



10-30-2006

Lawrence, Rosalind

Bronx African American History Project
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Transcriber: Danielle Lund

Dr. Brian Purnell (BP): Alright, today is October 30, 2006, here at Fordham University with Mrs. Rosalind Lawrence doing an interview for the Bronx African American History Project. Specifically we are going to speak about - - Mrs. Lawrence grew up in Sedgwick Houses, so we're going to speak a lot about that, but - - but about the Bronx in general, and your experiences in the Bronx. So if we could please start by you saying and spelling your first and last name and your maiden name if you're now married.

Rosalind Lawrence (RL): Okay it's Rosalind. That's R-O-S-A-L-I-N-D. Middle name?

BP: Sure.

RL: Estelle. And my maiden name is Dillard, D-I-L-L-A-R-D, and Lawrence is my married name.

BP: Okay. What is your birth date?

RL: November 26, 1956.

BP: Okay. Where were you born?

RL: I was born at [Laughs] Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx.

BP: We interview a lot of people who were born at Lincoln Hospital.

RL: Oh, okay.

BP: Was that - - was that a common hospital where - -

RL: It was either Lincoln or Bronx Lebanon.

BP: And where did you live as a child? Where did your family live as a child - - when you were a child?

RL: Okay. I grew up in Sedgwick Houses and I was in building 150.

BP: What was the exact address of Sedgwick Housing at that time? Where - - where did it span?

RL: It was - - it ran from actually - - University Avenue was one border, and it went all the way up to where you go onto the Washington Bridge to go into Manhattan, and it began at a hundred - - West 174th Street, and then it went back across to - - what was that? Undercliff.

BP: And you lived there from the time you were born? 1956?

RL: From 1956 to 1977.

BP: Okay. If we could - - I'd like to speak a little bit about your parents and their background. What are your - - what is your mother and father's names?

RL: My mother was Helen Dillard, Helen Eugenia Dillard. Well, Helen Dillard - - Helen Hagen Dillard. And my father was Robert Dillard, okay. And they lived - - before they came to Sedgwick Houses - - they came there when Sedgwick Houses was just finishing being completed and really it was opened up to Veterans, so they moved in. It was - - it was in the early stages of the housing project.

BP: Do you know your parents' dates of birth?

RL: The - - not exactly. [Laughs] I can't - - well my mother I think it was nineteen - - I heard it was March 20th - - I think she was 1923. I have to do the figuring. And my father was like 1922. Something like that - - in November.

BP: Did they - - were they from the Bronx?

RL: They were - - they - - well when they moved to Sedgwick Houses they lived across town in the Bronx on Prospect Avenue, but originally neither one of them are from New York. My mother was born in Connecticut, or that's a - - a story there [Laughs], but she was born in Connecticut. Well she was born - - actually between Canada and the United States on a boat

when her mother was coming - - they were coming to the United States, so she was born coming across to the United States, so when she became eighteen she - - she had dual citizenship, so when she became eighteen she had to decide whether she wanted to be an American citizen or Canadian citizen.

BP: Her parents were from Canada?

RL: From Canada. Nova Scotia.

BP: And where had they - - were they born in Nova Scotia, or - -

RL: Most of - - yes. Most of them were. Yes.

BP: Wow. And how about your father's family?

RL: My father's family - - my father was from the South from Georgia, from Springfield Georgia.

BP: Did your mother's family tie their ancestry to the West Indies or - -

RL: There is some there but - -

BP: Or even to the US?

RL: There's some Canadian Indian and some people are from like Trinidad. There's some family there, but a lot of my mother's family has passed away, or died off, so it's hard. We try to keep track of, you know, the family history, because we all said one day we would go to Nova Scotia to try to trace our history there.

BP: Right. So I have two questions. Moving from Prospect Avenue to the Sedgwick Houses - - was that a - - a welcomed move for your family?

RL: Oh yes. They - - they felt like that was like a step up because that was new housing created - - back then the projects was not a bad connotation, but that was like a step up. It was built for middle class families and for war Vets, from World War II and the Korean War.

BP: Was your father a Vet?

RL: Yes. He was a Korean War Vet.

BP: What branch of service did he serve in?

RL: I - - I couldn't tell you [Laughs]. I couldn't tell you. I don't know. It wasn't something he talked a lot about. Yes, but he was a Vet.

BP: What kind of work did your parents do?

RL: Well, my mother was basically a homemaker, and she would work part-time from time to time. She worked for a telephone answering service way way back in the Parkchester area when you had the plugs, and you would plug in and she used to work for that answering service. Some people were - - some were some movie stars or whatever where they would want call - - wake-up calls and things like that. So, she would do part-time work from time to time there, or she would work part-time in Macy's, stuff like that. My father worked - - he worked a lot of - - he was a taxi cab driver. He worked at a filling station, and then he also - - well, where he retired from was the United States Postal Service. And he worked for them way back when, when they had that huge, huge strike, and so - - he retired after thirty something years of service.

BP: Any siblings? Do you have any siblings?

RL: Yes, I have four siblings. I have two older brothers, one older sister, and a younger brother.

BP: So you're - -

RL: So it's five of us.

BP: - - And you're - - you're four out of five.

RL: I'm number four out of five, yes.

BP: Alright, alright. So do you remember where your parents exactly lived on Prospect Avenue?

RL: You know I - - no - - I have to - - they've told me but there is an old family friend. I could find out exactly where on Prospect. I can't remember the exact address, but we also had a family doctor that was on Prospect Avenue back then, in the days of family doctors when they made home visits. [Laughs]

BP: So, now if we could move into some of your early memories as a child. What was Sedgwick Houses - - what do you remember Sedgwick Houses being like as a - - as a very young child?

RL: It was very family oriented. It was a lot of black families. There were a lot of Jewish families, and some Italians, but it was more Jewish and more black families than - - and - - it was a very family oriented community and we really had a very nice - - everyone looked out for each other's children all the time. You didn't have to worry about your kids ever. You know, we could go out to play. We knew when to come back in, you know, you could back in for your lunch, or come back in for your dinner, you know, and everyone watched out for everyone else's children.

BP: Who were some of your earliest playmates?

RL: There was a girl Paula when I was in elementary school. I lived on the fourth floor and she lived on the third floor and she had two little sisters. So I remember Paula. That was one of my playmates when I was like in first grade and kindergarten, and - - oh gosh, and then friends of ours, the Collies, and that family - - that was four children in that family and then people in my building, the Reynolds family. There were so many families. There were just so many that we all interacted with.

BP: And would you say that black families and white families who were mostly Jewish - - Jewish and Italian you said - - how did they get along together?

RL: I, you know, I can't recall frictions, because even there was a Jewish candy shop [Indecipherable] on University, right on the corner of 174th Street, and what was his name - - Eddie, Eddie and Shirley, and they owned - - it was like the soda shop, and the candy store, and they knew my parents, and even the store owners knew the parents, and I think next door to them there was a cleaners. I don't remember the name of the cleaners because that changed hands after - - over the years. There was a butcher shop and then there was a deli and that was a Greek-owned deli and they knew my family, you know, when we would go through hard times. My parents could set up an account and they would just let them buy stuff on account, and they would pay them when they had the money, and that's how it was back then. And - - and this was a Greek-owned deli, and we were a black family, and we - - they took care of us.

BP: What types of games did kids play back then?

RL: Oh, we played everything, and that's, that's what I miss with the children today. We played in the park. We would play Ring-a-Leevio.

BP: Now what [RL laughs] if you could explain - - what is Ring-a-Leevio?

RL: Okay, you set up teams and you get two team captains, and they get to choose who they want to be on their team, and you know, we had a park right outside of my building there was a park, and we would just use the things they inside of the park, and one team would be on one side and another team would be on another side, and you would have to try to get to the base, and the opposing team would try to stop you from getting to the base and like some of your people would get caught and they would have to sit there, and if all - - if everybody got caught then that team won, or then it would happen if you had a good runner or somebody they would run over there and free everyone from the base and then everybody would run back, you know, so then it just - - it was a lot of fun, and what else did we - - Dodge Ball we used to play, Red Light Green

Light One Two Three. We used to play marbles, and it would be - - we would have our marble season, and I forget - - it was in the Spring, because most of those seasons would pop up when the weather changed in the Spring, or like right in the beginning of the school year, and we would have marble season, and everybody would get their marbles - - I forget where - - we bought the marbles in the store, and we would set up along the - - the street in front of the building. We would just line - - people would line up on both sides, and we - - they would set up all kinds of games to play with the marbles and you could win big jumbo marbles, or you'd win a few pennies and we all played together. This was black and white kids, all playing together. It was - - it was wonderful. Then there was - - we used to make - - what was that - - the scooters out of the wooden milk crates, and the skate - - the roller skates - - you would put that on the bottom, and we used to make scooters, and there was a like a storage room in the basement of the buildings where most kids would keep their bikes and the scooters and things like that and everybody would - - they would - - this was something we would all do even the, you know, girls would participate in making the scooters and stuff like that, and it was, it was - - it was a great time. [Laughs] It was a great time.

BP: Now did - - did - - oops - - did girls and boys play together or - -

RL: Yes. Except for, well, we didn't play stick ball.

BP: Girls didn't play stick ball.

RL: We didn't play stick ball.

BP: Baseball I don't think - - we - - we didn't bother - - we didn't bother with the baseball, or even the basketball, but we - - we had a basketball court at the end of the projects, so we would - - and there was also a handball court there, so you know, we would usually go over there and watch our brothers play, and watch all the people from different communities come over and

play from Nelson Avenue, and we would play handball, and that boys and girls would play together, you know, we'd play handball.

BP: So you - - do you have two older brothers?

RL: Yes.

BP: How much older?

RL: My oldest brother is seven years older than me and, and then the other one is six years older than me - -

BP: Okay, and then there's - -

RL: And my sister is two years older than me, and then I come in, and my younger brother is five years younger than I am.

BP: Okay, so were you close with your older sister? I guess you guys - - [Crosstalk]

RL: Yes. We were close. We were close, when we were younger. Well we all had the same friends, so, you know, we were pretty close until we got to like puberty and teenage years, so, and then you know, I became too young to hang out with [Laughs]. And then you know, when we got older that changed. We were close again, so.

BP: So most of your - - your childhood I guess is early 1960s.

RL: Yes, yes.

BP: You were a very little girl in the '50s. I guess I would say most of your memories of growing up in Sedgwick are - -

RL: The early, yes, the '60s and very early '70s through high school, yes.

BP: I would like to speak about some - - about school, and memories of school, but before that I'd like to, you know, just keep talking a little bit about your early memories of Sedgwick. How big was your apartment in terms of bedrooms?

RL: It was only two bedrooms. Now I used to think that was a pretty big apartment when I was younger, but then going back I remember when my parents moved. They moved when I got married in '77, and they moved, as a matter of fact, the day after I got married, and I forced my husband to take me home, because I knew I would never see this apartment again, and when they were moving everything it was like it's really small in here [Laughter]. But it was a two bedroom apartment, and we lived in that, that same apartment, I guess from when my parents moved in until 1977.

BP: And the - - the building itself. You described it as family oriented. Is there anything else that you remember about what it was like to - - did families visit each other within the building, or - -

RL: Oh, yes, that was - - that was all the time, and my house was sort of like where a lot of the kids would come. A lot of the kids used to come to my house. It was my brothers' friends, or it was me and my sister's friends. There was always a lot of kids in the house. There were always a lot of kids. And - - you knew everybody on your floor. You knew everyone on your floor. There was a Jewish family in the corner apartment, and my mother was very close to them, and there was a Jewish woman that lived straight across from us and she was - - over - - later years unfortunately she went a little crazy, but she was a really nice, she was a nice woman when it was Jewish holidays. She would always ring our bell and give some - - some meal, something that she made for the high holy days. She would always bring us something, so. Yes, it was - - it was really a - - a very good time. It was a good time.

BP: So then, I mean probably because it's - - it's coming up to that season now, but - - I grew up in a similar building, and I - - I think about Halloween a lot.

RL: Oh yes.

BP: What did kids do - -

RL: We all dressed up, we all - - but usually it wasn't store-bought costumes, because we couldn't - - parents couldn't afford to buy you all those store bought costumes. You know, you'd get old clothing, and rags, and you'd either be pirates, or, [Laughs] you know, we'd buy the make-up and make up your face, and you know, we would all get our brown paper bags, and go from apartment to apartment trick-or-treating and getting candy, and mostly we stayed within the projects. We really didn't venture out to like the other buildings. We - - because, like, you would get so much, you know, you would get so much candy, and I mean and a household with five children - - I won't say my brother because he was younger then, but four kids with four big bags full of candy. But, yes, it was - - you didn't have to worry about anybody bothering you. You didn't have to worry about anybody putting something in the apple or anything like that.

BP: Did your family go - - attend a church?

RL: Well, we attended Featherbed Lane Presbyterian Church, and my mother was Presbyterian. My father was Baptist, but he would attend from time to time or sometimes he would go to Harlem and go to church.

BP: And the church is located on?

RL: Featherbed Lane - - it's cornered Featherbed Lane, West 174th and University Avenue.

BP: And was this a predominantly African American congregation?

RL: Yes, yes it was. We did - - it was predominantly African American. When I was younger we had a African American minister, and he left, and I was pretty young. I think I was pretty young, when he left. Maybe seven, seven or eight, because I remember we used to have family picnics too, and I - - I remember that last family picnic when he was a minister, and then we did get - - we got a white minister, and now his name was Reverend Martin, and he was our minister

until he retired and I guess that was the '60s all the way through to Seventy - - when did he retire? Maybe '74, '75. I don't know. Somewhere in there.

BP: And what was the - - were - - did many of the families at Featherbed Lane Presbyterian come from Sedgwick Houses, or did they come from all over that part of the Bronx?

RL: It was - - it was mostly in that neighborhood, in Sedgwick Houses. It was Sedgwick Houses, along Popham Avenue, Undercliff Avenue. Our minister, Reverend Martin, he lived on Undercliff Avenue, and his whole family attended and it was mostly in that area, and then, through the '80s, when the neighborhood started to change, the late '70s, and the '80s, that's when the - - the, you know, people moved away. Some moved away. They would still come back. A lot of people moved away. A lot of people moved from Sedgwick to Co-op City, when Co-op City was built, and, and that's when the membership started to die down. And Co-op City I remember growing up was freedom land, and I thought we were going far away, when we would go to freedom land. It would usually be Mother's Day or Father's Day, and I really thought we were going on a long trip. [Laughs] And I never realized how close Co-op City was. [Laughs]

BP: Most of the - - the people at Featherbed Lane Presbyterian and your, your neighbors on your floor, or in your building what were kind of their general occupations? What were some of the occupations that the men and the women did your [Crosstalk]

RL: Most of the women were homemakers. Most of the women were homemakers. Some were professionals. Some were nurses. I know some mothers were nurses, or they worked in the hospital or something like that and one of my neighbors, he - - he was a physical therapist, and, but his wife was a homemaker.

BP: And do you remember - - and how about the men? What kind of jobs did the fathers do?

RL: They were either - - mostly civil servants, mostly civil servants. Some were firemen. There were quite a few policemen, and people that worked for the post office.

BP: Of the African Americans, were many of them from the South, or from the Caribbean, or a mixture, or - -

RL: It was a mixture, but I think the majority was from the South, yes. It was a mixture, but a majority was from the South, yes.

BP: Most of the interviews that we've done with someone who has a similar background - - they do mention how close-knit the community was.

RL: Oh it was very. Yes, really, very close-knit.

BP: Do have a memory of how this close-knit, extended family type community ever - - gave some information to your mother before you got it?

RL: Oh yes. [Laughs] Oh yes. I [Laughs] - - I remember - - that's when I realized that I couldn't lie. I didn't know how to lie. [Laughs] My friend Paula, the little girl on the third floor, we wanted to - - I forgot what we - - I either - - I wanted to play at her house and her mother wasn't home because I think her mother worked, and we knew that we weren't supposed to do that, and we concocted some lie, some story, and I think either her mother told my mother and my mother confronted me and I was like, oh no - - I like - - I got in trouble. I got in trouble. I got a beating for it. Yes, I did, so, and I said you know I can't lie, and I remember that. I was like six, seven, but I'm not a good liar. I realized then. [Laughter]

BP: Where did you go to school?

RL: I went to - - it was Public School 104, which was on Nelson Avenue. I think it was Nelson and Shakespeare, so that was on Nelson Avenue, which - - the sad part about the schools that I've gone to and so much of the decline of the Bronx - - a lot of those schools are doing so

terribly, and I think my high school was closed. But I went to P.S. 104 from Kindergarten to the fifth grade, and then I went to Junior High School 82 which was on McKoon's Road, and I remember right next to Junior High School 82 was a movie theater, was the Park Plaza movie theater, which we used to go see movies for like a quarter, or ten cents, and we would have a quarter and the change we would use to get our candy, or our popcorn, because you only got maybe fifty cents or something like that to go to the movies on Saturday. And you go to the matinee, and you see the cartoon, and you see the movie. So I remember that, and I went to William Howard Taft High School.

BP: Where was that located?

RL: That's on - - what is that? East 172nd and I forget the cross streets, right over the Grand Concourse. It's like a block down from the Grand Concourse.

BP: You said you went to a movie theater. Park - - Park Plaza movie theater.

RL: Yes. That was the neighborhood movie theater.

BP: Do you remember seeing any particular movies there as a kid? Like what - - do any stick out in your mind?

RL: Those, back then we used to - - what *101 Dalmatians* I remember, like the Disney movies, when I was younger from that theater was a lot of Disney movies back then. We used to see all of that, and get like a quarter or fifty cents to go to the movies. And across the street from there, there was a - - a pizza shop and that was another soda shop, but we could never afford to go in there because it was - - it was a little more expensive for us so - -

BP: Before - - before we speak a little bit about your educational experiences, since you're talking about where you went as a kid, were there ever any places that you didn't feel that you could go?

RL: Yes. There, there were, and I think sometimes maybe we - - I block it out, but I guess there were. There were some places that - - we just did not, we didn't go, and maybe not until we were a little older or something like that, but there were some areas where - - I, you know, I - - try to be specific. I'll have to think back, but there were places where you felt like you - - we shouldn't be. There were - - it was there. I mean because that was a time a lot of racial strife, but - - I don't think it hit me so directly, but it was just like some places that you knew you couldn't go.

BP: Do they - - and they don't jump to mind though? Or - -

RL: - - Where is it? Well, even over here in this area, in what's considered the Belmont area - - you wouldn't be caught if you were black, you didn't want to be caught here. You'd get chased out of here. You would get chased out of there. And there were some areas, even when Co-op City was pretty new, and I remember a few kids talking about how there were some areas over there that they couldn't be. They couldn't be.

BP: That's interesting. And another, you know, you mentioned there was a pizza shop and, but you didn't go there because - -

RL: Well that pizza shop, well we could go there, but - -

BP: You said you didn't have the money.

RL: We - - sometimes we didn't have the money, and then I guess sometimes, maybe you didn't feel comfortable either, because they may have looked at you like what are you doing in here, you know.

BP: Not having money as a kid - -

RL: Yes.

BP: - - or, you know, your story sounds like again a common one where people might say, well we, we were poor, or we didn't have money, but we didn't know it really at the time.

RL: Yes, yes. That was it.

BP: Did you - - did you feel like you were missing out as a kid by not being able - - by not having money, or having things or - -

RL: Always some - - some things I thought I missed out on. Maybe I would've liked to have a few more clothes, a few more of the stylish shoes, but other than that I didn't feel like I missed out on a lot on my life there, because I - - maybe because everybody - - we were all pretty much all in the same boat.

BP: Your schools, P.S. 104 - - what were the teachers and the kids like at P.S. 104? Do you have any memories that stand out from that experience?

RL: Well [Laughs] I'll try to think. I was more of a, a young timid - - I was timid [Sirens] when I was younger, and my brothers used to always watch out for me all the time, and there was like - - they were considered a bad group of kids from like Nelson Avenue that went to my school, but they didn't really bother me. I guess because of my brothers. I always had my brothers. They would be - - oh, leave her alone. That's - - that's Cliff's sister. That's Clayton's sister. Don't bother her. So you say there was a bad group of kids from Nelson Avenue?

RL: From, it was like Nelson - - Nelson Avenue. That was considered like the bad, bad end, the kids from there, you know, they got into fights, or they, you know, they were rough. So, but other, you know, going to the school, I was - - it was pretty good. It was pretty good. I know, alright, one time that I do remember sort of feeling left out, and maybe I was in maybe the third grade, third grade or fourth grade, and mostly in class we would interact, you know, with the white kids, but I remember not being invited to a party one time. I was invited to most of the

birthday parties. I think there was this one birthday party that I wasn't invited to, and I really felt I - - I felt left out. I was like, how come they didn't invite me, but then in a way I knew why they didn't invite me. But then they were still my friend in school [Laughs].

BP: Right, so why - - why had they not invited - -

RL: Because I was black, yes.

BP: So, in school at P.S. 104 black and white kids would play together, but - -

RL: Yes.

BP: Would you go to each other's homes?

RL: Not all. Some of them we did. Some we did, because I remember working on a project with a friend in elementary school. She lived on Popham Avenue I believe it was. And - - we would go - - I would go to her home, and that, there was no problem, and I was made to feel at home. I had another friend, now she was Hispanic. She was Hispanic, and I think her - - her father was Jewish. Her parents were Jewish. Her mom was Hispanic, and she lived on Nelson Avenue, and she was another one. Her name was Maria. She was one of my best friends too. And I would - - I was always welcome in their home.

BP: Her Hispanic family was from Puerto Rico, or - -

RL: I believe that she was - - her mother was from Puerto Rico and her father was Jewish. One of her parents was Jewish. Yes.

BP: Well when - - again the - - so the Nelson Ave area barrier, were those kids thought to be in gangs, or - -

RL: Well, yes, there were gangs then, but not the way it is now, and they weren't really thought to be in gangs. They were just a bad group. It was - - that's all. It was just a bad group, but then

again a lot of them - - some of the guys, they used to play basketball with my brothers so, you didn't have a problem.

BP: Is that how - - that's how they knew your brothers from - - from playing ball?

RL: Yes, from playing basketball, yes.

BP: Were your parents - - were your parents strict with you and your brothers and sisters, or - -

RL: Yes. [Laughs] Yes.

BP: Equally strict between the boys and the girls?

RL: The boys got a little more leverage, yes. The boys got a little more leverage, but - - my parents were strict. There was a - - you had to be in at a specific time. You had to come in and eat dinner. If you wanted to go back out, you had to do the dishes. I remember my friends that didn't have to do all those chores, and me and my sister had to wash the dishes before we could go back out. They would come and help us, so we could get finished faster. You know, and Saturday we used to have to clean before we went out. If we had a bad report card, I had to go - - my grandparents also lived in the projects. My mother's parents lived in the projects in another building, and they were strict disciplinarians, and my grandfather was very strong on education, and my mother very, you know, you had to, you had to do well in school. There was no two ways about it. And I think sometimes I was a little bit rebellious, because I was always following behind what my brother or my sister did, and my sister was very good, so I always felt I had to live up to what she did, so I was a little rebellious. [Laughs] So, - - because she got skipped, and I didn't get skipped and [Laughs] - - but if we got a bad report card, until the next reporting period, everyday after school I would have to go into my grandparent's house - - that was anyone of us - - and do our homework, and do study lessons. And we would sit there, and then my grandfather - - he knew what he was doing. We would finish our assignment, finish our

lesson, finish studying, then he would keep us there and just lecture us [BP Laughs] and we thought maybe if we finish our lesson and study we'll get out and save a little before it gets dark outside, but he would sit there, and then start telling stories, and we'd watch the sun going down there, [BP Laughs] and then all your hopes would sink, and all I could do was have to go home and have dinner. [Laughs]

BP: What - - what was his name?

RL: John Hagen, and he was also - - he was a deacon - - he was an elder in my church, at Featherbed Lane Church.

BP: Did he work when you were a child, or was he - -

RL: No, no. He was - - he was at home then. He was - - he was slightly sickly, but - - he was at home then, yes.

BP: What were, you know, the teachers like at P.S. 104?

RL: I can tell you, I finally remember my kindergarten teacher. I - - I, you know, I had her name on the tip of my tongue. I can't think of it now, but I - - I loved my kindergarten teacher. I don't know what it was but she was just so nice [Laughs], and let's see. I think my third grade teacher - - I'm trying to - - I can, I can see her, but she - - she was so - - she was pretty okay, but most of the teachers were okay. I think there may have been, you know, some types of racism then, but I was so young, I didn't really understand it. I didn't understand it at the time. I think I - - I understood it by the time I was in high school, and I was doing very - - I was honors English. I was doing very good in English, and I was - - I got so passionate about it, and reading Shakespeare, and I, you know, I went to my guidance counselor, I said, you know, they ask you what you want to do, what you want to study when you go to college - - what are you - - what are you going to do, what's your major. And I said, well I want to become an English major, and

she said, well, you know, there's not too much future in that. She really dissuaded me from it, and, and at that point, I didn't go to school right away, because that was all I could think about, and - - it was, it was you know - - that, that was like - - I don't know why - - I guess they felt that, why should I become - - I wanted to become an English teacher, and I was dissuaded from doing it.

BP: Wow.

RL: Yes. [Laughs]

BP: Most, again - - so even in middle school, and in high school was it a racially mixed - -

RL: Yes.

BP: - - student body?

RL: In elementary school it definitely was. In junior high, it was becoming a little bit more predominantly black. There were more kids being sort of bussed into the school.

BP: From other parts of the Bronx.

RL: Yes, it was more - - yes, from other parts of the Bronx, and I think somewhere in Manhattan because I had a friend - - she lived in Harlem, and she used to go to my junior high school. And then there was a little more Hispanic then, by the time we got to junior high school.

BP: So this is about 1966, '67, '68?

RL: Yes, yes.

BP: Any experience with teachers, or students in junior high school that come to mind, or even, even when, even in high school. I mean so now as you move into the, the early '70s, is - -

RL: Yes. I can't think - -

BP: - - is high school.

RL: I can't think of anything specific in - - with any of the teachers, because I was going to say I was, I was timid, you know, I didn't get involved in too much, or I shied away from a lot of things, so I don't remember, you know, anything really specific that happened to me besides that, when I was graduating.

BP: When did you - - did you - - were you ever interested in, or - - music? Did you pay attention to and follow music much as a kid?

RL: Music, well, when I - - when I was in elementary school, I took piano lessons, and then my parents expanded on that, and that was a struggle for them. They got me a music, a private music teacher to come in on Friday nights and she would give me piano lessons.

BP: Did you own a piano in the home?

RL: No, we didn't own a piano. We had an electric organ, but there was another child in the building, and he was an only child, so - - they had a piano, and she taught him, so if - - he was having a lesson, I would, I would go upstairs, and she would give him a lesson, and then give me a lesson also, and then if he - - if they weren't home, or whatever, then she would just teach me in my home, on the one [Indecipherable].

BP: Okay.

RL: Yes.

BP: So you studied piano?

RL: I did. For a short while, and I had one piano recital, which I loved, and then I - - I forget - - I continued with the lessons for a while, and then my teacher, she passed away, you know, because she was a little elderly, so, and then we really never picked it up again.

BP: How about records and, you know - -

RL: Oh, records, music, Motown music - - that was all - - we had all those records, you know.

And then also, the only radio station then to listen to was WABC, so we listened to [Laughs] all those songs too. We knew all of those songs, so.

BP: Do you - - which ones? Do you remember - -

RL: All the - - The Beach Boys and oh, all those good - - Frank - - well that was Frankie Valli - - it was his [Indecipherable] - - no he's not - - Frankie Vallie - - all those - - all those groups back then we listened to because at the time, that was about the only mainstream radio station, and then you would hear some Motown records played in there, and then I think we started listening to WWRL, then WRIB, but we had a lot of records. We had a lot, I still have - - I have a record holder of my forty-fives. We still have some old forty-fives from way back when.

BP: In 1968, '69, there was a big strike in the public education system.

RL: Right.

BP: Do you remember that at all?

RL: Oh, I remember that, because they - - they had offered - - to - - teach some of the kids. Like, there was a sick - - there was a Jewish synagogue on University, and the synagogue had opened up to allow some of the kids to go there for classes. I don't know which teachers would teach in it, but they - - I just remember it being cold and standing outside, and just being cold, and having to wait to go inside, and - - I don't even think we learned anything, but we would - - I guess they were trying to do something since we were out of school so long, but I remember that strike very well.

BP: In - - in high school, again, was it - - it was a racially integrated high school for the most part, or was it predominantly - -

RL: It was -- it was integrated. It was integrated, but I still say -- I think it was still was predominantly black, African American men in the high school, but it was still integrated.

BP: And did students get along?

RL: Yes, they got along, but then it was more -- let's see, by the time we got to high school -- I guess there were more fights and more things going on you know, at that time, by the time I got to high school, it was getting a little, a little badder in the area.

BP: 1970 about when you started?

RL: Yes, yes. It was getting a little badder in the area.

BP: How so?

RL: I guess just the type of kids, and I guess with drugs, you know, that was just like the beginning, because I even remember -- was I in high school? I don't know if I was in high school then with like the hippie era. We had quite a few hippies in the projects. We had quite a few kids, white kids -- they had rock bands, and you would hear them playing their rock music, and practicing, you know, you'd walk through the projects and you could just hear the music groups practicing and there were quite a few hippies, and -- that's when like drugs really, you know, started seeing that, and that I didn't even really quite understand. I was just wondering, what are they doing? What are they doing? You know, you didn't really see them doing anything, but you would see the behavior.

BP: What was the behavior?

RL: Well when they were high, or you know, walking around and -- or they were drinking, you know, something like that, but I remember that, that era in the -- I guess that was the early '70s. It was, you know, I guess this is when the kids went -- they were all hippies, you know, everybody had the bell bottom jeans, and everything. [Laughs]

BP: What kind of - - what were the drugs they were experimenting with? Just - -

RL: Then? Pretty much then I don't know, you know, I guess those, the rock groups that was like that LSD or hallucinogenic drugs and then, when I got into high school, they were sniffing glue, and I - - I - - I don't know if I lost, well, I lost some friends, like their lives are lost.

They're still alive, but, well I don't even know if I want to put that on here [Laughs]. Okay, but, yes, that's - - that's what happened around that time.

BP: Was there a big - - did drugs impact the neighborhood in a big way?

RL: Oh yes it did. It did. It impacted, and then there was also a change, unfortunately to say so in the '70s about the type of families that moved into the projects. That started to change. And unfortunately, and you know, you hate to say it, but you figured it was like more welfare families moving in or - - I don't know - - I didn't know about Section 8 back then, but I guess that's what they were offering then, and it was just different types of families moving in where you didn't - - the closeness was starting to - - to break up, and the families that we grew up with - - a lot of them were moving away. And we didn't have the closeness that everybody had, you know, it would become situations where certain people, you know, why you looking at me, you know. And we never had that type of thing ever. You know, you could talk to people or you say hi to people, and it was just a change that went about.

BP: Just curious too. This is also - - especially when you're around twelve, thirteen, fourteen - - it's kind of the high point of the Vietnam War too. Did - - did people in - - where you grew up - - were they talking about the war or - -

RL: Oh yes, my brother went to Vietnam, my oldest brother - - when he enlisted, right out of high school. And he would - -

BP: Did he go to Taft as well?

RL: Yes. My whole, except for my younger brother - - everybody went to Taft. I didn't want to go to Taft - - again my rebellion. I wanted to do something different. I was tired of following behind everybody, and my mom's like, no you're going to Taft, you'll go like your brothers and sisters, so there I was. [Laughs]

BP: Your brother served in Vietnam.

RL: He served in Vietnam.

BP: In which - - do you know in which branch?

RL: He was a private first class, and - -

BP: In the Army, or in the - -

RL: He was in the Army. He was in the Army.

BP: Did he come back?

RL: Yes, he came back. He did come back, but I wouldn't say whole. I mean he didn't lose any limbs, but psychologically.

BP: And did you notice similar trends in other - - other, you know, men from the neighborhood who had served?

RL: I guess I didn't notice everyone else. All I knew was my brother, but yes, there were some things - - some, some didn't come back. Some didn't come back.

BP: You move - - you get married in 1977, and you graduated high school in '74?

RL: '74.

BP: What did you do between the time you - - how did you meet your husband?

RL: At work. [Laughs] At work. We both - - because I guess I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I didn't enroll in college because I got dissuaded, so back then it was either you go to school, you go in the service, or you work. So I was a girl, so they weren't going to tell me I had

to go in the service, so I had to work, so I - - I went and I got a job. I worked at the bank, and I met him a couple of years after I started working in the bank. I met him at a training class.

BP: What - - what is his name or - -

RL: Peter. Peter Lawrence. I met him at a bank that is no longer around anymore a Manufacturer's Hanover Bank.

BP: So between the time you graduated high school and were married you were working in this bank. Did you go back to school at a later time?

RL: I went back to school very briefly. I went to Lehman very briefly. Only six months because I still couldn't find my way. I really couldn't find my way. I went to try to go back for six months and I wasn't comfortable so I just stopped, and when I finally did go back to school I was thirty-three. [Laughs] And I went back and I'm now I'm - - I'm back. I went part-time then with three kids to get my bachelors, and now I'm back in for my masters.

BP: So how, by the - - when your parents move out in 1977, where do they move?

RL: They move to the area over near Co-op City. They didn't move to Co-op City. My parents bought a house on - - off of Gunhill Road, on that side, on - - where Sexton Place and Gunhill Road.

BP: Is that neighborhood called Castle Hill or - -

RL: No. It's more - - I guess that's like Baychester area, Baychester area or Eastchester area.

BP: Do they still live there or - -

RL: Yes, yes. Well they don't - - my parents - - neither one of my parents are alive now, but I still reside in the house.

BP: Oh, okay, and did you and your husband live with them after they bought the house or - -

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

BP: - - lived in Queens.

RL: I lived in Queens.

BP: What neighborhood in Queens?

RL: I lived in - - we lived in, well, very briefly in Jamaica for like two months, and then Cambria Heights, we lived there for like ten years, and then in Rosedale for about five years.

BP: And your younger brother, he didn't go to Taft, where did he go to school?

RL: He went to Brooklyn Tech, and then he went to Evander Childs. He transferred over, because it was just becoming too much of a trip to get all the way to Brooklyn Tech, so he just transferred to Evander Childs.

BP: In 1996, you moved back to the Bronx?

RL: Yes.

BP: And you're still a member, or now you're a member of Featherbed Lane Presbyterian.

RL: Yes, I was - - I, well - - I guess I was - - I was still a member, but I wasn't a member in good standing.

BP: When you go back to the church now, how have things changed from when you grew up there in the '60s?

RL: Well the congregation is so much more smaller. It was just so very small. I mean and, and older, and a lot of people that were like my Sunday school teachers they were still there, but, you know, everyone was - - is much older now and the congregation, you know, really went down, and the church had been through its trials too, you know, trying to get a pastor, and trying to, you know, and since I hadn't been there for years I didn't really know what was going on so, and then when I got back, I really jumped in with both feet. I got involved in everything.

BP: And how about the neighborhood? Do you ever go - -

RL: It's - - it's sad to me because it's not the same vibrant neighborhood. It really isn't. I saw the decline, you know, in the '80s. I wasn't living there, but I saw the decline in the '80s, and now it's, you know, they're - - they're building new apartment buildings. They've - - they've renovated a lot of buildings. They tore down a lot of buildings and built those like two family homes and things like that but it's not - - I don't see the same community, and not it's mostly - - it's mostly Hispanic, and African, and there's still African Americans.

BP: In the late '70s, I guess right when you got married, did you notice any of the fire, or the devastations of the Bronx?

RL: Oh yes, yes. Mostly it was in the South Bronx. It didn't really hit us yet, on that side of town, but it was mostly in the South Bronx.

BP: What were some of the things that you heard about that during those times?

RL: It was - - it was like the lower South Bronx. You was - - I was - - you was - - wouldn't go near those areas. You know, it was just terrible things happening, and then it was - - I guess a lot of the landlords - - we figured they were just burning up the buildings. They were trying to get out of there, so it was just - - they were just decimating neighborhoods.

BP: But those types of things didn't really affect your neighborhood.

RL: No. Not then. There weren't too many fires there like that no. No.

BP: You mentioned earlier that you noticed a - - a switch in the population when Co-op City opened.

RL: Yes.

BP: How did that - - how did that switch affect - -

RL: Well, most of the - - the Jewish people - - most of them, they moved out. Some of the Italians moved out. They didn't all go to Co-op City. Some of them just moved out to like Long

Island, or just - - they moved away, and, but a lot of the Jewish people moved to Co-op City and a lot of the blacks that were a little more - - they had a little more money, they moved to Co-op City.

BP: Did your parents ever try to move or - - [Crosstalk]

RL: No. At that time they weren't - - they weren't trying to move. At that time my father wasn't trying to move. He started trying to move like a few years before I got married. He started looking into moving, moving away, but he didn't really want to move into another building. He wanted to buy a house.

BP: Which he - - which he did.

RL: Which he did, yes.

BP: Did your parents or your family every talk about politics as a kid or as a teenager?

RL: Well yes, I remember, I remember politics as, you know, I remember Martin Luther King. I remember when he died. I remember when President Kennedy was shot, because I was in elementary school at that time, as a matter of fact, I think he was shot on my brother's birthday, so - -

BP: November - -

RL: 22nd

BP: Yes.

RL: That was my brother's birthday, so, that wasn't a great birthday for him that year, so it was a little sad, so I remember that basically I thought - - I thought we lived in a Democratic household. I thought my family was all Democratic, but later on in life, my mother came to tell us, you know, your father was always a Republican, and I had no idea. No idea whatsoever, but he was a registered Republican. [Laughs]

BP: Well most African Americans from the South of his generation probably still had ties to the Republican Party.

RL: Yes, which I wasn't, you know, too much into politics. I would, you know - - we would watch, you know, things on the news and stuff like that, but I didn't get too deep into it but - - of course we were, we were against the war - - we were against the Vietnam War. We didn't like that. Yes, but that's - - yes, we were aware of what was going on.

BP: So as your family grew, grew older, you and your siblings grew up and moved, you know, some got married and moved on, did you stay in close contact?

RL: Oh yes, we were always close. We were always in close contact, because were always together, you know for holidays, or things like that - - we were always in close contact, and when my parents moved, my brother - - what - - well everybody pretty much moved with them except for me. [Laughs] So - -

BP: Because you - - you got married.

RL: Because I got married, so - - everybody was - - because he bought a two family home, because he wanted everybody to be together.

BP: And your siblings, you and your siblings - - how did you develop professionally over time - - how have you guys - -

RL: Okay, well - - let's see - - well my oldest brother was in the service, when he came back he started working for the postal service. My brother under him, he was going to college, and well he went - - really he was going to college trying to dodge the draft - - my young brother. He didn't want to go. He did not want to go to Vietnam. And he was, he was successful, because he went to school way out in Wisconsin where it was freezing, and it was cold, and he would try to come home every weekend and my father was like I can't afford for you to come home - - like

you can't come home like this, so then he finally transferred and he went to college in Pennsylvania to Gannon College, which I don't even think is there anymore he told me. And then, I think by that time, he was there for about a year or two, and then I think the draft had ended by that time, so then he was home, and he - - he began working at the US Immigration Service, and then he also went to the postal service. And my sister, she went to Lehman College, and she graduated. She went there straight from high school, and she graduated, and she - - and my father worked for the postal service, and she is now working for the postal service. She didn't start there, but she's working for the postal service now, yes. And myself, I - - I didn't go to college. I got married, I had children, I bounced around from, you know, different companies, different jobs, and then finally I got a job at the MTA and I've been there for the past seventeen years.

BP: You do not work for the postal service. That's where - -

RL: No I didn't. I almost did because my sister and I went for the same test, but I had - - I had just started a new job and I couldn't - - I needed to go back and complete the second half, but I really couldn't get the time off to do it so, I never - - that was it, or else I would've been in the postal service. [Laughs]

BP: Wouldn't have been able to rebel.

RL: Yes, yes. [Laughs] So - -

BP: And how about your younger brother?

RL: The younger brother, when he graduated he - - well he went to school in Buffalo. He went up to the University of Buffalo. And my younger brother was spoiled by all of us. [BP Laughs] We - - we all spoiled him and, you know, took care of him, because by that time, my parents were getting a little older and so he went, and then he came back, and he began working for - -

he did a couple of different jobs. Then he worked for the Social Services of Westchester County, and he's now living in Atlanta.

BP: So if you had to, I guess summarize or explain, why and how growing up in the Sedgwick Houses was important to you, how would you do that?

RL: It was important because of the childhood that I think I had, and it gave us a good background, and also, the religious upbringing we had. We would have to go to church every Sunday, or we would have to get up and go to Sunday school, because if you didn't, you didn't go outside. Because if you couldn't get up and go to church, go to Sunday school, you stayed in the house. So we got up, and we went to church every Sunday, and it was a chore then, but I appreciate it now, and it gave - - it gave me a solid background in order to raise my children. So it was, it was a very good - - and I was very happy when I moved out to Queens that first neighborhood I lived in, I felt like I had the community there that I had when I grew up, and that was good for my kids when they were first coming up.

BP: So is there anything that you think that's missing from communities in the Bronx that - -

RL: It may be there now and maybe I don't know it because I don't - - I'm not really involved in it, and I don't live in the projects, but - - I guess they just need more of a sense - - people need to be more open to help from other people about their children. They're not open to it. They don't want you to say anything to their kids, you know, or they, they come and they yell at you about - - don't say anything to my child, you come to me, you don't say anything to them, and back then it wasn't like that, and the kids are not taught enough respect of their elders. Elders period. It doesn't have to be an elderly person. They just are not taught to respect.

BP: And you felt that that was - -

RL: We were yes, definitely. We were taught respect. There was - - you could not, you couldn't - - the way they curse in the street now. You wouldn't do it because you felt somebody will hear you that knows your parents, and will tell you the parents - - tell your parents I heard her cursing, and your parents - - I don't know. Back then people didn't really lie about, if they were coming to tell your parents something about you. They weren't lying. They weren't lying or trying to get kids in trouble. They weren't lying so, you wouldn't, you wouldn't do things like that, and if you did. If they caught you doing something, you better stop, because they'll tell you, you better stop, if you don't want me to tell your mother. You know, you would stop. Even the people, the store owners, you know, because kids back then, you know, everybody tried to swipe a piece of candy, or something out of the store, and sometimes they would tell your parents, and sometimes they would say, you know, I know your mother, you know, so you couldn't, you couldn't get away with stuff like that.

BP: Alright so you see a difference - - and there's a difference too.

RL: Yes, you, the store, they don't want to say anything to these kids now - - they're afraid they'll shoot them, or something. It's - - it's terrible. You know what, I hear the way they talk on - - on the subway, on the bus, the young kids and I want to say something, and I'm like they'll either - - they might - - they'll curse you out, or you don't know what they might do. You really don't know. I do remember one incident on the - - I was on the subway, and it was two young [Sirens] kids, because a lot of young kids travel by train by themselves now, and they were pretty young. They were maybe about ten, ten and eight or something like that. Young girl and a young boy, and they were having this conversation. They were friends and they were having this conversation. I forgot - - I wish I could remember what it was about, but they were just going back and forth and - - a man standing there on the door, he said something to them. He said, you

know, why, why do you want to talk to her like that, or why do you all want to talk to each other like that, aren't you supposed to be friends. And I think the girl said, she said, are you a cop. And he said, no, I'm not a cop, but you know, you shouldn't talk to each other like that, and I was really surprised at - - they were young, and I mean they were well - - I guess they were well behaved, but it's just the way that they talk. Now, those seemed to be nice kids, but they - - just the way that they talk now is just too, it's too free, and, and they just say things. I guess because they get to watch too much also. I'm not going to say TV programs make kids bad, but you get to watch too much that you shouldn't watch. There were things that we just couldn't watch, or things come on at times where I guess it's hard to monitor, you know, for your family if a parent is working, so things come on all different kinds of day, so you don't know what the kids are watching. You don't know what they're watching. And they pick up that stuff. So it's, it's a little hard. I have a grandson, and I'm always watching what he watches. You know, I was just saying the other day because I don't know why I didn't think about it, and I said you know, my daughter has to put the child guard on the cable box. I mean not that he does anything, but like, when he's in his room by himself, but the child guard on, make sure that he can't get to certain channels. He doesn't need to see certain things. He just doesn't need to see it, you know, and I - - I'm always reminding her about speaking in front of - - they - - people speak in front of kids sometimes when they shouldn't. We used to have to leave the room, or you don't need to be around when grown folks are talking. Leave the room. What are you doing here? What do you want? Leave the room. They don't do that with children now, so children hear a lot, and they can't help but act it out, or project it out in the street, because they hear it all around them.

BP: Well, do you have anything else you'd like to add about your experience living in Sedgwick, or how things have changed over time, your family structure, and - -

RL: Well I guess things have changed. I guess it was a more free time. You used to be able to do a lot more things. We used be able - - we used to like - - the projects were on the edge of the Washington Bridge into Manhattan, and we used to walk over that bridge all the time because we didn't have bus fare. We wanted to save our bus fare, so we could buy something to eat, so we would walk back and forth across that bridge. I was always afraid, but I had to do it with my - - everybody else though. We would walk back and forth across that bridge all the time into - -

BP: And it would, it would leave you in Harlem - - in - -

RL: In Washington Heights.

BP: Right, right.

RL: And that - - there was a big shopping area in Washington Heights also, and now that you bring me back to that, now that was a time where there was a very nice department store over there. It was called Wertheimer's. It was like an upscale department store, and back then when I was younger, I felt like if you didn't - - you couldn't go in there, or you would be looked at funny, you know, when you came in that store, and I was so glad when it came to a point where I could just go in there and feel comfortable, but there were a lot of times when I walked in there, and I never felt comfortable.

BP: What would make you feel uncomfortable?

RL: It was more of an upscale store. It was just the way they would look at you. It was just the way they would look at you, and make you feel.

BP: Was there - - were there ever instances in stores where black people couldn't try on - - you know, clothes or shoes, or things like that? Did that exist? Or - -

RL: I can't remember coming across that. That I don't remember that happening to me. That I don't, no.

BP: Well, thank you.

RL: Okay.

BP: This is, this is very good, and very helpful. If there's anything else you'd like to add or - -

RL: Probably so, and I'll probably think about it when I get home, so I'm going to right it down

[Laughs] and I'll send it to you.

BP: Alright, well thank you very much Mrs. Lawrence.

RL: Okay.

BP: I appreciate it. I'm going to turn this off now.

RL: Okay. Thank you. Well, I don't know if I gave you - -

[END OF INTERVIEW]