way it would happen today. And we might as well say it, in the top four classes in each grade, that's where you had whatever white students there were in the school no matter what their academic standing was. And the rest, 7, 5 on, was entirely black and Hispanic in population. And unfortunately, a lot of those kids got lost. Except if they were talented in art. Because we had a very good art program and those teachers really could see talent and would nurture it.

MN: Now was there tension between kids in the lower classes and the upper classes? You know, or jealousy reflecting the differential - - like if you went - - I assume you're all together in gym class?

SM: Yeah.

MN: Did they and did you become - -

SM: [laughs] The target?

MN: Yeah.

SM: Well, interestingly, because they were very smart, they didn't mix us even in gym. It was like going to two completely separate schools.

HM: Schools, right.

SM: The only place where we were likely to meet was the bathroom. So we learned extraordinary bladder control.

MN: So the bathroom, the upper track kids kept out of the bathroom?

SM: No, yeah, yeah. I'm assuming you mean by upper track, the brighter, accelerated kids?

MN: Yeah.

SM: Yeah.

MN: So you kept out of the bathroom because that's where the hoodlum girls were gonna be?

HM: [laughs]

SM: But my mother almost disowned when I was accepted to 60 because my sister, who is five years older, had been accepted to an accelerated program in another school. But I was going to be really mixing with the riff raff. She really didn't have anything to say to me for ages. But that school was so devoted to fostering the growth of those top kids. I think certainly to the detriment of the other kids. I don't think they really got much.

MN: Right.

SM: My mother, I got back in her good graces in my second year because they got us on television for Gilbert and Sullivan day or something so then I was again accepted back into the full. But what they did for the kids who had even a glimmer of ability was unbelievable.

MN: Now what about your experience, was it - -

HM: Well the junior high school there was - - I was in nine-two I think. The first three classes, one was the music class - - no I was in nine-three, because nine-two was the music class. There was nine-one, then nine-two was all the kids who were in music, then nine-three. So actually, nine-three was kind of like the real nine-two academically speaking.

MN: Yeah, right.

HM: Okay. That group of students, those people ran the school. I was the vice president of the G.O. and I - - those people ran the school. The people below them, they were kind of like not there. I mean as I recall it, that's the only thing that I can say. And those higher classes were, I mean I'm glad you pointed out, they were integrated. I remember the Escanozzi's and it was three very brilliant, a family of these three students. These were very, very bright kids. So those classes were very, definitely integrated. But there was no thing about the arts. I didn't do any of my arts stuff in school. What it was about was sports and a kind of, a whole thing about social current events and all of this kind of thing. But no arts.

MN: Now by the time you were in junior high school were gangs an issue in the neighborhood?

SM: The Fordham Baldies?

MN: Uh huh.

HM: Yeah, the Fordham Baldies, what - - junior high school was nineteen fifty, I was fourteen so it was '57. Yeah, they were becoming an issue.

MN: were there certain blocks that you didn't go to because they were tough or there were gangs? Was that something - - were you aware of sort of, turf as an issue? You didn't go certain places because of gangs. Or for that matter, because of race? Or you felt pretty much that you know, you had the free reign of the city?

HM: There was a gang of people on - - when you cross Longwood Avenue, I mean, I think this has to be said, this is the area where people like my wife came from and they were a step up - -

MN: They were up in the hills.

SM: [laughs]

HM: Yeah, and what you did was cross Longwood Avenue, in the first place - -

MN: It was higher.

HM: Yeah. And it was a bit - - I mean, I remember this very clearly. I was always amazed that her parents didn't get upset with her fooling with me because I was really from that really terrible side over there, when you cross Longwood Avenue. And the Brathwaite's whom I hope that Bob has given you, they were on the other side. You know, they were homeowners and all of that. Her - - if I could just give you what the geography is, where she lived, even though they lived in an apartment, was on that side of Longwood Avenue where there were homeowners and artistic people, real middle class - - on my side there were a lot of cut throat people.

MN: So there were five stories?

HM: Yeah.

MN: Yours was a five story walk up?

HM: Yeah, it's a five story walk up. You know, and - - yeah, precisely and - -

MN: And there was some tough people on your block?

HM: There were tough people. There were - - she had private houses. There's private houses on your - -

SM: All private houses on my street.

HM: This is like a different world. It's like going to Park Avenue.

MN: Yeah. Because certainly, I guess between Prospect and Boston Road, then you head down the hill to Third Avenue and there and then down the Hill to - -

HM: They say 800, then the next block was Banana Kelly which everybody talks about. You know, stuff was getting rough there. So we did have gangs. We had problems with the gangs on Dawson Street on the 800 - - again, 700 Dawson was private houses, so forth and so on. But 800, there was a gang that I don't remember. The Crowns was one of the gangs - -

MN: The Seven Crowns.

HM: The Seven Crowns, yeah. [inaudible], the guy that lived next door to me was one of the main people in the Seven Crowns. And they sometimes had difficulty with whatever that group was over on Dawson Street. So I mean, you know, there was a lot of stuff going on. Especially as you get later into the '50's and the '60's. We had two rooming houses in the 800 block that they called hotels. The hotel Longwood and the hotel Kellal. But the hotel - - the FBI came every year to get some wanted person out of there that was nationally wanted.

SM: [laughs]

HM: I remember playing stickball in the street. I just have to tell you this. And somebody threw somebody out the window and broke up the stickball game.

MN: That'll do it.

[laughter]

MN: Now, in terms of popular music, when did you start becoming aware of rhythm and blues and rock and role and doo wop? And in your house was it acceptable to listen to that? Or would your family give you a hard time?

SM: Well, they gave my sister a hard time because she came before me and she's the one who really brought rock and roll into our home.

MN: Right.

SM: And my father called it noise which I'm sure is what everybody else called it [laughs] his age.

HM: [laughs]

SM: I didn't get a hard time about it.

MN: Uh huh. Were you very much - - did you get absorbed in it? Did you dance to it? Did you listen to it? Was this part of, you know, your emotional horizons being part of the scene, and you know, the excitement of all this thing happening?

SM: Um, I couldn't say that I was totally caught up in it. I liked the music. I made it my business to learn the words to every song. But - - I liked to, you know, I would go to the dances on Friday afternoon and so forth.

MN: Where would be dances in the neighborhood?

SM: At a school that - - a new school, comparatively new, 130, which is on Macy Place and the main entrance is on Prospect. That's where they would have, you know like, from say four o'clock to six or something like that in the afternoon. And I would go there to dance and stuff like that.

MN: Now did you use the after school centers in the public schools at all?

SM: Oh yes.

MN: Which one did you - -

SM: At 130 - - let's see, I think it must have started off because 130, I think I went there before 130 was built, in 52. I paid 50 cents a year to take ballet lessons and - -

MN: Ballet lessons in the after school, in the public school?

SM: Yes, yes, yeah.

HM: Was that in 52?

SM: It started off in 52 and then it moved a couple of years later to 130. And you know, I probably could have broken both legs because we were on point, you know, ten year old girls on point, 50 cents a year got you in [laughs]. And I did go on with dance studies after that.

MN: And what about you, did you go to after school programs in the elementary schools?

HM: Yeah there was an after school, there was a whole base - - basketball thing, back when I could play basketball. And there was a whole basketball thing at 52. There was school lunch of course. That thing was year round even when school was closed at 39. And they had games and ping pong and all of this kind of stuff. This is the thing that David Dickens tried to do again here but that couldn't happen. But that was - - and one of the major things for Kelly Street because it had - - to show you how the police related to the community back in those days, the Police Athletic League every summer had a huge, took over the block, and had what we call the PAL. That was one of the main things that -

-

MN: Now did you grow up with hostility towards police when you were a child?

HM: Yeah, yeah. I was just talking to my cousin whom you met. He's involved in a situation where there's been a shooting of a young, black college kid. And we were talking that on Kelly Street there was a shooting of a young guy, and I don't really recall his name. But it was never, you know, nobody ever did anything about it. And he was shot in the back right on the corner. So there wasn't good feelings, I didn't have good feelings about police.

MN: Did you feel that police had it out for black kids? Was it more like if you were from a tough neighborhood the police were your enemy? Or was it - -

HM: What was the first question?

MN: Did you feel that police particularly had it out for black kids.

HM: Oh yeah, yeah, very much.

MN: And that was something people very often agree.

HM: Oh yeah, yeah. Very definitely.

MN: So did you grow up with people talking about police brutality? Was that - - were those words there before the civil rights movement in your house?

HM: In my family, the hostility that whites had for blacks was taken for granted. I had to go through this with my son when he was growing up because in that generation, of course, nobody took that for granted. But that was kind of - - I mean, that police men were not representative of any kind of black community, because most of the police were white at that point, that was almost taken for granted. Not almost, it was taken for granted. So I don't think people gave speeches about it. But nobody thought that these

people were in anyway there to be representative or helpful to the community in my family. I mean that was just the way it was. I remember my father one time, who was about the same height but about 5 complexions darker than a man who was absolutely a criminal and had a criminal record of my father, must have been stopped at least a half a dozen times because he looked like this - - or, not to me as a black person, he didn't look anything like him, they were the same height [laughs]. But so that, yeah, it was a real antipathy about the police department. And I know they call it police brutality, it was what black people lived with. That's really what it was.

MN: Now did you have any contact with St. Augustine's Presbyterian Church and the minister Edler Hawkins who was - -

HM & SM: [laugh]

HM: She had more contact with Edler Hawkins than I did.

MN: Okay.

SM: I'm laughing because we shared an experience. I perhaps remember it and Henry doesn't yet remember it, but you will soon.

HM: Yeah, what is it? What is it?

SM: We were both very involved with the, what was it called? The YPF?

HM: YPF, the young people's fellowship.

SM: Yeah.

HM: At St. Margaret's.

SM: At St. Margaret's. And at one point we began to become rather politically active or we wanted to be politically active and we felt that one of the ways to do that was to band

together with other groups around the city or in our area. So we got ourselves invited to a meeting of young people at St. Augustine. And Elder Hawkins was presiding [laughs]. And he made it so - - you know, we stated our case, you know, what we were interested in and so forth, and he made it so clear to us, I mean, I thought it was hilarious. He made it so clear to us that he wanted to have nothing to do with us - -

HM: [laughs]

SM: - - and I saw it. Maybe I was about 15 or 16 at the time. I saw it as someone, as an adult who was suddenly feeling very insecure as though some power was going to be arrested from him if the two groups of kids got together to do something about the community.

HM: [laughs]

MN: Wow, so what year was this, about 1960 would you say?

SM: Yeah, '62.

HM: Yeah, about 1962.

MN: It was '62. And this was - - had you been, you know, was your political consciousness connected to the Southern Civil Rights Movement and what was going on there?

SM: I attended one of the earliest meetings of CORE at Columbia University and - -

MN: What year? I could've been there.

[laughter]

MN: I was in Columbia CORE [laughs].

SM: I don't think it was later than '63, something like that.

MN: I was in CORE in Columbia CORE in 1963. In the Fall of '63. It was huge. It was almost an all white chapter. But it was enormous.

SM: Yeah. Well, I went to an early meeting there and that's when I - - I had a tremendous political awareness prior to that but it was not about civil rights.

MN: What was your political - -

SM: Oh my father was a card carrying communist party man [laughs].

[laughter]

MN: Oh I wrote a book about the history - - why didn't you tell me this in the beginning? I wrote a book called Communists in Harlem During the Depression.

SM: Uh, huh. Yeah.

MN: You could have said this.

SM: Sorry [laughs].

MN: That's fascinating. And was he a union organizer also?

SM: Not really.

MN: So your father was a communist and did he - -

SM: He became a Maoist later on but - -

[laughter]

MN: Oh my god. So this is so - - you grew up - - did you go to the camps? The communist summer camps?

SM: No.

MN: You didn't go to like Camp Kinderland or anything like that?

SM: No.

MN: Were there - - you know, Morisannia, the Jewish population had been somewhat radical at one point. Did he have friends in the neighborhood?

SM: Yes he did.

MN: He had meetings in the house?

SM: Yeah [laughs].

MN: And what were some of the issues that they were dealing with? Do you recall any neighborhood issues?

SM: My father was not involved in any neighborhood issues. His interests were more global. Certainly nothing below the national stuff.

MN: Right. Was he at all involved in the Council on African Affairs and what were some of the international questions that he - -

SM: Well he coined a phrase, "White manism." And he used that to describe the pervasive racial attitudes of the time. And that was - -

MN: Was he in - - did he - - was he involved with West Indian independence? Was that an issue? Or was it more like a broader critique of race as it played itself out in world imperialism?

SM: Yeah. Race and economics. I think he was more concerned about economics than he was about race.

MN: And so were you enrolled in any youth groups like the Young Communists' League?

SM: No, no.

MN: So did your mother - - was your mother apolitical, was there - -

SM: [laughs] Exactly. She was apolitical. She wanted to bury her every time - -

HM: Every time he started to open his mouth.

MN: So in other words she, if he even wanted to make you, have you as a young pioneer and a YCL and all that, she made sure - -

SM: Yeah. My mother and my grandmother would have made sure that didn't happen.

MN: So there was one communist in the house?

SM: Yeah, yeah. Rabid but only one.

MN: But you were interested in politics as a result of that?

SM: Yes.

MN: what about your family? Was there any left wing political - -

HM: I thought they really were - - I mean, they had nothing to do with leftism. It was kind of like an early black nationalism - -

MN: Was there a Garvey movement? Would you say - -

HM: Well nobody talked about that. I mean nobody talked about Garvey. Because this was a - - you know, Garvey - - the Brathwaites were the people that were sort of like into Garvey because they were Caribbean and Garvey was Caribbean. But the more activist people of the South people talked about it in my house. So they were kind of like very - - I remember my grandfather didn't you know, would used to say things like, you know, this integration thing may not work out if people go for that, that may not really work out. The kind of beginning - -

MN: Right. Was W.E.B. DuBois someone who was mentioned in your house?

HM: You know I don't recall that.

MN: Now what about Paul Robeson?

HM: Oh yes. Ohhh yes.

MN: Okay, so what - -

HM: [inaudible] musician. I mean the music people were big - -

MN: Now did your family have Paul Robeson records? Did you grow up listening to Paul Robeson when you were a child? Or - -

HM: Yeah, my father had, my father did have some Paul Robeson.

SM: My father did.

MN: Now I would assume that your family was - -

SM & HM: Yeah.

MN: So you grew up listening to the records. Do you ever recall hearing Robeson's speech - - speak in the Bronx?

SM: No?

MN: Did you ever - - you never saw him in person speak or - -

HM: No.

SM: In the United - -

MN: He was like the - -

HM: He was like an iconic heroic figure for the adults in my family. But the music thing with us was jazz, modern jazz - -

MN: Oh so you - -

HM: - - because my father was, the whole thing with him was modern jazz.

MN: Okay so your father was a jazz - -

HM: Jazz, jazz.

MN: - - and was he - -

HM: I swear he used to have this thing about Doctor Rollins and Sonny Rollins and all of them, all of the jazz people were introduced to me by my father.

MN: Okay. And so this was the bebop people like Thelonious Monk - -

HM: Bebop, bebop and all of them.

MN: - - Charlie Parker, and John Coltrane.

HM: And the earlier people.

MN: And the early people too.

HM: Duke Ellington and - -

MN: Okay, so you had a very sophisticated jazz - -

HM: Very. We had these six room apartments, that people don't have now, so my father
- -

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A] [BEGINNING OF TAPE 1 SIDE B]

MN: Six room apartments?

HM: Yeah six room apartments, hers were seven. But so, after some of the extended family people moved out my father created this music room. I'll never forget it. He painted stuff on the walls and all of this. And in that music room, there was - - it went back to Ellington, you know, straight on down. And even a few white artists. My father - - Chet Baker, my father was a Chet Baker freak right [laughs]? And the saxophonist although I can't think of his name. The wonderful saxophonist I think it was, oh it was Jerry Mulligan. So that was, yeah - -

MN: Now did your father go down to Birdland and the Manhattan clubs all the time?

HM: Oh yeah, yeah. All of that.

MN: Now what about your - - so jazz wasn't a big part of your household in the same way?

SM: No, my father didn't discover jazz until about 1972.

MN: Oh okay, now what about Latin music? What role did that play in your household or your living on a - -

HM: Well it was a big, I mean it was a big - - my father didn't go that much into it but we were living in a Latin community and my father's grandmother was Afro Cuban.

MN: Okay.

HM: and my first girlfriend who lived downstairs, Lydia Ayalla, was Afro Cuban.

MN: Okay. I just saw a movie called "Cuban Roots, Bronx Story" about an Afro Cuban family who moved to Kelly Street, the Foster family, Pablo and Carlos Foster. And we just had the first showing of it last week. Now did you grow up hearing this music and did it become sort of part of your kind of consciousness as a kid?

HM: Oh yeah. Because I would go to Lydia's house, well she lived right underneath us.

And that's all - - I mean, these people were Afro Cuban.

MN: And this stuff grabbed you?

HM: I mean it was the most amazing. I mean I still [laughs], it was just the most amazing - -

MN: Yeah. [inaudible] Norman, who I also interviewed said he lived on Kelly Street near the Tropicana Club and he said he used to sit by the window and he said the horns, like they were saying, "Come, come."

HM: I'm trying to think of this, he's famous, I used to know his name, but I can't think of his name. He was a famous Afro Cuban who was from Cuba, black Cuban, Afro Cuban. That's who, when Lydia got married, he was - -

MN: Not Mongo Santamaria?

HM: Not Mongo. A man older than Mongo because there's always - - but he was the guy at the wedding [laughs]. And you know that's who they hired.

MN: Not Machito?

HM: Not Machito. This man, and this man was blind. But the thing I can never forget is that he played - - he picked up a - - they had a champagne bottle, he played the bottle. He put down his instrument and played the bottle. This was - - and that, yeah. So that was the whole Hispanic whatever they call it, that music just got to me.

MN: I mean one of the things is that this community has produced an extraordinary number of talented musicians that, you know, with the cross ferti - - now were you very aware of the neighborhood venues and clubs like the Hunts point Palace and Club 845? Was this something - - how - -

HM: My mother worked in the five and ten, in the Woolworth's which was like a block and a half away from the 845. So you couldn't, you know [laughs] 845 was a big thing.

MN: But, now were you aware of like the musicians who were playing there? Or were you a little too young? Was this - -

HM: I think a little bit, yeah.

SM: I was too young. To me it was just a bar.

MN: Uh huh. What about the Hunts point Palace? Were you aware of that as a center of music in the neighborhood?

SM: When I was - -

HM: Later on.

SM: - - in junior high school I was aware of it. I never went but I was aware of it.

HM: A lot of Latin music at the Hunts point Palace.

SM: Yeah.

MN: Yeah. Now what about, did you ever go to the talent shows at P.S. 99? Apparently there was a lot of doo-wop groups that they had talent shows there?

HM: I don't know if I was there. Were you?

SM: They got trophies as I recall. I remember kids parading trophies practically through the streets from P.S. 99.

HM: From 99.

MN: Because that was - - you know, Art Crier, who was again, this you know Morisannia who ended up as a singer/song arranger at Motown, he said that and Morris high school had talent shows. When you were in junior high and then in high school, did you feel a lot of pride in being from the Bronx, or it was just some place you grew up? Was that something you were aware of as like special in any way?

SM: No. I felt nothing. I didn't feel special, I didn't feel put down or anything.

HM: We both went to high school in Manhattan so - -

MN: Now you went to High School of Performing Arts. Now how did you - - did you have to audition for that?

SM: Yes.

MN: And did you get in in theatre?

SM: Yes.

MN: So what was - - describe that audition process.

SM: Well you had to prepare a monologue. And of course I did St. Joan [laughs].

HM: I'll never forget it. Fabulous! [laughs]

MN: You heard it?

HM: Well of course! We knew each other.

SM: He practiced it.

HM: I practiced it. We practiced it.

MN: Okay, so you were both, in that time, in the St. Margaret's little theatre?

HM: Around that time.

SM: I was only in the little theatre in one production. But Henry was in more than one production.

HM: Yeah, I was in more than one.

SM: But anyway. I did the monologue. And then I discovered later that what I was doing was a sense memory and then improvisation.

MN: And it was one audition or they call you back for a second one?

SM: Oh I got in on the first.

MN: You got in on the first? Wow.

HM: You're leaving out that, or did you say that she - - you had already been on television at that point.

SM: Yeah I had mentioned that, Machado.

HM: Machado, yeah. It was PBS. It was PBS.

MN: So the Machado - -

HM: That was the early channel 13.

MN: - - and was this by a group in the school?

SM: Yeah. We had, every year they did 3 plays.

MN: And this is junior high school 60?

SM: Yes, junior high school 60. And I was in the Machado and I played Coco. And there was some connection and we found ourselves doing that particular presentation on - -

HM: Channel 13.

SM: Was it 13? I thought it was 5. I don't know.

HM: Okay.

SM: Anyway, it was on when I was in the 8th grade.

MN: Wow. Okay.

SM: So then I had - - but anyway, I had - - you see, in order - - okay, I had, clearly had some ability in acting and they saw it in elementary school. I had three years of really good drama training.

MN: And this for the junior high? They sent you to private training?

SM: Yeah, well I had good training in the junior high. And I had private training as well.

MN: Now was the private training in the Bronx or in Manhattan?

SM: It was at the Gene Frankel Theatre Workshop in Manhattan.

MN: And they send you down there?

SM: Yeah.

MN: And did they pay for it also?

SM: They gave me a partial scholarship.

HM: Scholarship.

SM: While I worked I paid half.

MN: and so by the time you entered performing arts, you had already had a lot of theatrical experience and training?

SM: Yeah.

MN: Uh huh. Now what about, where did you end up going to high school?

HM: I went to Central Commercial High School because nobody believed [laughs] that anybody could do the theatre at that point. But yeah, I went to Central Commercial and did nothing there inside the school in the theatre because they didn't do very much in the theatre but I did stuff outside of school.

MN: Okay so you were doing theatre at St. Margaret's. Was there any other place you were doing that?

SM: The Joseph Patterson - -

HM: The Joseph - - we founded a theatre company at the Forest neighborhood houses as - -

MN: Oh wow!

HM: Remember I read some stuff particularly - -

MN: Yeah, the Forest neighborhood.

HM: Yeah, yeah. We founded that theatre.

MN: Now what year did you found that theatre?

HM: 1962. Joseph Patterson players.

MN: Now who is Joseph Patterson?

HM: Joseph Patterson, I could just see him now. Joseph Patterson was a wonderful black social worker who really worked so hard for us problematic kids that it killed him. He, I think it was ulcers or whatever that - -

SM: Walking pneumonia

HM: Walking Pneumonia.

MN: Now was he at the Forrest Houses - - .

HM: He was a social worker at Forest Houses. Raymond Burr was the executive - - not Raymond Burr - -

SM: somebody Burr.

HM: - - Burr was the executive director.

MN: Okay, so he was the figure who was instrumental - -

HM: With us. I mean he was really a very extraordinary human being. That's how this got to be the Joseph Patterson players.

MN: After he passed away. Oh, in other words, he was this - -

HM: He was there - - I'm sorry.

MN: Go ahead.

HM: No, he had been working there with the kids, but I mean this guy - - he walking pneumonia because he didn't stay home, he didn't take care of himself, just took care of us.

MN: wow.

HM: Yeah, he was amazing.

MN: Because a number of - - there are these sort of heroes who come out. And one of them was the director of the night center at P.S. 99, Vincent Tibbs, who Howie Evans told me saved his life in a gang fight. You know so this is another [inaudible] person.

HM: another one of these people.

MN: Yeah, and I think it's really - -

HM: How old could he have been when he died? I mean because he seemed old - -

MN: Did he live in the neighborhood? Do you know?

SM: I don't know.

HM: I don't think Joseph Patterson did live in the neighborhood.

MN: Okay so you founded this theatre company. And this was when it was on Forrest Avenue or had it moved into the Forest Houses?

HM: this was in the Forest houses because I lived where we just moved form at 920 Trinity Avenue. This is after in 1962, we moved to 920. And that's right on the corner across the street from the Forest Houses.

MN: Okay and that's right near the Episcopal Church?

SM: Trinity Church.

MN: Yeah, Trinity Episcopal which is right across from Morris - -

HM: Right exactly! It was right down the street from us.

MN: Okay. Now did you move, was that, did you move into a private house? Or - -

HM: That's a co-op. It was a housing - - Woodstock Terrace Co-op - -

MN: Oh!

HM: - - was the name of it. Right. Woodstock Terrace Cooperative. So it was there from '62 until two thousand what?

SM: Three

HM: Three.

MN: Okay - - oh, so that's where both of you lived?

HM: Yeah.

SM: No, no. I didn't. I lived there after we were married.

HM: After we were married.

MN: Oh you got another apartment?

HM: Another apartment. My parents lived upstairs - -

MN: And what year did you two get married?

SM: '67.

MN: '67, okay. So, and how old were you when you moved into Woodstock Terrace?

HM: It was 1962. What was I, 19?

MN: You were 19, okay. So, you were in - - were you in college when you founded this theatre company?

HM: Uh huh. And working as a police officer [laughs] and all the rest was crazy. Uhh, it's crazy, yeah. I think that was - -

MN: A New York City police officer?

HM: Yeah, uh, a transit police officer.

MN: So you got a job at 19 as a transit police officer?

HM: No, no. I shouldn't say at 19. I mean, it ended up, I wasn't 19, I was what, 22 when I got the job. But all of that happened around the same time.

MN: Okay. And so this theatre company - -

HM: That's earlier on, '62. Joseph Patterson players.

MN: Now, because the original Forest House had been on Forest Avenue. And North - - and now it's a seventh day Adventists school.

HM: Oh I see.

MN: But that Forest House had moved into the Forest - -

HM: Neighborhood houses.

MN: - - neighborhood houses. Now, in 1962, what kind of a place were the Forest Houses? Was it considered a pretty safe housing development at that time?

HM: They were, they were. I mean it wasn't - - we never had any issues over there about you know danger. And we were there for a long time.

MN: Right. Because later, you know, Fat Joe comes out of Forest Houses and talks of it as a pretty ferocious place in terms of drugs in the late '80's and early '90's.

HM: Oh yeah. By then that's possible. But not at that time.

MN: Now where did you go to college when you went?

HM: Well you see, I spent my adult life in college. Because at this point, first it was Baruch.

MN: Okay. So you went from Central Commercial to Baruch.

HM: Went from Central Commercial to Baruch because we thought we were gonna go into business [inaudible] the arts. And then, after that, what college did I go to after Baruch? Then much, much later on it was City College. And then the Graduate Center, which is very recent.

MN: Right, right. Now where did you go from the High school of performing arts?

SM: I went to Hunter. And I have a B.A. from Hunter, a M.A. professional certificate. And then I got this great opportunity to go to St. John's College in New Mexico where your master's degree is in the great books of the Western world. And so that was another [inaudible].

MN: And so, when did your path diverge from being, you know, from having a life in theatre to becoming an educator?

SM: Interestingly, I never wanted to be an actress. I just knew it was something I was good at and gave me opportunity. But I always said that I wanted to be a teacher.

HM: We used to have big fights about that [laughs].

SM: Yeah, my husband said, "You threw it all away." [laughs]

HM: [inaudible]

SM: Yeah. You see in my family, my great grandfather was a school master for fifty years.

MN: In what country?

SM: In Guyana.

MN: In Guyana. That was your father's father?

SM: My father's grandfather.

MN: Your father's grandfather was for fifty years a schoolmaster in Guyana?

SM: Yes. So the roots of teaching and education are very deep in my family. Everyone, all of my cousins at one time or another have been engaged in teaching.

MN: Right.

SM: So it wasn't unusual for me to go into education.

MN: Now when you - - you had this business orientation and the theatre was a sideline?

HM: Yeah, well, I didn't take it - - I did it because I loved it but I didn't think you could make real money at it or make a livelihood, not the kind of theatre that I was interested in or what I wanted to do. So I just had to do it. I mean I couldn't - -

MN: So this is something you did in your spare time so to speak?

HM: Right. I got married, I had a child, you need a job [laughs].

MN: Right, right. Okay. So you became a transit police officer.

HM: Yes, that's right.

MN: Now where did you meet Bob Gumbs?

HM: Bob Gumbs - - Johnny Brathwaite is the brother of Elombe Brathwaite who is the - - Bob Gumbs is all related to them. But Johnny Brathwaite, we're roughly the same age so we were in all the same grades together at Thomas Nolton. So I kind of know those people through him and Johnny Brathwaite is the youngest of the three Brathwaite brothers.

MN: Right. Now were you involved in that group, the African Jazz Arts Society?

HM: No, they're 7 or 8 - - they're all in like Colin Powell's age, right? So they're a bit older. I'm alone with Johnny who's the youngest brother, we're the same. So we're I guess 6 or 7 years behind them. So that's [inaudible] and all of those people at [inaudible]. Bob is a little older than me.

MN: Right. Now when you formed this Joseph Patterson - -

HM: Players.

MN: - - players, what was the first drama you put on?

HM: Oh God what was it?

SM: Spectrum of Ram [laughs].

HM: [inaudible] It was a terrible play.

MN: [laughs]

HM: Well now [inaudible] because it's actually published but you have to start somewhere, so I wrote a play. So yeah, it was Spectrum of the Ram that I wrote.

MN: Do you still have it?

HM: Yeah, as a matter of fact, I'm setting up for the Schaumburg because they are interested in these things, a whole thing of black theatre and history - -

MN: See because that's the kind of thing we'd also like to put in the Bronx African American History archive at the Bronx County Historical Society.

HM: Well we have photographs of - -

MN: All of those things would be exactly the kind of thing we'd wanna put there.

HM: Okay.

MN: So you know - -

HM: I have programs. We have all of that.

MN: Oh all of that stuff! At least copies of that. Maybe even an exhibition of yours at some point.

HM: We have photographs of St. Margaret's, of the parish house - -

MN: And do you have any of the programs from the original plays that you do - -

HM: One of them I do, I'll have to look. That was thing you said Merrill wrote all over it? Merrill Stuart who thought of himself as a critic.

SM: [laughs]

HM: He was really quite bright but a little crazy. He really was. So we do have that, but not a lot of stuff, but some photographs even from then.

MN: Yeah I would definitely like to archive this material in the Bronx Historical society because we're trying to build up this archive of documents as well as these interviews.

HM: I think I sent you a thing of me at fifteen and it's Stephanie and - - it's one singing shot of me standing on the Brathwaite's block which is the 700 block with all of the private houses and then there's a shot of us in the parish houses.

MN: I never got those.

HM: You never got those. Okay, well I gotta send them to you.

MN: Definitely do. Now who came to these plays? Did you promote these? How did you - - did you promote them in the neighborhood or in other parts of the city as well?

HM: Well, I mean those were neighborhood - - we didn't have the resources - -

MN: So this was your friends and your family and you know - -

HM: Well Forrest [inaudible] was a center that we [inaudible] to more people than our friends and family.

SM: Yeah, yeah.

MN: So how many people, when you put on a play, how many people would come?

HM: I think it was considerable. I don't really remember. But I know it extended past friends and family [laughs].

SM: Yeah, it was - - we held - - we performed on the stage of a gym area as I recall.

HM: Of a gym area, yeah. So you're talking about 4-500 people.

MN: Wow, okay. And you could fit in that facility, that particular - -

SM: Oh yeah.

HM: Yeah, that was the gym.

MN: And how long did this company last?

HM: I think it was about 3 years because around 1965 or 1966 then I went to Harlem to work with kind of like an historic theatre company now called the New Heritage Repitory Theatre which is run by Roger Ferman who had been a member of the American Negro Theatre. So that must have been about, I think it's about '65 or '66. It's just that the other church - - we can't leave this out about the theatre because I did two shows there which is the church right down 163rd street right? What is the name of it?

MN: Mount Thessalonia?

SM: No, the Lutheran church.

HM: We were married there.

MN: Okay you were married at a Lutheran church.

HM: Bethany Lutheran. Bethany Lutheran, this is the church we were married in okay?

[laughs] But before we were married, I think our show was before or after we were married?

SM: Before.

HM: Before we were married, they also had a little theatre group which was run by a woman named Brudhill Meyer who was a descendent of, who was really a descendent of Germany right?

SM: Yeah.

HM: Yeah. And she ran this. She was also from the American Academy of Drama and she lived in the neighborhood. This is one of the few white people who lived - -

SM: In McKinley.

HM: - - in McKinley, in the McKinley projects, Brudhill. She wasn't really much older than - -

MN: Now McKinley is what streets?

HM: McKinley is 920 Trinity, where we just moved from, last summer, is on 163rd Street and Trinity Avenue. McKinley is right behind - -

MN: Okay so that's right south of the Forrest Houses?

HM: Right, right, right.

MN: McKinley, okay. And right near Johnson's Barbeque.

HM: Right near Johnson's Barbeque.

[crosstalk]

MN: I have been taking a lot of students down to Johnson's Barbeque. In fact, we're having, I'll you this after, we're having a big whiteness conference and it's being catered by Johnson's Barbeque.

HM: So anyway, Bruny ran this little theatre company at the, at Bethany Lutheran, so they also had a theatre company.

MN: Now was that a predominantly African American Church at that time?

HM: I don't think it was, was it?

SM: I think it was.

HM: Bethany Lutheran, was it? We got married there but we never attended that church [laughs]. I mean it was very strange, yeah. So yeah we did Death Takes a Holiday and - -

SM: Debroot.

HM: Debroot and [inaudible].

MN: Now this is interesting because there's clearly culturally a lot going on but there are also things negative happening in the community as well in terms - - you know, could you comment on, you know, the signs of decay that you were seeing and especially with the drug problem? When did you start noticing a heroin problem in the neighborhood?

SM: Well certainly before everybody else did, I mean nationally.

HM: Yeah, it was - -

SM: There was always somebody.

HM: Yeah, there was, I remember there was, yeah, on Kelly Street - -

MN: Even on Kelly Street, even the late '40's?

HM: It's the late, it's the late - - I mean for me, we began to notice it, this would have to be the late '50's I think, around the time I was in junior, going to junior high school.

There was a friend of mine's brother I recall. You know the brother was suddenly acting strange and then he did all the things that people with heroin did with you know - - nobody ever heard of people like stealing things from their own family to get money. It was very strange. It wasn't a big, prevalent thing at that time so that's why I think that was still the '50's. But that's when that began to come to notice and then that's when the real deterioration of the community started. But it was kind of gradual in a way. But by the 1960's, by the time I went to Baruch in the early '60's, I can remember, I was coming home, and this is the gang-drug warfare thing, I was coming home, came down, walked down Prospect Avenue, turned into [laughs] Kelly Street and I'm walking down the block and suddenly, it's at night because I went to evening school because I worked, and the block is lit up with gunfire and you can hear it, and there were people running towards [inaudible] Longwood Avenue with such look of fear. But my thing was just to turn around very calmly and walk around the back of Dawson and come behind the people and the gunfire that was coming.

MN: Now what year would you say that was?

HM: This had to be, now we're getting into the '60's, this is like 1964 or '65, about that time.

MN: But you were already living in the new - -

HM: Oh yeah, yeah, wait a minute, it had to be earlier than that - -

MN: This is before you were - -

HM: Maybe it was 1960 because we were still - - we hadn't yet moved, that's probably one of the reasons why we did move. We hadn't yet moved from 847, so yeah, maybe it was 1960 or '61. But I remember that I had started with the college thing by that time because I was coming from school.

MN: Right.

HM: So there was - - but it was, what I'm saying, a little more gradual because I think that whole problem started a little earlier than we kind of think that it was. Most of the time people say it's the '60's, it was earlier than the '60's that the drug - - a lot of the working class people began to escape from Kelly Street, from that particular - -

MN: So it was also people began to talk of moving out because it was getting [inaudible].

HM: [inaudible] did. Yeah, a lot of people did.

MN: And so a lot of the families you grew up with ended up leaving the neighborhood and in some cases leaving the Bronx.

SM: Yeah.

MN: When did you start teaching Stephanie?

SM: 1970.

MN: Oh okay. And before then what were you doing?

SM: I was going to school.

MN: You were going to school in different places. And where was your first teaching job located?

SM: In Spanish Harlem on 103rd Street and Madison Avenue. Right behind the museum of the city of New York.

MN: Okay. And this was elementary school?

SM: Yes.

MN: And were you as excited to be in the classroom as you thought?

SM: Oh yeah. I loved it. I loved all aspects of my career, all 31 years, even the near killing experience of being a principal. I loved it all. One of the parts that really is germane to this discussion is I taught at I.S. 58 on Holmes Street and I often took my students on trips. And we would walk down Prospect Avenue to go to the subway station. And as we walked down Prospect Avenue, I would be saying to them, "Now you see, this store used to be Meyer's Ice Cream Parlor, and this used to be, this supermarket used to be the [inaudible], I could go to see a movie for 26 cents." And I would be the tour guide going to the - -

MN: So telling them what the neighborhood was like years ago.

SM: Yeah, right.

MN: And what was their response?

SM: They loved it. They said, "Really?!" First of all it was disbelief that these things could have existed - - and ice cream parlor on this street? Those kinds of things, but they loved it and they would tell me, "C'mon Mrs. Miller, tell us where all the places were."

HM: And that's an important cultural factor too because we lived in the movies.

[crosstalk]

MN: See we constantly were going to the movies.

HM: Oh alright.

SM: Yes, yes.

HM: Her mother was a movie - -

SM: My mother escaped her life by spending at least 2 days a week at the movies.

HM: [laughs] Right, right, right.

MN: And did she do all in the neighborhood?

SM: Oh yeah, sure.

MN: Because there was how - - there were movie theatres - -

SM: Yeah, there was the Prospect - -

HM: Theatre.

SM: - - theatre. There was the Franklin and the - -

HM: Raphael Franklin and then the Berlin. That's all the movies right up until the 845.

SM: [inaudible].

HM: First it's the 845, then the five and ten, then that was - -

SM: The Prospect Theatre was next to the [inaudible].

HM: The Prospect Theatre, right, exactly. But there were 3 theatres within what? Three and a half blocks, is what it was?

SM: Yeah.

HM: Yeah we lived like - -

MN: Were they all South of St. Augustine's?

SM: Yes.

HM: Oh yeah, they were all South of St. Augustine's.

MN: Right wow.

HM: So we lived in the movies and I mean that was, yeah.

MN: And all those were closed down?

HM: Oh yeah, well they're not movies you know.

SM: No, they're not movies anymore.

MN: They're not movies at all. So that was an important - -

HM: Yeah because you got those - - you cash those plastic bottles - -

SM: Plastic bottles and then you went to the - - you got the money to go to the movies.

HM: The bottles were 25 cents [laughs], I mean - -

SM: If you got there before five o'clock.

MN: Now just to change the subject here, it says your mother was Miss Prom Café?

HM: Yeah [inaudible].

MN: So tell a little bit about that experience.

HM: Well that's what I'm saying, my parents really came out the whole jazz kind of thing, both of them did. But she was sort of like a little Harlem beauty queen - -

MN: [laughs]

HM: - - at the time right? So [inaudible].

MN: Now did your family impart to you a sort of sense of hip-ness, was that part of it?

HM: We didn't know what that was at that time, but I guess that's what it ends up being you know what I'm saying? I mean especially, my father - - I had - - it's amazing because I'm now working on a major musical by Duke Ellington and it's got major unpublished Ellington music. And people say, it's kind of like before your time. But I grew up with

Duke Ellington because of my father. So I guess I am hip [laughs], but I didn't know there was hip. We thought that was the music that you know, dealt with. I mean, that's what I thought.

MN: Now, this whole experience of, basically you both stayed in the neighborhood you grew up in until a year ago.

HM: Yeah.

MN: What was it like when, you know, parts of the neighborhood began burning. How did you - -

HM: The Bronx is burning.

MN: Yeah, how did you experience that and why were you among the folks who decided to stay? Or was the burning not close enough to have - -

HM: Well I remember when they burned down one of the hotels, these places that were rooming houses and obviously they were being burned for insurance. That was a horrible fire that could have extended because it was only 2 buildings away from 847. And it was a horrible fire. That was the "Bronx is burning" period. I guess that was when we were on Kelly Street so we thought in moving to Trinity Avenue that we were moving to a safer environment. And eventually it did actually turn out to be a safer environment. But it was a very, very frightening kind of situation.

SM: It was also very much to our advantage to stay where we were. Just from an economic standpoint, we really value education and by living in a co-op, the apartment was very nice and the building was well kept and the prices were low, we could send our

son to private school, we could take him to Europe because money was not being eaten up by rent.

HM: Mortgages and all that. I never bought into that part of the American Dream. And I could retire from the police department at 37.

MN: Oh wow.

SM: [laughs] Now that's an advantage.

HM: Yeah I retired with a [inaudible] pension at 37 and then was able to go back and get my masters degree and all the rest of it. It certainly would not have been possible otherwise.

MN: Was the play you put on at- the Patterson plays- the first play you had ever written?

HM: Yeah I think that was the first play I had ever written yeah. I wrote that play when I was 17 and we put it on when I was 19.

MN: Right and was playwriting your major - -

HM: No, I started as an actor. When I was in the earlier groups at St. Margaret's I was an actor. Right? That's how we met. I played [inaudible] in The King and I, I was 15 years old. She played one of the King's many children.

SM: It's an incestuous relationship.

[laughter]

HM: So no, it's acting and then I guess as I became professional it began to be directing and then playwriting.

MN: So when did you start the directing, or did you direct this play you wrote?

HM: Yeah, I think I did.

SM: You started directing but I'm the one that ended up directing.

HM: Yeah, right, she did end up directing, yeah.

MN: And was your graduate education in theatre or theatre history?

HM: Yeah, by the time I went to - - I went to the business school, Baruch. Then I dropped out and went to work and family and all this kind of stuff. Then I realized you have to do what Joseph Camel says, follow your wits. So then when I went back to school it was all about theatre. But I don't have an M.F.A., I have an M.A. so it's about theatre theory, dramatic structure, theatre history and so forth. And I just thought I had done enough work in the theatre so I wanted that track rather than the terminal degree M.F.A.

SM: You gotta tell him about the film and the death of a Dunbar Girl. I mean, how could you leave that out?

HM: I don't know how I could leave that out.

[laughter]

MN: Go for out.

HM: Death of a Dunbar girl which she's in and my son is in. When I went to college, when I decided I'm following my thing, I've given my life as a police man or whatever, I majored in film at city college, I'm a graduate of that film department. But before, even before them, we did a film that was distributed and exhibited all been to more countries than I have.

SM & HM: [laughs]

HM: This so called Death of a Dunbar Girl. And of course I was able to use my wife in it because she's an actress.

MN: Now do you still have it.

HM: Oh yeah, we have it filmed.

MN: Do you have it on video - -

HM: It's on video. You can take a copy of it of course.

SM: Now he directed this, he wrote and directed it - -

HM: I wrote and directed it.

SM: Did you produce it?

HM: Well yeah.

MN: And what year was this?

HM: 1974, I remember, my father is also in his film.

MN: Now what's the hook if you're trying to explain this to somebody who doesn't know anything?

SM: The hook about what?

MN: The focus - -

HM: How do you describe it.

SM: Oh, it's about an old vaudevillian and her daughter who clash over the racial tensions of their performing pasts.

MN: Wow.

HM: And it has a little interracial thing because the mother has had a affair with a man who was a white man who is obviously her producer and the daughter ends up marrying

this guy. So there's that tension in it. It's really just two people, it's really just two people. And the film got a lot of notice. It was in - - her relatives in London saw it - -

MN: Wow! Has it been on television?

HM: Oh yeah, on PBS on channel 32 or something like that.

SM: In Atlanta, is that where it was?

HM: In Atlanta but also here in New York, WNYC.

MN: Right, this is again something we'd like to archive because this is you know - -

HM: My son's in that.

[crosstalk]

MN: Is your son in the theatre also or no?

HM: This is [laughs] - - no, no, no, no. This is - - he does the computer stuff. That's what I say because I'm not computer - - He's a programmer, let me get this right, he's a programmer and he designs web pages and websites and all that kind of stuff.

[crosstalk]

HM: But he does write poetry and short stories [laughs].

MN: Now where did he end up going to school? Where did you send him?

HM: Haverford and the University of Virginia.

MN: And where in New York City did you send him to private school?

SM: First Hoffman School and then the Cathedral School.

HM: And then he went to public school which is - -

SM: Yeah, we were very sorry about that.

HM: Which was - -

MN: He went to Stuyvesant?

SM: He went to Stuyvesant. He was one of the private school kids that edged out the public school kids.

[laughter]

MN: So this was your first film?

HM: Yeah that was my first and sorry to say, only. Yeah that was my first film.

SM: Yeah that's what he did when he was being a transit police man

HM: That's what I did. I was a police man at that time.

MN: Now did you become politically active when you were living in Woodstock Terrace? You didn't become involved in - -

HM: Well I was the youngest chairman. I keep forgetting all this stuff. I was the youngest chairman of the board of directors of a [inaudible] housing co-op even at that time. So that's not political but that's - -

MN: You never ran for office or did anything like that?

HM: No, I was encouraged to do that but didn't really want to do that.

MN: What did you think of the quality of your local elected leadership? Did you know any of them?

SM: I don't want to put Wendell Foster down [laughs] but - -

HM: Wendell Foster.

MN: Well - -

HM: Who was the lady that lived down the hall who was the big political - -

SM: Mrs. Jefferson.

HM: - - Mrs. Jefferson lived in the apartment down [inaudible].

MN: Was she like a district leader?

HM: She was like a district leader or something like that and she tried to encourage me to go into politics a great deal. But I just never had a great deal of interest in that particular thing because I had to go to school and work and do all of this kind of stuff. So I don't know, I mean I feel I'm being - - I'm never quite so sure what those people in politics, representatives, are doing. Garcia, who is the congressman, seemed to be somebody doing something but then he got into the what's that? Webteck thing - -

MN: I had the experience - - see I was involved in an organization called Sports for the People, which had its headquarters on 156th and Prospect. We had a number of community programs. And in our last days when we were in trouble, we did a benefit honoring Robert Garcia and Joseph Galiber. So there's a picture of me on the front page of El Diario a week before they were both indicted and [inaudible].

SM: [laughs]

HM: But of course that wiped out their conscience.

MN: Because both of them were good guys I believed.

HM: Yeah, yeah. They were.

MN: I mean, I thought they were decent people. I don't know what their private dealings were but you know, they definitely tried. Now what was your shopping like in Woodstock Terrace after the neighborhood had taken its blows? Were you able to shop in the neighborhood for groceries, clothing, or did you find yourself having to go into other areas to shop?

SM: Well for a few years we used to go to Pathmark to shop.

MN: Where was Pathmark located?

HM: That as really outside.

SM: In Manhattan, yeah.

HM: No, you mean the Pathmark up by Bruckner Blvd. Didn't we go there for a while?

SM: Yeah, we also went to another Pathmark that was in upper Manhattan. Yeah that was kind of backwards.

HM: You see we lived there so long that we went there when the neighborhood went down - -

MN: And then it went back up.

HM: - - because now we're in Yonkers but there's a store in my old neighborhood that I go back to [laughs].

MN: Now did you ever go to this store that Elias Carmen owned called Hollywood Clothes on Prospect, just south of 163rd street.

HM: Well we never shopped for clothing, I never shopped for clothing in the neighborhood. And I don't whether that's a habit that came from my parents because they didn't. You know, it may have been that. They bought from Harlem because the wise people from Harlem didn't shop for clothing because it was a rip off thing.

MN: Right. Now was your son, did he have neighborhood friends as well as school friends?

SM: Yes.

MN: And this is mostly Woodstock Terrace kids or did he have friends from the surrounding - -

SM: Woodstock Terrace.

HM: Yeah, it was Woodstock Terrace because Woodstock Terrace takes up that whole block. There's no other. And the 920, 900 block there's no other.

SM: And when he was growing up there were many, many children there. That's not the case now.

MN: Now it's mostly older.

HM: And the school was across the street, just so you know exactly where it is. What is that, 140, P.S.140?

MN: Did he go to that school?

SM: No.

HM: No.

MN: So he went to - - where is the Hopkins School located?

SM: That was in Riverdale.

HM: Riverdale.

MN: Okay, now did you drive him there or did he go by bus?

SM: His bus was a Fleetwood Cadillac that came to pick up all the black kids.

[laughter]

SM: The white kids would ride in little chunky little yellow buses and the black kids for some unknown reason got the Fleetwood Cadillac.

MN: Right.

HM: There was another retired principal, we already said this right? [inaudible] Banks who, she really was this - - [inaudible] was I guess somewhat older than us, maybe a decade older and her children, that's how we found out about Hoffman. And she lived downstairs from us.

MN: Now, we've gone on for quite a while so I wanna just say is there anything in looking back that you haven't said that you'd like to say in terms of reflections on growing up, issues we didn't cover that you think are important?

HM: Inevitably I will comment on something but it won't be at this moment [laughs].

MN: Okay, Stephanie do you think - -

SM: Yeah, I'm fine.

MN: Well thank you very much.

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B]

[END OF INTERVIEW]