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Keller, Bernard

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Interviewer: Brian Purnell

Interviewee: Bernard Keller

20 November 2004

15 January 2005

Brian Purnell (BP): ... is to maybe just talk about your early years, childhood, your experiences living in East Harlem and this neighborhood, and maybe build up to when, how, and why you moved to the Bronx and if we have time to move into some of those memories and those experiences.

Today is November 20, 2004. Brian Purnell interviewing Mr. Bernard Keller. We are at the Boys Harbor Multi-purpose Educational Center at One E.104th Street in East Harlem.

So, Mr. Keller, if we could just start with some basic biographical information such as your date of birth?

Bernard Keller (BK): I was born 11-14-52.

BP: Where were you born?

BK: Right here in Flowers, Fifth Avenue. It's not here anymore but I was born in Flowers Fifth Avenue Hospital. I guess that used to be on 110th and Fifth but it's not there anymore. We grew up in - - we lived in Washington Houses until I was about eight years old.

BP: Where were those located or where are they located?

BK: Ninety Ninth Street. They're still there. Two twenty-five E. 99th Street. That's where we grew up and it's still there. I go by there once in a while to remind myself, you know, what home used to be. Then we moved up to Monroe Houses because my dad was

a maintenance man and he was at maintenance man at Washington Houses and they were just opening up Monroe.

BP: Where is Monroe Houses?

BK: Story Avenue in the Bronx, not far from Stevenson High School. When we moved up to Monroe Houses we were like the fourth family in the whole projects. If you ever go up to Monroe Houses you'll see that the projects are like fourteen, fifteen, twenty buildings and there were only four families when we moved up there. Four families! That's it. Hey, when I got to P.S. 100 there were only three classes of students in the whole building. [Laughs] There was a kindergarten class, a first grade class, and a fourth grade class. That was it. Ok, so, it was wild man. The Bruckner Boulevard Expressway, which is paved now was all dirt. There was no paving at all. When you got into the Bronx it was all dirt.

BP: What year did you move to Monroe Houses?

BK: 1960.

BP: So you said your father was a maintenance man?

BK: Right.

BP: So he worked for New York City Housing Authority?

BK: Right.

BP: Do you know how he got that job?

BK: I know he had to take a test. Originally he was working for the transit and the reason why he quit the transit was because - I think it was like the maintenance work on the transit - he would come home every day and tell me how he almost got killed. He would say, "clipped." And one day he saved a woman who was pregnant. She fell into

the track and the train was coming and underneath - I don't know if they have this kind of space now - but underneath the platform there's a little cutout so the platform goes further than the piece underneath it and he grabbed the woman and rolled her under the cutout and put his back closest to the wheels and it just missed him. Just missed him.

BK: He would come home every day and tell his mother how he almost got - - my mother how he almost got clipped or how he almost got electrocuted on the third rail and [she'd] say, "I can't take this. You got to get a regular job." [Laughs] So he took the test to become a maintenance man in the Housing Authority and he passed it and that's how he became a maintenance man. .

BP: If I could ask a few questions about your parents and their background.

BK: Sure.

BP: What are your parents' names?

BK: Mabel is my mother and Howard senior was my dad.

BP: And you had a few siblings you said?

BK: I have four brothers and sisters; two brothers and two sisters. I have an older brother, Howard. He worked at Stevenson for like twenty years. We worked - - it was great. I have a younger brother who I call my little brother who's like forty-two or something like that, Michael. He's actually the Chief Executive Officer. He's the head of the [inaudible] YMCA. The baby sister, who is Susan - - Susan's like forty years old too. And the older one of the two sisters was Michelle and she's like a Vice President in - - I forget what union Stanley Hill was running but she's like the Vice President in that union. She's met the President of the United States. She's traveled all over the country so - -

BP: Your parents, were they born in New York City as well?

BK: Yes. Well, no. Actually I should say since they - - my father was but my mother was not. She was born in Newbury, South Carolina and moved up here when her mom was poisoned. She moved up here with her mom's sister and that woman became her mom.

BP: Your family's history is rooted in the South? African-American blood, not the Caribbean?

BK: Yes, no it's rooted - - because my father's mother was born in Atlanta, Georgia. So it's definitely rooted in the South.

BP: Was your father a veteran?

BK: No.

BP: So his entrance into the civil service was strictly for his - - to take that exam - -

BK: Pass that exam, yes. He passed some other exams. He passed the exam to become a fireman, you know, to be able to run the boilers and he advanced. He stayed as a maintenance man but he had several certificates and stuff showing that he had gone and progressed and had all these other abilities and skills too. For me, and when I talk to kids, for me the most amazing thing is he never got on to sixth grade and my mother never got on to ninth grade - -

BP: No kidding.

BK: - - and yet all five of their children have college degrees.

BP: What did your mother - - did your mother work as well?

BK: She worked when we got old enough that she could get a job as - - and she worked for twenty-five years as a school aid, a school aid at P.S. 100 and then later on a school

aid at P.S. 14 in the Bronx. But she didn't work for the most part. She stayed home for the most part until my little sister was old enough to go to school and she was in the second grade or third grade at P.S. 100 and then my mother got a job as a school aid there.

BP: So both of your parents having rudimentary levels of education?

BK: Yes, very basic levels of education. You know I tell you one of the tricks that they did was really - - and it took me until I got to college to figure out that they jerked us around. Every night they would tell us, "Okay, you have to put your homework on the desk and I'll check it when I get in." My father had like 500 jobs so when I got to college I was like, "There's no way he can be checking this homework because he's getting home like at eleven-thirty at night, twelve-thirty at night - - he goes to work at six-thirty in the morning but he signed. He always signed. Then it dawned on me that my mother never got to ninth grade. She's checking chemistry homework, geometry. Wait a minute, you take chemistry in the eleventh grade. She never got into ninth grade. Wait a minute, you take geometry in the fifth grade. So she really can't check this homework assignment. She has no idea if it's right or not. And she would tell us, "You know I think this wrong, you need to - - I think you should do this over," and I went and I did it over again and I'm like wait and it dawned on me. I figured out how she did it. When we were growing up they didn't have these erasable pens so you had to lick the eraser and we had to do everything in pen. We had to do math in pen. They wouldn't let us do it in pencil. So you licked the eraser and you could erase it and you could write on it but if you held it up to the light you could see where the paper was lighter, where you could erase the fabric of the paper away. So I guess my mother's theory was if you erased it, it must have

originally been wrong. It may be right now, but since you erased it you really didn't know what you were doing in the first place so you would have to - -

BP: Do it over. [Laughs] Get it in your brain.

BK: I think they were very smart. They were remarkably smart given their very rudimentary, as you said, education and it did alright by us. I mean, look at where we are. So it must have worked.

BP: What was - - I guess to do a quick contrast. Did you notice any differences between life in East Harlem, which for you as a young boy I guess went up to eight years old, compared to when you moved to the Bronx? Who were your neighbors in East Harlem and who were your neighbors when you moved to the Bronx?

BK: Now thinking back on that, I never really even noticed a difference, honestly. But now thinking back on it, the neighbor that was closest to us was - I'll never forget her - her name was Mrs. Ortiz. And when my mom had to go someplace - -

BP: This is in?

BK: This is in 229 E. 99th Street. When my mom had to go someplace her daughters would watch out for us. Her daughters would watch us. If my mom had to go and my dad couldn't be home they would come next door and watch us until they got back. They were beautiful girls and they were really very nice. When we got up to the Bronx I had a woman who was Jewish was one neighbor. A family, an Irish family down the hall, they were really great. We would go over to the house for Christmas. They would tell us, "Come over, we're going to open gifts." It was great. All kinds of people. I became really good friends with a kid named Frank Milo who is a pastor in Minnesota now. He was Italian. We would go to his sister's birthday party and his father and his mother

would walk us all home through the Projects. Whatever building, they would walk us all home and upstairs to our room, to our apartments. They wouldn't say, "Okay, you go home," or get us to the front door and say, "Okay, you get upstairs the best way you can." They made sure that every one of us got to our apartment and our parents opened the door. It was remarkable. For me it was a great life.

BP: How long did you live in the Monroe Houses?

BK: All my life until I became an adult and then moved out. I didn't move out until I was like twenty. I lived there at least twelve or fourteen years and then I moved out and moved back to Manhattan.

BP: What schools did you go to as a child?

BK: P.S. 109, here in Manhattan, which is right on the grounds of 229 E. 99th Street.

P.S. 109 is right on the grounds of that - - we could walk out our building and walk right into the school. It's on the same grounds. P.S. 100 when I got to the Bronx., Junior High School 125 - Henry Hudson, and Monroe High School.

BP: Monroe High School. I'm interested to talk a little bit about the community that you found in Monroe Houses, particularly this type of care-taking that you just described by the Milo family. Did you see that continue throughout your childhood? Was that something that was sustained over time?

BK: Probably until we started to get to - - because that was the time period when if you did something wrong, Ms. Milo or Ms. Butts or somebody would tell your mother, "You know, he didn't do what he had to do." That kind of changed around the 80s. When you started telling people, "You know, he didn't do..." well you should mind your business, because he's not your child, okay? And that's when that started to break down. Right

around the 80s that started to change. People kind of felt that that was evasive that you were minding their business if you were looking out for their child.

BP: That kind of stayed throughout your - -

BK: Yes, throughout my - - sure.

BP: Was it always kind of a multicultural community?

BK: Very much so and I'm not only talking about in that building. I'm talking about in the projects altogether. You know, when people talk about the projects now as a place where, "Oh God, I want to get out the projects," we never saw it that way. I mean I never thought of the projects as a bad place. It was clean. People didn't urinate in the elevators. They didn't throw things out the window. I mean, we used to have a little fun and throw the little water balloons out the window. I threw a water balloon out the window one time - a little small balloon - and it popped and they said, "It's right there on the sixth floor!" and man we ran away from the window because we knew that if my father found out we were throwing stuff out the window he would kill - - it's a water balloon. It's the summertime. We're not talking about throwing bottles out the window. We're not talking about throwing pampers out the window. It's a water balloon and it just wasn't done.

BP: What were some of the - for lack of a better term - well I will use a better term. What were some of the educational methods that your parents would use to impart lessons on you and your siblings?

BK: For one thing, they would use the - -

[Tape skips]

BP: I wanted to say disciplinary - -

BK: [Laughs] You could say that.

BP: - - but not everything is disciplinary.

BK: Well, look, I'm going to tell you they were smart people. I was more hardheaded than the other children so I got disciplined more. But looking back I got what I deserved because they said "Don't do these things," and I would look and say, "Well, I'm going to do it anyway." Okay, well, you know, hard head makes a soft behind. That's what my mother used to say and she was right.

They used a lot of different techniques like one of the things we had to do - - we had to get a library card. In the summertime we had to do book reports for my mother. We would read books and then she would ask us, "What was the book about?" and if you weren't - - if she wasn't convinced that what you said the book was about was about, she made you read it again. So you had to convince her that you actually had read the book and she would ask you, "Well, why did this character do that?" How the hell do I know? I'm only a kid. I don't care why he did it. I'm just telling you - - "Well then read it again." Here's a woman who never got to the ninth grade and she's asking questions like, "Well, why did he do that?" That's a teacher's question. You never got up to ninth grade. Why would you ask me that? And she did.

I remember how I learned my times table. Man, I was bad in math. I couldn't do a times table to save my life. Well, in the third grade my mother told me this, "You will never see the street until you learn the table - - you will not get out in the street this summer until you learn all the twelve times tables. Never ever." And then she proceeded in July to do the girls' hair with the hot comb, cook greens and black-eyed peas in the projects. No air conditioning. Those walls were sweaty in July, oh man, two weeks I

knew the twelve - - I knew it backwards, forwards, sideways, pick one out. Yup. Took two weeks to learn the twelve times tables. Two weeks! Something I couldn't do in a year, I did in two weeks. That's right. That's right.

That incentive was there, okay, and I think that they were great. I think that they understood the importance of education and they made us understand the importance of education. They helped us to understand that they did not have the opportunities that we had. They wished they did but they didn't and that's just the way it is. And we're not going to bemoan them or complain about them but you do have them and what you are going to do is you are going to take full advantage of them. She did not ask us, you know, like I said - - Harold got a four year scholarship to Fordham University. He won every award that you can win at Monroe at his graduation. He was getting so many awards they had shopping bags. My mother kept coming up out of the audience. They said, "You know what, just sit right here because we're going to be calling his name again. There's no need for you to come up." And so she sat on stage and just collected awards and I remember telling my mother when I went to Monroe - - I said, "Listen..." - - because he would come home at like two-fifteen to two-thirty and we wouldn't see that boy out of his room until eight-thirty when it was time to eat dinner and then he'd play around with us a little bit and go back in his room at nine o'clock. Because my room was here and his room was across the hall and you can see underneath the fluorescent light that was still on. So when I would go to bed at nine-thirty to ten o'clock, the fluorescent light was still on.

BP: How much older is he?

BK: He's four years older. He's four years older than me. I'm four years older than my little brother.

BP: Michael

BK: Right. I'm two years older than the oldest of the sisters.

BP: Michelle.

BK: Right, and I'm eight years older than Susan.

BP: So you had your own room? Or you and Michael shared a room?

BK: Michael and I shared a room. Harold had his own room and the girls shared a room. I can remember telling my mother, "I'm not trying to be like Harold. I'm not studying no ten hours a day. That's not happening." She said, "You know what, that's okay." But she said, "But all I know is I have no money and you need to go to college however it works out."

BP: Where did you go to school?

BK: I went to Hunter. I got a scholarship to go to St. Francis in Pennsylvania but my mom didn't want me to go away so I went to Hunter. I think I got a great education at Hunter. I really do.

BP: What years did you go to Hunter?

BK: 1970 to 1974.

BP: That was still when CUNY was free?

BK: Right, well essentially. We paid a little something but it was little, negligible. I'd always tease Harold. I'd say, "They paid a lot of money for a four year scholarship. I got the same thing for free at Hunter." He claims that's not true. Fordham University, better education. It was good. I thought it was a great education. I loved it.

BP: Your father, you said he worked not only for - -

BK: He worked the Housing Authority. Right down the block from where we lived is Lafayette-Morrison Houses. He worked for them and then he worked for Emergency Service for New York City Housing Authority after that. So, in other words, he'd get off work at like five o'clock, from six to nine or something he's working at Lafayette-Morrison and then from ten to midnight or one he's on Emergency Service for Housing Authority, which means that if something goes wrong in Throgsneck, that's where he goes. He's not just Emergency Service at Monroe and they would call him at home and say, "Listen, we got a call," and he would drive up to wherever it was.

BP: How did he learn his- - how did he develop his skills?

BK: That's a good question. I really don't know. I'll tell you an anecdote about him. I used to go around with him and he would do them panes of like when glass would break and he would do it and what he would do is he would hold the pane of glass up to the window and slice it and put it in and I thought that was like really cool and then when I watched him work one time work with somebody - - he was training some guy. The guy put the pane and he said, "Well where's your ruler?" He made the guy measure and I was like kind of confused because well he doesn't measure. He's telling this guy he's got to measure. So when the guy walked away I said, "Dad, why you made him use a ruler? I never seen you use a ruler. You don't ever measure." He said, "He's not me. When he learns how to do it this way then he can take the shortcut." So he had learned how to measure. He had done what he had to do and now he can look at it and visually make the cut and he did and that's - - I assume that's how he learned. I assume that he did it from

the beginning, learned the basic steps, and then became good at it and was able to shortcut it.

BP: Were other families in the Monroe houses similar to yours in that it was a two-parent household?

BK: Almost every kid I knew - - there was a kid named Jay Rosenberg. He lived on the fifth floor. Sometimes my mom would let me go down and play with him. Father and mother. Sylvia Butt and Ronald Butt Senior right next door to us. Father and mother. The - - I forgot their names - - the Irish family down the hall from us. Father and mother, okay. Every one. Every one that I knew. The Milos. Father and - - Every one that I knew. Father and mother.

BP: And most of the men were similar to your father in that they - -

BK: Yes. They weren't like carrying briefcases. They would - - like one of the kids father's drove the delivery truck for *Wonderbread*. One of the kids father's worked for transit. You know, one of the kids father's was a New York City Housing Authority police officer. He was on the fourth floor. They were just, you know, everyday people. Just regular folks.

BP: Was there an atmosphere of, you know, let's say - - when I say gangs, you know, it evokes all this type of stuff, but was there this - -

BK: We were too busy having fun. Really, I mean, you know, we played with everybody and we didn't say, "Oh, I'm not going to play with him because he's a white kid." I mean we got in trouble with everybody. We played with everybody. There was none of - - if they didn't like you it was because you're from this project and we have

beef with that project. Yes, that could happen. But it wasn't, you know, *Crypts, Bloods*, no.

BP: Was there any type of underground economy that operated in any way?

BK: I'm sure that there were drugs and stuff but I've got to tell you I never really saw it. You didn't - - like there was a guy in - - I forget his name but when I realized he was a drug addict and now I'm in high school and I'm almost ready to graduate and I'm realizing that this guy is actually you know, he's a drug addict. He's nodding off and everything and that was like the biggest like shock to me. I couldn't believe that I was actually seeing - - I mean I'd heard about it but I couldn't believe I was actually seeing it. It's like girls getting pregnant. Look, they must have got pregnant when I was in high school too but I swear I never saw a pregnant girl in high school. Never! Now I noticed - thinking back - I noticed that Maryanne kind of like disappeared. Diane kind of like disappeared so what probably happened is they got pregnant and sort of bounced out but it wasn't like it is now where, "Oh let me rub your belly. Are you having a baby?" No! No! This was not a good thing. No! Like going to summer school. This was not a good - - like, "Psst. How'd it go in summer school?" No! This was not good. This was not good.

BP: How did you spend your summers? Did you work as a teenager?

BK: No, I didn't work until like my senior year of high school and then I was working for the Housing Authority. My father, you know, the woman - - he knew a guy who was pretty high up in housing and his wife had a lot of power in housing when he passed away and she was able to get us a job and I learned how to fix cylinders - change cylinders. They were going to teach me how to re-pin a lock because in a lock they have

little pins. That's what the little ridges of the key actually turn on. They were going to teach - - because you can take the same cylinder, change the pins around, and you can't use the same key anymore and that's all they do. That's all a locksmith does. He just changes the pins and that same key, you can't use it. I learned how to do that. I learned how to change locks, which is the actual piece that the cylinder sets on. The lock is not the cylinder. The cylinder is the part you screw out to put the key in. The lock is the black piece that fits in the door that you screw the cylinder into and I didn't know that until I started doing that.

BP: What made you - - what did you study at Hunter?

BK: English.

BP: What made you want to pursue a career - - a more academic career as opposed to a more kind of - -

BK: You're not going to believe this - a bet with Harold Junior. That's what actually - - Harold was a teacher by that time and he was working on these lesson plans long periods of time at night.

I said, "There's no way it takes that long to write a lesson plan. I'm telling you. You've got to be doing something wrong."

And, you know, he's like, "Let me ask you a question. How many teaching jobs have you had?"

Now I'm just in my senior year at Hunter. I said, "Well, I haven't had any."

He said, "When you get a job and it doesn't take you this long, we can talk."

"So I bet you..."

He said, "First, get a job."

I don't like to be told I can't do things so when I got out I went to - - he knew Ben LaBelle, who at that time was the English Chairmen at Stevenson and I got a job as a private ____ because they didn't have any teaching positions and then a month later a teacher quit and I had already taken the teaching test and everything and they moved me from private [inaudible] into teaching. But I only planned to stay in teaching eight years. That was my game plan. I figured it would take two years to kind of find out what teaching is about but it would take two years to really develop skills to teach and then it would take two years to really sharpen those skills to hone them so I could be like the expert teacher. And then I figure I would rest on my laurels for two years and then I would leave and become a lawyer. That was my game plan. That's what I envisioned. That's how I was going to do this. Didn't work.

BP: You know what, let's stop there for now.

[END OF SESSION]

15 January 2005

BP: Today is January 15, 2005. We are continuing with the interview for the Bronx African-American Oral History Project with Mr. Bernard Keller. So today I would like to really concentrate on your experiences teaching at Stevenson High School, which is where we left off in the last portion of the interview. Right at the end of the tape you were saying that what prompted you to become a teacher was a bet with Harold Junior and your initial plan was going to be an eight-year plan to exit triumphantly as the expert teacher.

BK: That's right and go on to law school.

BP: And go on to law school. I'd like to start by - - I think we said this on the earlier tape but I'm not sure. What year did you first enter teaching?

BK: 1974.

BP: I want to come back to that period and speak about what it was like to be an African-American male teacher in the Bronx and in New York City at that time. But before that I'm very curious - - [Crosstalk] [Laughter] - - what deterred you from the eight-year plan? What kept you in there longer than eight years?

BK: I thought it was going to be easier to leave than it was. But I've got to tell you that, you know, whenever I got - - the two or three times when I really got fed up and said, "You know what, I'm out of here. I've done this enough. I'm going to go do something else," some kid would come up - inevitable - and say, "What's up?" and I'd say,

"You know this is probably going to be my last year and..."

"What do you mean it's going to be your last year?"

And I'd be like, "You know, I want to do some other things."

"So you let everybody else graduate and you watched everybody else and you're not going to be around for mine."

And I would say, "Listen, you know it's not personal. I'll come back..."

"Nobody ever comes back."

I said, "You know what, I'll stay for your graduation." Now there's another year. Now I'm ready to leave until another kid says, "Oh, you can stay for *his* graduation..." So that's really what happened. There was always somebody else to stay for and I gave up leaving after that.

BP: So since 1972?

BK: '74.

BP: '74. Since 1974. This is going into your - -

BK: Thirtieth year teaching, yes.

BP: Thirtieth year teaching. Why is that important? I guess this is a more personal answer. Why was it important for you to stay and see through that one last kid?

BK: It seemed to mean so much to him or her. You know, it was so important to this person. I could have sent them card. I probably would have made every effort I could to come to the graduation. If I said I would do it, I would. I would have taken that say off from whatever but it - - that wasn't enough for that person. They wanted more than that and if it was that important to them then maybe it should have been that important to me.

BP: Why did you want to become a lawyer? What was your interest in law?

BK: I was good at making arguments. It's really hard to beat me. My kids will tell you. The students will tell you, "You can't win. Just be quiet," and they'd tell their friends, "Listen, don't get into it with him because you're not going to win." There would be a point where the kid would get ahead and he'll have more points on his side than I do. I don't know. But then I said, "So, okay, you're right there but now let's look at this because this is really what the crux is," and then their argument starts to crumble, okay, because what I'm really good at is defining the prerogative of the argument, which are not their - - see, they're not smart enough to understand that we're not going in that direction. I don't want to go over there. They go over there and once they go over then my parameters supercede theirs and then my argument supercedes theirs and I'm really good at that.

And, you know, I'll tell you I really don't think George Bush is a really good President but I'm going to give him credit for one thing and I can't believe the Kerry people were so stupid that they didn't see this. That's how he won the election. You will ask him, "Okay, fine, we hear about Iraq everyday. What are we going to do with No Child Left Behind?" and George Bush's argument will be, "You know what, that's an excellent question. The most important thing that you can have in this country is security. You would agree with that right?"

"Well, yeah, but that's the..."

"I'm going to get to that. Let me get to that."

But you can't argue security is the most important thing we could have in this country. No, no, no. "Okay, well, I'm locking it up. I'm getting you a secure country. Next question." And that's what he did. If you go back and you look at the debate - - I mean it may not be that blatant, but that's what he did. He never answered any questions. He defined the parameters of the argument and then he would not let Kerry move anyplace else other than that. He was really good at that.

BP: It's 1974 Stevenson High School. Is that - - not Hunts Point. I guess it would be - -

BK: Soundview.

BP: - - Soundview area of the Bronx. What was kind of the political atmosphere? I would characterize that as like post-Ocean Hill-Brownsville in terms of New York City Public School System.

BK: There were a lot of - -

BP: What was the political atmosphere?

BK: A lot of the awareness of being black, you know, because that's the *I'm black and I'm proud*. It's coming out of that era. A lot of working class parents, you know, still a lot of moms stayed home but the concept of you know, getting a job, going to work, my child being well so he won't have to do this. He'll have a better life. That kind of mind set. That was prevalent. Let me tell you now if I called your parent, your behavior changed tomorrow. I guarantee it. The parent didn't say, "His behavior will change." The parents said, "I will take care of it," and it was taken care of. The next day your behavior was different. Oh yeah. When I called the parent, "Are you going to be there?" "Okay, I'm on my way up there right now."

None of this, "Well what would be a good time? How about April? Would April be good?"

"No. Right now."

That was the climate and the kid knew that was the climate. A kid wouldn't tell you, "Go ahead. Call my mother. I don't give a damn."

"Mister, please. Don't call my mother. Look, I'll do anything. I'll stay after school. I swear I'll do anything."

BP: What was the racial/ethnic makeup of students in high school at Stevenson?

BK: Predominantly black. Right now it's fifty-one, forty-eight. Fifty-one Hispanic. Forty-eight black but back then I'd say it was easily fifty percent black or even more and then the Hispanics were the next biggest group. Maybe forty, forty-five. We had a pretty good number of white kids there too, I mean, which was kind of like odd to me because we had all these black and Hispanic kids. You got these white - - and the white kids never seemed to me like, "Oh god, I'm white. I can't associate with them." They fell

right in, went to the dances, learned the dances that the kids were doing, learned the slang, talked the slang.

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

BP: What about in terms of the teacher population?

BK: That was predominantly white.

BP: Predominantly white.

BK: Yes, we had three-hundred people on staff. We would be looking at maybe twenty to twenty-five blacks and if you included my brother when he got there in '76 or '77 you were looking at - - they had twenty or twenty-five blacks. They had about seven or eight black males and everyone else was white. There weren't very many black males. In the building it was a predominantly white staff.

BP: Did some of the debates about Ocean Hill, you know, with the extent from Ocean Hill-Brownsville in terms of community control - - I guess like what you were saying, you mentioned briefly before, a more culturally black-centered curriculum?

BK: Not the curriculum but in terms of black power and in terms of black people thought of themselves and, you know, that we can do this, that we have to have pride in ourselves - that part. But the curriculum, it only became black-centered when teachers like myself or women named Ms. Joyce Brown - - I had never heard of *Clotel*, *The President's Daughter*, the book and she taught that book. I had never of *Freedom Road* and she taught that book. That's how it became black-centered because individual teachers did that but they were black teachers and of course there weren't very many of them.

BP: What was the response like from your school's Administration?

BK: They really didn't say anything. They didn't say, "You can't teach this." I think the better question is, "What was the response like from the kids?" and the kids ate it up. They were like, first of all, "Black people actually wrote books? No! You're bullshitting me." [Laughs] No, this is deep. That was their - - "Oh, black people have something to say?" or, "There's something to say about black people?" because Howard Fast, of course, is white but he was writing about the Reconstruction Era and, "Black people actually had a contribution? They actually had something to say? They actually had some value?" It was awesome.

BP: How long did that kind of sentiment carry on throughout the school year?

BK: I guess I'd say to some degree it still carries on today but the truth is that I think the wheels started coming off the wagon if you will in the 90s because so many things started happening. For example, kids could sue their parents and you know, they could sue schools, they could sue teachers. We got into this permissive - - "Look, don't correct him because when you raise your voice it's traumatic and it makes him feel like he's being humiliated." That kind of mind set became prevalent in the 90s. One of the reasons why my brother left the Dean's Office and one of the reasons why I would not go back is because, like I told you, that we had a time where if you wrote on the desk and the teacher reported it, you went down to my brother and he said, "Listen, we've got two situations here. We can suspend you because you damaged public property or you can clean it. Here's some _____. Here's a sponge. Here's a basin. They have water upstairs. When you feel it's cleaned sufficiently you'll come down and get me. If it's not, I'm going to suspend you." And the kid would - inevitably - "Mister, I'll clean it, I'll clean it," and they would go upstairs. I'm not talking about no five minute thing. I'm talking

about they'd come down a half an hour later and they'd say, "Mister, I'm finished. It's clean now," and it would be and not only did that person stop writing. When he saw you writing on the desk, "What the hell are you doing? What are you stu-," because he had to clean every single desk that was written on. Not only when he wrote on it but every single one. That became corporal punishment in 1990.

BP: What do you think accounted for the change?

BK: I don't know if you can actually put this on the tape but I'm going to tell you.

[Laughter]

BP: Feel free to stop it if you like.

BK: This is what I think. You know, for years, these were my experiences. I'm sure it's been yours. When I was growing up I could always tell you who the white parents were and who the black parents were, not even by looking but by listening. The parent that said, "Johnny I'm going to tell your father. Okay Johnny, you know what, you're not getting the toy. Okay Johnny, that's it. Johnny, you're not getting the toy!" that was a white parent. When you heard, "Let me have to talk to you one more time," that was a black parent and that was the difference. They really couldn't control their kids and to a large degree they still can't and those are the same people who are making the rules and saying the kids can sue their parents. Those are the same people - - that's not a black judge's rule. It's not a black judge's rule you have to take the - - and call up DCS on their parents. It's not a black judge's rule. It's a white judge's rule. That's - - honestly, that's what I feel. It's a vast difference. Listen, can we be honest? They didn't raise their kids. Go back to slavery. Who was raising their kids? Black folks! Slaves! Slaves raised their own kids and their kids! They have no concept of what it takes to raise a kid.

They give their kids everything. Give them the car. Give them the money. That's not raising a kid. Black folks understood that. Sometimes they have to take the switch to them but black folks understood that too but that became, "Oh! Abusive, abusive. No, no. Abusive, abusive."

BP: Did those types of policies - - how did you see them affecting black families just through your experiences?

BK: Look, you got - - I speak to black parents who are like, "What can I do? I can't yell at them. I can't spank them. Well, what am I supposed to do Mr. Keller? They're going to come and arrest me." There was a woman who was having a problem with her son. He was coming in at four o'clock in the morning and then he wouldn't be able to get to school if he didn't sleep so the guidance counselor, you know, I was in the room with the guidance counselor and it wasn't my business so I didn't say anything and the guidance counselor says, "Well, you know, I don't know what to tell you because what I would like to tell you I'm not permitted to tell you because..." So, she said, "I don't know. Maybe Mr. Keller can give you a suggestion." I said, "I'm not a guidance counselor. I abide by that." So I said, "Well, you can do what you like but if it was my kid I would change the lock." So, like when you went out, if I told you to come back at midnight and you weren't back at midnight, I'd just take the cylinder out and put in another one. It wouldn't change the key. You like that? I bet you'll be on time tomorrow. So she said, "Well, I can't do that because he'll report me to the police and say I locked him out and they got me because of negligence." But see, what I would do as a parent is say, "Oh my God! You know what happened? Oh Jesus! I changed the lock. I forgot to tell him I was going to change it. I forgot to give him a key. I'll give him this key." And then I

would give him the key - - I would take his key from the old lock. I would give him a key to the new lock and I'd change the shit again. So you have a key but it wouldn't do anything until he came in when I told him to come in. That's what I would do but you got kids coming in whenever they want. You got kids smoking, drinking in the room, having sex in the room. Their parents are afraid to say anything to them because if they do and they report them to the ACS - - I mean take a look at the Columbine situation.

“Well, we don't go into his room.”

“He was drawing up plans to kill people. He had guns in his room.”

“Well, we don't - - that's his area. We don't violate - -”

“Violate what? He lives under your roof. You're paying all the rent. You're paying the mortgage. He's your kid.”

BP: In the thirty years that you've been - - so you said the 90s was a big shift.

BK: I think so.

BP: Was there other shifts that you noticed besides I guess what I would call policy decisions towards child management?

BK: I think one of the shifts is, of course, you know in the thirty years - - I mean take a look at - - I have nothing against these guys. I kind of do like A-Rod. I like Derek Jeter a lot but \$17 million a year to play a game. Michael Jordan made \$30 million in one year; a one-year total because of his balloon payment. Patrick Ewing was one of my favorite players. He made \$33 million in one year. These guys are great players and I'm glad they're getting all the money they're getting but the rap stars came along and they're making unbelievable money. The impact that has had is fast money, quick money, easy money, education not necessary. Therefore, unless someone is reinforcing that -

someone at home perhaps - unless someone is reinforcing that you still need an education, it isn't happening. George Bush's No Child Left Behind. Nice sentiment. Not being funded. Not realistic. Mayor Bloomberg's decision that he's going to redo the Board of Ed, that he's going to make it work so that parents will have the freedom to transfer their kids anywhere they want to go. It isn't happening. There are two few good schools and too many schools that suck. The good schools can't absorb all the kids from the schools that suck. That was never a viable solution. The only solution was to make all the schools work well. Not two or three. Every one of them. Because if you're Jack Welch you can make *GE*, you can take *GE* from a losing corporation to a multi-billion dollar multinational corporation. Whatever system you used, you can use with any company and it goes along with _____ companies and he does just that, okay? Pat Riley, Joe Torry - they all wrote books on management - their management system beliefs and they took those management systems from sports, from baseball, from basketball and said, "This is what you need to do to be successful in business," and people use those management systems because it can be done! It can be done anywhere. I mean they're sort of doing it right now. They came out with a system on how the kids can become better for writing the essay on the new ELA. This system will work. It would work - -

BP: What does the ELA stand for?

BK: I mean the SAT. The ELA is the English Language Arts Regents. But this system would work whether you're taking the ELA, whether you're writing the essay on the SAT, whether you're writing a dissertation for a PhD. The system would work. It's not a system that only works if you're in the third grade. It will work in the third grade as well as the twenty-third grade because the system works. If a system works it works all the

time. It doesn't just work under certain conditions. Small schools work under certain conditions. I can make anything work under certain conditions. I can stand on my head for a quarter of a second under a certain condition.

BP: In your opinion and from your experiences growing up in the Bronx in the 50s, coming back to teach in the Bronx in the 70s and 80s and in the 90s and into today, does the Bronx have the tools to create schools that work? What does it take to make the schools work well and does the Bronx have it?

BK: What I tell people is that the answers are not hidden in dirt that only certain people can find. I believe the answer to this is right in front of peoples' face. So, I think what it would take, yes, is there. Now, are people going to have the commitment and are they willing to take the heat because let's face it, you're going to take some heat because people aren't just going to say, "It's a good system and we're going to accept it." Hey, I'll give you a perfect example. You know, say what you want about Mickens in Brooklyn. There are people that couldn't stand him. They felt that he was hegemonic. They felt that he was - -

BP: Who was that?

BK: Frank Mickens, the Principal of Boys and Girls High for like thirty or forty years, I think, out in Brooklyn. Utica Avenue. They said that, you know, he had his own little fiefdom, he only allowed certain kids to come there. You can say all of that but I tell you this. When I was a Dean in the 80s everyone was having a problem with the sheepskins and the chains being flashed. He had no problem. He stood at the door of the school and said, "If you're wearing the sheepskin, go home. If you're wearing a gold chain, go home. If you want to come here - because I'm not chasing down the sheepskin and I'm

not chasing down the gold chains.” They had a minimum amount of those kinds of problems. Other principals said, “Well, what can you do?” That’s not what he said. One time a kid tried to transfer there. He had not been in school in three years. He said, “You can’t come here.” He said, “Well this is my school. I demand the right...” He says, “You’re not coming here.” He went down to the Board of Ed and they told Mickens he had to take him and he said, “Over my dead body. He won’t come here,” and the community supported him. He said, “What do I want with a kid who hasn’t been in school in three years? What do you think he’s going to do when he gets here? I don’t need that.” That’s logical science. He didn’t say he didn’t deserve an education. He said he just isn’t going to get one here. That’s logical science. I think that’s a stand that people have to take more.

Look, I had a kid who came to my class just recently I haven’t seen in two months, you know, except the one or two times that I saw him in the hallway before my class so obviously I knew he was in school and he cut. He walked into my room and said, “Mr. Jones, can I get help?”

I said, “It’s nice to see you. I’m glad you showed.”

He said, “Yeah, yeah.”

I said, “So, where you been all this time?”

He said, “I’ve been home.”

I said, “Two months you’ve been home?” I said, “So, basically you feel that school - - you can just go whenever you want to go. That’s your feeling. If you decide - - like today you felt like you wanted to come here so you came?”

He said, “Yeah, that’s right.”

I said, "Okay, so basically we work with our feelings here." So, I said, "Okay, check this out. I feel that since you didn't come for two months - - I feel that I don't want you here so get your stuff and get the hell out." I kicked him out. Can I get heat for that? Yes, I can but until we start making kids understand that this is not a place where you just drop in, "Well, let's see, okay, what time is it? Okay, there's no more movies to see. I already banged that girl today. My friends went to school today. I'll go to school." Where is the game plan baby? Where is the game plan? If you come over here every day you come over here for an education not when you get ready, not when you feel like it, not when you want to. Is that there? Yes, it's there.

The question is not so much the Bronx but are the people in power going to permit that? That's the question. Not so much are the people in a place in the Bronx to do that. Not so much is there a system that can be - - that's there. It can be done. It *can* be done. Question: Are they going to allow it to be done? Somebody spoke to me yesterday and said, "Bernie, why aren't you a principal?" I said, "I'll be a principal just as soon as they let principals do what they're supposed to do." I don't need you looking over my shoulder saying, "No, see you can't." I'll give you a perfect example. They had a problem with some students a couple of months ago. Yes, they called it a riot. It was a problem. It's not the end of the world. You have these things at every school, you know, good schools. A 20-year-old kid jumped on the back of a policeman. Twenty years old. Tenth grade. Twenty years old. Jumped on the back of a police officer and battled him to the ground. He was injured. It wasn't a serious injury. His suspension hearing came up. Now, twenty years old, you're in the tenth grade. You're looking at somewhere between ten to twenty credits and you're twenty. In the best case scenario when he

passes everything, he will graduate from the twelfth grade at the age of twenty-two. Now at the age of twenty I had already been teaching one and a half years at Stevenson High School. I'm sure at the age of twenty you were not in the tenth grade. I'm sure at the age of twenty you were almost finished your college career. One woman who was representing Stevenson, the Dean, said, "Okay, you know we're asking for a hearing basically expulsion."

"Well," says the woman who was doing the hearing - -

BP: Can you describe what hearing?

BK: Yes. When you're suspended you have to go to a hearing.

BP: Through the school?

BK: The school send representation and then you, the person who was suspended, have a right to have legal representation. You are provided with an advocate even if you don't bring legal representation and the advocate looks out for your interest and the woman who is running the hearing, she's supposed to make a fair and impartial decision based on the information.

BP: Through like the Department of Ed as the - -

BK: Right, right.

BP: - - judges.

BK: Yes. If that's what you want to call it. And she said, "Well, you know what? I want to give him an opportunity. If we expel him he will not be able to attend any of the city's free GED programs."

"So, let him pay. He's twenty years old. He's like a grown man, okay."

She said, “You know what? I want to give him a chance. I want to give him a chance.”

“Give him a chance? He’s twenty years old. He’s had his chances.”

“So, I’m going to suspend him for ninety days and then I’m going to send him back to your building.”

“He’s twenty years old. How about this? At twenty years old do you realize that he’s in a building with ninth grade schools who are thirteen, who are fourteen? At twenty years old do you realize that there are fourteen-year-old guys and thirteen-year-old guys who are being influenced by his presence? They’re looking at him and saying, ‘I don’t have to do shit. He’s twenty years old.’”

At twenty years old he jumped that police officer. He comes back. Do you understand what that’s saying to - - “Hey, he jumped a police officer. Nothing happened to him. Well, I can punch that kid through the f*#\$n face. _____ the police officer.” So these are all the ramifications of that decision, which she doesn’t have to live with. I’m in the school. She’s somewhere downtown. She doesn’t have to live with the ramifications of her decision, which is stupid, lastly.

BP: So, it’s not a question of - does the system have what it takes to be excellent? It’s more of a question of - does it have the will? And the will comes from power.

BK: There’s a great quote in *Stand and Deliver* by Jaime Escalante. He says to the students, “You must have the *ganas*,” and there’s a great quote from Muhammad Ali that says, “It is the will, not the skill.” Here was a man who always talked about how great he was, his talents and ability. It’s interesting that the man who had some of the greatest boxing talent of all time said, “It is the will, not the skill.”

So, it's like, they talk about that there's no money. We don't have money. But there's money there. How the money's being used, for example, the Department of Education is spending \$100,000 per person for these young people who are now working at the Board of Ed as the heads. In most cases this is their first job. They've never worked before and in most cases they have no educational skills at all. They are business majors. [inaudible] and we can pay them \$100,000 a year but you say that you can't pay teachers and then "How much you guys want to make?" There's the question. I make about \$80,000 a year as a teacher but here's the question - -

BP: After thirty years.

BK: Yes, right. And who's doing the work? Not the people downtown. So if you can pay them \$100,000 a year for coming up with ideas, which for the most part are half-baked and don't work, certainly I'm doomed. So to me that's the question. How is there enough money for people who have no experience at all? None! They didn't even take an education course. Talking to you about education is like talking to my dog about swimming. We can't even have a conversation. You're talking to me about business. I don't know anything about business. This is what I know and I know this isn't business.

BP: How do things like, you know, when people talk about the Bronx, the history of the Bronx, maybe even it may have been during the time you had been a teacher in the Bronx. They talk about things like the fires. They talk about things like the crack epidemic. They talk about - especially with youth - they talk about the gangs, right?

In the story that you're laying out, basically what I'm hearing is that over time there has been families trying to push their children to succeed, families struggling within certain

policies that in some ways don't necessarily provide the support for - the disciplinary support - -

BK: Or at the very least don't get out of the way. There's a great saying that says, "Lead, follow, or get out of the way." Okay you won't be bothered with anything. Just don't hinder me. Don't give me nothing. Just get out my way and let me take care of myself. You know James Brown has a great song that says, "I don't want nobody to give me nothing. Just open up the door. I'll get it myself." Same concept. Don't do anything for us. Just get out the way. We'll do it ourselves. You don't even want to do that.

BP: Did things like the fires, crack, and gangs, I mean how much of an impact did you see that on the everyday life and functioning of your school?

BK: Of course, they had an impact. For example, take a look at the crack epidemic. You got these people on crack. They don't have no idea what they're doing so obviously they're having sex not even knowing that they're having sex. So at fourteen years old, fifteen years old they're bringing more life into the world. Are they well educated? No. Do they endanger the life of their child because they're crack addicts? Yes. Whatever. We don't know the total effect but brain cells could have been damaged, okay, and let's talk about ADD and hyper activity and they trace that back to some of that and these kids then have kids at a young age. It's not like their mothers can tell them, "No," because they had kids so you can't say shit to me about it because you did the same thing. Their mothers can't tell you, "Well, let me with your homework," because they don't know how to do no homework themselves. So, yes, of course it's had an impact. No question.

I just think that those other things that I mentioned - - the family, you know, stripping them, just fed the kids to those areas. There was no other option. There is nothing else. I

don't have a family. I don't have a mom. I don't have a dad. I have - - they donated sperm. They gave me a place to live for nine months but they're not really parents. They can't offer me and they can't do anything for me. So, all of those things did contribute, sure.

All of things did contribute but even when you talk about the fires and everything like that. They rebuilt the Bronx. It came back as the phoenix so just like when the city went bankrupt in 1977 and it rose again. That can't necessarily be all to it that there were these epidemics because it rose. It overcame those things but still the problem persists. They were contributing factors but why are they still here. What factors do we contribute to resolve the problems of those factors? Get it? That's why the problems are still with us even though those things may not be.

BP: Just in summation, what will it take - - if you had to lay out a plan to transform these types of issues, what would it be?

BK: It's not going to be any one simple thing. It's going to be a many-pronged attack. For one thing, you know, black folks have always been kind of spiritual and I think the church has to step up its role in terms of reminding people through special programs and things that we're part of a great people. A great and mighty people and the fact that we're doing such a crappy job is just not acceptable. It's not acceptable to us or it shouldn't be and it certainly not acceptable to the people who gave up for their lives to get us to this point so we have to change that around.

That's one place and then we as a community, we start holding people accountable. Like, I didn't see it. I'm going to go see it because I think it speaks to what I talk to all the time. Coach Klein. We need to come up with - - we need to tell coaches and people

who are involved with our kids. I don't care that he's the greatest basketball since God. Can he read? "If he can't read I don't want him playing sir. You bench him until..." instead of, "Well I got to tell you this kid is great. Don't worry about if he goes to tutoring." No. So we've got to start holding those people accountable.

We've got to start holding our kids accountable. We need to tell them what our expectations are of them. I expect you to go to school everyday. I go to work everyday. I expect you go to school everyday. I earn my money everyday. I expect you to earn a grade everyday. A sixty-five average is not acceptable to me when all you have to do is go to school. You don't have to work. You don't pay rent. All you - - your job is to school so a sixty-five average is not acceptable to me, okay? We have to demand that the people who are in power stop this idea about, "Well, we'll make a few good schools and then people can transfer." I don't want that. I want my school to work. I want your school to work. I want the school down the block to work. I want them all to work.

We have to start holding our politicians' feet to the fire so that instead of pretty slogans, we'll get product. I don't want something that sounds nice. No Child Left Behind sounds wonderful. It isn't doing anything because in the reality someone is always left behind. If you know the story of Harriet Tubman, you'll know that there are times when slaves came with her and said, "Listen, I want to go back," and she's half way between down south and freedom and she said, "Well, I'll tell you what. I'm going to kill you here and I'm going to leave you here. I'm not letting you go back." I'm sure that there might have been one or two she had to kill. Those people were left behind. Sometimes people get left behind. I'm not saying leave them behind, you know, just leave them behind but I'm saying if people don't want to be saved, let's stop investing all

of our money and our time and our energy on that kid. Let him go. Let's work with the ones who want to be saved. I spoke to a young man the other day. He told me,

"Mr. Keller, I'm worthless,"

and I said, "Listen, you should have passed this class."

He said, "No I ..."

I said, "No, really."

"You know I didn't start asking questions until two months into the semester. My friends [inaudible] but really I've learned a great deal in your class because you're a very good teacher and if I had started doing these things earlier, I would have had a passing grade now."

I said, "But that does not make you worthless." I said, "The learning process is such that sometimes we don't get where we need to go immediately but we get there. That's the most important thing. We get there." That's when I - - I spoke to him. I walked into the class.

He said, "Yeah, I never thought of that."

I said - - there's some bricks on the wall. I said, "See this wall? They didn't put it all up in one day. They put up this brick, then they put up this brick. They put up this brick, then they put up this brick." I said, "Life is a big brick proposition."

He's like, "You know what? I never thought of it that way. Thank you."

That's what I'm talking about. That's what I'm talking about. Yes, he's going to fail my class. Yes he is because I don't see any way he can pass. I really don't but I've seen a change. I saw the change from disinterested - coming in when he got ready to - to, "Mister, the reason why I wasn't here yesterday is because..."

“I didn’t ask. I don’t care”

I saw the difference between, “Well, I don’t care. I don’t know how to do this,” to “Can you help me because I’m having a hard time with this?” Then I said, “Let’s do one thing at a time. Take this back to your seat. Fix this and then bring it back to me. Take it back. Okay, now, take this back to your seat and fix it - - take it back.” He might have been up to my desk four or five times in one period as opposed to never coming up.

“Mister, I really don’t understand how to do this.” That’s growth. That’s learning. That’s what school is about. Everybody doesn’t learn it just like that. They don’t and there’s nothing wrong with that and there’s nothing wrong with that. I mean that’s what I believe.

So in our neighborhoods, we have the doctors, we have the lawyers, we have the teachers, we have the mentors, we have the businesspeople, we have the principals, we have nurses. We have them. They’re there. Those people are there. Not only the ones who are coming up...

[Tape is cut off]

[END OF SESSION]

[END OF INTERVIEW]