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Melendez, Benjamin

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Interviewer: Mark Naison, Johnny Man, Andre Hill, Maxine Nodel, Dawn Russell

Interviewee: Benjamin Melendez

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Transcriber: Danielle Lund

Mark Naison (MN): - - 79th interview of the Bronx African American History Project. It is November 20th 2006, and we are interviewing Benji Melendez, a long time Bronx activist, musician, and philosopher who is going to be talking about growing up in the Bronx and his experiences with gangs and with peacemaking, music and activism. Our videographer Dawn Russell is also attending, and Maxine Nodel, principal of Millenium Arts Academy, and Johnny Mann, and Andre who are two students at the Stevenson High School Complex. So, Mr. Melendez, tell us a little bit about your family and their background.

Benjamin Melendez (BM): My family's background it's - - it's unique, and it's different, but especially with the people in our community, because when we were living there, we felt ourselves different from the people who lived in the area. I knew why we felt different because our rituals were different, the way we were talking was different, our way of thinking, our philosophy was different. My parents happen to be Moranos which are secret Jews. We were Crypto-Christians. I mean the outside very Christian, but at home very Jewish. Now, we knew about this as we were little, and we were never supposed to talk about family secrets to no one, so everything that my parents would teach us we were supposed to give that life to the people in our community. In other words, show the example, this is how you live. This is a - - you treat your neighbor good, you treat people kind, and when you do that you get good rewards. My father always said, you treat people nice, you're going to get rewarded for that, so in our home, we - - even in our foods everything was different. When we had pasteles, which is a - - it's in the Puerto Rican cuisine. It's made out of platanos, okay, but the Puerto Ricans when they do it, they use - - you can do it with pork. We did it with beef. We didn't cook with mateca which is lard. It was oil. So everything we did was kosher in our eyes even when, when we introduced - -

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some of my neighbors - - and I gave some pasteles to them, and they said, no, we don't eat that.

I say - - we heard a comment from one of our friends, who told this family, oh no that's Jewish.

I say it's stupid. This is pasteles, and Benny the beef is cooked for you, you know, but they didn't want to understand that, so because to them, a pasteles is not pasteles if it's made out of pork. Alright, alright - - so then at home - -

Dawn Russell (DR): Cut, cut - - I'm sorry - - like can I just pick this like, because it keeps disappearing under your collar.

BM: Oh yes, oh. [Indecipherable]

MN: Okay, now you've got - -

BM: You've got [Indecipherable] bad timing.

MN: When did your family come to the United States?

BM: Okay this is a good question. I was born in August of - - 1952. I came here - - eight months. I came here at eight months. I was born in Puerto Rico, came here at eight months. So my father came earlier. My father came much earlier. He came a year - - yes, eight months earlier, so he was here earlier, and he came to the United States earlier. I think it was 19 - - I can't - -

MN: What sort of work did your father do?

BM: My father was a laundry man. He owned a laundry, you know, a cleaners. And - - the economic situation for it was not that well. So, he moved over to - - at that time - - his sister moved to the United States already, two or three years ahead. I think that's what it was, yes. The following year he went over there.

MN: Now what neighborhood did they move to from Puerto Rico?

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BM: From there, from Puerto Rico we moved to 23rd Street. No I'm sorry - - yes, 23rd Street and Tenth Avenue.

MN: Chelsea?

BM: Yes, where the train is, the house is still there. The house is still there. We moved there. We stood there for a little while, because my mother lived - - my aunt lived and my father's sister lived there. So we were there for a little while. Then from there we moved to 125th Street and Broadway. Now when I was a little boy, and we lived there. My mother just gave birth to a little baby girl. She went downstairs for a few minutes, just to pick up the mail. I was playing with matches. I was a little boy. I didn't know anything. Playing with matches. The place caught on fire. The only thing I remember was the firemen taking my brothers and I outside. I looked at my mother and she was screaming. Found out later on that the little girl died in the fire. I was a baby. I didn't know anything. From there, my father packed us up, packed up, and we moved to 14th Street, where - - Washington and Horatio. We lived there. Greenwich Village area. I loved that place. That was my world, and we used to go to Gansevoort, the Sanitation Department. We used to go there. I remember when we were little, we used to get milk in front of the door. It came - - bottles of milk. Also the streets didn't have the tar that you have today. There were cobblestones, so then my father would say, here take these knives and go out there, and tell the man to sharpen them, so the guy would come with a carriage. So then we'd give him the blades, and he would sharpen them. [Sharpening noise] Then the man would come with ice. Oh get me ice. So he goes out there. He breaks the ice in the machine, you get a bucket of - -

MN: Now were you living in like walk-up buildings? Were they like tenements?

BM: Yes they were old tenements, yes, and we lived on the first floor. Seven eighty-nine Washington Street, apartment 1-R. Never forgot that. Okay, so we lived there, and there was - -

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the whole place was between - - I would say between, I'd say Washington and Horatio, this was all families. Cousins, uncles, every - - so anyway I had an uncle called Hioto, and I forgot the name of his band. He had his Latin band on the third floor, and he used to play in those days. He used to play the flute. My family is musically inclined. Everybody's into music. If you don't know how to play guitar, it's piano. If it's not the piano, it's flute. Everybody plays, sings, writes music.

MN: Now was - - and when you were growing up, did people speak Spanish in the house?

BM: All the time. It's - - it's interesting. I was saying this to my wife. When we were growing up in my - - in - - where we lived at, they had, the women had penas. You know what pena is? You know the Spanish women with the lace? Well, everybody used to dress like that. With the big fans. That's the way it was in my house. It was like Spain. So all the old ladies there were just looking.

MN: Now when did your family move from Spain to Puerto Rico? It was how long - -

BM: Now this has - - this is what I remember. My father was born in 1899. My father said, I remember when the Spaniards were still walking down the streets. I remember they didn't enter Puerto Rico until what, 1898. They came into Puerto Rico 1898 when he was growing up, so in 1899 he said when he was growing up. He still remembered there were still Spaniards there. You know, Americans had already come in, but there were still Spaniards in the Streets. My grandparents came - - my father's family - - which I did not know. And I said Papi, was your father born in Puerto Rico? No. My father came from Spain, with his parents. So my great grandparents came to Puerto Rico. Listen, what did grandpa look like? So one day, by accident we were looking at Archie Bunker. He goes there goes my father right there. He looked just like him, just like him. I said oh please. So he called my mother, and said Josefina- - oh yes, your

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father looked just like him. Okay so, they came into Puerto Rico, that I don't remember, what year they came. But they were not born in Puerto Rico. They came - - they migrated from Spain to PR.

MN: And then the family moved from Puerto Rico to New York?

BM: To New York, yes.

MN: Did you always live in neighborhoods with a lot of Puerto Ricans? In - - when you - - in Manhattan?

BM: No, when we lived at 125th Street and Broadway, there were still Jews, Italians, Irish, pockets of blacks here, and the Puerto Ricans are on the block. My father - - there was a restaurant called Luz, L-U-Z, Light, but it was a Sephardic restaurant. Spanish Jews. My father at that - - so that was predominant. I remember seeing many Jews in that area.

MN: Now where did your - - where was your father's laundromat? What neighborhood was it in?

BM: In San Juan.

MN: And so he owned in San Juan, and then what - - what did he do when he - -

BM: Okay now when he came over here, that's when he got a store. A store on Stebbins Avenue. I'm sorry, 163rd Street between Prospect and Stebbins Avenue, and then he had another store around the corner.

MN: And what kind of - -

BM: Grocery store.

MN: So he had a grocery store right in Morrisania?

BM: Yes, a grocery store.

MN: Wow.

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BM: Two grocery stores.

MN: Two grocery stores.

BM: And he was superintendent of four buildings.

MN: Wow, so he was a superintendent of four buildings, and owned two grocery stores.

BM: Yes.

MN: And when did he get those stores in the Bronx.

BM: Well, dad, he already - - remember, when we lived in Manhattan, he already had the stores up there in the Bronx.

MN: So he - - you were living in Manhattan, and he had his property in the Bronx.

BM: He was already in the Bronx, but people already looked - - many of the Puerto Ricans already migrated to the Bronx. Everybody was moving to the Bronx at the time.

MN: What kind of music did you grow up with in your house?

BM: Aguinaldo, and Argentine music. I never forgot that. No Tito Puente. No Celia Cruz. No. On my father's side there was all Spanish music. I never forgot that. The old - - what is the name of the Argentine music, that they do the certain dances.

MN: Tango? Tango?

BM: That type of music. We always heard it in the house, and always Spanish music. My father used to have those old - - those long records, long playing records. Never, and Tito Puente we heard. Tito Puente when we moved to the Bronx, but not when we lived in Manhattan.

MN: Now how old were you, when you first moved to the Bronx?

BM: Right after Kennedy died. The following year.

MN: So 1964.

BM: Yes.

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MN: So most of your childhood. You were born in '52.

BM: Yes.

MN: So you were in junior high school when you moved to the Bronx?

BM: No. I was in P.S. 41. I was still in elementary school. I used to go to P.S. 41. Now if you go to P.S. 41 today, you - - you have no Puerto Ricans at that school. I told teacher - - when I went back, that was my wife. She looked at me. I said, yes, I used to go to school there when I was a little boy.

MN: What street was that on?

BM: St. Vincent's Hospital, but right down the block.

MN: So this is in Manhattan. You were the only - -

BM: Yes.

MN: Now what was it like speaking Spanish at home, and going to a school where nobody was Spanish speaking?

BM: I didn't feel alienated because there was a lot of Puerto Ricans who were going to the school too, and all the other Hispanic, like Spaniards, but there was a Spanish, or a big Spanish community there, a few Mexicans, right, but in the house - - that's what it was spoken all the time was Spanish, Spanish, Spanish. And we learned English by watching the television and hanging out in the street with the guys.

MN: Now did, you know - - you're growing up in the '50s. Did rock and roll make an impression on your - -

BM: Oh yeah, it sure did. The Four Seasons, okay. The Four Seasons - - oh as a matter of fact, before that, the one that used to bring the grocery store, the grocery bags to my mother's

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apartment and my father when we lived on 125th Street was the guy from - - [Sings] I know you
- - Anthony Gourdine.

MN: From Little Anthony and the Imperials.

BM: Yes, he used to bring it upstairs and my - - and my brothers and my sisters say - - Benji
was that - - he used to bring the groceries - - they used to practice right there in the hallway when
we used to live there. I didn't know that. Already in those days, so it would - - Little Anthony
and the Imperials was an impression on us. The Doo Wops, then later on became The Four
Seasons - - well we flipped on The Four Seasons. I mean - - then with the '50s, that was the
Beach Boys. Oh those - - to me that was - - everything changed when the Beatles came. Beatles
came into the United States - - it was a completely different thing. I remember when my brother
first introduced me to the Beatles. When we moved to the Bronx, he said, hey, Benji, there are
four faggots coming from England. There are four faggots? Yes, they've got long hair. Now
when you look at the pictures, when you look at them now, to me, that's not long hair. Long - -
any - - but we didn't - - my father said - - listen, you want to sing your songs I don't care - - I
don't want - - I don't want your hair like that. So we didn't have our hair like that when we first
heard them, but we got our harmonies through the Chipmunks. You know, Alvin and the
Chipmunks?

MN: How could I forget? [Laughter]

BM: We got our harmonies by listening to them. And then everything, everything changed from
there.

MN: So you, you and your brothers sang harmony together?

BM: Yes.

MN: Now what was the Bronx like when you got there?

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BM: Oh man, when we moved to the Bronx the first time, first of all - - I actually - - I said to my wife, I don't know how I got here. My brother said man we came by car. My other brother said, yes, but we came by train. I said, man, how did we get here. I don't remember. All I know, when I left I felt it was, it was a different world, a different world. When I - - came to the Bronx and we lived on Stebbins Avenue, first of all - -

MN: Stebbins between where and where?

BM: Stebbins between 163rd and 165th Street.

MN: Okay, I know, right near Thessalonica Baptist Church.

BM: Yes, yes. With the big giant synagogue.

MN: That was a synagogue, right?

BM: Right. Now for the first time, for the first time I went to P.S. 23. P.S. 23, that's in the [Indecipherable]. The Bronx at that time - - it was beautiful, a lot of nice beautiful houses, the streets were really clean.

MN: Twenty-three, that was right near where the Forest Houses are now.

BM: Yes, yes. It was nice around there. But I kept on - - I was home sick. I said, man, I miss 14th Street. I miss Greenwich Village, and every - - every other week where would we go. We'd always go to the same spot. I tell my children since they were tiny, I said, I lived here. They say pa, what did we move up here - - what are you? Crazy? You know, I even ask - - I tell people when they live in the apartment I lived in, I say, excuse me, do they have elevators in those buildings? Yes. We never had that. Our stairs were wooden. So then, at the first time, I went to P.S. 23 in the Bronx. So, my first altercation, and my hair was combed back like this - - like a pompadour. I had an altercation with a young black girl, and she said, "this white boy started that!" I never forgot that. She said, "that white boy started it." Nobody ever said that to me.

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White boy? Spanish, Puerto Rican, but - - I looked at the teacher and I said - - and I looked at my brother. My oldest brother was there because my father couldn't make it - - he was sick. Now if you look at my oldest brother, you would never think he's my brother. Blue eyes, strawberry and red. So I said, so when he said that - - she said that to me - - I looked at her and I said I felt weird. I was in another world, and I remember - - now that's where I met many blacks - - when I came to the Bronx, but in - - where I lived in - - hardly nobody was there. It was mainly whites, specifically Italians, and Irish and we were always fighting with them. Come to the Bronx, different world altogether together. You know what I mean, so - - I said man, but we still - - the same principal is still alive. At that time you had the discipline. My father would take me to school, never forgot - - he told the teacher, "he gets out of hand, you give it to him, and then you let me know. I'll give it to him." That's the way it was in my time. I say, you couldn't disrespect the teacher, you couldn't say nothing - - in those days, [whipping sound]. You know, so you had to - - father gets you home, does the same thing. But in those days, I learned to respect them. Respect my - - even when you say, hey you [In loud voice], you know, because I was brought up, always to respect my elders, even when I was in the gangs. When I was in the gangs, and I had these chains here, and my hair was like this. And I had the blade - - an older man, "Excuse me, you've got to get off the stairs." Oh, okay. Come on guys, let's go. Thank you, we're supposed to be - - now, shut up - - I'll tell you - - that could be your pops man. I don't want no trouble. So then - - so when we lived in the Bronx. The burning down of the Bronx did not exist at that time. It was beautiful.

MN: This was 1964?

BM: Yes, it was beautiful. I used to go to John Duarte Junior High School. It was fantastic.

MN: What junior high - - where - -

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BM: Junior - - John Duarte Junior High School, right there on Stebbins Avenue.

MN: On Stebbins. Oh - -

BM: Same place. Between Thessalonia Baptist Church. Right there.

MN: There was a junior high right there?

BM: Yes, it was called John Duarte Junior High School 133.

MN: Now, you know, were there still movie theaters in the neighborhood?

BM: Yes, right on Prospect Avenue, you had the Berlin Theater, you had the RKO, you had the Loews and then you had Prospect right around the corner. I went to see *A Hard Days Night, 007*, and *Hercules Unchained* for thirty-five cents. [Laughter] And then when *Batman* came out - - remember Bat - - the original *Batman*. When it came out we went to Berlin Theater, and oh we were excited. We went up there - - that - - it was a different world at that time. Oh we had some good times!

MN: What about live music in the area? Were there clubs or - -

BM: Oh yes of course.

MN: - - What were the places that you went?

BM: Tropicana. The Tropicana, where you had Tito Puente, where you have Celia Cruz, where you have people like the - - el Gato - - Mongo Santamaria. Then you have Colgate Gardens, and then you have the Embassy Ballroom, and then you have - -

MN: Would you go to Hunts Point Palace at all?

BM: Oh yes, of course. You know, but that - - that was not my thing. I never got into that. My brothers and I never got into Salsa. Everything was rock and roll. We were influenced with rock and roll in Manhattan. We came up with that over here. Seeing how - - even when we were Ghetto Brothers, we brought all these instruments out in the streets. I remember, we were doing

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Bino's and Grand Funk Railroad, and Beach Boys and all this, with congas, timbales, and the guitars. When Afrika Bambaataa said, I remember when you guys used to go out in the street. We said before we started with all these big amplifiers- - you guys were doing it. We were doing that already.

MN: What was the street life like on Stebbins Avenue? You know, did people do a lot in the street?

BM: Of course, there were parties. There were - - on every Friday or Saturday, you know, there was always the parties. There was a community party. They closed the streets, and everybody would go out there to have a good time. You know, I get nostalgic. I look back, and I remember, man, I look at that area, and I say it's not what it used to be even though it's coming up again. It's coming up again. They have a - - a sticker. It says, "I am proud to live in the new South Bronx." Now you go back to the neighborhood where I used to live at, forget it. The rents there. If you don't work, they don't accept welfare. If you don't work, you can't live there. And I go back, and I say man. In fact, I was in Blacky's house the other day. Blacky started the Savage Skulls again. So, Blacky, Blacky lives there. And I say Blacky man, and he says Benji, look, it's coming up again. It's not what it used to be. Look at that man. You see how beautiful it is? It looks nice.

MN: On Stebbins there's a lot of new buildings.

BM: Yes, yes. And then you have - - you have whites that are moving up into Charlotte. I'm telling you. The new houses, I met a black Irish family. You know, check this out man. You know, this is coming up. You know, it's nice. But, to live in those areas now - - man I'd feel really bad Mark, because where I live at today, guys its like, I've never lived like this before. I've always lived in a nice apartment. Now I live - - if you go to my apartment, it's like going to

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back to the South Bronx, and back in those days. Am I right? Paying all this rent - - we tell the man, why don't you fix this place man. These guys don't want to do nothing. Where am I going to go? Where am I going to go? I have to save money, save money. Hopefully to move away, and then look where I can find an apartment at suitable rent, so we can move. You know, it's not - - I have to live with what I have right now. But - - I don't know.

MN: Now when did you first become aware of gangs in the Bronx?

BM: When I lived in the Bronx every community, every interval, every block was inundated with gangs. Now I didn't want to just join a club, because I felt that I can do this on my own. I don't want to be under somebody else's leadership when I can do it myself. Now my greatest inspiration was John Wayne. I said I wanted to be just like John Wayne. Look at the way he commands the Marines. Look at the way he managed the Iwo Jima. I said, man, I loved that - - I want to be like that. Well chronologically, I started with the Barbarians. Then from the Barbarians I joined the [Indecipherable] Cats.

MN: Now where were the Barbarians located?

BM: Prospect Avenue.

MN: Prospect Avenue between where and where?

BM: Between 163rd Street and - - Prospect between 163rd Street and 165th Street. Right here. It was on the roof, the Barbarians, and we wore masks, like wrestling masks.

MN: Now was this a multi-ethnic gang? Or - -

BM: Oh yes, yes. Mostly Puerto Rican, and actually yes, we had that. We had that little group there together. So then from there I joined the [Indecipherable] Cats, which was on Marmion Avenue and Tremont, right mama. Marmion and Tremont.

MN: So that was when you moved up there? Did you move up?

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BM: No I was still. I was living in Tiffany, but I was going up there, because I knew a lot of people up there. So I start - - I left the Barbarians, joined the [Indecipherable] Cats with my friend Ewing. Left the [Indecipherable] Cats, started the Savage Skulls, but originally it was called Savage Skulls Nomads. This was on Freeman.

MN: Now was this when you - - was this when you were in junior high or high school?

BM: I was in junior high.

MN: So you were in - -

BM: The Barbarians I was in elementary school.

MN: You were still - - you joined your first gang when you were in elementary school?

BM: Yes.

MN: Now what did it mean to be in a gang - - to be in the Barbarians at that point?

BM: [Whispers] Power, power. But like I said it's not - - my ex-wife always wondered - - she said something interesting - - one day she was being interviewed by somebody from the New York Times. He said, we want to interview you for a minute. Tell us something about Benjamin. Now you don't want to know anything about Benjamin. Let me tell you something about this guy. He's not they way - - the way you see him like that - - he dresses up to be that. He's not. This guy's a pussy cat. This guy likes to help you around the house. This guy likes to wash dishes. This guy likes to make - - he's a nice guy. This guy - - I was. You saw me in those days, guys? I mean with the chain and the - - you see - - I'm walking around with a blade here on the side like that, here - - a cop got me for that in Fort Apache. You know what I mean. But if I was to see you, I would say, hey guys, how you doing, listen, my name is so and so, would you like to join my club. That's the way it used to be. You know I gave - - I projected myself to look mean, but it - - that wasn't really me. When you get to know me, I was a nice

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guy. We had gestapos. Have you heard of that expression? When the gangs they would send out people to join another club to find out information to kill the leader. Well we had this guy named Israel Reshack, I think that's how you pronounce his last name. He joined my club, only to find out later on that he was the gestapo from the Bachelors sent to kill me. So he was hanging out with me and knowing all of this, you know, and in the end - - 162nd Street between Prospect and 153rd Street - - he goes like this, takes a gun, puts it on the table in my living room - - he said Benji, and I already knew. He said, I can't do it man. You befriended me. I mean you're a cool guy. We became the best of friends. He's right now one of the bodyguards for the mayor. [Laughter] You see what I'm saying? So, we became good friends, because I never gave him the impression that I was a threat to these guys.

MN: Now - - it sounds like you sort of, almost had to have a double life. You know, one for the street, one for your family. Now what about school? Did you take school seriously?

BM: Yes, I loved school. I loved school. Especially in the fall. Every time I - - when we used to go up to - - the last school I went to was Morris High School. But I loved studying. I loved reading. Guys, anytime, you go to my house, from the minute you step into my apartment, all the way to the bathroom, all the way to my room, all the way to the closet - - what's there?

Books, all over the place, and I adopted them - - [indecipherable] science channel or anything, I recorded, put it there, but school, I loved school at that time. Now there was a point in my life when I went to Morris High School. I dropped out at the age - - at the tenth grade. I remember that the teachers were on strike. They were on strike some time that I lost the incentive. Man I want to go to school, so then I said - - no, I can't take this anymore, so what I did, I said mommy - - my parents felt terrible, so I left and got a job. Only years later is when I got my GED, and I wish I just would have gone straight there, but I loved school. I really - - I do.

MN: But were there ever - - did you ever have any like older person kind of try to take you under their wing, and get you through school into college or anything like that?

BM: Well, there were several. Okay, several. The first one was my ex-wife. You know, and I'd say, if it wasn't for Melinda. She was the one that made me into a man. You know, she said, she - - I'm telling you - - she shaped me. She helped me. She - - I mean constantly there. She'd say Benji, don't let these guys use you. Don't be manipulated by this. Do what you've got to do. You know, this is where you're heading at. Go to school. Finish it. Do something, you know. But it worked. And another guy was Paul Gonzalez. Paul Gonzalez came into our community, and there was another guy who was inspiration to me. You know, he came into the club, and he said, I want to talk to Benji. I said, "What do you want me for?" You better leave him alone because we've got a good life - - please. Where is he at? That's him over there. So, he took me under his wings. We went to his house on Jesup Avenue. He spoke to me. He said Benji, you've got to get off this trip man. You know, you can use that power to bring up these guys - - to do something positive in the community.

MN: So - - but you, you know - - it sounds like you found power in these - - building these organizations of a kind that was very heady for a young person.

BM: You know I wasn't - - you have to understand the circumstances at the time. Even when the politics came into it - - when the Young Lords came into the scene, which I never liked. I never liked the Young Lords. The Black Panthers - - they came in - - they brought in films, paraphernalia, and I remember Mark - - I never forgot this - - I remember when they had the Decolonization Committee. When there were thousands of people protesting in front of the United Nations on the decolonization of Puerto Rico. I remember the poster where they - - with the Puerto Rican flag down here, so they were protesting about Puerto Rico being a colony. So

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there was this protest, and the cops were here, and then you see two guys coming up this way, suits, tall guys, with a bull horn - - Benjamin Melendez. I said, "Oh man." "Over here. Come with us please." They took me to the United Nations, went inside the United Nations, all the way down these stairs, and I sat down with Juan Mari Brás, president of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, and Roberto Alarcon, the ambassador of Cuba. I sat that there when they were protesting about the decolonization. He turned around, and he said, Juan Mari Brás said, this is Benjamin, the new - - the new guy who's going to bring up the revolution, revolutionary movement here in the United States. Roberto Alarcon turns around and says, I read about you in *Gramma*, the Cuban newspaper he's saying. And he shook my hand and I was there. I didn't expect to be there right, and I remember, after that time, detectives came to my wife, the FBI came to my wife.

MN: How old were you at this time?

BM: Twenty-one, twenty-two.

MN: But how did you get to the point of starting the Ghetto Brothers. You know, you said you started with the Bar - -

BM: Originally the Ghetto Brothers - - the concept - - the Ghetto Brothers was originally my family, was my brothers. Robert, Victor, then we befriended named Raymond, who was with us since we were little - - he became part of the scene. Huey, who today is the grandmaster of the [indecipherable] System. And then Charlie who later on who we befriended when he lived around 58th Street, so it was a brother thing. Never in my wildest dreams would I think it was going to become a big organization. So from the Ghetto Brothers it became - - it just started to propagate, and we just started to spread, and I did that. I went around there talking to young guys like yourselves, "Hey guys I'm doing this, why don't you join my club man. This is what

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we're all about." But what attracted, the thing about us at that time, was not this or this, or this, or this. It was the philosophy of bringing people together. I mean that - - I mean you do it all when you just get the president, the vice president of all of us together, and you look at the sea of people. That's just the leaders. Not the members. You say damn. Look at all these guys, and to think, you know, I could just go like a Caesar, but I never did that.

MN: Now when did the - - when did the - - you start to see the neighborhood start to deteriorate? You said, you know - - you came there in '64, and said it was - - it was a beautiful place, and by the '70s a lot of those - - when did you see things start to come apart?

BM: '73, '74. Even my wife told me, when she said, oh the Bronx is burning. When I saw that. When the Bronx was burning, I said, this is sad man. Look at you guys man. Hey whenever you've got time, look at a picture of World War II Germany. Berlin when the Allies bombed the whole area, that's the how the South Bronx looked at the time. My brother came from Vietnam "yo Benji man, you don't know what it is to be in Vietnam!" Yes I said, "man I'm in Berlin, what are you talking about?" Look. And I looked at the area, and I said, man this is like, like after World War II. Everything was devastated. I said I don't want to live - - that's what I said in the film. I said, I don't want to live in this, and I got this - - found out later on that the landlords were paying arsonists to burn these buildings down. You know what I mean. Even where I lived at - - it was so beautiful. When I moved out, come back a year later, it was gone. You know what I mean, but I've seen the whole thing, from beauty to - - it looked like after war, after World War II it looked. Go down to the Bronx. Different world altogether.

MN: You guys have any questions?

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Johnny Man (JM): Yes I do. Every night when you went to sleep, and every morning when you woke up, like what were you thinking like as when you were in a gang - - weren't you afraid of what was going to happen to you, like were you going to get murdered and stuff like that?

BM: That is so - - what's your name again?

JM: Johnny Man.

BM: Johnny Man you're right. You're absolutely - - you read my mind. Yes, of course. I wake up, I say damn what's going to happen. I know I've got to think, if I walk out this door. I've always said somebody's aiming a rifle at me, and incidentally, I had a jacket that said Ghetto Brothers, but on the top over here it said president. My friend, Herc, wore that jacket on 163rd, on Prospect between 163rd Street, again 165th Street [Indecipherable]. Guy up on the roof. Shot Herc thinking it was me. Shot him in the spine. To this very - - that was in the '70s. To this day, he's still in a wheelchair. He said Benjamin that bullet was for you. Then my brother was walking around St. Ann's with the same jacket - - was stabbed three times in the back, one year. I said, oh man. So you're right. I've always said man, what will happen if I walk out this door and a bullet would just get me, because you had people that were jealous - - that were mad. A lot of the gangs, members would leave that gang to join the Ghetto Brothers because we wanted that gang stuff to - - No Benji you leave us alone man, we're about being outlaws, you know, you keep on doing this man we're going to - - we'll take your head. I've always feared that - -

JM: Also, like in your neighborhood, you said there were many gangs, right. So like - - is that, is that - - seeing many people in gangs - - that's what inspired you to join it? Like what inspired you to join it - -

BM: Oh very good okay Johnny - - I didn't join. I was forced. Got it? Oh yeah, well you're not in the club? No. Well you better join us. So instead of me joining them, I did my own stuff.

I didn't want to be under their roofs, their organizations. I knew if I ran it, it's going to be my way. So when I started my own thing, they left me alone, but in those days if you didn't belong to a gang - - either you're in it, good or bad, but you're going to be in it. Yo, you're at - - where do you live at? I live right here. You're in our club. So that's what it - - I said yo - - if I didn't join, okay - - the only people that were left alone were the people that were religious, like Pentecostals, or Catholics, or Jehovah's Witnesses. I could have gone that route, but I - - I didn't want to be - - I didn't want to do that, but if I said, nah, I don't want to join, then I - - I would've taken the risk of getting beat up.

JM: Also, like - - you said the consequences like for everybody like - - if it was like simple - - if that way for like one person - - why wouldn't - - why was they like just nice to the people that was religious like - - like all the Jewish people and stuff like that - - like why weren't they the same towards everybody? Why treat one person different and not treat the other person the same?

BM: Because they - - remember peer pressure? That's what they saw - - all they saw is young guys like that. You understand what I'm saying? So when they saw them, they go oh, this guy's got potential - - he could be one of us. We got to get this guy. That's what it was all about okay. I know they would of left me alone if I would have had the briefcases - - nah I don't want to talk over these - - don't put this guy in the gang because he's too - - he's going to us about religion so we don't want - - let's get this guy over here. See this guy who's dressed with the denim with the sneakers over here? Him. That's how - - but I didn't want to do that, you know Johnny, because I know they would have found me out later on. Oh this guy's a fake phony fraud. Go ahead.

Andre Hill [AH]: What is one of the most regretful things you've done while you was in the gangs?

BM: You know - - what's your name?

AH: Andre Hills.

BM: Andre, well, I thought about this you know. One of the things that I wish I can take back is when I sent Benji, my Benji, to get the clubs together to bring him to the club and he never came back. To this day, that bugs me. I said to myself, damn man. I let him go to play - - to bring these guys here to peace. Benji never came back. It's my only son, and then to think that I have to face the mother. You know, that's the thing to this very day. That was in the '70s. To this day I still think about that. I still look at his pictures. What did I do? If I could take that back, I would have done that. If that was me, I used to go over there anyway. You know, but I felt that this guy that had the potential - - you can do it Ben. Lost him.

JM: If you still had like - - if you still had the same type of people that you were with, like back in the days - - would it be possible - - if you could like - - would you try to like still make peace with the gangs now these days? Would you possibly try?

BM: Oh no doubt about it. They invited me - - who was it? Bill - - a guy named Bill Wright invited me to a place in Connecticut. I forget it, but I've got the information at home. They invited me over to talk to some guys who were Mieta. Mieta - -

JM: Latin Kings.

BM: Latin Kings, right. There was a whole bunch of - - these two guys. Benji can you talk - - so I went over there - - the lady told me, can you - - can you tell me who's [Indecipherable].

You can see it right there, the beads. You can see it, the signs. Right there - - Now the interesting thing - - you was there - - on the panel, there was this - - a ranger, big guy like that, and in the

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back there is two big counselors, so we were talking, and I didn't know anybody here. So when I finished saying what I was saying then I told the lady - - the boys that you want are right there.

The other guys you want, they're right over here. I told these guys before right - - we became good friends man. They got along after that, okay, so - - the ranger gets up, the trooper gets up - - he says I understand where Benji's coming from, because I was an ex-Ghetto Brother. When I go to the back, the two big black guys hugged me. Benji, don't you know who we are? Oh man - - two ex-Ghetto Brothers were counselors there. So they - - he told the other guys - - I told you, that was our president man. So, we used to call it Ghetto Brothers City, because the Ghetto Brothers were known for what, going down to establish peace with all the gangs. Man, when I - - when I went to 138th Street, there was a guy who called himself Yellow Benji, me, and went around there shooting members of other gangs, and I said, yo, this has got to stop. I went myself. I didn't want my boys - - to 138th Street and Cypress Avenue. When I go there, I'm looking like this with my colors on, and guy comes across the street, Ghetto Brothers right? Yes. Benji? Yes. Grabbed me. Put the gun right here - - in the street. I said, oh - - Listen, I'm the real Yellow Benji. Guy comes running across the street. No, no. That's the real Yellow Benji. He said what are you doing here. I says, I've come to clear my name. Now first of all, I didn't shoot your boy. If I did, why would I be here with my colors. The only way you're going to burn down is - - Ask your boy in the hospital. Wasn't me. The guy says, alright, makes a lot of sense. Yes, let me go. So I was walking down Tremont Avenue with my wife, my ex-wife, my brother. Guy comes right in front of me with Ghetto Brothers with plastic, and it was painted on. I'm looking at it - - Benji, look at this guy. I said, excuse me, you Ghetto Brothers? Yeah. What's your name? I'm Yellow Benji. That was him. I said, I'm Yellow Benji. He ran - - They said,

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come on let's get him! I said no, no, no. Benji. No, no. Let him go, and from there on I never heard that again. So I took responsibility. You understand. I used to go - - it was scary man.

JM: Like - - do you have children?

BM: Yes I have - - well I have eight. [Laughter] I have my own gang.

JM: Wasn't it like scary for you? Like wasn't you - - like during the gang - - when you joined it like - - when you started - - when you had your first child, were you interested in leaving the gang, would you like - - what would you - - what were you thinking about? Like how are you going - -

BM: Very good. What happened is that I already left the gang. The Ghetto Brothers made a transition from a gang to a political organization. So we were already getting influenced by the Black Panther Party, by the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, by the Nationalist Party, so we were already getting into that, but my ex-wife said to me, I want you to get out of it altogether, because they're going to kill you Benji. Somebody out there is looking for you. And she said, you have a choice - - or your boys. And I said of course, I'm going to be with you. And I did that. I went to the club, guys, I'm quitting. No. Then we had black berets with a red star. No Benji you can't do that, come on - - they were crying [Crying sounds]. So I said I'm going to leave, so - - so the guys - - Benji's wife was the one - - she was the one who got him out because they - - they knew her for that. So they called her every night. We're going to kill you Melinda - - you took away our leader. So I said - - that year I packed up and I moved to Jesup Avenue. To this day, they think - - they think I'm dead because I'm there - - ex-Ghetto Brothers they don't recognize me because I was very skinny. If you look at the pictures, I was a very skinny guy, and then I said, you remember the Ghetto Brother guys? Yes, I remember them. What ever happened to Yellow Benji? You was there Wanda - - he goes, they killed him man. Oh they

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killed - - yes, they killed him jail man - - they killed my Brother, and I say oh that's really sad.

So my ex-wife - - Wanda says, say something Robert, and I say no, no. I go places, but people think that Yellow Benji is dead. Then one day I had this guy looking - - Johnny, was looking up at my meter, and then he looks at me, chubby guy, an older guy, and he says, I've seen you somewhere, then I kept on saying - - I didn't say anything. Prospect. Ghetto Brothers. Benji! I said shh, relax. Yo Benji man. Gave me his card. He started, you know, he was crying. I thought you died. I'm alive. When Afrika Bambaataa saw me - - what happened?

Wanda Melendez (WM): He [Indecipherable].

BM: No. Jeff Chang who wrote the book said to Afrika Bambaataa, you know, we were in Seattle. There's a woman who - - you know who's here? Said he was with his crew. So he went like this, right Wanda? Walks up to me, in my ear, [Whispering] Benji I thought you died. I said no. Right here in living color brother. I ain't going nowhere. The guy said, now Benji, the rumor was that they killed you - - oh man - - I just didn't want anybody to know where I was. So we were there - - then the other guy was - - the other guy was insane. Benji - - there's the guy - - that's Yellow Benji. I want to - - you know so, when I left the scene, everything was - - the gang situation went down, people started taking off their colors, a lot of people went into businesses, jobs - - some people joined the service. I had Ghetto Brothers that - - I wanted to the Ghetto Brothers to be so military, so militant that I would go to a Ghetto Brother and say, you're going to join the Marines, you're going to join the Navy, you're going to join the Air Force, but these guys were smart. They did - - to this day they made a career out of it. Their job was to come back - - this is how you use an M16 Benji. This is how you do this, you know, and they came back and - - then they tell me like that, and they're still behind you. You look great! You know, and they're still with that career. And then, that's it. Hey, thanks a lot Benji. You're welcome

sir. You know very - - well it was amazing in those days. But to this day John, they know nothing about me. The only gang that knows about me is my children.

Maxine Nodel (MN): What - - what would you say to kids today who find themselves in gangs, and then as they get older, and maybe have families of their own - - they want to get out, but they feel trapped. They feel like they've been shot.

BM: Well, they have to - - true, they have to talk to a person like me. They have to talk to people, see look - - what makes the world go round is not love - - it's R-I-S-K. Got it. Risk, because it takes that. You took - - it took guts for you to join, and go back to [Indecipherable].

Johnny's right. And it takes us to do what? To do the opposite. I'm out of here. Yo, we're going to have to initiate you, and take the blows, take the blows. You know, you've got your family over here man. But you've got to stand up, because you can't run away from fear.

There's always going to be something. So - - that's what I did. I went up to the guys. I quit. I expected them to beat the hell out of me, but I was ready. But that's what life is about. It's about risks. I mean - - okay, you can easily pack up and move, but then down the line, they're going to say, remember me? You know what I mean? Face up to it man. You know.

JM: Also like, when people dropped out of gangs back in the days, weren't they considered like suckers, or punks, or something like that?

BM: No, no. What they do like - - for example, myself - - when some guys left the gang I felt bad - - I missed them - - I said listen guys I wish - - that was me. I wish you a lot of luck. Oh they were grown. Benji I'm leaving the Ghetto Brothers because I want to join the Savage Skulls, because they want to be more outlaw. I say I understand, you know but Archie man I'm going to miss you man. I mean alright, go ahead, you can go. I'll give you an example. For example, in the gangs, you have property, right. The girls belong to who?

AH: Us.

BM: To the guys. We didn't do that. In the Ghetto Brothers, the girls were independent. I would tell the guys, you get fresh with them, I'm going to hurt you. You get stupid with them, I'm going to hurt you, because I had sisters. So, if you like them, then court them, be nice to them, okay. Sex things no. Not here. Orgies? None, not here. Now, if they did it behind my back [Laughs] but not when I was there. Second, if one of the Ghetto Sisters liked you, and you were from another gang, I permitted that. I can't stop people from liking each other, but they were not permitted - - their girls to like one of my guys. Why? No, because we're Savage Skulls and you're Ghetto Brothers. See that's why - - that's why the girls in our club liked the GBs, and one time Johnny, it happened. One guy got fresh with a girl in a party. Got fresh with a girl at a party. The girl the following day said that this guy put his hand here and there, and there were Ghetto Brothers that were witnesses. So I said, Tommy come here. Did you do this to this girl? Yeah, but come on man, I mean - - hey this is - - yo man, we're GBs. Oh really? So we had a panel of judges, and then my spokesman was a brown belt at karate, Golden Glove boxer. I said what's the rules and regulations my brother? - - not supposed to be getting fresh with the girls, and then he's trying to rape one of his sisters. No, I didn't do it. I made a mistake. Go ahead, I'm sorry. So then, Louie looks at me. Four Ghetto Brothers are right here. So I go [makes hand motion] When I did that, you know what I'm doing right John?

JM: You're signaling him. Giving him a signal.

BM: Yes. So when I go like this. Louie's standing out here. He says, ah no, well - - Benji sent us here, BOOM! Knocks the guy's jaw so hard that it came out. I saw it. Like this. Took him to the hospital. Lincoln hospital. What was the signal I sent to the Ghetto Brothers? They never got stupid with a girl again. You got me covered?

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

BM: It's bad enough that my brothers are in [Indecipherable], because I was a very happy person. You give him that, he's going to go out of his mind. Okay you do something like that, we're going to hang you right here. So, from that they never told me to - - walk by days later, and I walked up to the guy and I say, you know, that wasn't too nice.

[Tape stops and restarts]

MN: Okay, we're back in business. Now what was - - what were we talking about?

JM: I asked him a question about - - I think - - never mind. I don't remember.

BM: You know I've got Alzheimer's. I forget what I was going to say.

JM: Yes, I do a lot of thinking - -

MN: You were talking about girls. [Crosstalk]

BM: Oh yes, yes.

JM: People getting fresh with girls. Oh.

BM: So you see what I'm saying Johnny Man. That sort of a thing. That means if your sisters were to join our club, you didn't have to worry about that these guys would - - not when I was around. You'd say, see Johnny Man, that's his sister. You mess with her, you're going to mess with me. You got it? Now Benji why'd you do that? Because I had sisters, so you got it? So, don't mess with my sisters. Don't mess with these girls either. So all the girls were being protected. Now the other gangs, it was a different sort of a thing. You running a train. Hey every guy goes at her. Not over here, no. Did not know that. Now this guy - - there were Ghetto Brothers and Sisters that got together and later on got married. So, you know, they were together from the time that the club - - to this day. You know what I mean, but it's a reason. That's a way I ran a gang. There's an article in the New York Times. There was a person

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named Zevi, who was - - lives at the Chelsea at the penthouse, all the way down there. And in the future, if you want information, this guy - - his mother did an archives of the gang - - they have everything up there. So when I saw that article from the New York Times Johnny Man, I said oh look, all the things I just told you, it says it right there. You know I mean? So they had films, right Wanda, documentaries, everything - - it's up there. So everybody goes there, so before you leave, give me your address or something, so that way I can make you a copy and for you too Mark of the CD back in the day, what I looked like, back in the - - you're going to see a lot of these guys.

MN: This is the movie *Flying Cuts Leaps*?

BM: Yes, *Flying Cuts Leaps*. It's called *Flying Cuts* - - you're going to see what we were like - - you're going to see me like that, and I'm talking to the guys now. When you see it in the film, I wish I was in the home, because when the camera's going to each person, I could tell you that guys dead, that guy's dead, that guy's alive. A lot of those guys are dead man. I mean because what you just said Johnny, they're going around thinking they're tough. Yo, it's about - -

JM: It is - - like to me it's crazy out here, because being in a gang is crazy. I mean I'm in a gang, but are you feeling me, I do my thing. I'm sort of like you in a way that I keep everything smooth and nice, you understand. And like I was in the car with my cousin the other day, coming through, young kid got shot by - - I think it was Morris Park or something. Got shot - - sixteen year old kid just laying there dead. You know what happened, it was over five dollars over money, and it was like - - and he was in a gang. He was involved in a gang come on. It's petty stuff guys come on. Be realistic. Over money? Come on. Is it really - - was that worth it? Was it worth your life?

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BM: Johnny now that you said that, now that you said that - - I was going through my brother's - - wait, where did he live at again? I'm seeing it in my mind - - the Pelham Bay area.

JM: Okay I know where you're talking about.

BM: So I'm walking, I'm looking at this guy. It was a young guy, sixteen or seventeen - - selling drugs at the corner, I watched him. I kept on looking at him. I said that's a shame, a young guy like that - - go to my brother's house still. I was to come back. I see cops and a sheet and blood, and I said to the cop, I just saw this guy! What happened? They drove by, shot him. And I looked and I said man I just saw this guy, alright, and those are the things that really, you know, that when you look back, it gets to you. Even a friend of mine who led the gangs years ago, but he still has that little thing in his heart. His daughter was beat up - - constantly beat up by her boyfriend, and this was one of my boys back in the day. So, he's already dead. Guy died of AIDS, so he looked at his daughter and he said, what happened. He keeps on doing that to you, okay. On a rainy day, takes his hood, takes a forty-five. Goes into the park, tells his friends, yo - - homey what's up. Get out. I'm talking to this guy. Then the guy said who are you. You like to beat up on my daughter? [Boom] Shot him right here. So I go to his house the following day. I read the newspaper. That was me. You know Benji, he kept on beating on my daughter man. Enough was enough. That's it. Two years later the guy died. You see, but that's - - this is the way he felt, this is the way I can deal with it. And I say no man, you see - - let the gangs, but he still had that little thing in him. You know what I mean? Hey daughter, stay away from this guy. Stay away from this guy, or this guy will wind up hurting you. I can call the cops, but don't go to the point where you're taking it upon yourself. And he didn't - - he didn't care. He said, hey, listen, if they grab me now, right now the cops, I don't care, but at least I got it off my chest. Nobody's going to hit my daughter with that again Benji. I mean so it's - - you

know, I agree with you. That's why you have to be - - even to this day I - - I agree with you.

You could be sitting in a train - - and I'm looking at this guy. I was with my ex-wife, and I'm looking at this construction guy. This guy is big, sitting down. These two young guys go, "you heard what I said man!" Come on. So my ex-wife says "the construction guy's crazy, he should get up and break his neck caca! How come he didn't do it?" And I said, Melin, Look at the guy carefully. You see it? See what? Keep on looking. Yo man, right there. Soon as you go like this, you know what you saw. It was a gun. That's why the construction guy wasn't caring. He was like this. He was cool. He didn't say nothing. He says, that's why the guy didn't do nothing, because if he gets up, the guy would shoot him. And I looked like this, I said damn, man. That's how today is, and you're right, if I look at a guy. If you look at a young guy, "yo, man what are you looking at?" So, you have to look away.

JM: That's the thing with me, like, I wear glasses, but my glasses broke, so I look like I'm giving people mean looks - -

BM: I do that. I do the same thing.

JM: - - And people are just looking at me like - - and I'm in my school. Seriously, like first day to my school. I've been to prison. I've been to jail. My first day to school, people are already scared of me. I walk in the classroom, and everybody gets up and moves away. What's going on? I'm not going to hurt anybody. I'm not coming to school to hurt anybody. I'm coming to school to do my work. Like you say, I love school just like you. I'm a senior about to graduate.

BM: Cool, I like that.

JM: Also, today in school, like when I go to school everyday and - - I come in, people are showing me a lot of love, this and that. I have a little brother there that goes there, I show him much love and make sure he gets to class everyday. Every time I go to school, and everyday that

I miss a day when I'm sick or something, I think about my brother, and I think about the innocent kids that are in that school, and what's going to go down because of all the gang members that are in that school. They got mad gang members in that school. You got DDP, the Bloods, the gangs, the Crips. You got Latin Kings, Queens. You got mad stuff in that school. Now if you think about it, all the other kids that's not down with that, and there's kids that are really trying to get their education are suffering because of all this stupidity and stuff that they're doing. You understand, there's been so many fights in my school that I don't - - I don't know what's going on. It's just been like - - why - - why is it going to happen now? Why are the young kids doing this? Why can't there be a young kid and they - - that just go to school, do his work and come home like a regular boy. You've got kids that go to school, cut class and go outside, smoke, go back to school. Do whatever the hell they want.

BM: She was with me. We went to Washington High School on University - - you know where that's at right?

JM: Yes, I know where that's at.

BM: They invited me to talk on the panel.

WM: Macombs.

BM: Macombs. So the people in the audience were making fun of everybody up here. Ah shut up, you know, awful. So they called me. Hey you. So I say, yo my man. After this is over, I'm going to talk to you, because I want to see how tough you really are. And what did he tell me? Everybody - - what happened - - you was there. They all said, yo, my man, you're on your own. He was like wearing the black pearls. What was he? I think he was a Blood or a Crip. Red, green, red.

JM: Yes, it's Bloods.

BM: Yes, so you understood Johnny? He was right there. They left him out alone in the end.

Who'd he come up to? He came, look, mister, I'm sorry man. Okay, listen. I'll accept your apology, because I was just going to talk to him. You wouldn't have done that to a guy in my time. Those guys from the old school, they would have killed you. I mean it. So everybody was quiet in the school. So I looked at the girls in the front row. Young ladies, if you had a diamond this big, would you throw it away? They said no, why. Oh because it's worth a lot of money. You wouldn't throw it away right? No, of course not. See what you've got between your legs, there's your diamond. Got it. They were like - - They all went like this. You see these guys, those are gold miners? They're after your diamond. Better show some pride. Man, after that the school counselor said - - "I didn't think you were going to say that." I say you - - "you invite me, you're going to get something." From then on, I had a lot of friends in that school. You see Johnny. It's going to talk to them. If you don't know how, you're a lion - - you talk, but with love. If people can tell that you are strong, but you're a kind person, there's something about this guy they don't like to, because he doesn't come up - - you know. See Afrika Bambaataa could talk to you, but just by his presence you could tell, this guy don't have it. You know what I mean? But he's got a good heart. You understand what I'm saying, he's [Indecipherable]. That was it, but you could tell that people do a lot of this are six feet under the ground. That's why I survive to this day, because when I met the gangs. It wasn't about this. It was about come on brothers, listen. I know there's a lot of anger out here. Why don't you and I resolve it? Why don't you tell your club to - - let's go over here. I'll buy us a coffee, let's sit down and talk, but it's all about diplomacy. It's how you talk to these guys, and Johnny I congratulate you my brother, because the fact that you're thinking about your little brother, that's cool man.

JM: It's not only that I think about him. It's that I really care about my little brother, you understand. I hug him, I kiss him before every time before I drop him off for class. You never know that could be my last - - that could be my last time kissing him or hugging him. You understand that? And then again, like the females again. I show females much love. I grew up in a household with four little females. You understand that? And I give nothing but females love in my school. They - - sometimes there's females that come to me - - Oh Johnny Man, what did you all do to my boyfriend? They'll sit down and literally have a conversation with me. That's how much respect I've got at my school, and it's not because of my fighting or this or that or the third. It's because I show respect, and I get it.

BM: There you go, there you go.

JM: You understand that. To get respect, you have to earn it.

BM: That's right.

JM: You understand that? It's not about oh yeah I'm tough. I'm this now - - I'll beat you up.

No. So me when I went into my school, I went in there quiet.

BM: What school?

JM: Stevenson High School right there. Pablo Neruda Academy. People get scared and I'm like, what are you scared for? Then I find out almost two weeks after I was there - - oh you came from jail, you live right up the block - - you're involved with gangs where there's mad shootings and stuff up there. I'm like - - I'm like listen, I'm here to get my education just like you. I want to graduate, I want to go. You understand? Me, my goal is to become a pediatrician, go out and help - - help everybody out with their kids that are sick and stuff like that, because I hate to see stuff like that on TV. You understand that. I me - - I don't know. I

want to be the first - - the first Puerto Rican pediatrician that goes out everywhere and helps everyone. That's just me. You understand?

BM: There you go brother.

JM: And like that gang stuff - - I'll just hope it just stops one day man. Just like you all said.

You all stopped everything. It just calmed down. Everybody got peace again. Come on.

Everybody needs to stop killing, because every time there's another kill - - another child is born.

And when a child is born, by the time that child is five, he's already seen drugs, guns, hookers,

all this other type of stuff in the streets, and that's - - what is going to happen? Another person

that's going to adopt a baby that when he grows up, he's going to pass away too for the same

stuff that he heard in the past.

BM: So it takes, you see Johnny, and takes a person like you, and Anthony?

AH: Andre.

BM: Andre. It takes people like you that believe in that. See, because I've always believed in

seven words. By their fruits, you will know them. You know what I mean? People know you

by your fruits, by your time in - - I'm gonna tell you - - Everywhere I go, people that move in

the building - - I make friends with people who are evil - - am I right Wanda - - people who are

nice. I make friends with everybody, but it never happened in my community and we lived there

for twenty-two years, a person was just murdered. Right Wanda? Never, I said man, what

happened? And I'm looking at other guys on the block, and you know the deal. They know who

they want, you know, and I'm looking - - so I'm looking in their eyes, and I go oh boy. So I'm

looking and you can almost say, there he is right there. And Angel, what happened? Nah - - no

man it was about. He owed five bucks. The guy didn't want to give it up, so they killed him in

his apartment. So I told Wanda, we've got to get out of here. But it's like I said, they know me -

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- they know who I am. I don't bother nobody. People come to my apartment for what, sugar, milk, you have whatever I've got, you got. See they - - hey no, not him man - - this guy's a cool. They pulled a gun out on me remember? Young guy goes like this to me. I say young brother, you either use it, or don't do it. In my time, if you took out a gun, it means you're going to pull the trigger, so put it away, and I walk up to him. There's this guy from the city - - hey, hey, hey. After this, he's looking at me - - yo, not this guy. So - - no, no papi, Im sorry, it's alright. Alright - - never come back again. And anytime he sees me, hey how you doing. He used to wait [indecipherable] Oh - - no ,young man. You're going to do it to the wrong guy, and they're going to want to kill you. You understand what I'm saying Johnny? After that they keep their friends. See? And then now, they used to smoke in the hallway - - now, get out - - if you're going to smoke, go smoke over there. You understand this, but if I come out stupid, [Whispers] if he comes over here, shoot him from across the street. So they do that.

JM: And that's the thing nowadays with young kids. They're - - yo some young kids minds be so corrupted it's not even a game. One of my friends I grew up with yo, his name is Derrick. It was on the news and everything. He got shot in Castle Hill. I had just saw him yo. We were going to a party. He went to a baby shower. I went back to the party. I said, yo Derrick, are you coming back to the party? He said, yes Johnny, before I meet you, I'm going to go to the baby shower real quick. Next thing you know, we come out like three in the morning, you see mad cops, Channel 7 News, everything. The van was parked there for like two days. I'm like wow what happened. I go over there, I see my boy Derrick, I'm like oh man - - that's crazy. How that's going to happen to him. He had a good thing going for him. Nice basketball player. He used to go to school once in a while. He's a good kid man. That was my boy, and everybody, and everybody showed love and respect for that dude man.

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BM: You see that? That reminds me of a situation that happened to me. Same thing, you know, I just saw my friend - - as soon as he left, they just killed him. It's like you're not. If we did not leave in that spot, it could've happened to us. You know what I mean.

JM: And now, look at that. Everything we basically like - - half of everything we're saying, they got killed in it. What is this world coming to nowadays? What if there was no guns and knives? What would you do? Would you battle it out? You couldn't battle it out. The cops would be in and they'd clip you. What would you do? Now that you've got weapons and knives, you think you're tough, you're trying to hide all your soft feelings inside. Show them. What's wrong with showing soft feelings? There's nothing really wrong with that. All you're doing is being a little bit sensitive that's it. What are they going to do? They're going to hurt you and scared somebody's going to call you a punk? What are words?

BM: You see Andre, you listening to him? See Johnny, that was Benji. I didn't hide my feelings. They knew oh - - when the Dirty Dozen surrounded me, and they came into my club, all my boys were already gone. So they come - - I turn on the light - - no something hits me in my face - - It was a double barrel shot gun. You know, my brother what was the name of that - - that - - those three comedians that they were dressed like Mexicans?

MN: The Three Amigos.

BM: The Three Amigos with the guns ch-ch-ch. It was just like that, and I say oh man I went like this. So when I looked at these guy Louie, he saw - - my eyes got glossy. They're pink like [Grunt]. I felt bad man I had a tear. I said damn, I think this is my day man. Because you know, you're not going to believe this. I was thinking of my wife. At that time she was my girlfriend. I was thinking of my girlfriend. I was thinking of my parents. I was thinking of Sesame Street because I've always liked Sesame Street, you know, with Grover and Cookie Monster. Believe

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it or not, I had those things, because I used to like those shows. I said damn, I will never see that again. I will never see it, and I went like this, so he did what I used to do to the other gangs. He tells the guy, shoot him, so I went like this. I close my eyes, and he goes BOOM! And it hits me in my chest, and you know what it was? What I used to do, you remember the bee bee guns. If you cut it, it looks like the real thing. Am I right? But if you put sand inside - - that's how I used to scare the gangs. So they - - you see Benji, we're even now. You did it to my boys, I did. You know how I felt when - - oh man - - he said alright - - they all left. Then after that, the Ghetto Brothers - - Benji, what happened? Forget it guys. As far as I'm concerned, I'm dead. You know, because the thing would have happened. You see what I'm saying? So did it teach me a lesson? Boy - - But you're right, they saw the sensitive side Benji. They didn't see no tough guy. I said, yo I'm a man just like you. Of course if I'm - - if I have a tear, it's because I'm scared. You know what I mean? Don't tell me - - don't be playing that - - what's the name of that guy? Hey, you dirty rat - - James Cagney, when he was about to go to the electric chair - - when the guy said make the - - make it like you're going to get scared, oh please, but he didn't really want to do that. Alright, so, be human, be brave. You know why - - hey you're scared? Yes, I'm scared. You know, you got me. Yes, okay. You want to live. Fifty-four years old. Learn how to talk to people. I always tell my children, you raise your voice. There's a certain intonation. If you look at a person a certain way, you know how - - you're right. Yo man what's, and at this ever happened to you, you're sitting on the train, you're looking around, "Yo what are you looking at?" You're not looking at the person, you're looking at the poster behind you. So it's about - - I am so sorry. I wasn't - - I wasn't looking at you. I mean, so you do this, or sometimes, I don't say nothing. But the gangs these days, I was telling my wife, everything is about mind your business, be quiet. Somebody's looking at you, and you don't - - you're in the

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party - - can't you tell when somebody's staring at you? Don't look over there. That's where - - oh, so you know, mind your business, but don't act scared, but act like - - you know what I do, I use my discretion. Listen Johnny it's a - - listen - - I had a nice time, I'm going now, because I don't want to give this guy any room to give me an excuse to - - so I just go home. You understand? Especially when it's a girl involved, I act. Any other questions Mr. Mark.

MN: This is - - you know - - thank you both for coming here because I think this really adds something to this whole discussion. I want to ask you one question before we close, and that is, how did the Vietnam War affect the communities that you lived in, in those days?

BM: In my time there was a lot of anti - - people that were against the war. Okay. Now, but my point - - just try to understand where I'm coming from, me. I'm looking, and who am I thinking Johnny? I'm thinking of my brother in Vietnam okay. I was for my brother. I was for America. That was Benji - - everybody - - I hate - - not me, not me. My brother was out there, and I joined the marines because I wanted to get out there. They refused me because I had a daughter. They didn't want to take me. I passed the test for Paris Island, and they said, oh no, you can't do it. You have a wife. I didn't know the Marines at that time, you couldn't have a child. But I was think of my brother. My brother. You understand? You know, after that - - that's what I like about history - - that's what I like about - - then after the aftermath of the war, look at all the millions of people that these people killed. And we were the bad guys, and look at the millions that they killed. And I look back, and I say yo man - - we are supporting them, and these guys are bad. Look what they did to all their own people. Three million, damn! And I thought we were bad. Got it? That's what they - - I used to remember - - I had my own mind. I didn't like people influencing me - - oh Benji, this is this, and no, no, no, no. Listen, I've got a mind, and I have eyes, and I have ears, so let me listen, let me see. Then in the end, the truth, I don't want to

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live in that type of government. I want to read my Bible. I don't want nobody to say no you can't read your Bible here. This is communism. No, no, no. Not me. No, you're never going to do it to me. That's what I'm saying. Even when I went to Puerto Rico, and I looked at the - - the argument in Puerto Rico, when the Puerto Rican Socialist Party - - Juan Mari Bras said on TV. He said, if Socialism comes to Puerto Rico, it would be unique. I will not take away the religion in this country, because I know what the Puerto Rican people would do to me. You got it. When he said that, I said wow. He said, I will not be like Cuba. I will not suppress them, because I know over here they'll take my neck. So in Puerto - - Socialism in Puerto Rico will have to be unique. Can't be like the other nations. I have to keep those churches on and the synagogues. If you do that to me, no. You understand? So, when I'm thinking about this country, no. But let me explain - - when something is wrong you're wrong. If you're wrong then I'm going to say you're wrong okay. But remember I had my brother in my mind, and there was a lot of brothers out there, okay. Okay, true, alright. In the beginning, even when I read that man when Ho Chi Minh wanted the United States, who in my opinion the US should back Ho Chi Minh up, and get the French out of there. They didn't have to stay there and continue to fight in my opinion. So I said that to my brother. I said that I wish that - - because in the beginning Ho Chi Minh, yo he praised the United States. He even said - - the stars - - he did everything. I said man, that would've been a great opportunity for the Americans to ally themselves with Vietnam and look what they did. They took off like the French did, and committing all those crazy things that the French did out there. But I was just thinking of - - like you said - - I want my brother to come back alive. Just like I said, they had mothers and fathers too, but you know, I just have to look at it - - I have to balance it, you know what I mean. And just in my opinion, I just don't adhere to Communist philosophy. That's not me. I can't live under that type of government, me. They're

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going to put me away, put the synagogues - - can't read the Torah. You get it? You can't do that to me. You know, I can't do that.

MN: Dawn do you have any questions?

Dawn Russell (DR): What do you think about the - - our current war? Iraq. And it doesn't have the same impact on the young people because we don't have a draft of course.

BM: I know Rangel's is pushing it.

DR: It's interesting. I understand why he's doing that, because once you have the draft then people suddenly get interested, but when they don't have to go, most people just don't seem to think about it, but it does seem to me that it's mostly like the young people of color who are you know, are being recruited into the army over there.

BM: Dawn that's an interesting question because if you look at the history of the Middle East, you know, you can't give a government to a people that they're not used to. You know, the Muslims think different from us. You can't impose our way of thinking. [Crosstalk] Right, you can't impose our way of thinking to them. That's - - they reapply it. Listen, with Muslims, we believe in this, this is our form of government, you can't impose this type of government - - you can't do that.

DR: So don't you think it has to do with the United States trying to protect their sources of oil?

BM: That - - to me, there's a lot of practice involved with that. There's a lot of crazy things going to happen. That's why - - that's what I'm saying. When you get into areas, and those politics there's a lot of crazy things happening around there, but what we have to concern ourselves with is how do we reach out to our fellow men. You understand what I'm saying? All I remember the only thing that I remember is when those planes hit those buildings, and my wife works right around the corner. Who would've thought that that would ever happen here? When

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you look at that I say oh man. You know, and then - - what Dawn said - - it makes you think, because the ones who did it came from Saudi Arabia. They didn't come from Iraq. You know what I'm saying, so you know, oh man. But you go but wait? But the ones who did it were nineteen back from Saudi Arabia. They weren't from Iraq. You understand what I'm saying? So you know, why are you attacking these guys when they were really over here unless you're buddy buddies with these guys, and you don't want to do it because they're - - we know the deal there. A lot of things going on over here. But I have my own opinions about prophecy. You know, I believe in the Bible. I believe in prophecy, and these things are not going to change into the Messiah. Change, you know, raise, come back through the kingdom, because the only one who wants to have peace - - has to be through the hand of almighty God. Man, in and of himself, cannot do it, because the only way we could do it, is - - oh, you don't want to do it? Oh alright it's - - than this is the only way we're going to deal with it. See? You kill my brother. They're going to want, and the killing is going to continue, just like the gangs. It's never going to stop, you understand? And if there's somebody who's going to say, you know what, enough is enough. Let's just get out of here.

DR: I have another kind of a question too - - I was thinking when you were talking - - why is it do you think - - what's the reason why young people of color particularly don't have like - - don't want to - - don't seem to have like ambitions, like for instance - - you know, Ed Bradley, just died and so on - - like don't look up to people like that. But look up to only people who are pop stars or people who are gangsters.

BM: You know it's - -

DR: Why is that? I wonder - - because there are so many other people that are famous, but they don't look at those people at all.

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BM: Yes. I often said that to my children. Sometimes, a lot of times, the media has a lot to do with this. Okay - - what it - - and then there's certain values that they teach you. You know, like for example, I value a person who is involved in the sciences, who's involved in history, who's involved in professions, things that I look up to, because these are the people who teach us things right, to enhance our knowledge, but when we find - - like to me, when I look at sports - - to me - - I like what Clark said. Remember Clark the principal? The guy with a bat. He said, man what I really want for my kids, I want them to look up to teachers, scientists. He mentioned a lot of these professions. He said not sports.

DR: Like a lot of black kids don't know that for instance, the head of the Museum of Natural History is a black man.

BM: That's right.

DR: A very exciting, interesting guy, you know. And I always seen like - - [Crosstalk]

BM: What about Schomburg?

DR: - - on TV, but you don't see it on like you know - -

MN: And his parents were from the Bronx by the way.

DR: Really?

MN: His father was a graduate of Morris High School.

BM: Who?

[Crosstalk]

MN: Yes, his father, Cecil DeGrasse Tyson is a graduate of Morris High School, who is the head of the City Human Rights Commission. We interviewed him for the project.

BM: Oh wow.

DR: Do you know if they talk about people like that in the schools or anything?

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JM: Basically, like at my school, Millenium Arts, we do many things, like - - like before we used to have a group called MPI where we used to have like young kids helping out elderly people and stuff like that. Talking about - - all the types of history that we had. One lady - - who she was elderly and she was Chinese told us everything about her, how she moved to New York. Like we're doing a brief history on every kind of person that came. You understand? Like that's - - from when I entered the school, that's the only thing that we were basically doing.

DR: So do you think that influenced you at all to have your thinking - -

JM: Well what influenced me a lot was that - - going through what I've been through. I've been through so much like - - I've been locked up since the age of ten. I've been just in and out of jail going crazy. Staying around so many drugs, around so many gun shootings. At the age of nine years old I had to start taking Benadryl because of the shooting. I couldn't fall asleep. I would break night, up all night watching TV, until the morning time came, and I knew it was safe again, and I would fall asleep, and I couldn't go to sleep, because I had to go to school.

MN: And what neighborhood was that in?

JM: Well, that's in Castle Hill. That's where I'm living at right now.

MN: So this was in - - when the Castle Hill Houses, or is it - -

JM: Castle Hill Projects, and like sometimes, maybe once and a while to this day, they do a little bit of shooting now and then, but then again, I still like - - it phases me a little bit. And like - - that's all - - that's all that affected me is just the ways of my - - is just the ways of me thinking like how I think. Every morning I wake up like thank you Lord, you blessed me again. You let me live.

DR: Yes, but so many people are in the same situation like you, starting going to jail real young and stuff. What do you think made you different? Can you think of anything in particular?

JM: For me?

DR: Why you changed a lot.

JM: A lot of - - a lot of inspiration from the COs, and staff that's inside. Because me being basically - - when I was locked up - - I was going to school. I was like one of the main kids like that really loved school, that enjoyed it, you understand? I was passing all my classes inside there. I made the honor roll four times when I was locked up. You understand? And like teachers they used to really like - - like really help me, like be on my back. I used to get frustrated sometimes, flip out, start cursing, but when I actually relaxed and calmed down, because I used to have a short fuse, and I used to realize, dang this isn't - - they're making sense, so I guess I - - a lot of the people inspire me. Like you understand? Like he has inspired me right now, by telling many great things. You know, like you've inspired me. People inspire me by letting me come here, and experience the college and what goes on here. You understand? A lot of things inspire me, and I like - - how can I say this like - - I'm open to new things. I'm will to try any new thing no matter what.

DR: Well that's what - - I do think about this, and wonder what reaches young people, because when you say you're open to new things - - a lot of people seem so closed like they really don't want to hear you know, anything so - -

JM: It's like - - sometimes people are like that, because they're - - they were raised like that. Like very very stubborn, you know. There's some people that like to isolate themselves. I see it in school a lot. Like, sometimes I try to talk to them since I'm popular in school, I try to talk to them - - like, you know, calm down or something you know, I'm a good guy. I'll introduce myself Johnny Mann Lopez, my full name. No nickname or nothing. I give them my full name.

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Let them know that I'm a nice guy, you understand, but then there's other guys that are just like jerks. Do stupid things. You understand, like - - last week, fighting in school. [Indecipherable]

BM: You know Johnny, that just - - you just said that - - going back to like what Dawn said, know what's happening with these gangs - - what's the name again - - that is seven now.

JM: Oh I know - - Scarface.

BM: Killing each other, beating themselves over a game.

DR: Oh PlayStation game.

MN: PlayStation. [Crosstalk]

JM: Yes, somebody got shot. [Crosstalk]

BM: They're not going to buy books. No knowledge. It's about that. I took my little boy one time.

DR: But there's grown people doing that. That's the thing, when I say like - - grown young people over twenty-one - - [Crosstalk].

JM: They're killing people for the PlayStations.

BM: So Dawn, I took my little boy, Judah - - and we sat on the milk crate at Fordham at the corner, and I saw a dinosaur book, a dinosaur book, and I said - - I said Titi, watch this. Now you know - - Fordham Road surrounding what - - closed stores, railroad and everything, and look - - looking - - nobody's doing this Johnny, and nobody's looking down. They look - - check out the dream - - check out the clothes. Nobody - - I say Titi, notice something - - see papi, nobody's picking up the books, and we stood there for like an hour. I went over - - I picked up the book. I said this is great. I got it to this day. I say, see Titi - - nobody wants to - - when it comes to knowledge, nobody wants to read books. I say what else do you notice about Fordham Road. There's no bookstore.

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MN: Right.

BM: There is no bookstore. Everything is clothes store, appliances, but there's no bookstore.

MN: Beepers.

BM: Where are the bookstores? Downtown.

MN: Cell phones.

BM: Go to the libraries in Harlem, you'll find kids there. Go to the ones downtown. You see what I'm saying. There [Indecipherable] different, but up here.

JM: And even if you do see it. Even if you do see a lot of kids in the library, they're probably just all friends joining up to meet up and talk or something.

BM: Or throw bottles, remember that library we went to? That they go there, and they threw bottles at the [Indecipherable]. Do you come to the library to learn? And it goes back to what Johnny - - you're right. They go there to hang out. Excuse me, listen people, I'm trying to read - or the lady, people trying to read. Oh shut up. So that's when they had to get a guard. In my time, they did not have guards when they checked you out. Never had that. In these days, they go up - - you're right.

DR: It seems like young people don't believe in the future which I think is bad. It's like people really just do not believe in the future.

JM: Like most of teenagers nowadays, we're just not - - we're not thinking about the future.

We're thinking about now, and how it is now, because there's so many things that are going on.

Like, we're just like - - most of us on our minds - - oh, we're at war now - - we don't know

what's going on. You understand? So like right now, and especially if it's some kids that have

got problems at home - - that's why most kids some days, they join gangs. Because they think,

they think - - oh the gangs are going to help them out - - that's their family.

DR: That's the family.

BM: The extended family.

JM: And then again, that's why some kids wind up going to jail for life, doing murder, doing Fed time for selling crack, heroin and stuff like that, because the simple thing that there's always stress, there's peer pressure. All these things that are going on - - it's just driving us teenagers insane.

BM: And Johnny you've got another good point. What you noticed was - - it's when a person's locked up that they start thinking. They say man, why did I do that man.

JM: And it's when a person got a gun or knife to his neck that he realizes what the hell - - what he did - - you understand that, and I had to figure out how - - at the age of fifteen, I had a forty-five pointed at my face. The guy said, yo, give me everything you've got. I was selling drugs at the time. He said give me everything you've got. I'm looking at him, me? I was yelling - - I was crazy. I was like - - what are you crazy? I'm not giving you nothing. So then the guy was like, oh, you think I'm playing? It's a game? So he pulls it out, then after when he pulls it out, I seen that it was serious. I got scared. So then I started - - I started to cry a little bit. I'm not scared to show my tears. I'll show my tears anytime, anyplace. You understand that? And the guy grabbed me, then he hit me with the gun. Boom. I fell on the floor. I stayed on the floor. I didn't move. I'm not getting shot over no drugs or nothing. So the guy went in my pocket, he took everything off alright. I left I went upstairs, whole different story. My sister came down flipping on everything. You understand that? That's how I got my respect of my hood - - from my sisters. You understand that? My sisters - - people respect them. They respect - - people respect my sisters, and my sisters respect them. You understand that? They're just like the same way I am. You understand that? And my sisters went through the struggle when I was younger.

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Selling drugs, doing that, everything in front of the building being tough. Half of the time, my sisters weren't even acting like girls. Not playing - - no playing no girl sports, no jumping ropes.

BM: You know Johnny - - in my time Andre - - we used to say, yes sir, yes ma'am in the Bronx, when they came up here. You know, you're still - - yes sir, yes ma'am. Excuse me. You sit at a restaurant, you wait for your turn. I mean that was then - - and what I did is that I implemented that type to my children to this very day. Even when I tell them to throw away the garbage, I say, I don't want to find out that you're throwing garbage outside - - put it inside in the garbage receptacle. To this very day, I have my children, since they were little, every body in the house, in the apartment has a chore. Yes, mops, sweeps, washing dishes, taking care of your clothes, your get-up - - so they've been doing that since they were tiny to this day. Why am I implementing? They learn responsibility. Then at a certain time - - now look what I did - - you guys did your homework? Yes we did. I say alright - - they have a half an hour to an hour to play their little game right Wanda? After that, what do I say?

WM: To read.

BM: Okay, time to read, let's move it. Whatever you want - - I've got tons of crates of books. Okay. See Johnny, they already know the routine. See Andrew, they know the routine. After they play their game, they go - - oh okay - - alright look. Alright, you read the book? Yes. Tell me what the book was about. And they articulate it. Or sometimes I say - - why don't you write the story. They want to compete with each other, because they like that, but this is the way that it happens since they were little. You come to my apartment, all my kids - - what did they ask for? Johnny would you like something to drink? Mark, Dawn would you like something to eat? That's then - - I go to people's apartment. They don't do that now. They don't even offer me coffee. In my time - - thank you very much. These days, they don't even say nothing. So in my

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house, you come to my house, meet my kids. [Indecipherable] this is Johnny. Hi guys, would you like some soda, would you like something to eat? And you say, you know - - you see my - - because this the way - - alright, after that, make education the highest priority. We're members of the National Geographic. We're members of the Zoological Society. We are members of the aquarium, American Museum of Natural History. I want them to get involved with educational aspects, you understand. Put your minds there. So, it's about, when we go to Barnes and Noble, right - -

JM: Barnes and Noble has a lot of good books there.

BM: They go to their little corners, and they start reading their books. Everybody knows them there because - - then my oldest ones go back there, and you know, so - - take your time. We'll rendezvous here at this time. We'll get our books after this - - we'll go to the movies, after the movies, after the movies we'll have some dinner. Then we'll go home. So this is the routine that I - - and I've been doing that since the time I was - -

DR: Children need a lot of attention. Really a lot. Like even the stuff you were talking about while you were in jail like what young people think and yes, you need attention.

JM: There was always this one kid when I was in jail. I'll never forget that kid man. His name was William. Skinny boy though I swear. The kid weighed ninety pounds. Very skinny. He showed me. He bent his elbow, and showed like maybe two or three bones. I'm like oh man I felt sorry for the kid. He used to get extorted yo. The kid - - he was going through so many problems, parents didn't even help him any more. Hardly got any visits, anything, and I used to just sit down and look at him. Then like at first I was just like - - I didn't know - - I was confused at the point, you understand? What the - - am I seeing this for real. Like dang - - it's not even. Imagine, I used to think it was hard out here, imagine how it is in there. You can't do

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nothing. You've always got to watch your back, you can get extorted, and that kid, trust me, that kid, he got extorted lovely in there. That kid, when it was time for him to go home - - he didn't want to go home. The reasons why, because he got used to the system - - he was eating good. When he's outside, his family wasn't taking care of him. He was sleeping on the streets.

BM: I had a friend that deliberately - - every winter went to jail. I said why you do that, he says my father don't take care of me. I go there, you know. Every winter he'd go to jail. And one day in front of me he said you know Benji I'm going to stop selling smoke man. I look at him - - what you going to do? You see that guy on the corner there, he thinks he's slick, you know. He's a cop, but he's under cover. Watch what I'm going to do. Oh man don't tell me what. Goes over there, you looking for something? Yes. [Pop] Take me I'm yours. He actually did that. Take me, and he went - - see you Benji, I'll see you in the summer. He thought that. You see, because he - - my family's not going to take care of me so - - he goes to jail and I said, you know but that's not the way - -

DR: But that's sad, that's how some people's lives become. I've seen like people who spent most of their lives in jail. Two documentaries where guys came out and they're in their like fifties, and they went and did something and went right back, and I could understand it. If they don't have any skills, or any abilities - - they've been in jail for most of their lives.

BM: There's a film called Old Enough to - - Old Enough to, *Old Enough to Do Time with Dana Jovanti* - - he goes to film - - I'm in the film, but we're singing - - my band with the soundtrack you know what I mean. So it talks about young people like you see young - - young people in jail man, you know, I mean - - you're old enough to do time. Yo man - - you did it, you're going to have to pay time, but it's scary being locked up even when we went to Tombs - - when they had me up there and all the guys are - - Yellow Benji, what are you doing up here - - I see they're

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new. Me being locked in [Indecipherable] and then the next day my friends got me out, and you can imagine when I looked at my mom's face. Listen embarrassment is when you're talking to your members of the club, and one day I was talking to the president, the vice president - - all the others of the club, and somebody says Benji, there's an old man looking at you. I go, oh man - - it was my pops. Now remember now, he didn't know I was in a gang, and he went like - - he motions to me, and he goes like this. They call him in Spanish the ruso, which means the Russian. He was a big man. So he went like this. So I went over there. What are you doing here? Um, I was talking politics. [Yells in Spanish] Get over here, and he grabbed me like this Dawn. In the club, 162nd Street, walked me from there, to Tiffany in the street, in the summer in front of everybody, the president of the - - oh man, in the street - - then he took me upstairs, sixth floor, 940 Tiffany Street. Take off your clothes, get in the bathtub. I said damn man. Made me take a bath. You know the scrub brushes - - the old scrub brushes for the clothes? You want that huh? He cleaned me like a lobster. First his tail man, then he said alright, dry yourself, put on your pajamas, and I stood like this. Then he sat down. What is this you joined the gang? Papa. You only want to do what everybody else is doing. Papa, look at all the things you taught me. Isn't it possible that maybe they could turn around and be like me? And he went that's a good point. Papa all the things you taught me I'm teaching them to them okay. I would never disgrace your name like that. You know what I mean - - but look, look at this. I said, yes, you're right, because I projected myself to be something that I'm really not. Then he says, you want some coffee? See and then he gave me some. He came back and then the guys are out there calling, Hey Benji. Shut up. I went to see father's [Indecipherable] go outside. That's a real leader right there. So then he kept me in the apartment. I was locked down man, but after school, I had to go sit down downstairs, so I could - - hey Benji - - shut up leave me alone. So

then after that he let me go, then from there on he understood that I was trying to form an organization to help the people in the neighborhood. But that's my problem. In the street, now - - what could I have done? Here's the leader, the president - - man yo, what the hell's wrong with your old man. One example that I showed my guys yo. I love my pops.

JM: Always have respect.

BM: That's right, that's my man right there. That's the real president. My father was a powerful man, and everybody in the community knew my father. If you didn't have any food, remember when you go to the store - - can I have this and put it down - - [Crosstalk]

JM: Yes, the credit?

BM: My father would say - - Que tu quieres, what do you want. Tell your mother okay yes, listen. And my father kept the notebook for the whole month and due, and your family didn't pay, my father never made a big deal. Papi, but Anthony's father he owes you - - He gives it to me when he has it. That's the way my father was.

MN: So he fed the neighborhood.

BM: Yes, he took it. There was one Jewish family left. He told them, you don't need to go to Pelham Bay, tell me what you want, crackers, the matzas and everything, I'll get it for you. Don't worry, you don't have to go I can get it for you. Then anything in the community - - my father, it didn't matter, anything he touched turned to gold, but everybody loved my father. The one - - we don't have any milk - - go ahead, take it, you know. We don't have any bread. Go ahead, don't worry about it. My father always had a lot of money, but in the end, they wanted to pay him anyway. That's how much, you know, after my father passed away, he wanted to give the stores to us. Nah, I wouldn't - - Papi that's what you like. We don't want to do that. So everybody went their own way after that they just - - the stores are still there, but it's owned by

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other people, so I tell the people my father used to work here. Is he [Indecipherable] We're talking about forty something years ago.

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

MN: Okay, thanks, yes.

JM: Also nowadays like you were talking about the stores. People nowadays, like, you know how you used to have respect for the stores, like people were very cool. Nowadays, people just going in, throwing money on the counter [Crosstalk]. And like, for the people, like some of people there, they make people like - - oh look at the Arabs. The Arabs very nice people, just get to know them. Like there's a store around where I live at this guy - - he's not an Arab. He's not nothing. The guy's Indian. He speaks Spanish. He speaks Chinese. Very cool guy. Very nice to know, you know. Every time I go in there. Sometimes when I go in there with my godson, I go in there with my son he doesn't even charge me money. No charge Johnny.

BM: You have a son?

JM: I have a son. He's one year old. And he tells me every time. No charge, no charge Johnny man, no charge. No but it's alright. I look out for you, you understand that.

BM: You know Johnny, now that you said that - - that's very interesting. One day I was at a store Dawn, and I bought something from this woman. She's a Muslim. Now you don't, you don't touch it - - so she drops the money like this. This guy behind me - - no man, don't let that woman - - I said excuse me, that's their culture my brother. You're not supposed to be touching them. So you know, it's like you got to learn things about these, like Chinese - - they're not that, you know. My ex-wife, she says why do you people like to kiss each other a lot? You know, Latins. I said that's the way that we are. You see Chinese don't do that now, you know. Shhhh - - kiss him, not me. Because they're not touching others. The Chinese people they do this right,

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and about the hugging no. Our people we're known for kissing and hugging, but they don't - - they don't do that, so it's about respecting people's culture. You know what I mean. Oh man, I don't appreciate that her dropping the money in my hand, you're my brother, listen. I got to explain, in their culture, a woman's not supposed to be touching a man. And especially if the husbands looking. Oh but I didn't know that. Well now you know, because you're right.

Around my block there's a lot of Yeomenites. A lot of my friends, you know, there's German in them, you know the people - - remember when 9/11, remember when 9/11 came down? When 9/11 situation like a lot of people in my community already started to blame the Arabs like yo, yo, yo, yo. Going back to what Johnny said. It's not them man. Excuse me, these are people who have been living here for years stupid. Get out of here.

JM: You know what people did on my block? When guys on my block started accusing them, you know what they did? They went in the back, they got the guns - - you want to accuse me? Come and accuse me. Come and accuse me. [Crosstalk] They said it just like that, and you know there were some guys that really thought they were tough and actually went in there, and started to shoot up the place. You know what I mean? Around my block, they switched that - - they switched that store so many times because a single pack - - people go in there, they think they see a nice place oh can make a lot of money, a lot of people come into the store. A lot of people do go to that store, but then again once they get to know you, that's when you get to feel out everybody and see how they are, you understand what I'm saying? Like these new people, like they just fired people, and just hired other people, new people. Other people - - those people are good with the eyes, but never good with their mouths. Never. Always come out snotty. And I used to go in the store. Let me just say, I might just get my money, take my money and go. Now other people in the store, who the hell you think you're telling this and that, you don't know

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who I am - - I'm running this block and this and that. Not knowing - - not knowing what that lady got under that counter, and you're running your mouth. You don't know what she's got under that counter. People got to use their heads sometimes. People got to use sense.

BM: Johnny, I had a beard like this. A beard, like this. So when they caught - - what's the name of the guy? Sadaam. The people in my community - - hey Benji, we saw you on TV.

[Laughter] And you know what the people call me around my block? Sadaam. Hey Saddam. I don't say nothing, you see, you know. You know what a mezuzah is? The Jews in the door they have a little box like this. This little tiny box where the commandments are there right. I can't have that on my apartment because they'd rip it off. People - - so I keep it inside the apartment.

You understand what I'm saying. Some of the guys, my son's friends - - all the rabbis - - how can your parents live over there in the South Bronx during Chanukah? You're supposed to put the Menorah out the window, you know, on the window. So they asked John my son that they - - so how was your Chanukah? He said, well, my windows are still in tact. Everything's okay.

You see what I'm saying? So this is what I've got to live with right? So when I had - - I had to cut it off, because then you had people - - remember on the train? They were looking at me

[Whispering] one of these Arabs. I heard them, and I go - - I'm saying it in Spanish [says phrase in Spanish] and he was trying to talk Spanish to get away with it. And I said what? He said no, no, no, no, no. he thinks he's slick by wearing a Puerto Rican flag over here. He doesn't want to be known as an Arab, because that's what you are. Remember the train, like the lady was like - - he said man, you Arabs, and I am not Arab but thank you for the compliment. Man what are you talking about it. Forget it. You see what I'm saying Johnny, so it's a problem.

JM: You sound just like me.

BM: I do that [makes ch-ch-ch-ch sound]

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JM: Anything anybody say like people around me, grown up - - a lot of people, some people just try to bug me, call me ugly. Now back in the day, I used to wile out. Now, you say yo, Johnny Mann, you mad ugly, I'm like - - I'll take it as a compliment. Thank you for the compliment. That's what I do, and people call me stupid and stuff. I'm like thank you for the compliment. I don't go back and say oh yes, well, that's why I'm in school, and you're not and this and that. No. Say thank you for the compliment, and keep it moving. There's no need to stand there argue over little petty things, and wind up getting killed.

BM: You see Johnny what you just said. Andrew, one time years ago when Dominicans started come in, in droves, lady I go into the store on Crotona, I walk in the store, and I don't know. Maybe it's the way I spoke the Spanish. It's a Puerto Rican Store. I walk in the store. The lady looks at me like this. She says excuse me, are you Dominican, but she said it in Spanish. I said no I am not ma'am, but I said, but thank you for the compliment. I said thank you for the compliment. You know, listen, you don't do things at other people - - Yo, don't call me Dominican man. People are people. What's wrong with you?

JM: A lot of people say I look Dominican.

BM: That's what I'm saying, so how - -

JM: I'm really not. I'm full Puerto Rican. This is - - in the summer time I like to take off my shirt. Puerto Ricans - - everybody likes to take off their shirts, especially when you want to get a nice tan and stuff. [Laughter] Come on, I definitely got to tan alright.

BM: But these - - when I was walking with her in the Italian community, in Little Italy with my wife Wanda - - that was years ago. Walking, three Italian guys - - Hey, get away from that Italian girl. I said, how do you know that I'm not Italian. How do you know I'm not Italian? And then I'm Latin just like you. So the guys, oh shut up. They wanted to be - - I just walked

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away. I said, see Wanda, you almost got me in trouble. You know what I mean? Even when I went to Chinatown and I had my granddaughter from my ex-wife, and I had two children. And if you look at my children, you can see the Asian in them, but one of them got married with a Chinese, so it came out even more Asian, so I'm walking down the block right there with my grandchild, and the baby's crying, and all these Chinese surround me man. My daughter went downstairs to buy some food, so the little baby was crying. So the young guy, hey, hey, what are you doing with that little baby? This is my grandson. Oh yeah? Yeah yeah yeah, what? Oh you're trying to take away that little Chinese - - this is my grandson Mr. And the old man - - old man comes right by and [Boom], he hits me over here with a stick. I say what's up with this guy. So Melina comes down, hey, hey. That's my father! And they say, oh yeah. Oh that's your father? So I had to walk away. So my ex-wife and I had - - we got into a little ethnic argument. She said, oh yeah, how do you compare Chinese girl and Puerto Rican girl, and I said what - - I said Melin, I'd have to stand in the corner in Chinatown and wait for an hour before any Chinese girl, pretty girl that walks by. Let me see. One [hums] two or three hours later, two, you know what I mean? I said, Puerto Rican girls you can go like that happily. And she goes, yes, she goes, okay, okay I got you on that, but what about the guy. Oh please. How you gonna compare Chinese and Puerto Rican guys? We had groups me and her. I said look ever our rice Melin. In Puerto Rican rice you see it's loose. If you go like this, the birds - - they all have individual, but Chinese rice sticks, you see the burns on the plate, just to get the rice. You see we had such a good time. But people took it like no, that's - - how we used to goof around. So Melin, once we were in Chinatown, I said Melin - - because she spoke directly Spanish and understood - - Melin, talk Spanish with the Chinese. They're saying in Chinese, oh she's probably Philippine, so then she turned around and talked to them in Chinese, and [Chinese speech]. No, there was this

Chinese old man. He looked at me, looked at my face, goes like this, and he was saying [Chinese speech]. [Indecipherable Chinese] means thank you, so my wife was laughing. She said this man is condemning you. He's saying you're no good, you're ugly, and I'm saying thank you [Chinese word] and so he said [another Chinese word]. When you hear the word [Chinese word] in Chinese, that means a demon. A white person's called [Chinese word], Spanish [Chinese word], black [Chinese word]. Anything with [Chinese word] is a Demon, but Chinese you can't say that, they are Chinese. So when I said no. I'm [Chinese word]. [Chinese word] means a man, you know what I mean? So, I put them in their place over there. See, when they see me, and I go to Chinatown, the guy - - you know the Chinese - - hey hey - - don't get him like that. So when I had my first daughter my - - my father in law looks at me, and then his mother said, ah it's good - - it came out like - - oh it came out with the round nose not like yours. Because they're like puggy noses. She's oh, you came out Chinese, not like you. Oh you look good. You know so, when I had my son, you look at my son, he walks in, he's the leader of a band - - it's called Eve's Fault. Eve, so it's my son, the lead singer, who left my band to go with him - - he thinks he's a little boy, he's with all these young guys. His son is - - there's a bass player - - then my other son - - Juan - - he's the drummer, so they got the - - you look at them and you hear - - like a [Indecipherable] night. You can see, he's a nice looking kid. You like the Chinese girls? I don't like the Chinese girl. I mean he likes every other girl except Chinese girls. Kenneth that girl likes you she - -

DR: What time of music does the band play?

BM: Rock and roll. See same thing, but they're getting a little on the heavier side. But my brother my - - but I can't - -

JM: I think it's more like - - rock and roll is like for getting you hyped and stuff like that.

BM: You know what it sounds like, rock and roll right. Relaxing.

JM: For real?

DR: Well rock and roll it sort of came from blues, because all of us - - the Rolling Stones, that guy, you know what I'm talking about the guitar player.

BM: Yes, oh man.

MN: Jimi Hendrix?

BM: No this guy. Chuck Berry.

DR: Yes, Chuck Berry. But I was thinking about one who's around now with - - [Crosstalk]

BM: All these guys - -

DR: But all of them were - - were into blues.

MN: B.B. King?

DR: No, the white guy. The white guitarist.

MN: Eric Clapton?

DR: Eric Clapton.

MN: Eric Clapton, yes.

DR: Right. All of those guys used to come over here and listen to blues.

MN: The Beatles started - - yes.

DR: When they started their bands - -

BM: That's what I was about to say.

DR: So all those bands were heavily, heavily influenced.

BM: I have old films of the Beatles that say they give their - - they say look, we have our inspiration, but at that time, you didn't say black, you said Negro. We had our inspiration from

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the Negro music. You know all that [Sings a rhythm]. That's all black. That all started from them. They learned from there. The ones took it, and then never let it go. I love rock and roll.

DR: Rock and roll is just blues speeded up. It's really - - listen to the - -

JM: I think it's very good that all that - - all types of races are like coming together because you can really learn good things from each other. Like Spanish, Latinos, they can teach blacks, whites, Chinese people how to dance by Cha Cha, Salsa, Merengue. Chinese people can teach us how to do their yoga, how to stretch our bodies, and notice how they cook their food. You understand that? And then you've got blacks, who teach us how to - - how to dance the way they do. You know me? Do what they do. It's many ways. They could do like French - -

BM: My daughter - -

JM: As many things - - that's why I think it's good to really mix.

BM: If you met my daughter Andrew, and she seems always at the window, and all these videos that come out, you've got to hear this girl sing. Right Wanda? She always has a crowd and she dances. She goes to Roosevelt, you know what I mean? And that girl can dance. And sings - - and you will close your eyes, and you will think that it's going to - - those girls that do videos - - she's - - but she doesn't like to dance in front of me. She likes to dance in front of mommy. I don't want to dance, because I don't like Papi. I don't like men looking at - - no.

WM: She's in plays.

BM: Yes, she's always in plays. She doesn't like her own brother - - no, don't look at me when I'm dancing. Yes, but you're going to go on the stage. Yes, but then - - not my brother. You're not my brothers, because they can't see me. But, you know, that's what we did. The groups - - we could be - - we comprised about other music. My brother was into James Brown, Sly and the Family Stones - - then my other brother was into - - a little heavy metal. I was into the Beatles,

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so we mixed all that. My brother always says - - we went to a club, and - - because we played everywhere, so we went to a club. It's like - - like Soul Train, all blacks man. We - - like we said, and we looked up and we're all like this - -and I said you know Victor, what are we going to do man? We only know Beatle tunes. Follow my lead, let's do Twist and Shout. Now Twist and Shout is not a Beatles song. That's the Isley Brothers. So it - - [Sings rhythm] - - Well shake it up baby now. Everybody went out of their minds. Then we get another song called Give Me Money, so when we sang, they threw quarters. So Victor's like keep on singing. Don't let that song go. And they kept on throwing money. The money it just - - we got such a great - - that show. My brother Victor said, if can have somebody going on like this, you got them going. And to us, who were the greatest critics when it came to music, children. When a child looks at you, you know, when they like you, they say, man - - when they don't like you, they say, man you suck.

JM: They say it just like that.

BM: So when they invited us to sing, you know that, we sang in front of children. They dance they clap. Yo man, yo that's cool man. Then with the guitar mix, right, so then I had another band, and I send oh - - we invented another band called Moon Power. They're like oh man, you suck. And you, you're ugly. You know, and things like that. They said it to the guys, and oh man, but these children, that's how - - if I have a song, and it's - - I go to my hallway and I sing. Am I right Wanda, you know, and you hear the little children. When we played at the South Street Seaport, the lady said, the lady said - - we had to audition Johnny. We had to audition. So the lady - - Wanda was our manager. She goes - - oh boy. Let me see what you've got. Right Wanda. But she said, then Wanda said, but you're going to be in the surprise. We started to sing. Right Wanda? And her mouth just went, and for the first time, she looked up and people

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were throwing money from the windows. They just through money at us. We were just singing, and we made money in that, and we didn't even put the box down yet. So you know, and from there on, you know - - so it's about how to get across people. Because music is a message. What you cannot say verbally, you can say through the music. You know man, I heard the message. I liked that. So when the kids don't want to hear me. You know, these tough guys, I play the new music, and you know, they sit down - - yo man, that sounds like me man. I've been through that. See - - there's always a way, like you put it Andrew. There's always a way to get in through.

JM: Alright, you know what I think - - if a lot of rappers and singers nowadays. If they were to start putting educational things in their music, they would have a lot of kids inspired to start going to school. A lot of kids would not be dropping out. Like drop outs. You see the ratings in drop outs coming back.

BM: You're right, you're right.

JM: They started to say - - they start like - - me, I ain't going to lie. I like hip hop. I like hard music, stuff like that, but it's also times when I like listening to songs like - - songs like Nas made. [Sings] Sure I know I can be what I want to be. Stuff like that that inspires you to do things that you've never done before. You understand? That's what I think the rappers should start doing. Personally. That's my opinion.

BM: You're right. Remember, we said the same thing. If they could only have a message behind it because these guys got power. Music is power. If they could challenge that power, and bring it over here to make a challenge. Well you know what, I want to see you in school. I want to - -

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DR: But it's not about that. It's about - - the industry wants this stuff that can be reset - - already sell and bought already sell and - -

BM: That's - - that's what we're talking about. But this is what the industry wants.

DR: So the people, because there are rappers who want to do who are conscious of us, but they don't recorded. They don't get - -

JM: But then it's other rappers that have got their own producers and stuff, like [Jamaica Pri], he produces his own stuff. Other people like Jay Z produces his own stuff. P Diddy. Those are the kind of rappers that can really get out there, and get a chance to make stuff for schools.

DR: No. They're not interested. They're not going - -

JM: There's some of them that's not interested in, but it's not - - there's a lot of them - - I know like Nas. Nas is - - Nas loves kids. Another one is who can I say? I really don't remember but I know Nas is one of the ones that really loves kids the most.

BM: You know he lived in the Bronx all your life Johnny?

JM: Yes.

BM: And you too Andre?

A: Yes.

JM: My family was born in Puerto Rico, and I was born over her.

A: My family all was born in Jamaica.

BM: Okay cool, but you were born here? Alright.

DR: I was born in Jamaica.

BM: I have a friend. Kenny Walsh right. Kenny Walsh - - he's - - he's from Kingston. This guy is a genius. This guy, I miss him, because we were really close friends. This guy does research on anything. Oh Benji I can get this for you. He got it for me. When I meet - - when

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you meet Wanda's family. You look how much - - she looks Albanian. I mean, people look at me, listen - - is that - - they're Albanians? No. No. I mean because you know - - I like people. When I talk to people from different cultures you learn so many - - I loved - - I mean I look at a guy. How did you know I'm Japanese? Or how did, because there's something - - you know, you can look at - - like the Hispanics. I can tell Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, separate [indecipherable] You know, you can tell your own root and city. This guy is this. How'd you know? I know. There's something about his talk. You know, remember wrestling? Carlito? Carlito, the guy with his hair like this? In wrestling I tell Wanda, all I need to do is - - let me hear his Spanish, so Wanda goes in - - [says a phrase in Spanish]. You know what he said? That's Puerto Rican. Then later on he said - - oh from San Juan - - He says ah you see. But I love that when you talk to people, and you just mention something about their country. You only know so much, you know. Oh yes, but how do you. No, no, I'm sorry, that's all I know. It's just that, but it shows some interest right? So in the Bronx at that time when we moved here, there was still old Germans living at 138th Street, Irish people, the Germans in Mott Haven. They were still there, and I noticed when I go around the area on bicycle - - all the churches are there. One synagogue I found, just one, but every other was these tall churches. Later on they were German and Irish communities. If you lived there on 138th Street, that's Alto Puerto Rico Alright? Every - - ever heard of the Alto Puerto Rico? It's at 138th Street. They had many famous Latin players, singers comedians. They used to go over there. Then you go there now, it's a church. You know what I mean? So you look back. The original Winter Garden Theater was on Washington Avenue. Did you know that? Did you know that?

MN: No.

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BM: On Washington Avenue and Tremont, when I went to that church I said man this church is - - so there was this old black man that is in the church. He said, this used to be the original Winter Garden Theater that James Cagney came here to get a wrestler for one of his movies. I said get out of here. He said, right here. And I looked at that. Then around my block, I see this old structure. I said man that feels like - - like a fire house, and sure it was - - it used to be like a fire house that was there. I talked to Lloyd. The one who wrote the book on the Bronx.

MN: Yes, Lloyd Ulton, right.

BM: Remember when we met Lloyd?

WM: We were in the Bronx.

BM: Oh man. He was telling me about. Remember on Tremont, there were seven theaters. You didn't have to go to Fordham Road. Those movies were on Tremont Avenue. And you didn't have to go to Fordham Road to buy because everything was on Tremont. You know and then I - - when I lived there. All those things were still there. But then I see the evolution. You know when you came into this community you messed it up, and then everything [Laughter] - - everything just started changing. See, you want to go to a movie? Now you've got to go all the way down 161st Street, you know, you can't go to the Concourse Inn [Indecipherable]. It's just gone. Now that's good because a lot of good movies were downtown. But Manhattan they retained a lot of those movies.

JM: Well in Parkchester, their movie theaters finished, they've got a lot of tough type of stuff in there.

BM: Get out of here.

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JM: Parkchester movie theater is great. That's why every day - - it's only five dollars for you to get in there. Every day it's five dollars at Parkchester because it's a wreck in there. You go inside there. It's look like you're in an old, old, old movie theater.

BM: Parkchester where the number 6 train is at?

JM: Yes.

BM: You mean that there's rats there now?

JM: Yes there's rats in there. Me personally, I don't like rats. So - - I don't go there.

BM: Oh no. That's where - - my dentist is around there.

Johnny: And I think, the people - - the people that - - that built that - - when we did that - - when it was - - back in the day - - I guess they got the family to keep it the same way. To keep like the - - keep their movies going. Pay the person that owns the movie theater, you understand that?

BM: Yes, because I used to go there. It was a beautiful theater man. Just like the Loews that was on the Concourse. Wow.

MN: The Loews Paradise? They fixed that up now. You know, they have music there.

BM: Yes, and it was beauty, and you look at that - - I said man look at the beauty about this, I mean - - I love the architecture. I used to tell my children. Listen every time you - - when you're walking down the street, look up the building. One of the best architects are on the top of the building. The relieves and everything. You look at that, you look at that sometimes. You look at that sometimes. That's right there, and she buys me binoculars, and I go around. I say look at that. But I get scared at the same time when I'm doing that, because people are like - - what is this guy doing with binoculars, but I'm looking up, I'm not looking straight at the windows you know what I mean? And look at the structure. I say look at the beauty of these things. I mean - - the people just walk by like they don't notice. Then there's that building

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across the street from Webster. I say Wanda look, little faces. You know look at the relief, and I say look at that. And you watch them - - the last time I worked in construction was across the street from the store at the Hilton. We were on the fiftieth floor. Nobody wanted to go to the skyline. The skyline was this way, all glass and you had to go up there and take out the paint. Ronnie didn't go up - - Benji - - oh man, I have to go up there, so I go up there, then you had the belt. Go out on the window, then I had the gun. It was five hundred pressure. Five hundred pound pressure. So, it went off [Makes sound of it going off] with the chemical. So you know, you look at the window, you can see the stares - - oh all the way down there - - all the way down. So I went [shhhhhh] and washed it. When the chemical was coming down, it went to my feet. I slipped, and I hanged on. I hanged and I got up, because I got used to heights. Big deal. After I finished cleaning, I got off, went downstairs, I said I quit. Come on - - that's it. I did my years in prison. No more. And I was working on the scaffold with no safety belt.

MN: What union were you in at that time? What was that - -

BM: No union.

MN: You were doing non union construction?

BM: Non union, yes.

MN: Oh boy.

BM: Non union. Check this out. We were on the top floor Johnny, and the wind would move, and Tato, my friend - - come on Benjamin, come on man. I said let's just do this quick already. The thing that was the bad part was the gargoyles. Like this. You know the creatures that fly.

JM: The statues yes.

BM: So when you're coming down the scaffold, you have to kick it so it can go under, so that you go like this. Oh Tato, come on man, stop it. Let's just get rid of it. So the gargoyles are

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there, we're cleaning it. So, you've got to go under it and there was the electric scaffold. So sometimes instead of - - you have the wire that's supposed to go around the wheel. Sometimes it gets caught and it goes [Vroom] it comes down. I said Tato it's coming down. [Indecipherable] I said okay man don't worry. He's a big - - if it happens, just break through the window. So I didn't have no safety belt. That's how I got used to the height. And we went all the way to the bottom. When you're finished, then you have to take the scaffolds off. Go right back up again and do the same thing. We did the whole hotel. We did - - we worked at the Statue of Liberty, not the statue itself. It was the buildings around the Statue of Liberty. It was so cold that when I put the water, it went [Shhhhhh] and it froze. I said, oh look how beautiful that is, and then I was saying hey Ronnie, Ellis Island. There were rats coming from Ellis Island to the island of the Statue of Liberty. So this man - - they hired this guy, and he had a gun with poison in it and he said towards - - you want to see something? Watch. He goes - - well then he shot it [Ch-ch] in the holes. He said watch it. The rat came out and it couldn't breathe, but [Cah] he hits it. In the end of the day, he caught at least twenty, thirty. I said where do they come from? They come from Ellis Island. They come from the pipe.

JM: It couldn't be me.

BM: Yes, I said wow. We cleaned the whole thing there, and then one day, I was starving. I said Tom, do you got any money? No. Ronnie - - he's not even - - in the islands - - there was a restaurant on the islands, and oh man - - I went to call Ronnie and go. And [Ringing sound] oh quarters. I said oh Tato look, I hit the jack pot. I took it - - there was twenty dollars - - I give him ten. Ten to me, then we ate something. But in construction, after I did that to the high buildings, I said never again, from there - - I went to United Bronx Parents, where I met the four nationalists that shut out the Congress. I met them there - - I met all of them. And I said - - so

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Miss Antonetti said Benji look who's here. I said oh wow. She looks like a Pentecostal with her hair combed, and I said man. He said are you still - - I said yup. Then Felipe Luciano - - we were playing in the street. Felipe Luciano - - you know Felipe Luciano? Young Lords ex-president. He Benji come over here, I want to talk to you man. Seventy-second and Broadway. You still in the movement man? You still in the movement? You still in the movement? And I think he had a Cougar. A nice Cougar, a nice lady in the car, a lot of American Express, and you're telling me am I still in the movement. He says listen, why don't you put some money in the box. Come on. Stop that already. You know, don't do that to me. You know, come on. If you're going to say it, say it, you know what I mean. Nice guy. Yoruba wanted to something I didn't want to do. At that time I just didn't want to be recorded on TV because remember what I told you? A lot of the guys thought I was dead. And I said I want to keep it that way. He wanted to do a story about the Ghetto Brothers. Let it go. McGregor. Charles McGregor. Have you ever seen the album with Superfly? There's an album, there's a film years ago called *Superfly*.

JM: I remember that. I remember the movie.

MN: Curtis Mayfield did a lot of the music.

BM: So on the back of the album, there's this black guy painted over here. That's Charles McGregor. He came to my house with a lady from NBC. They did a four day special Johnny, "From Gangs to Ghetto Brothers." Wow what a documentary. He won - - they won an award with that. He said thank you - - if you can do this for me I would really appreciate it. I could give you some money. Hey, no problem man. He got the job, they won the award, I never saw him again. When I went to Central Park when I was with my boys. Guess who I bump into?

JM: Him?

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BM: It's okay, you can keep the money. Don't worry - - did the film come - - did you get the job yes. Good. And I just walked away. You know. There's another book called *The Islanders*, by Steiner, and my wife found it the other day. I thought that the book is obsolete but she found it. It's a book that costs five dollars, but they sold it for fourteen dollars because it was back in the day. So there's a picture of me Johnny if you look at it, real skinny, because - - oh man - - Ghetto Brothers. And I looked at that, and I said oh wow. But if you look in the internet, I'm Ghetto Brothers Benji. You see a lot of things there.

MN: Yes, Google it.

JM: Okay I will.

BM: There's a lot of crazy things there.

MN: Okay. I think we should probably - - listen I want to say one thing, that I'm so happy that Johnny Mann and Andre came, because you added a tremendous amount to this. This is something I mean. I think that people need to see that the issues that he was confronting, you know, in the '70s, are still being confronted here now in 2006, and that, you know, we have to try to reach people, you know, and give them hope, and energy and inspiration, and I think the two of you were an inspiration for me to want to do this work. I mean it's - - I can't tell you.

It's a - - you know, when something - - you never know what's going to happen when you bring people together, and I thought that something very special happened in this room, and we have a model. The Bronx African American History Project, finding history, writing history, making history. And we made history today, and thank you so much for being part of it, and Dawn thank you for filming it.

Dawn: You have to say that after I finish my tape. I would have liked - -

MN: Well I can talk anytime. [Laughter].

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[END OF INTERVIEW]