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Lewis, Doreen

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Transcriber: Connor Murphy

Tape 1, Side A

Mark Naison (MN): Is the 121st interview of the Bronx African-American History Project, taking place July 20th at Fordham University. We're here with Doreen and Pamela Lewis, and this is the first of many interviews which will take place about the Edenwald Houses, the largest public housing complex in the North Bronx. To begin with, Doreen, tell us a little bit about your family background and how they came to New York.

Doreen Lewis (DL): Ok, my mother is from Abingdon, Virginia, and my father is from Grassy Creek, North Carolina.

MN: How did they end up coming to New York City?

DL: Well my dad's family migrated from North Carolina, which was - - well it is Indian reservation territory which became depleted, there was no action at all on the land, so they migrated over to West Virginia, which is a coal mining state, and he didn't want that kind of work. So he himself, after being released from World War II, which he served, they came here to the Bronx, my dad.

MN: Was your father from the Lumbee Indian - -

DL: - - Cherokee.

MN: Cherokee. And where did he meet your mother?

DL: In Abington, Virginia.

MN: Now, was she also Indian, or was she - -

DL: - - She is - - there is a mixture of African-American, back in those days, they were called Colored, white, and my mom's not sure what that heritage is, and also Indian.

MN: Which army did your father fight in? Did he fight in the - - with African-Americans, or was he in the regular segregated army.

DL: OK, prior to him - - he left North Carolina, back in that time I was told that there were this camp called CC camp. And he ran from the reservation and joined, and joined as a Colored person.

MN: So he joined as a Colored person.

DL: And from then on, took himself, and referred to himself - -

MN: - - He identified as Colored, not Indian, through his entire life.

DL: For his whole life.

MN: We've interviewed somebody from the Paterson Houses named Ronald Carson, whose family was Indian, identified as light skinned Colored, and - - but later, re-identified as Indian. Did that ever happen with your father or any of his relatives?

DL: Oh yes. Most definitely. But with him - - Indians were looked upon - - they were worse treated, according to my father, than a Colored man. And if he had to choose between being Colored or Indian, he chose to be a Colored man back in the 50s, the 60s, and the 70s. He died in 1972. And in the later 60s, they began to refer to the American Indian as the Native American, and there began some recognition. And as he became sick, we can - - I have pictures where you can see, he began to look, act, and took on that Indian character, whatever that might be, as opposed to in the years I grew up as a young child. I only saw him as a Colored man.

MN: So his identity went through several transformations.

DL: Yes.

MN: So your parents met and they - - did they marry in the South or in New York?

DL: Yes - - no, in the South, Abingdon, Virginia. Which is, from what I understand, the tail of the beginning - - not the tail, the very beginning of what they refer to as the Appalachian Mountains. Now, the way I've been told that story is that during the Civil War, the Indians were already pushed back into the mountains, and that's where originally - - my mom's mountain was called King's Mountains, in Abingdon. There's two, Abington and Abingdon. But a lot of the whites, as well as the African-Americans, Blacks, Coloreds, Negroes, whatever they refer to, ran to the mountain, and all of them migrated up in there. And there's a lot of mixture of us.

MN: So, when your family moved to New York City they identified as Colored. Now what was their - - did they have a church affiliation?

DL: My mother - - dad's people were Baptist, or Methodist, and that thing. My mom's people were Baptist and Methodist, and when she came here, I don't know what her reasons were, but she went over into the Catholicism.

MN: So were you raised - -

DL: - - I was raised Catholic.

MN: You were raised Catholic, ok. Now, your parents, when they moved to New York, was their first place of residence in the Bronx?

DL: Yes.

MN: Do you know how they found the Bronx? Did they know people who were in that -

-

DL: There was an older couple, that I remember my mom speaking about, Otis and Margaret. And they are somehow related, or we're talking about this mountain [Laughs], lived - -

MN: - - Abington.

DL: Abingdon, right. And all everybody - - they were up here. And from what I understand they either visited and liked it, or whatever, but the first stop was right here in the Bronx.

MN: Where was - - you said their first place was a room.

DL: Their room. They only had rooms. As far as I know.

MN: This was furnished rooms.

DL: Furnished rooms. And they were share the kitchenette and the bathroom.

MN: And what street?

DL: Brook Avenue, around 168th, 167th, right around Boston and Brook.

MN: That area. Have they talked about that neighborhood with you at all, and what it was like living there?

DL: Mama would say those were some stomping good times.

MN: Stomping good times!

DL: There was party time, they went to the - - was is it the Boston Ball - - the Boston Road Ballroom.

MN: The Boston Road Ballroom. Did they mention any - - did they mention Club 845?

DL: No, but the Savoy, the Savoy Manor.

MN: So they went to Harlem.

DL: They traveled a lot in Harlem.

MN: So they spent a lot of time in Harlem, they went to the Boston - - did they mention the Hunts Point Palace at all?

DL: No.

MN: Ok, so the Boston Road Ballroom is the one place from there. Now, where - - how long did they live in that particular room? Did they move around?

DL: Well I believe they came after he - - 45', he was released from the army, or thereabout, so I would say they were definitely here by 1948, if not sooner. And they lived in that area, but they did go back and forth to - - they lived in Niagra Falls.

MN: Were there other relatives in Niagra Falls?

DL: Well this couple, this older couple who they seemed to - - Otis and Margaret, somehow went up there. Oh, and there were Indians up that way, and they wanted my dad to see how they lived in the area, up in New York State or in Canada. Because he had this terrible feeling about himself as an Indian, and what America made him feel like being an Indian. And I believe they wanted him to see that it was exactly that - -

MN: So this was a very powerful - - he had a powerful sense of - -

DL: - - Low self-esteem.

MN: - - Low self-esteem.

DL: Being an Indian. When we - - when my sister and I - - now over the years, relatives would tell us that we had a - - we were American Indian. And growing up we began to see, well, we had the characteristics as Indians did, and definitely his sisters did and their children. So we would question it, and he would tell us, never tell anyone that you are Indian, never. And when my sister and I were filling out our social security because we were - - working papers, they began that summer youth program in my era. We went to

go put down - - you know they had American Indian down, and white, black, I think they referred to it Colored, Negro, I don't know. But we were going to mark it off and he got very angry and told us never, and this was in the later 60s. So he had a real problem with it.

MN: Were there many other members of your family in New York City?

DL: All his family and my mom's family stayed in the South. Their children came up. Their siblings' children came up, and he helped them get on their feet.

MN: What sort of work did your father do after he left the service?

DL: The one job that I do know that he had - - what he did prior to our being born, I'm not sure, but I know he worked for Swift and Company up until the day he died, which is a butcher company. Swift and Company.

MN: Did he work in - - it was like a - - in the factory that - -

DL: - - dad would be at Hunt's Point. Swift and Company. It's like what we would - - like Petridge Farm or any of those. It was called Swift and Company. Actually he became the foreman and the union rep for the workers.

MN: So he was in the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen.

DL: Yes he was.

MN: Now, how did your parents end up in Edenwald Houses. What was the process of going from Brook Avenue to Buffalo - -

DL: - - They traveled and what have you, they were young. My mom thought she was barren. And she ended up pregnant with my older brother. And they had heard that now staying in these rooms wasn't appropriate. So someone told her - - I don't know she came to know about - - Edenwald had been just recently built. But it was for veterans.

MN: This was perceived as a whole housing complex largely for veterans.

DL: Veterans, that's what she was told, that's what we were told as I grew up.

MN: What year did your family move there?

DL: Well my brother was born January 55' and she finally got a place May of 55'.

MN: When you're family moved to Edenwald, was the population in there multiracial?

Was - -

DL: No. It was - - well, yes it was, but the majority were Italians and Irish. There were a few, a nice number of Jewish families as well. More Jewish than African-Americans or Colored.

MN: So when your family moved there it was overwhelmingly white?

DL: Yes.

MN: Was this a friendly environment for Colored or African-American family - -

DL: - - We were always treated well. We being my - - well by the white people. I don't know what kinds of things that my mother might have endured being perceived being perceived as a white woman and my dad as a Colored man, because she was very fair skinned.

MN: So your mother identified as Colored, but to anybody else - -

DL: - - would still see her as a white woman.

MN: - - would see her as a white woman. Was this something that - - and your father would always be identified as Colored.

DL: So he said he was Colored, period.

MN: Let's - - if people saw them walking down the street today, would they think they were a mixed couple, or would think they were like Puerto Rican?

DL: No, definitely, you would see it. As he got older - - my younger years as a child, color wasn't really even discussed in our family. I only began to - - well that's a whole crazy on it's own.

MN: No, that's important because we're dealing - - there's a lot - -

DL: Color was not discussed. I didn't know me to be black, white, Indian, or anything. Not until we got older. And then as we, the children, their children, began to discuss color. And at that time, the Civil Rights movement was booming, and one time we were in Harlem, and we were afraid for mommy to be seen in the car that we were driving, so we told her to duck, because that was - - you know say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud. And there was a lot of anger.

MN: The late 60s.

DL: Right, a lot of anger towards the white man for whatever was happening before. So, but that awareness of color differences took place as we approached our teenage years. As children, there was no - - I didn't see my dad as white, black or otherwise.

MN: Now what neighbors? Was this - -

DL: - - well they thought my mother was a beautiful white woman. She never said she was or she wasn't. She just, she referred to herself as a - - they were black as far as they were concerned. I'm black, I speak, act, and think black. That's all I can - -

MN: Now you went to a Catholic church?

DL: Yes.

MN: And what parish was it?

DL: Our Lady of Grace on 226th and Bronxville.

MN: Was that a predominantly white parish?

DL: Yes, most definitely. There was only a handful of blacks.

MN: What are your earliest memories of Edenwald as a child, which would I guess be late 50s, early 60s?

DL: Fun, fun. It was a very clean environment, a very, very clean. For the most part, we stayed with the few black families when we went out to play. We were with the other African-American, Colored children. But there were white children that played with us as well.

MN: So you had - - there was - -

DL: - - the Burnbaums is one particular family, I fully loved them. The Giacchi's was an Italian family that we played with them. A little guy named Douglas Vasquez was my best friend. I loved him, he loved me, we were going to get married. [Laughs]

MN: So this is a predominantly white, but - -

DL: - - later 50s, early 60s, mid 60s, and then it began to drastically change.

MN: Right, was - - and it was clean, it was safe.

DL: - - very safe.

DL: Till the day my mother left that apartment, which was in 2001, she never locked her door. Edenwald Projects. And especially - - the environment got bad. If I said ma I'm coming and I didn't have a key or whatever, that door would remain open till whatever I came in - - [Crosstalk] [Inaudible].

MN: Did people look out for each other?

DL: Yes.

MN: And how was - - everybody watched everybody's kids?

DL: There was a camaraderie amongst everybody. Whites, blacks, and otherwise. Now I have to say that - - we have pictures that our friends there might be a speck or two of whites in there because the blacks tend to stay to themselves. Whether it was - - I don't recall one saying don't play with them, I never recall anybody saying come away. There was a few little - - [Crosstalk] [Inaudible].

MN: Did you ever hear slurs being thrown around?

DL: Not in - - when that began was when we were teenagers, my sisters and myself. And it came from the blacks, not from the - - the other Colored people were getting - - black on black jealousy.

MN: But you weren't being called nigger, there wasn't spic, kyke, guinea, none of that sort of stuff?

DL: No.

MN: Were there gangs in Edenwald?

DL: When I - - as I - - yes. There was the Intercrime. It was the biggest, terriblest, notorious gang that I ever - - as far - - maybe in my mind - - and the Spades, the Black Spades.

MN: Now this was later. This was the 60s.

DL: Yes.

MN: In the 50s or early 60s there wasn't - -

DL: No. If there were I didn't know about it, but I was a young child.

MN: Describe the physical environment of Edenwald in terms of what was - - where it was, what else was there, because I guess it was an area that wasn't that settled.

DL: Right, it was just new homes being built up. It was in the middle of private homes being built or having been built around about the same time that Edenwald itself was. Literally there were no streets. When I remember walking from what we called Lacunia to White Plains in my younger years, and there were no streets.

MN: No streets?

DL: No streets, there were no pavings, you understand what I'm saying? There was grass and a house, literally.

MN: And were any of the roads unpaved in the surrounding - -

DL: Yes, this gravel road and that kind of thing. There were no cars [Laughs]. There were no cars. This is the North-East Bronx, this is the furthest portion of - - as you can go. We're just a few blocks away and you're in Mount Vernon.

MN: Right, so there weren't many cars when you were growing up?

DL: Not many cars at all. And on Sunday forget about it. You can literally lay in the street. We played in the street, which is the main street now. We played everything that you can imagine in the street. We would go - - this is how few cars there were. There is a street from 228th to 229th, very steep street, very long street, I'm not good with math as you are, figure out what that distance is from 228th - - and we would just - - this is kids, we were like the Little Rascals, and we would get a cardboard box and lay belly down and go zip down that street and fly into the - - I mean down the - - we would go down the sidewalk. Now by this time there is a sidewalk. But that cardboard box would go flying into the street, and you didn't never have to worry about a car coming and crashing because there were no cars. [Laughs]

MN: Now how did your father get to work?

DL: He would walk to White Plains Road, the number two line.

MN: So there was a subway.

DL: The subway was up.

MN: And what about busses?

DL: And the el train.

MN: And the el train. So it was mostly people took subways to work.

DL: Right. I don't think the busses came about - - in fact they didn't because I do recall we went to - - I went to P.S. 21, which is also off of White Plains and 226th, 225th. And even in there, there was nothing but white children and up until I graduated.

MN: So you went to elementary school in a mostly white school?

DL: In elementary. Junior High it was very mixed. I can count on one hand, as big as Edenwald was, how many Hispanic people there were.

MN: And there weren't many Hispanics at all?

DL: Not at all. A few, handful. And we thought they were the most weirdest group of people you ever met.

MN: So you didn't grow up with Latin music and Latin culture?

DL: No, only rhythm and blues, Billy Holiday.

MN: What was the music that your parents listened to, when they played in the house?

DL: Well, who are they? Ella Fitzgerald, they did a lot of Mahalia Jackson because mommy and them would try to stay with the lord. But the regular ones, just like, who are they Smokey Robinson, all those, the doo-wop - -

MN: - - the doo-wop people.

DL: Yes, whoever they were.

MN: The Chantelles, - -

DL: - - All that, yes.

MN: Now did you grow up with rock and roll? Was that part of your childhood?

DL: No.

MN: It wasn't.

DL: Mostly rhythm and blues.

MN: It was mostly your parents' music.

DL: It was their music, not ours. Billy Holiday, that was a big thing in our house.

MN: Was there a lot of street corner singing in Edenwald?

DL: Every Friday till - - everybody cleaned up on Sunday, but Friday to Saturday all that
[Imitates doo-wop singing], all that.

MN: Everybody was singing.

DL: Everybody was trying to sing and trying to get a group together.

MN: Was this the white kids and the black kids?

DL: Whites, blacks, all that.

MN: Everybody was singing.

DL: On the corner.

MN: Did anybody make it, did anybody cut a record from up there?

DL: Not that I know of.

MN: So everybody was trying [Laughs] - -

DL: - - just trying, had groups, dancing, you know.

MN: Were there dances at the - - was there a community center?

DL: Yes there was. This is when we became like 10, 11, 12, 13, 14. Yes, it's called the Edenwald Community Center, and it's still there today. And they were affiliated with the P.S. 112, which is located on Shieffelin Avenue and 229th Street, where my brother - - they had the PAI, and also the Cadets in there. And they did any kind of basketball or that kind of activity.

MN: So you had a lot of organized activity for kids?

DL: Oh yes, most definitely.

MN: So there was a lot of supervised activity for kids, in the schools, in the community centers.

DL: Yes, after school, yes.

MN: Did you go to the after school centers at the local public school?

DL: Well mommy was a stay home mom, and - - which was typical for us.

MN: Now were most of the families two parent families in Edenwald?

DL: Yes, and if there wasn't it was because - - blacks, whites, and others, it - - a lot of the fathers died early, such as mine's did. But no - -

MN: So the fathers stayed but some of them died at a young age.

DL: The African-American families, they did. But I didn't know anybody - - every family had a father. Literally, every family had a father, it wasn't a single parent house - -

MN: - - now, did the fathers police the environment? Was this a place where, if teenage guys who were tough deferred to the older men?

DL: When I was coming up, no matter how tough the gangs began, if you saw a male or female adult, everybody stopped their nonsense. It was a teenage thing, it was a child thing. Cussing and any of that kind of thing went down, trying to be cool.

MN: There was respect.

DL: There was respect for your elders, period, because you didn't know who knew your mother, and your mother would kill you when got - - if it would be told.

MN: So this sounds very much like what you read about in the Patterson Houses. Two parent families, everybody looking out for one another, a lot of services for the kids and activities.

DL: Right.

MN: So you grew up feeling - - you look back on your childhood with a lot of good feelings?

DL: For the most part, until we became teenagers and there was that other issue of - -

MN: - - Which we'll talk - -

DL: - - right. But as a child, yes.

MN: So you're - - what about elementary school? How were the teachers in the schools you were in?

DL: Now, there was some - - there was what appeared to be discrimination or we - - this may sound weird, and I can't really say I've spoken with anybody that - - we were fair skinned children, and back then, most of the African-Americans that I met were of color, brown and dark. And so we stood out. And there were not very many Hispanics. So they knew we weren't Hispanic. And they assume my mom was white, my dad was black, and that was it. Nobody - - so we didn't get any kind of mistreatment. Mother was very much involved in our lives. If anybody would have even messed with us, and once or twice teachers tried to get a little - - and she went over there and gave them a piece of her mind and [Inaudible] so they never - - but there were teachers who would do this kind of thing

to the darker kids. I remember seeing that. And the darker children would always sit in the back.

MN: They pulled them by their shirts?

DL: Not pull so much as like, just that like, get over there. Whether they were smart or not. And we did the tracking in my time.

MN: Ok, so the classes were tracked by ability.

DL: Yes. 1-1 was the smartest, [Crosstalk] 1-5 was the dumbest.

MN: And were you and your siblings generally in the higher tracks?

DL: Yes. And it wasn't necessarily because we were all that bright, it was because we were good and we were fair skinned. I say that specifically for myself. I know I was passing every time just because I was a nice, decent little girl, and they were always commenting on how well my mother dressed - - because we were quote-un-quote well off people who came down to the projects. My dad was a butcher, he made good money. It was like meat on the table, bills was paid, Christmases was wonderful, we went to school with lovely clothes. So it wasn't typical of the Colored people.

MN: So there were many other kids who were black [Crosstalk] [Inaudible] who came from poorer families - -

DL: - - and they had welfare, and they had the welfare lines during those days.

MN: Really?

DL: Yes.

MN: And these were people not in Edenwald?

DL: They lived in Edenwald, these Colored - - whose not from Edenwald?

MN: You're saying there were black families on welfare in Edenwald?

DL: In Edenwald, yes.

MN: But there was a stigma attached to welfare?

DL: Right. I mean, it was - - they would sit on the - - they would be on the welfare line, that's when they would have the - - there's jokes about it today, government cheese and big thick can of peanut butter and Spam in the can, that kind of thing. If you had a Spam - - if you ate Spam, it was an indication that you were on welfare. And I remember them, but we didn't.

MN: When did you first start being aware of race, yourself as an individual?

DL: Well, it was approaching teenage years. And I told you my dad - - we went to fill out our - - by the time we were - - I was - - I did everything with my older sister, so I really wasn't supposed to be filling out a - -

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

DL: Junior high, because junior high school started in [Crosstalk] [Inaudible] - -

MN: - - And which junior high school did you go to?

DL: John Phillip Sousa.

MN: And where was that located, what street?

DL: That's the one on - - is that Baychester?

Pamela Lewis (PL): Baychester.

DL: Baychester, and Edenwald - - John Phillip Sousa is here, Edenwald is here, and right up across the street is Cardinal Spellman.

MN: Ok, and when was Cardinal Spellman built?

DL: Round about - - I guess mid-60s, I believe. I'm not sure.

MN: So in junior high you were filling out neighborhood youth core forms, and there were boxes - -

DL: And we were going to put in all - - by this time, we had relatives that came. As I said, my father and mother's siblings stayed in the South. Their children came. And they talked about our - - my mom's birth certificate literally had white mother - - has her parents as being white, just white, handwritten white. And when she went to marry my father, she was 17, so her parents had to sign for her. And the story goes is that when they saw my mom marrying my father they marked it out, and you can see where its marked out, Colored, Colored, and her Colored.

MN: And this is in Abington where they were more flexible. In another part of the state they wouldn't have let them get married.

DL: At all.

MN: Because there was this whole - -

DL: But they said if you going to marry a man of color, or a black man, then you're Colored too.

MN: And she identified with Colored.

DL: And so she says she's black. I have friends who met my mom - - well actually heard her speak, and they're so thrown off when they see her because, speaking to her, you would see her as an African-American, you can hear her as an African-American woman, but when you see her, you're like, well, the face and the color didn't never match.

MN: Have you read this book The Color of Water by James McBride?

PL: [Inaudible]

MN: Because his mother was a Jewish woman who married a black man, was kicked out of her family, and lived as a black woman.

DL: Well she wasn't really kicked out, but there was - - they left Abingdon and West Virginia, and came there and they didn't go back. And not many of them came.

MN: What about in junior high school? Was there starting to be racial tension among the kids?

DL: Yes.

MN: And how did that manifest itself?

DL: Well, at that time, there was this - - with civil rights, and say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud, everybody went around with the black power hand thing, and so Colored - -

MN: So you were born in 1957, so this is like - - you're in junior high in 68' - -

DL: - - And so, my sister was - - I've always been a healthy helping individual whereas she grew up slender and pretty and long hair, and quite naturally all the boys, whites, blacks, and otherwise was very attracted to her, so there became a lot of hostility and I just got the backlashes of that because I was with her. And a lot of it had to do with the fact that she was light skinned, as opposed to - - now by this time we're - - as far as we're concerning, we speak, act, think black. We're black. Nobody couldn't tell me - - no one still can't tell me I'm not black. So she got a lot of that, a lot of that. And then when my - - when they would approach - - I mean they literally would be like little riots. They would follow us from school to home, taunting her, pushing her, calling her all kinds of names.

MN: Now this was girls or boys?

DL: Girls.

MN: These were black girls.

DL: Yes, with the darker skin.

MN: Darker skin - -

DL: - - [Inaudible].

MN: And this was a school where there weren't many Puerto Ricans yet?

DL: Not at all, up until - - [Crosstalk] the Puerto Ricans didn't really - - ok, in the 70s, early 70s, they said that there was a lot of burning out in the South Bronx and a lot of people from the South Bronx came. And I think that was the turn on how the environment went down and it brought a whole new element of things going on, and why I don't know.

MN: You actually have - - this is in junior high, people following you and your sister home - -

DL: - - taunting her - -

MN: - - taunting her.

DL: - - screaming at her - -

MN: - - What were some of the things they were screaming?

DL: Calling her whores and saying that she done f'ed that mother - - she was a young girl, she didn't do any of these things. It was just jealousy, and they used to have what they call - - what kind of book was that called? It was - - you remember that book? There was a book that would go around. Darn, I wish I could - -

PL: Slam book?

DL: Yes, a slang book or something like that.

PL: Slam book.

DL: Something like - - well I don't think - -

PL: - - I just bought one for one of my students.

MN: A slam book.

DL: No. You saying slam, but it was another term, but what it did would go around and they would say, write whatever they felt like writing and of course if you got caught with something like that you'd be suspended or expelled. But, they would just write horrible things about her, but it had nothing to do with her behavior. It had to do with her being a very pretty, light skinned black, as far as they were concerned. Literally one girl even went up to the - - my mother was screaming why are you doing this to my daughter. And she said because you think you're daughter is cute. Not that her daughter thought she was cute, but because my mom thought she was cute. They treated us well, my parents.

MN: So this must have been a - -

DL: - - traumatizing.

MN: [Crosstalk] - - a traumatizing experience.

DL: Yes it was.

MN: Now - -

DL: It told us to fight early. [Laughs]

MN: So, fight literally.

DL: Literally fight.

MN: So you had a fist fight.

DL: Physically fight. This is - - now this is something I'm not to proud of this, but - - [Laughs] I'm really not, but my mom, as I say, we would lovingly, we referred to as the hillbilly. She's from the tip of the Appalachian Mountains. And she wasn't one to mesh much of anything. Don't mess with her or her children. So when this continued to

happen, like the third or fourth time, we were taught keep to yourself, don't fight ladies, you know, don't fight. We didn't have - - we weren't even allowed to wear dresses, I mean pants during back in those days. So you know you keep your legs crossed, dress down, all that lovely stuff. We were catholic, holy, holy thou stuff, so but when this continued to happen, she said, you know what - - she started teaching my sister Debbie to fight. And because I was right up under Debbie all the time, I was there too. She said you would bite, scratch, kick, pull hair, do whatever you got to do. And if they fight one, you fight them all. And there was four girls. And so when [Laughs] - - when these things happened, and they did, she would send us all out there, and she would tell us to kick their you know what, and we would just act like a bunch of little wild Indians, and then they started calling us those little wild Davis girls. But it only happened 2 or 3 times, they didn't bother us - - [Crosstalk] [Inaudible]

MN: - - ok, so you had to go crazy in order to get respect?

DL: Yes.

MN: And there were four girls.

DL: Four of us.

MN: The four Davis girls.

DL: [Inaudible] You know what, we still have - - we still a legend today [Laughter].

MN: Now did all of you end up doing pretty well in school?

DL: Yes. I did - - I went the furthest though. But each of us finished high school, and each of us have gotten some portion into college, but I'm the only one - -

MN: - - who has a four year degree.

DL: Actually I have my Masters.

MN: You have your Masters, ok. So, how did you think about - - this is going on. How did the black power movement affect your conception of yourself and where you saw your place in American society?

DL: I became very Africa-centric. I mean I had the afro, the whole nine yards. I just went all there.

MN: You got to see pictures. We got to get - -

PL: I have pictures but - - [Crosstalk] [Inaudible]

DL: - - well not of that. I have the afro. I'm like - - it was - - ok, but now, as a young child, we saw - - we were afraid for mommy. We were in Harlem. My cousin came up and we went driving around and whatever, but we actually had one of the aunts on dad's side live to Espegard Gardens [SP] down in Harlem, so she had - - we went to visit her, and he had the roof off, what is that called? Those cars.

MN: The convertible.

DL: There you go. And she was in the car and we were just like duck, because they were looking. It was very hostile.

MN: I was part of a black family myself because I was involved with a black woman and my family kicked me out and so I was in Harlem. It was tense. It was - -

DL: - - there was a lot of hostility. So we said hide mom, and she ducked, literally. I mean, we were like - - because they were like, if you stopped at a sign, [Crosstalk] they were looking at you and seeing this - - she looked white. So, you know. There's mixture in her but she didn't look that way.

MN: Now, was there any civil rights activity that you recall in the Bronx? Any demonstrations, marches, any things going on at the school? Was anybody trying to teach black history?

DL: In junior high school, they did, but we had a - - what is that teacher's name? There - - you know back in our times when - - I never saw a black teacher up until I got to junior high school. And thinking about that, I think that's kind of - - not to say that there weren't - - and then the ones that were teachers, they were like the shop teacher, or the music teacher, art teacher, and they had a - - I can think of that - - if my sister who did the fight was here, she would let you know, because they did. They did a lot of - - I remember there was a lot of African - - some dancing and music. It was all of a sudden, everything was exposed and - -

MN: - - And this happened pretty quickly?

DL: Really fast, yes.

MN: And it was happening in your junior high?

DL: Yes.

MN: Was there any counter-reaction from the whites to the black consciousness?

DL: A lot of whites began to move out.

MN: So there was a sense - -

DL: - - it changed dramatically, quickly - -

MN: In the late 60s or the 70s?

DL: I would say early 70s, mid-70s. Whereas when I came up, there was predominantly white. And then by the time - - I would say 71', 72', and definitely by 75', there was

predominantly blacks. But there still was a nice handful of black - - whites that were there, but they were older.

MN: They were older.

DL: Yes. But their children grew up and left.

MN: In junior high school, were any - - were you close friends with any white kids?

DL: In junior high? I was the nerd in the family. I was always with the white kids [Laughs]. All the time.

MN: So you were in the - -

DL: - - I did the music. I was more - - I played instruments and - -

MN: - - What instruments did you play?

DL: The violin and the flute.

MN: And did they have - -

DL: - - Debbie did the modern dance.

MN: In junior high, did they have a good music program?

DL: Yes. I was pretty good too.

MN: Did they have a band or an orchestra or both?

DL: Both.

MN: And were you allowed to take home instruments?

DL: Yes we were.

MN: So you were part of that whole music education phenomenon?

DL: Yes.

MN: Do you still do some of the music that you did at that time?

DL: No, but whenever - - no, no. But, Pam has been exposed to it too. And I like to say, you know you have - - she's got a musical ear and I like to think that she got that from me. [Inaudible].

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

DL: Evander Childs.

MN: Evander Childs.

DL: I did all the CUNY things. She calls me - - she says I had a CUNY education. She had a private one [Laughs].

MN: So what was Evander like when you went there?

DL: Predominantly white.

MN: It was predominantly white even in the 70s?

DL: Right.

MN: Was it considered a good school at that time?

DL: I thought so. There wasn't any trouble. I mean, that gang thing was - - it was - - the school was well policed, put it like that, well secured. Because that was always an outside factor. It wasn't something that walked in the school.

MN: You mentioned Intercrime. When did that start, when you were in junior high or in high school?

DL: Junior high.

MN: And this was - - who were they - - who was Intercrime?

DL: This guy named Joe Crack and Ricky Ferguson. And I understand Joe Crack, lord have mercy - - now this might pay everybody that knows him - - well whatever, it's the truth, I understand he's from - - in the witness protection program because he did so

much. He did so much. He terrorized so many people. And anyone that grew up in that era knows who I'm speaking of. His name is Joe Crack.

MN: And he was one of the founders of this gang?

DL: Yes. Well, as far as - - I don't really know if he was the founder or not. I don't know how long it existed prior to my becoming aware of that. You know, once you become - -

MN: - - now what did they do?

DL: They went around terrorizing people.

MN: Give me an example of terrorizing somebody.

DL: Ok, if you were to come in the building, and they - - if you wanted to come in your building, alright - - and we lived in the short building. Edenwald has 14 story tall buildings and also 3 story short buildings. We lived in the short building. The short buildings had the larger apartments for the larger families. If they were in there and it so happened that they tried to use our building as one of their hang spots, you couldn't come in. They would lock you out and you better not say anything.

MN: At this point, the fathers couldn't - -

DL: My father came down and told Joe Crack under no - - one time I came in the building and there was - - they really would encourage - - there was drugs involved - - they would try to get the younger boys. My brother got caught up into being a part of whatever they did. You know, I stayed clear of that. But, there was drugs involved, fighting, then there was rival gangs, which was the Black Spades, which came out of Gun Hill projects I understand.

MN: So the Black Spades - - Intercime was mainly Edenwald - -

DL: - - Edenwald, right.

MN: - - and then the Black Spades - -

DL: - - was Gun Hill.

MN: - - Gun Hill. But - -

DL: - - But I understand they extended their territory.

MN: Right.

DL: Especially the Black Spades.

MN: When was the first time you became aware of heroin?

DL: In the later 60s, 70s. When the boys came home from Vietnam.

MN: How did you become aware of Vietnam and how did it affect you?

DL: At that time my father became sick with his cancer, kidney cancer. And he was in and out of the Veterans Hospital. So when we would go visit him, we would see the guys come back either strung out on drugs, half bodies, limbs, the whole nine yards. I saw it first face.

MN: Right, when you were visiting. What about kids - - were kids from Edenwald getting drafted?

DL: Yes. A lot of them didn't come back.

MN: And didn't come back.

DL: Or came back on drugs.

MN: So that was a factor that really - -

DL: And you would - - Laconia would be from - - I told you Laconia runs from 225th to 231st, 230th, and from 225th - - 225th was where, you asked earlier about stores. The main stores would be right there on 225th Street to about 227th. They would just be lined up there, nodding.

MN: Really? And what year was this?

DL: This was like 68', 69', 70', 71'.

MN: And it was that visible?

DL: Oh yes.

MN: So it took a whole generation of young men out of commission.

DL: Exactly, yes.

MN: What is something you and your friends talked about?

DL: Well we were quite afraid of them, but they didn't bother anybody. They were strung out on drugs.

MN: Did you ever go to any anti-war demonstrations?

DL: No, no.

MN: Did you become political - - were you ever inclined to join a group like the Black Panthers or - -

DL: No I just became physically black. [Laughter] And then I went on to Bronx Community and we did - - you know I joined clubs up on there. The African-American Society's Club and that kind of thing. Actually the first hip-hop song, [Sings] the hip, the hop, the hippy to the hippy - -

MN: The Sugar Hill - -

DL: - - We were there, Pam's father and I, while they recorded it on, on Bronx Community's campus.

MN: Really?

DL: Yes.

MN: Ok, so you were in that original hip hop scene, which we'll talk about. I didn't realize you were original hip hopper.

DL: There you go. Well, the rap, the first rap kind of thing.

MN: The T Connection and all that?

DL: Yes.

MN: So were you involved in any clubs or activities when you were in - -

DL: - - college.

MN: - - what about high school at Evander?

DL: No, I just - - I was an accounting major- - I told you I was a nerd in the family. I was an accounting major and music was my minor.

MN: Was Edenwald dangerous when you were at Evander?

DL: Yes.

MN: And you felt it?

DL: Yes.

MN: Like you were scared to come home late at night?

DL: [Inaudible].

MN: If there was a moment when you started feeling fear, sort of in a timeline. When would you say it was? Junior high, high school?

DL: It was, I would say junior high school. That's when it became a big - - this black power push came and the African-Americans, we became, they became - - that's why pretty much really went with that violent towards anybody white or other than that looked like them. Very violent.

MN: So there was a lot of - - the whites became - - were targets oh violence - -

DL: - - all the time, just because.

MN: - - in Edenwald?

DL: In Edenwald.

MN: And it was something you saw?

DL: And teachers as well. No respect, disrespecting - - [Crosstalk]

MN: So this also filtered into the school in terms of defiance and rage in the school?

DL: All in the school, yes. And that happened in junior high. But by the time I got over to high school, Evander was a lot different. There was - - I said it was well policed but there still was a lot of white children in that school, more so than African-Americans because all around, at that time, that whole area was nothing but white people.

MN: Did the Italians - - were the Italian kids tough kids? Did they fight back?

DL: [Inaudible] No, no. No, I always got the sense that they were terrorized.

MN: That the Italian kids were terrorized by the black kids?

DL: By the way the black kids acted , yes. I never saw anyone cow down to - - when this era of being violent and - - the best way I can describe it is say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud.

MN: Well this is an interesting take on it because you're saying that, to some degree, the black consciousness spilled over into a violence that turned the community in on itself.

DL: Exactly.

MN: And it led to violence that undermined academic achievement.

DL: Exactly. [Crosstalk]

MN: It was not a positive thing.

DL: It was not a positive thing. They did not take it as a positive thing.

MN: So even though it was something which gave them - -

DL: - - this freedom to be able to speak out was not done in a positive, a productive manner. It was done to - - all it did was add ignorance, poverty, stupidity. I don't know, I think poverty had a lot to do with the fact that they did not understand the freedom that they now had, to be able to speak out against injustice. It wasn't done to benefit themselves. It was done to literally hurt others because of their own low self-esteem. I can't really figure it out.

MN: Did this lead whites to try to get out when they could - -

DL: Oh they left speedily.

MN: So in other words, you think that the black consciousness contributed to white flight? Or do you think the white flight was something that was going to happen anyway?

DL: I think the violence that came from the African-Americans in the North Bronx contributed to the white flight, because it became a - - there was violence. They would riot. They were violent.

MN: They were violent towards each other, violent to anybody who wasn't black - -

DL: - - black, right.

MN: Violent to teachers - -

DL: - - even light skinned, you're uppity. You think you're white. That kind of foolishness. It was like all these years of the oppression and the anger and the low self-esteem, and had to take less and low, and had to be quite otherwise be heard or killed themselves. It was like, ok, it was now our turn to give back that same violence, and that's what they did. And I experienced - - this is, well - - as I said, my sister, being the young, beautiful one, she endured that in that junior high school era. I never endured

black on black prejudice until I became an adult, and an administrative position, and had supervisors who were from the era with - - back in the 40s, 50s, and they endured prejudice from the whites, and when they saw me, it was their action to get right back at me.

MN: So you became a surrogate for all the rage - -

DL: - - that they had, right. And I still endure it today from African-American women, who are of that era. Not anybody my age or younger.

MN: From the older generation. [Crosstalk]

DL: Yes.

MN: Now what about your - - how did your sister respond to this ultimately? Did this - -

DL: She has some issues now, my sister. She has a lot of issues because - - I'm telling you - - it was more than once we were ganged going home. Where she would be shoved and shoved down and spit at, talked at, called all kinds of horrible, sexual, promiscuous names and what have you. She's got problems. She's got rage.

MN: So this - - so you were kind of caught in between, and - -

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

Tape 1, Side B

MN: You were able to make blackness work for you.

DL: I surely did. [Laughs]

MN: But your sister - -

PL: - - [Inaudible] with that afro picture.

DL: Oh yes, I became them all - - I didn't want nobody running me down. I was nerd, I was scary. So I was like, oh mm. I talk, ask - - my mother used to say to me - - I did the - - I even really - - this is terrible, but I did this, that, and you know, whatever.

MN: You started speaking vernacular.

DL: I did ebonics. [Laughs]

MN: So you became ebonic.

DL: Oh yes.

MN: What was your mother's language like? Was it Appalacian or was it King's English?

DL: King's English. [Crosstalk]

MN: How did - -

DL: She had a southern drawl.

PL: She had the southern thing going.

DL: But she spoke well, she had very good - - my mom's very bright, very good diction and stuff.

MN: What about - -

DL: - - Pam has a southern drawl, and I think she got it from my mom.

MN: What about the cuisine at your house. What kind of cooking did your mother do?

DL: Southern. But she by trade was a chef, a cook. So she - - her father was a cook, and his father was a cook, so - -

MN: Did she do that red velvet cake?

DL: No, I did that.

MN: That was something - -

DL: - - That was me. And I took her talents with me.

MN: So, did you - - when you were started dating, did you only date black guys, or did you date white guys and others?

DL: I dated - - the first - - oh this is terrible. [Laughs] The first few - - you know they say a woman tends to - - people tend to go to - - the males go with their mom or opposite, well so I associated with Spanish men because - - but then [Laughs] - - ok, this is terrible. The first - - ok, this is horrible - - ok, the thing is, there was only a handful.

MN: Ok, of Spanish men?

DL: Yes, families. And they, when they moved in, they - - I don't - - garlic - - I understand later that it's used in the same in whatever the garlic is cooked in, which makes it a very old smell, I guess. However, as a child, it was a sickening smell to me, so the first guys that I liked were the Spanish because of the way they looked, and that would be Indian. But after getting closer, [Laughs] I couldn't deal with it no more.

MN: The garlic?

DL: [Laughs] I really had a problem with it. So [Laughs] I went to the African-American black guys. But my first love was white guy. Thugy, Thugy Velasquez. He couldn't - -

PL: - - Velasquez is Spanish.

DL: They were Italian.

PL: Velasquez is Italian?

MN: Now, at that point, did a white guy have to be tough to date a black woman in the Bronx, because you were going to catch shit?

DL: There was no interracial things going on when I was growing up. The only thing I ever saw interracial was my parents.

MN: Really, so there were no other interracial couples?

DL: No, and when we - - by the time that junior high when we were allowed to date, or we weren't allowed to date, but you still liked guys and guys liked you, you definitely - - it was a definite separation.

MN: And the same thing at Evander and Bronx Community?

DL: Right. Definite separation. And if you saw our - - [Inaudible] I remember, when I went to Bronx, seeing interracial relationship would be black men with, well not so much black men with white women, but white men with black women. There was always some kind of conversation about a negative - - you know, she thinks she's white, and look at him, he doesn't - - he's only using her and all that. And it really, pretty much, remains like that today in the circle of people that I speak with.

MN: You mean the people you work with?

DL: Yes.

MN: When did you meet your husband?

DL: At Bronx Community.

MN: At Bronx Community. And was he from the Bronx?

DL: South Bronx.

MN: He was from the South Bronx. From what neighborhood in the South Bronx?

DL: The same area, the - -

MN: The Morrisania, Boston Road - -

DL: Yes. I mean, that's just only coincidence. But I didn't know when - - his father would talk with my mom, and they hung and recall and remember, reminisce on the same

places that they - - those were the good old days because there was good food, liquor and drinking. It was party time.

MN: Even though you didn't feel safe in Edenwald, was this - - you didn't say, I've got to get out of the Bronx, I've got to get out of - -

DL: Strangely enough, ok - - the junior high, high school years, I evolved into this strong black individual, so those were nerdy, scary years, and our environment did contribute to that, but by the time I was in high school, college, I had become this militant myself, and I was very much Afro-centric. I was very much involved in the rights of black people and all that wonderful stuff. Because Pam is militant today and she doesn't realize that she got it from me because she thinks that I'm prejudice but I'm not. [MN Laughs] She thinks I'm prejudiced against blacks, not - - she doesn't even see me as seeing myself as black. She's sees me seeing myself as other. [Laughs] Because she's the black one in the family. In fact, she thinks she's the only black one in the family, but that's another story.

PL: And Ricky.

DL: And Ricky, yes. So we - -

MN: - - But as you adopted this identity you felt safer.

DL: Yes, and better accepted.

MN: And better accepted. So with the hair, and the dress.

DL: From African-Americans.

MN: Right, African-Americans now claimed you because of your body language, your dress, your appearance.

DL: My actions, right.

MN: Your accent, and actions. So you were starting to feel comfortable in this environment?

DL: Yes. And then - - now, we still. I haven't been in Edenwald for many years, so to speak, to really be with the people and deal, but I worked in Edenwald up until like twelve years ago. So I never really left that environment.

MN: Now when was your first job? The neighborhood youth core?

DL: Yes.

MN: And that was in Edenwald?

DL: Yes.

MN: And what were you doing in neighborhood youth core?

DL: Taking care of other children. At that time, there was still a lot of stay home moms, or if they worked, they worked their schedules around the children's school hours. So we would literally have to go out and find children to bring to this carriage room to give them arts and crafts.

MN: What about when you were in college, what sort of work were you doing?

DL: I became a substitute teacher.

MN: You became a substitute teacher.

DL: Inside Edenwald.

MN: In Edenwald.

DL: In the daycare center.

MN: In the daycare. So you started out working in day care - -

DL: - - and stayed there.

MN: - - and stayed in daycare. And that's what your training and certification is?

DL: No, I have New York State certification nursery to raise 1 through 6.

MN: Oh, ok. Have you ever taught in the New York public schools?

DL: Never. I have taught college classes on early childhood education.

MN: Your mother, meanwhile, while all of this is going on around her, black consciousness, black rage, white flight, and how is she dealing with all of this?

DL: She assimilated as well. Nobody couldn't tell my mother she wasn't black. All the way black, not whatever mixture. She was black, it's just that when she told her childhood stories and whatever, then you know it was a whole new - - that hillbilly kind of thing going on.

MN: What year did your father pass away?

DL: 72'.

MN: And at the end of his life he was coming to terms with his Indian ancestry. Did that affect any of your siblings?

DL: Well we were quite confused for many years. I have - - the oldest sister is just now identifying with all that mixed-ness. I don't think my brother ever got who he is.

[Laughs]

MN: Because that's an interesting question. How does your older sister identify?

DL: She always identified as black as well. But now she doesn't. Now she's beginning to come to terms with - - in our age, and she's always worked with and around white people, whereas I've always worked around African-Americans. So, she identifies with being black, except that the whites that she works with see her features, her speech, her actions, and stuff, they'll say, and Pam has it happening to her too, you definitely have to be mixed with somebody, you just can't be black. And so by this repeated conversation

that she has with them, and when we talk I saw well Debbie you can't take out the fact of mommy being who she is and daddy being who she is. So she's now coming to terms that she's more of other nationalities than African-American.

MN: Does she live in the Bronx also?

DL: No, she works in - - she lives up in Mount Vernon and she works in White Plains.

MN: And did she get married and have kids?

DL: She's been married and been divorced, and has been divorced for many years. She's never remarried. Me, I've been married three times.

MN: Now, how do your other siblings identify? Does everybody identify as black or no?

DL: No, we're mixed. American Indian, we tend to more identify with being American Indian.

MN: Ok, so now there's more of an Indian identity than a black identity?

DL: Yes.

MN: And when did this begin to develop, would you say?

DL: For myself or them?

MN: For yourself.

DL: For me, I would say, I was probably in my early 30s when I began to - - well see the afro thing went away, and the hair grows back and that kind of thing and so - - and then I constantly had people say - - you know, it's a constant thing, blacks, whites, Hispanics. Hispanics think we're Puerto Rican or of some Hispanic nationality. And we're not. Then you have to mention who you are. What the mixture - -

MN: - - just to give an example, this is my granddaughter, who everybody will say looks Puerto Rican, and her father is black and her mother is white. So, you know - - so this sort of happens - -

DL: - - she's pretty.

MN: - - in your 30s.

DL: Yes.

MN: And your other siblings also more identify as Indian or multi-racial - -

DL: - - well we will just say we're mixed. However, when my father's brother's son, who went and traced the Indian heritage, did it all, therefore so we're in the process of getting the papers and that kind of thing. Because I think you have to have proved 16 percent or something like that.

MN: Now, when did Spanish families become a significant portion of Edenwald, and how did that change Edenwald?

DL: Back in the, I would say the 70s, there was - - as I said there was a lot of, from what I remember, there was a lot of buildings being burnt down in the South Bronx. So they had to house whoever were there, and then a lot of Spanish people came in.

MN: Was there a point in Edenwald at which the standards for admission for families began to change so that - -

DL: - - well we were already - - I really don't know the criteria. I just know that when mommy and dad applied for the apartment, you had to be married. Families had to be married.

MN: And that changed by the seventies?

DL: I would think so.

MN: You had more single parents.

DL: Right.

MN: How - - ok, you're in the middle of the Black Power movement, although the 70s that begins to fade a little. How did the black families, the black kids and the Spanish kids get along?

DL: Pretty much everybody - - I would say I think we got along ok, it's just that people stayed separate. I don't know if people were - - it wasn't because - - it was just everyone stayed to their own kind. But it wasn't that we were made to, it was just everyone seemed to stay to their own kind.

MN: What year did you get married for the first time?

DL: 1980.

MN: And how long were you dating or seeing each other before that happened.

DL: I met Neil in 75'.

MN: Those were - - what was the music you were - - what was the soundtrack?

DL: That was like the - - the 8-tracks at that - - that was disco fever and that kind of music going on.

MN: Did you go to clubs together?

DL: Yes.

MN: And what were the main clubs you went to in the Bronx?

DL: Ok, well I'm not really - - I've stayed - - the North Bronx has been my life, I don't know why. I've not really expanded other than whatever travels I do for vacationing. But the clubs that we frequent is, one was called Stars, which is on the Boston Road, closer to the - - between Gun Hill - -

MN: - - it was called Stars?

DL: It was called Stardust.

MN: The Stardust Ballroom?

DL: Yes.

MN: Ok, and what part of - -

DL: - - and [Inaudible]

MN: And what kind of groups were performing there? Was it mostly DJs and - -

DL: DJs, we had DJs. Not live bands. The live bands kind of like went out in my high school years.

MN: So it was mainly DJs.

DL: Right.

MN: Were the DJs at that time mostly using two turntables, or it was still more conventional?

DL: It was the - - well they had the reel to reel. Remember the reel to reel?

MN: Yes.

DL: I recall - - yes, there was - - so the music was already taped on the reels.

MN: What were you favorite groups from those days?

DL: Oh I love Marvin Gaye. Marvin Gaye, the Temptations, Smokey Robinson was good. Most the R&B ones. Teddy Pendergrass was kind of cool back in that time.

MN: Did you get much into Ohio Players or - -

DL: - - oh yes, the Ohio Players - -

MN: - - Kool and the Gang - -

DL: - - Kool and the Gang, yes.

MN: The Funks.

DL: The Funks, yes. [Inaudible] The other typical ones that everybody listened to.

MN: You had mentioned that you saw the rapper's, the - -

DL: - - the Rapper's Delight.

MN: The Sugar Hill Gang perform live?

DL: Rapper's Delight, yes.

MN: This was at Bronx Community?

DL: At Bronx Community. The hip, the hop - - they went, a couple of them. I don't remember their names off hand right now, but a couple of the heavy guys, they went to Bronx Community.

MN: Which they recorded that in New Jersey.

DL: Did they? I don't know where they recorded.

MN: Did you know anyone from your area who was a DJ or - -

DL: Not off hand, no.

MN: So you were - - at this point, when you got married, you were working in daycare?

DL: Yes. Inside Edenwald is a daycare called Susan Wagner Daycare, and actually it was one of the first, from what I understand - - I think daycare began during the World War era, World War II era, from what my understanding is. And they were saying who's going to take care of the children while the women went to work. And the Board of Ed. didn't want to take the daycare, so Edenwald opened up the - - it was one of the first daycares back in that time. And I started in that program, and just never left until I - - well I transferred over to another daycare program as an administration.

MN: Where did you go after Bronx Community?

DL: From Bronx I went to Lehman College.

MN: Oh, so you stayed in the Bronx?

DL: [Inaudible] And then I went to City for my masters.

MN: And it's in early childhood education?

DL: Early childhood and elementary.

MN: Was your first apartment - - when you got married, did you get your own apartment?

DL: Yes we did, we lived on the Concourse.

MN: Ok, so you didn't live in Edenwald?

DL: No, no I left.

MN: But then when that marriage broke up, I went back to Pam - - with Pam to my mom's at Edenwald, and raised her up until she was about 5 or 6 there.

MN: Ok, so you lived in the Grand Concourse and what year was Pam born?

DL: 82'.

MN: And when did the marriage break up?

DL: 87'.

MN: So Pam grew up on the Grand Concourse and moved to Edenwald when she was 5?

DL: Right.

MN: And you moved back with your mother.

DL: For a couple of years and got back on my feet, but the base was always Edenwald, because even while I was married, I still worked, so when I worked, I still - - Pam was in - - Pam would be with my mom while I went to work in Edenwald, and then we would go

home. So Pam, as far as she knows she lived in Edenwald all her life because - -

[Crosstalk]

MN: - - she was in the daycare center and with your mother.

DL: Right.

MN: Were your other sisters around Edenwald?

DL: One got an apartment in Edenwald. She married a Spanish guy. And the other one moved out, and - - yes, we all stayed in the Bronx in that vicinity. Gun Hill Road, she was on Gun Hill and the Montefiore area.

MN: Of your four sisters - -

DL: - - one passed. Pam is named after her.

MN: Oh, I'm so sorry. How many of them - - who did they marry, end up marrying?

DL: My sister - - my brother married a girl who was multi-racial as ourselves, and they're not together, and then he got with a Spanish girl. They're both very fair skinned like my mom. And my sister Debbie, she married a black guy.

MN: This is your older sister?

DL: That's the older one. I met - - all three of my marriages are from - - well actually the last marriage I married a Caribbean Islander. He's from Trinidad. And my sister married a Hispanic guy, and she's still with him.

MN: There was this - - were there other relatives around in the area?

DL: Of my family?

MN: Yes.

DL: Most of my father's children's children came and stayed with us until they got on their feet.

MN: And then they were around the Bronx?

DL: Yes.

MN: So you always felt always very comfortable in that area, even when - - now, was there any point at which you started telling people you lived in Edenwald and they said oh my god.

DL: Yes, yes.

MN: What was the reputation of Edenwald in the rest of the Bronx?

DL: One of the worst projects in the Bronx.

MN: Would you say that reputation is still there?

DL: Yes.

MN: And what did you tell - -

DL: - - and not because - - well I would say, because I've continued - - I've continued my education, so my response is not everybody in the Edenwald Projects - - not every person that comes from the projects is bad. Because look at me and myself and my family. But I only know that from a personal level. And the other people that I grew up with, the other families, they've done well. And they came, and we grew up in an era where it wasn't bad at all, but it did turn bad, and this is - - even though it's the most beautiful projects that there is. Have you ever been in the Edenwald Projects?

MN: No, I've never been there.

DL: It's beautiful. Well kept.

MN: And it's still well kept.

DL: Well kept. Some buildings are not as kept as others, and for whatever reasons they tend to be the buildings that whatever drugs or whatever's going on - - at one point,

Edenwald was like the place that you can go - - if you wanted drugs, it was like the drive-through McDonalds. You can go and pick up your - -

MN: - - What years was that?

DL: This was the early 80s.

MN: The early 80s. This was - - the drugs were - -

DL: - - Horrible.

MN: - - was tremendous.

DL: It was terrible. And the white people were coming over with their Mercedez-Benzenes, their Lexuses - -

MN: - - This was where the drug buys were.

DL: Right. And it just so happened to be the place where my mom lived, what we called the horseshoe. There's four building and it was a driveway.

MN: So how did your mother feel, still feel - -

DL: - - She loved Edenwald, she didn't want to leave it. [Laughs]

MN: Did people take care of her?

DL: Yes, they loved Ms. Davis.

MN: So everybody said, nobody's touching her.

DL: Don't touch Ms. Davis. That's exactly true.

MN: Even the hoods.

DL: No one bothered her. If she was coming, they would get her bags and help her in the building.

MN: So even the worst thugs were polite to her.

DL: Treated her well.

MN: Which is interesting. Were there other situations like that, even in the worst years, where there was people - - because I'm sure in every housing project in the Bronx, there were elderly people who stayed, and somehow, they must have been taken care of by the people.

DL: By the people themselves, right.

MN: Which is a whole story that - -

DL: - - And it's always - - my mom just passed in November of 04'. And everybody from the time we were little kids up until who is still there now came, and from every walk of life as well. Drug addicts, or ex-drug addicts, because they remember - - that she was like one of the icons - - that she opened up the place.

MN: Are kids still growing up in Edenwald and able to grow and develop and progress the way you did? Are good things still going on there?

DL: During the 80s they did have what they called the TLC taskforce. And that they went in there and they cleaned it up pretty good. I personally think that the 47th Precinct is located right there so the crime that takes place is senseless. They don't care, perhaps the people don't care, they don't fight for their rights, I don't know. But I would say that if you have a parent that's involved with their kids, making sure that schools are giving them what they're supposed to have, and any child will be ok in that environment. But if you leaving the child out there to just get involved, everything is - - I think the Bloods are the gang - -

MN: - - the Bloods are a gang there. Are you still working in Edenwald?

DL: No. I've been out of Edenwald since 94'.

MN: And where did you move to?

DL: White Plains Road. I'm [Inaudible] North Bronx, as National Council of Negro Women.

MN: And what programs does your organization - -

DL: Alright, we have - - it's one of the largest programs in the Bronx. It's a daycare center. Daycare through the city is called ACSACD, Administration for Children Services Agency for Child Development, though they've changed, we're going over to the Division of Childcare. In our program we have what we call group daycare. And that serves 2.9 to 6, family daycare, and that's where provided caregivers give care into the home, and the children are 6 weeks up until 12 years, and we have what we refer to as an after-school age program, which we no longer will have. DYCD took over. But up until September of 06' we'll have it, and that's from 5 years to 10 years. So we have 80 homes, the provider homes.

MN: So a lot of this is done in homes?

DL: No, no, no, no. The group daycare and the after-school is done inside the program. The family daycare is in homes.

MN: Oh wow, ok. And you license the providers so that they can operate under - -

DL: - - provide care.

MN: And when you went to work there, did you know you were going to be running into a hornet's nest of - -

DL: - - No I did not. Actually when I met [Laughs], when I met these women, they are the National Council of Negro Women, and these women are 60 plus, the women that are the sponsors of this daycare. But of course you can join, I joined, their organization. It's a group of women that came out of the national organization to sponsor this daycare. And

no I did not. When I interviewed for the position, it was during the summer, and I'd go tanning all the time, so I was quite colored. But in the winter, that color changes drastically, and then they met my mother, and literally all hell broke loose. The attitude was, oh shit, we've let one of them in here.

MN: And this was pretty quick?

DL: As soon as they met my mother. I was - - and this is no lie, and there is staff persons there who - - my mother came in, and by this time it was about - - I had been there maybe about 6, 7 months, and she happened to be up in that area, and so she dropped in. And the stare that I had when I was a little girl in the convertible saying ma hide. I knew then let me get her really fast out of here because if they saw here with all the prejudice statements I heard them say about white people, these women, I knew, if they saw her, that it was going to be it for me. And so I tried to get her out as soon as I can. And this literally happened. And when I - - so I said oh you're here, and I ran across the street with her, she was going to get some medicine or something. And when we came out of the drugstore, which is right across the street, everybody on the back - - there's two doors, there was like 7, 8 people in the front and in the back to see me come out the door with this white women. And then was asking me - - or what they perceived to be white - - who was she.

MN: Did you ever run into this when you were working in daycare in Edenwald?

DL: No, that was my militant time. I had - - I went in there with an afro.

MN: So some of this was your sense of yourself now was different than it had been 15 years ago when you took this position.

DL: I grew up, I became - - my education expanded, my thoughts and horizons expanded. I wasn't young anymore, so to speak. I was being educated.

MN: And these women were very angry.

DL: The ones that I work with now, or back in Edenwald time? In Edenwald, I endured that light skinned, dark skinned women thing by the director, I did. But she still saw me as a black woman. And when she became aware - - well that's another story. She just saw me as a black woman. I didn't get into who I was or what I was.

MN: Ok, any other thoughts, things you haven't said in looking back at all of this? It sounds like you're growing up experience in Edenwald was pretty positive until junior high, and then - -

DL: - - that Civil Rights thing, blacks began to speak out, kind of messed a lot of things up.

MN: And that changed your experience but it also led to the deterioration - -

DL: - - of the community, period. This is not just my ticket, it kind of like - -

MN: - - One of the things is, in the schools it reflected in, you think, people rebelling against education or just giving their teachers a hard time? Or did any of it produce intellectual curiosity or the desire to learn?

DL: No. Literally. I'm just talking about my experience, and with those who I was around. My parents did pretty much keep us sheltered, so I'm not saying I knew everything or any of that, but prior to the junior high school experience we were a community which everyone looked out for one another, loved one another, we had a lady, her name was Ms. Dowd. She would plop your head, plop, if you didn't do right. And it was alright. And if you got plopped by Ms. Dowd, you better believed you was going to

get your butt spanked by your mom that evening. We looked out for one another. And there was a time when it came where you couldn't say anything to another person's child.

MN: And so - -

DL: That's my child, you know. And this attitude where we had freedom of speech was something that African-Americans could exercise, and when they did, they didn't do it to benefit themselves or their community. I think what they did was begin to - - black on black crime occurred. It did not benefit them. They - - and my take is based on ignorance, lack of education, and poverty. So when they began to speak, they didn't know what to speak about, or what to act for. That's just the group that I grew up in. And that's not everybody, because the rest of those that I grew up with, they moved up and moved out too, to white communities [Laughs].

MN: Ok, well thank you very much, this was really a thought provoking, important interview, and if any of your siblings want to be interviewed, I'd be very happy to do them as well.

DL: I'll ask them.

MN: Ok, terrific.

END