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## Bailey, Helen

Bailey, Helen. Bronx African American History Project  
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Transcribed by Gregory Peters

Mark Naison (MN): Ok, this is the 34<sup>th</sup> interview of the Bronx African American History Project. I'm interviewing Helen Gordon-Bailey, an attorney who spent much of her life in the Bronx. When did your family first move to the Bronx?

Helen Gordon Bailey (HGB): Long before Morrisania came into being. We lived on 176<sup>th</sup> St. around Marmion Ave.

MN: Now what neighborhood would that - Marmion?

HGB: Jewish!

MN: That was a Jewish neighborhood.

HGB: Totally!

MN: And was that in the West Bronx or the East Bronx?

HGB: Marmion Ave. is right off of Crotona Ave. You know, I must have been about two or three when we lived there.

MN: Do you recall where your family lived before they moved to the Bronx?

HGB: We lived in Boston and we lived on 129<sup>th</sup> St. My grandfather owned a house there and we lived in an apartment across the street.

MN: So the move was from Harlem to the Bronx?

HGB: The second time around. The first time I think we came from Boston you know I can't really document too much for you because my mother came to America went to Montclair, New Jersey and then came to New York. My father left Panama and went to Boston and from Boston came to New York.

MN: Right. Now, so your father was from Panama.

HGB: No, he was from Jamaica but he was in Panama for a couple of years and then he came to America.

MN: Right, and where was your mother from?

HGB: Jamaica.

MN: Ok, so both of your parents are - -

HGB: - - Are Jamaican, yes.

MN: When you, when did you first start going to school in the Bronx in elementary school, what was your first - -

HGB: - - I attended St. Anthony of Padua when I was five. I did two years there.

MN: Right. Now, was your family then living on 176<sup>th</sup> St. or were they? - -

HGB: - - They were living, no, no they only stayed on 176<sup>th</sup> St. a very small time. No, we lived at 854 East 167<sup>th</sup> St. and St. Anthony was right there.

MN: Was your family Catholic?

HGB: No, I was ahead of myself. I learned to read and write when I was three. And most public schools didn't like me because I would bring my books and things to school. So when my father enrolled me in PS 23 in the community; I brought my books! And they put me in kindergarten. And he said, "Oh, no no no, my daughter reads and writes." And he went to St. Anthony and they took me, first grade.

MN: Now, PS 23. What street was that on?

HGB: That's right there in Morrisania. It's maybe it's out of existence now but I think it was about 161<sup>st</sup>, 162<sup>nd</sup> St., Forest or Tinton somewhere around there.

MN: Now when you moved to Morrisania was this in the 1930s?

HGB: Yes.

MN: And it was an overwhelmingly Jewish neighborhood.

HGB: Totally! Totally! My mother was accepted because she looked like them. My father was accepted because he looked like a foreigner. My sister was brown so they called her shvartza.

MN: So your sister was - -

HGB: - - My sister is brown.

MN: And so you were, the skin color was an enormous factor - -

HGB: - - Well, not to me, but apparently to them.

MN: Now were there any other students of African descent in St. Anthony of Padua when you were there?

HGB: I think the chap who became the bishop, I think his family, there were two or three black families who were superintendents who lived in the community and they were from, I think the Virgin Islands or one of the other...and they attended, the Salmons, they were Catholic. One of them became a priest and then bishop whatever his name is who died, he became a bishop ultimately, and a couple others. But I was the only girl I know who was there at the time.

MN: And after the two years at St. Anthony, where did you go?

HGB: My family moved to Claremont Parkway. And I went to PS 42 there. And I attended 42 from third grade through eighth.

MN: And was 42 also any overwhelmingly Jewish school?

HGB: Yes it was.

MN: So how many African American students would you say there were?

HGB: Oh, at PS 42? Maybe about six in the entire school. And they lived on Third Ave. and we lived on Claremont Parkway.

MN: Now what sort of work did your father do?

HGB: My father worked for the post office.

MN: He was a postman. Now did your mother work or was she a homemaker?

HGB: She was a homemaker in those days.

MN: Did you have a fairly smooth experience when you were? - -

HGB: - - I never had a problem.

MN: And you were socially accepted and the whole business - -

HGB: - - Who else was going to be my friend if they weren't Jewish or Polish or Armenian? There was nobody else.

MN: And this was again in the late '30s.

HGB: Yes, this was '33, we lived in Claremont Parkway, that's when they closed the banks, they just built a new bank there. And then what was it the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, is that the one booze?

MN: Yes, prohibition ended.

HGB: Yes, prohibition. That was around then, we lived in that community then, and from there we moved up to the northeast Bronx.

MN: So you stayed on Claremont Parkway?

HGB: For about three or four years.

MN: And then when did your family move to the northeast Bronx?

HGB: About 1936 or '37.

MN: Did they buy a house there?

HGB: No they were tenants. Our landlord was Italian, that community was Italian.

MN: Right. Did your family attend church in the Bronx or were they not church - -

HGB: - - My father and my mother had peculiar religious backgrounds. I think he was a fallen Catholic, my mother was, came from an Episcopalian Anglican family. My sister and I attended parochial school, Methodist, African Methodist parochial school. Jesus, I went to so many schools I can't even remember. In Harlem, when we lived in Harlem briefly, my mother would attend church but she didn't have a membership until 1935, '34, '35, '36, [Crosstalk]. St. Augustine, I'm trying to remember when St. Augustine, it had been Woodstock, very middle class white Presbyterian Church; and they all moved out. The neighborhood was still Jewish, a few blacks were moving in, and the presbytery gave St. Augustine's to St. James the Episcopal, the Presbyterian Church as an adjunct. And my parents joined St Augustine, and they became very active.

MN: And they remained active even when they moved up there?

HGB: Oh, always.

MN: Yes, now do remember when Rev. Hawkins came to the? - -

HGB: - - Yes! He was the one who opened the church. That's when my parents joined it.

MN: Oh, so in other words it was, it had a different name before - -

HGB: - - It was Woodstock Presbyterian. And when the presbytery gave that church to the community for the people of color Edler Hawkins, who had been one of William Lloyd Imes, the minister's protégés came up there and became the minister.

MN: Ok, so because I, when did my research on Harlem, I had William Lloyd Imes, was a major powerhouse.

HGB: Oh very much so. Dr. Imes was very - - and Edler was his protégé.

MN: So this was a conscious decision by the presbytery to have a church that would - -

HGB: - - Oh, yes. They empowered the church for years; they gave them money, because there weren't enough people to support it.

MN: So initially, how many African Americans were in the congregation when Rev. Hawkins came?

HGB: Oh, it turned into a real dynamic place. The people that Edler Hawkins had an influence over became the shakers and the movers of my generation.

MN: Yes. Ok, so as soon as he came your parents - -

HGB: - - No, they didn't just do that, he sent out one or two people to (makes knocking sounds).

MN: Knock on doors.

HGB: And my parents would come over and go to services. Fact, I don't know if you're old enough to remember Dick Powell movies? There was a black man, of course he didn't call himself black, named Lancelot Penard who sang calypso songs in all those movies and Mr. Penard was the gentleman that Edler Hawkins sent around to entreat the people to come in now. Mr. Penard's wife was like my mother, she was white-black and Mr. Penard was brown.

MN: Now was your family politically active?

HGB: My father was a Democratic ward-heel, please.

MN: In the Bronx?

HGB: Jackson Democratic Club; I grew up there.

MN: And where was, what street was Jackson Democratic on?

HGB: It was on Boston Rd. at about that curve; it was upstairs. And Mildred McCaffrey was the executive leader, female, and a chap named Harry Cooke was the male leader, and her husband was the commissioner in somebody's administration, commissioner McCaffrey. And she ultimately made him a Supreme Court Judge. Bertha Schwartz, who's Jewish, was one of the ward-heels, their prime ward-heel. Fact, when I finished law school Mildred said to Bertha, "I want you to take Helen under your wing." And Bertha said to me, "How much business can you bring me?" You know, when you come out of a middle class background nobody litigates. (Laughs). That was the end of me.

MN: So had your father been active in politics before he came to the Bronx? Did he have a background?

HGB: Well, I don't know if he was involved in the few years that he lived in Harlem, but he was very active in the Bronx. I'm sure you've heard the name Netty Hailey in things that you did.

MN: Oh, not yet.

HGB: Oh, Mrs. Hailey was the powerhouse. She was the prima donna ward-heel. She was the colored leader, so to speak.

MN: So McCaffrey and Cooke were Irish?

HGB: Oh, yes. And everybody else was Jewish. They told and then they elected all the Jewish people. Isidore Dollinger became the Congressman, oh, Jesus. I was a nice young ward-heel until I began to think for myself.

MN: Now, do you remember the American Labor Party?

HGB: Oh, very much so, Vito Marcantonio, used to go to his meetings, very interesting, nice boys.



MN: Now, so your father became involved in that Democratic - -

HGB: - - In the political club, in the Democratic - -

MN: - - Was this in the '30s?

HGB: Oh yes, the '30s.

MN: Now was there a lot of political discussion in your household?

HGB: My father read 6 or 7 newspapers a day, you know there was political discussion.

MN: So you grew up with this swirling around you.

HGB: I came out of a family that read.

MN: And your sister was also - -

HGB: - - Oh, yes. Their friends, everybody who came to the house, there were always discussions.

MN: Did your parents have friends, were dinner parties with friends, a big phenomenon?

HGB: No, my parents didn't have any of the mover shaker people. They were just ordinary, nice human beings.

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

HGB: Evander Childs.

MN: Ok, so you went Evander. Do you recall when you were living in the lower Bronx, any of the clubs where, which were the major music venues? Was this something - -

HGB: - - They had the nine, the nine right, there's a movie house there now - -

MN: - - The 845?

HGB: The 845 club, that was the only one that was there. Oh no, Ethel Waters' ex-husband Eddie Mallory had a club, he owned Fatman on the hill down here, but up there he owned a nightclub. And he was married to an extremely beautiful woman, Marion

Mallory, who was a model. And I guess the world thought of Marion as a Caucasian, very blond, very... she could outdo Marilyn Monroe in looks; she was a really beautiful woman. Eddie Mallory had his spot; I don't know anybody else who had anything of consequence.

MN: Now, was music an important part of your family?

HGB: Oh, yes. My grandfather played seven instruments. Music was music.

MN: And was their musical taste eclectic or? - -

HGB: - - My mother liked classics, she played the violin. I liked music, my sister took piano lessons, I took piano and violin lessons.

MN: What extracurricular activities did you participate in before you went to high school?

HGB: Well, St. Augustine had a very active young people's program. We played basketball like crazy there and all sorts of meetings; it was the hub.

MN: Now one of the issues that I came across when I was doing research years ago was something that people called the Bronx slave market.

HGB: Well, that was on 160<sup>th</sup> Street, women of color would line up and then the white sisters would come by and hire them to go home and clean their houses.

MN: Was that something that St. Augustine's was trying to - -

HGB: - - I have no idea.

MN: But that wasn't an issue that you heard discussed?

HGB: Well, it wasn't part of growing up. I mean, if they discussed it, it was with the adults when they had their meetings.

MN: Right. Were there cadet corps and things like that?

HGB: No, Minisink, that's Minisink, and that was over on University Avenue later on. No, there were no militaristic organizations in the immediate vicinity.

MN: Now, when you, when your family first moved to the north Bronx, what was the address? What was the first address?

HGB: You mean when we left Claremont Parkway? 866 East 225<sup>th</sup> Street and St. Mary's RC was right across the street until it burned down.

MN: Were there any other African American families?

HGB: Oh, my God, from the time I was knee high to a puppy I'd go there. There were always African Americans up there. We had friends who had lived up there, oh, from the 1900s and before. In fact, one of my good friends, her mother just died and Melissa's my age, she's a doctor, and the family owned a house up there way back when, always.

MN: And this would've been called Wakefield?

HGB: Well, I guess they call it Wakefield now; we used to call it Williamsbridge.

MN: It's 225<sup>th</sup>.

HGB: 225<sup>th</sup> had a very, very prominent black group and they had an American Legion Post up there.

MN: And what were the major churches up there?

HGB: Trinity Baptist, St. Luke's Episcopal, a Catholic church, St. Mary's, and then, now of course they have St. Philip and St. James down there by Boston Rd.

MN: Now, what was the major cross? Was this near White Plains Rd. or? - -

HGB: - - White Plains was the major cross one. Then you had Barnes and Bronxwood and Bronx - - Bronx - - Paulding and Laconia.

MN: And so you started off renting there and then bought a house?

HGB: No, we moved back to, down to the lower Bronx. That's why I say we were back and forth.

MN: Ok, so you moved to 225<sup>th</sup> - -

HGB: - - We lived at 225<sup>th</sup> for about four years.

MN: Right, and during that time you were at?

HGB: I commuted to PS 42. My parents didn't believe in you leaving your school. I went on the train down to PS 42 until I graduated 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

MN: And then you went to Evander Childs, and you were at that time you were living down - -

HGB: - - We moved back downtown when I came uptown to go to Evander.

MN: Oh, that's great! So where did you move then, what street?

HGB: Union Avenue, 1072 Union Avenue, right around the corner from St. Anthony, in fact the convent was on the street.

MN: Now by that time were there more African Americans coming?

HGB: Well, yes there were, there were. It was a big influx of people.

MN: And this was, would you say, the late '30s or the early '40s?

HGB: This would be the late '30s because my family then moved to Longwood Ave., that would be the cross street crossing Prospect. But life went on up between 163<sup>rd</sup> and I would say 169<sup>th</sup> where Jim's family's from.

MN: Now were those the years, did you meet? - -

HGB: - - I have always known the Pruitts. I saw Jim when his mother was carrying him.

MN: Now, did your family know the Pruitts from? - -

HGB: - - Not my family, not my mother or my father; I knew the Pruitts.

MN: And how did you meet them?

HGB: We went to Minisink.

MN: Oh, you went to Camp Minisink.

HGB: And Mrs. Pruitt was a muckety-muck on the board. And Harriett is about a year or two younger than I am, Bessie was my camper when I was a counselor, and Mrs. Pruitt was always pregnant, Jesus Christ.

MN: So Camp Minisink was a - - when was that program founded?

HGB: I went to Camp Minisink the first or second year it was opened, I was six years old, six or seven. And my mother had a friend who worked for the city mission society and she suggested my parents send us to Minisink and my sister and I - -

MN: - - And that's where you met the Pruitts.

HGB: Well no, they're younger than I am, I could not have met them then! I just told you Harriett the eldest is a couple of years younger than I am, and I went to Minisink at six years of age.

MN: Ok, right. Now when you moved to the neighborhood were the Pruitts in the neighborhood by the, when you moved out?

HGB: They were not, they lived here and I lived here. But my best friend's mother came from the same community I believe, that the Pruitts came from, and so she and Mrs. Pruitt were friendly. And I know Harriett and Jackie, then later on Bessie when she became my camper and I'd see the boys, but you'd say hi and no involvement. Mrs. Pruitt was a shaker, though. They were the Republicans, I believe.

MN: So they were Republicans, they were in that.

HGB: I think Mrs. Pruitt, I could be wrong.

MN: There was the Lincoln Republican Club.

HGB: Yes, Mrs. Pruitt was a Republican.

MN: So you had the Jackson Democratic Club and the - -

HGB: - - I don't know anything about the Republicans because my family was up to here in Democratic politics, but I knew that the Pruitts - - because Mrs. Pruitt had quite a bit of political influence. It was interesting because the blacks in the Republican Party were very few. Because all of the Democrats were crowding into the Democratic Party, my husband's argument, because they denied them membership in the South they couldn't wait to join in the North. My husband is a Republican. (Laughs).

MN: Now, was you family ever involved in the NAACP?

HGB: Not really. My dad probably had a membership.

MN: Because one of the people I interviewed, his name is Jesse Davidson, and his father - -

HGB: - - Oh yes, please, they were friends of my parents. Mrs. Davidson, Mr. Davidson had the first newspaper, *The Listener*. Sure, I knew the Davidsons very well.

MN: Oh, so *The Listener* was a local newspaper?

HGB: Yes, a Bronx newspaper.

MN: And you have pretty vivid recollections of that?

HGB: Oh, sure, Mrs. Davidson was a very bright lady. Mr. Davidson I think worked for the post office, too. They were friendly with my mother and father.

MN: Because Mr. Davidson has copies of *The Listener* which is why - -

HGB: - - Yes, well that was his parents' paper, yes.

MN: And he said that they founded an NAACP chapter in 194 --

HGB: Mrs. Davidson may very well have. I knew her, she knew me, we didn't know each other, we knew each other. But I knew that they were friendly with my father.

MN: Do you have any recollection of a woman named Angie Dickerson who was a political activist?

HGB: She came late, honey. (Laughs).

MN: So you knew her?

HGB: No, I said she came late. I'm trying to tell you, she was not there at the time the rest of us were growing up.

MN: Right. What was Evander Childs like when you went there?

HGB: Well I finished in a class of a thousand and I think there were ten blacks. That's what Evander Childs was like.

MN: And what year did you graduate?

HGB: 1940.

HGB: You graduated Evander in 1940. Was it an academically strong school?

HGB: Oh my God, it was one of the leading high schools in the city.

MN: And what sort of extracurricular activities were you involved in there?

HGB: Not at the school, because remember, I'm commuting again. I'm coming up from the lower Bronx going up to Evander. But at St. Augustine's still, as you grew, your contemporaries grew with you.

MN: Now were there lecture series at St. Augustine's, what sort of activities? - -

HGB: - - People would come in and speak, yes; I wouldn't call them lecture series but...

Edler Hawkins was a very interesting man. He ran for office on the Liberal Party ticket, he was a little crazy, he was nice.

MN: Now you mentioned the American Labor Party, when did that become a factor in the Bronx?

HGB: Well, I don't know if it was a fact in the Bronx, I knew of it because of Fiorello LaGuardia, Vito Marcantonio, I think I really became aware of them when I was in college.

MN: Where did you go to college?

HGB: Hunter College.

MN: Yes.

HGB: But the American Labor Party didn't do very - - you know this system of electing was a part of New York City then. You had the lines - - it's very interesting that Mr. Bloom-Bloomberg - - would because it's been here. In fact Adam Clayton Powell, I believe, got elected on the City Council on one of those - -

MN: - - On proportional representation, yes, and then Ben Davis took his seat - -

HGB: - - Yes, Benjamin Davis, interesting man, very bright! Oh God, Harvard. Very bright! His sister used to rave about him when she talked to me.

MN: Did, were there a lot of left-wing activists in the Bronx when you were coming up?

HGB: They gave the black boys white girls, yes, they were activists; that was the way they entrapped them.

MN: So that was a very visible? - -

HGB: - - Well, the boys liked parties and there were pretty white girls.



MN: So this, where were these parties held?

HGB: I don't know, I never went to any of them, but I knew of them.

MN: And was this, were they active in Evander?

HGB: Oh, there was no politics in Evander. There were people whose parents were, if now known communists at least sympathetic communists. They had that housing development - -

MN: - - The coops.

HGB: Allerton Avenue, yes, I had a number of classmates who were from there.

MN: So, these kids went to Evander, the kids who grew up in the coops. Were there any African American kids who grew up in the coops who went to Evander?

HGB: I don't think they had any of us living there, though. Even though it was allegedly the Ladies Garment Workers housing, and everybody loved everybody, I do not think that anyone noticeably of color lived in there.

MN: Did you know any people who grew up on Fish Avenue?

HGB: Sure, when my parents' owned - - Fish Avenue is right around the corner from our house.

MN: From the house or from the apartment?

HGB: No, when we owned.

MN: When you, ok. Because I interviewed a number of people from Fish Avenue - -

HGB: - - Who'd you interview?

MN: Sylvia Carr was the main person.

HGB: No, I'll tell you who was there at the time. Oh God, I can't remember the name, but the mother became the "American Mother of the Year." They lived right around the

corner, Rhea, I attended classes with her, Muriel, I know the father, he had an oil company, but they lived around the corner.

MN: Now was Evander, would you Evander was more Jewish or more Italian when you were there?

HGB: Italians don't go to school the way people of the Jewish persuasion go to school, I mean that, come on, answer it!

MN: So the Italian kids weren't even going to high school?

HGB: Oh, they were going, but if you had twenty Jewish, you had three Italians and one Black. [Crosstalk] And maybe an Irish.

MN: Was Hunter the same composition? - -

HGB: - - Hunter was known as being the greatest women's college in the world for brains, and socially, they called it the Jew school. Because it had no class but it had brains.

MN: Now, did you have a social life that was created that, where African American educated kids found one another?

HGB: Yes. I mean, we found one another because there weren't that many of us going to college.

MN: Was this a fraternity/sorority scene?

HGB: No, no you met at the YW, you met at church, you met at camp, if you had enough in common, you became friends.

MN: Now, when did you know that you were going to become a lawyer?

HGB: I knew I was going to college. I am the fourth of my mother's family to have an advanced education, so education is no big thing in my family. I knew I was going to

school, I wanted to be an actress, my father told me, "Hell, no!" I wasn't going to play servants on the stage. I wanted to become a doctor, two of my uncles are doctors, I couldn't find my pulse, I knew I couldn't do that, so law was the next thing.

MN: And where did you end up going to law school?

HGB: Brooklyn Law.

MN: And when did your family, now it's after you graduated from law school?

HGB: Yes, the same time I finished. I had just been sworn in - - my parents bought back up in the northeast Bronx, on Laconia Ave.

MN: and that's Lac - - is that near the Hillside Houses?

HGB: Hillside, my parents' house.

MN: And Fish Ave., right there?

HGB: Around the corner.

MN: And was this a racially mixed block that they bought in?

HGB: No, we had a black neighbor next door and a black neighbor here and everybody else was white.

MN: And mostly Italian?

HGB: Not In Hillside! Hillside was Jewish! Jewish people go to apartments; they don't like to clean up after themselves. Italians want gardens, Jewish want somebody to clean the garden.

MN: So the houses were owned by the Italians mostly and the apartments were - -

HGB: - - Yes the private homes were built, usually. The one really amusing thing if you bought a house that an Italian owned, you never found closets. They only had suit on and one suit off. They did not put closets in their houses. [Laughs].

MN: Well these were - - Italians mostly built their own homes?

HGB: Oh yes, in those days, yes.

MN: Now did the north Bronx have farms when - -?

HGB: - - We had goats on Gun Hill Rd. when I was in high school, little shacks and goats along the way. In fact, my brother-in-law, my sister's husband, bought a couple of those lots at a city auction later on and that's where they have that drive-in, Rite-Aid is there, but goats were there.

MN: So you did have - - and were there farms further northeast?

HGB: I would imagine so. They didn't build up Dyer and those places for years.

MN: Did you ever have occasion to go in what people called the valley, because - -

HGB: - - What's the valley?

MN: That was a neighborhood a little further, not too far from where Co-op City now is.

HGB: You mean over in Eastchester?

MN: Yes, Eastchester.

HGB: Oh, yes, I had friends that live there. They built their own homes.

MN: So there was an African American community over in Eastchester.

HGB: Well, I wouldn't say there were that many, but there were four or five families there that have been there for a couple of generations,

MN: Now, so once they bought the house on Laconia did you ever go back to - - ?

HGB: - - We never left the lower Bronx, they continued their membership at St. Augustine and you had a life down in the lower Bronx.

MN: So in other words your father was still in the Jackson Democratic Club, or did he transfer over to a club in - -?

HGB: - - By this time now, we're talking 1950, you have a complete change. My parents were in their, let's see my father died in the '60s, he was 68, so I guess it was about '50, in the fifties, they had a life. My father was very active in the Mitchell Royal American Legion Post, he ended up commander. Then they moved downtown, bought a place.

MN: Now, where was that American Legion Post located?

HGB: Well, they owned a building on Boston Rd. right above, in the Morrisania area. They bought down in the lower Bronx and my dad was commander.

MN: So this was predominately African American?

HGB: It was, no it wasn't predominantly, it was a black.

MN: It was an African American, a Black American Legion Post.

HGB: Yes, that's right.

MN: Is this organization - -?

HGB: - - I have no idea, I have no idea.

MN: It was called Mitchell - -

HGB: - - It was called Mitchell, it was named after two of the men from the Williamsbridge area, Mitchell Royal, they were two - -

MN: - - Mitchell Royal. So it - -

HGB: - - It was named after two of the chaps who went to World War I, I guess.

MN: So you have Mitchell Royal which is in Williamsbridge and then it ultimately moves - -

HGB: - - It originated up there, but it moved down to Boston Rd. They bought a building on Boston Rd. at about 165<sup>th</sup> Street.

MN: So, is your family, some, the migration, Bronx pattern, typical of people moving back and forth between?

HGB: I have no idea. I had a very interesting father and he did not like totally segregated communities, so he did not allow us to grow up in segregated communities.

MN: So this was a very conscious decision on his part.

HGB: Well, if my mother went to get an apartment she could go anywhere she wanted to go. So he would, and she was very annoyed because my mother was very black mentally, and got very indignant when my father would say, "I know you go and get an apartment," "I don't want to get an apartment!" And then they'd see my brown father, my brown sister, and me.

MN: So skin color, this is something that again the Pruitts mention, skin in terms of African American families and renting, skin color was a very significant thing.

HGB: Your Jewish brothers and sisters did that, yes, yes. They couldn't tell the difference amongst some of us and when they found the rest of us, if we didn't stand out, we didn't annoy them.

MN: So that was the pattern in the - -

HGB: - - In the lower Bronx. That's they way the lower Bronx came into being.

MN: So the families who moved there from Harlem, most of them were - -

HGB: - - Most of them were lighter-skinned people, yes. Except for the ones who went to St. Anthony's, they were very dark-skinned. They came from St. Croix, some of the others.

MN: And they were predominantly superintendents?

HGB: They worked, they were the supers.

MN: And the people who were in, the lighter-skinned families tended to be - -

HGB: - - Well, you know, you've got to understand if you're around anybody of color, people of color run the gamut. They have a black, a brown, a tan, a green, a white in a family, so there is no, you can't say a lighter skin. A woman coming in with blond hair and blue eyes would drag in her dark brown son.

MN: Ok, so this is a different - -

HGB: - - Whites don't understand the Black background. Too much of the Caucasians are there, and two Caucasian, two Blacks, will marry, who are brown and they produce little yellow children based upon as you know, the genes. So it's, there's no hard and fast rule for people of color.

MN: In college and in law school did you see yourself as being potentially a political activist or - -

HGB: - - No, I went to law school to practice labor law and I found out that the labor unions were as bad as anything else. And I walked away from that.

MN: So you were trained as a labor lawyer?

HGB: No, I was not trained! I went there with the idea - - first of all, do you know much about law school? You take a, it's like going to medical school, you learn medicine, then you pick your specialty. I didn't pick a specialty. I practiced general law; however, the specialties picked me. So that, at one time I did nothing but divorces, another time I did nothing but something else. Now I have an office that does a hell of a lot of probate work and a lot of property.

MN: Which unions did you approach to try to work for?

HGB: I didn't approach. I started reading and I started watching and I didn't like what I saw. The big boys got money and the little people kept on trying. And then when the CIO and the AFL came together I wondered why they didn't go after them, they were a trust just like the others.

MN: Did you, did you ever have occasion to see Paul Robeson in concert?

HGB: Well, my husband and Mrs. Robeson took classes at NYU together. Everybody knew everybody, they were of the generation. My husband died at 95 so Paul Robeson was a contemporary of his. And what was her name? Eslanda - -

MN: - - Eslanda Goode Robeson.

HGB: Joe started taking courses in the '70s down at NYU, some graduate courses just on general principles, and she was his classmate. And the two of them used to go to the ice cream parlor, the coffee shop that Paul Junior's wife's family owned. Well, interesting. The last time I saw Mr. Robeson, he, and Hubert Delaney, and Robeson's brother, Ben Robeson, three of them were standing on a corner of Seventh Ave. Mr. Robeson was this high and the others guys were down. He was a giant! [Laughs.]

MN: Did you ever try to get involved in Liberal Party or American Labor Party politics?

HGB: No. I ran on the Republican ticket a couple of times but - -

MN: - - Was this in the Bronx you ran for office?

HGB: Oh never, never. I did all my political whatevers down here in Manhattan.

MN: When did you meet your husband?

HGB: When I went to work for him in 1950. He's my boss.

MN: He was a lawyer?

HGB: Yes.



MN: And where was his office located?

HGB: 321 West 125<sup>th</sup> Street, right on the corner of 125<sup>th</sup> Street and St. Nicholas Avenue.

MN: And was this your first - -

HGB: - - my first job.

MN: And this, how long was this after you passed the bar?

HGB: He hired me, I passed the bar, I got the notice in September and I went down to the office to work, I got sworn in that December.

MN: And when you got married, were you then living in Manhattan?

HGB: We lived in the Bronx, in the northeast Bronx, in my parents' house for a while and then we bought a home in the Yeshiva University area. A little private street called Washington Terrace, had a brownstone there.

MN: And from that time on you've lived in Manhattan?

HGB: No, I went back to the Bronx. We lived in the Co-op, 1270 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. for awhile. And then my little girl went to Little Red, my husband was very upset, he did not believe in public schools. So we moved to the Bronx. Our house was here, and there was a public school here, PS 78 I think it was.

MN: And, so where was that house located?

HGB: Weeks Avenue, one block off of the Concourse.

MN: Oh, and right close to where the Cross Bronx Expressway was - -

HGB: - - Honestly, it was here and here was our house, they built a crossover and you could see it. You had to walk over the thing if you wanted to get across the other side.

MN: Oh, that's right, your daughter told us about that!

HGB: My daughter?

MN: Yes, because the last time we, Jim and I - -

HGB: - - Josette? Oh, really?

MN: Yes, because we had missed signals she had told me - -

HGB: - - Yes, she's a little girl.

MN: Now in reviewing this, are there some things that you would want to say, that I've passed over that you know in terms of looking at this experience from, you know - -

HGB: - - It was a great place, that's all I can tell you. The lower Bronx was a beautiful place, the families, you couldn't do anything without a neighbor calling your mother or your father to tell them, "I saw so-and-so doing - -." The parents, they were not friends, but they were friendly, it was a great place.

MN: So you had a great growing up?

HGB: Oh yes, I had a very nice growing up, yes.

MN: And so there was this nurturing environment?

HGB: Oh yes, everybody cared, everybody cared.

MN: What about the teachers, were the teachers more caring do you think, than teachers today?

HGB: Well, you know, I wasn't aware of the blatant prejudice, I guess. It was only as I grew older that I realized that perhaps I'd been a victim. For instance, do you know that there are scholarships, state senatorial and state assembly scholarships, and no black child was ever told about those scholarships in the schools they attended? So there was, nobody was about to give you any help up. They were pleasant, they were nice, but they didn't love you. My principal was an Irishman at PS 42, my teachers were both Christian and Jewish, I never had an Italian teacher.

MN: Were the teachers respectful to your parents when they came in?

HGB: Oh, they had to be respectful to my father. You did not meet, you did not meet my father and not give him respect. And my parents were very, very much involved in our going to school, my father predominately.

MN: Were they involved in the PTA?

HGB: I don't even know if we had one back in those days, they certainly didn't tell us to tell our parents to come out to the meetings.

MN: Now, did you go to, other than Camp Minisink, were you involved in organized recreation programs or was it more a question of kids playing by themselves with sort of everybody watching?

HGB: Well, there was a group of us and we all, I guess we were all going in the same direction, in high school, going to college and we associated, we had our little social clubs. And as I grew older I got active at the YM, that's where the boys were.

MN: Now, was there a point where, you're growing up in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood, where the signal went out that we're going to go our separate ways socially?

HGB: No, there was never any reason to be into each other's pockets, as you grew older you made friends, some were Jewish, some were Black and two of my closest friends as I went to college were girls of Jewish background, and I mean you didn't, you didn't make a conscious effort, if you liked somebody. I think that was my error, my three children married whites, and it was because I didn't tell them that we stay in our own backyard. I told them good people are good people.

MN: Well, it seems like my kids are following the other route.

HGB: Yes, yes, good people are good people. The only catch is it makes it easier if you stay in your own backyard, oh well, we can't do anything about that can we now?

'Course my son told me, "The only difference with my wife and you is that she comes out of a white Quaker background and you come out of a black Episcopalian background, but you got the same disposition."

MN: Again, anything else, because this is - -

HGB: - - It was just a very, very, very good growing up. If we were poor we didn't know we were poor; if we were being discriminated against we didn't know we were being discriminated against. A buddy of mine says to me, "Did you know we lived in the ghetto?" I said no I didn't know we lived in a ghetto. "Did you know we were poor?" I said no I didn't know we were poor. So it was that kind of growing up.

MN: so what do you feel like, or what did you feel like in the '70s when you saw some of the neighborhoods that you had this wonderful experience in - -

HGB: - - I cried at the way they had gone down, and the lack of caring in the communities. Nobody cared and hygiene had been sort of lost. The street that Jim's sisters, Jim's sisters live on has just come back into its own, but his parents never left. And the house they have is fantastic. Have you been in their house? Did you know that Beth has the nine-room duplex; did you know it was a duplex? See, people don't understand what those houses are like, they are fantastic.

MN: Yes, I've been in the downstairs.

HGB: But you didn't know it was a duplex?

MN: I went upstairs - -

HGB: - - To Harriet's - -

MN: - - And I only saw a little of the upstairs.

HGB: Well, Beth's has the nine-room duplex where they were raised. I guess their parents may have rented the six-room apartment that Harriet lives in.

MN: So they have a nine-room and a six-room.

HGB: Yes. See people don't know those things and the Pruitts never left.

MN: Yes, yes we had a discussion there.

HGB: They stayed, sticking plaster, oh yes. Doctor, what was the doctor's name, Dr. Gathings lived next door.

MN: Yes and he apparently helped them get the house.

HGB: Gathings did, I don't know. Well they were close. I just knew him as: Good morning, Dr. Gathings, good afternoon." But I knew Mrs. Pruitt because of - -

MN: - -Did you and your law practice ever have occasion to do work in the Bronx?

HGB: Oh, surely. Well, five counties what are you going to do? The most horrendous of the five counties is Richmond, that is all Italian as you know, and God help you if you step on the wrong toes out there. Queens, very Jewish, very Jewish. Brooklyn, very crooked. [Laughter]

MN: I'm a Brooklynite, so - -

HGB: - - You know what happens in Brooklyn. Oh God help us, I was trying a case for a man they just took away from - - he was very pleasant to me. And I possibly would've gotten a bad deal because my adversary is a very prominent lawyer on Court St. So I perhaps got out just in time. I now have either a Greek or an Italian as the sitting judge, who I don't think is partial to anybody.

MN: Anything else, in looking back at St. Augustine's, would you say that that church was - -

HGB: - - Played a focal point in our - - oh yes, oh yes. So many of the young people who came under Edler Hawkins, for instance, I'm 80 so I guess everybody is between 70 and 80 now.

MN: If you could mention some of the people?

HGB: Well, a lot of them have gone, but there's a guy Vernon Alleyne, Vernon was I believe number two man to the chancellor out there in the Board of Education, he's retired now. Clarence Cave who became a Presbyterian minister in Philadelphia. I guess Tommy Matthews, who at one time was the outstanding neurosurgeon, black or white, in the country, perhaps in the world, until he had an accident and then lost it. Oh, loads of people who did very well.

MN: So that church was - -

HGB: - - Oh, Edler Hawkins was a terrific person. Creighton Berry who at one time headed the art department at Gimbel's. Hawkins, well he was a Bronxite initially -  
[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE; BEGINNING OF TAPE ONE SIDE TWO]

HGB: - - Dr. Imes, young man at Minisink. I mean Minisink and St. Augustine, all those things.

MN: Wow, so you met him first at Minisink.

HGB: Of course, he was courting one of the counselors. It was very interesting.

MN: So that Minisink program - -

HGB: - - Fantastic, let me tell you the guy who headed the Ford Foundation was a Minisink boy, Minisink was terrific. The Pruitts were very active there. Jim because of

his mother, but Carol, who didn't know Jim, went to Minisink too, his wife. So it was a very important place in our lives.

MN: So what gave Edler Hawkins the power to do the things that he did? If you look at him relative to other ministers?

HGB: I think because he cared. I think you've got to have the fire in the belly. And he cared. So many people rise, but they rise performing, you know they do the things that are expected of them. But he really, really loved the community, cared about people, and he showed it, and everybody responded to him that way. It was funny, my mother adored him, he'd ring her bell at eleven o'clock at night, "Mrs. Gordon I was in the neighborhood, do you have any food?"

MN: So he lived in, there was a rectory?

HGB: There was a manse.

MN: Oh, it was called a manse?

HGB: Well, that's the English word for it. Yes they bought a private house about two doors from the church and that's where he and Thelma lived.

MN: His wife was - -

HGB: - - Thelma Hawkins. Thelma, what was Thelma's name, she was a Minisink counselor, Thelma, Thelma; she had a twin sister - - he dated two Minisink ladies; one became one of the international women of the world, Emily Gibbs. And then he met Thelma, and bye Emily and hello Thelma.

MN: Now was Thelma an active force in the community as well?

HGB: I don't think, she didn't have that kind of personality. But she was an RN, a Hunt College graduate and then an RN. But she was there, she participated, but she didn't have a forceful personality.

MN: Any other local institutions, was the library something important, the Morrisania library?

HGB: Oh to me it was, I don't know about other people, but I went to the library twice a week, they got sick of me. Morrisania and then Woodstock, we had two libraries. One on 161<sup>st</sup> and then Morrisania right off of Boston Road.

MN: What about movie theaters, were movies important?

HGB: Oh, yes, yes, yes. We had two big theaters on Prospect Ave. The Loews' Birdland and the RKO. Jesus, what was it, RKO something. And a big ice cream parlor where everyone went to get ice cream.

MN: This was on Prospect Avenue?

HGB: Prospect Avenue was a boulevard, a very beautiful street.

MN: Now, Jim said there were these trees, beautiful trees.

HGB: It was a boulevard! I don't know how it blew down because I wasn't living in the community at that time but Prospect Avenue was an utterly beautiful street.

MN: So this was, you had everything in this neighborhood?

HGB: I think so. I didn't know so at the time but in looking back, I think we were very fortunate.

MN: Was Evander considered a better high school than Morris?

HGB: Oh, Morris was down there and Evander was up here. Evander was three years old when I went there, they had been in existence maybe about twenty years but they had



been up above Wakefield, in the boonies, and then they built that building on Gun Hill.

Oh no, Evander was very very, Dr. Alpert was our principal.

MN: So if you lived in Morrisania you wanted to get into Evander if you could?

HGB: Well no, I didn't, I could go anywhere I wanted to and chose Evander. My father of course would have preferred Hunter High, I wasn't that smart. But my dad went to Morris, as an immigrant, he went to Morris, he liked Morris High.

MN: So your father had actually gone to school in the Bronx?

HGB: Yes, way back when, long before he married my mother.

MN: And then he went to Boston?

HGB: No, he went to Boston two or three times, he and my mother lived there for a while after the marriage.

MN: But he grew up in the Bronx?

HGB: He didn't grow up, he came here as a teenager!

MN: Ok, from Panama.

HGB: That's right, he attended Morris High I guess at night, my dad ended up with a steam engineer's certificate. But of course, as you know, when they appointed you to governmental jobs they had three choices. I don't know if you're old enough to know that. They'd pick three people and my dad was usually number one, but somehow he never got picked, I wonder why.

MN: Was he bilingual, Spanish and English?

HGB: He could speak Spanish reasonably well.

MN: Did your family eat in restaurants or no?

HGB: Oh no, well in those days you didn't go to restaurants. The only people I know who went to restaurants were the extremely well to do or the ones whose mothers didn't cook and there was a place they went to pick up a meal. But people didn't eat in restaurants, unless you went out for a party or something.

MN: Now the Pruitts, when they took me on a neighborhood tour, took me by Forest House. Was that a place that was part of your - -

HGB: - - Yes my dad sat on the board of directors, Gregory, what was Gregory's name? He had been Columbia University's star basketball player, what was Gregory's name? At any rate, he was the director of Forest House. My dad sat on that board for several years.

MN: And did you participate in their programs?

HGB: I went on a couple of conferences with my father, but I wasn't active over there, no.

MN: I'm kind of running out of questions, oh, one more question. When did you first notice seeing Puerto Rican families moving into any neighborhoods?

HGB: 110<sup>th</sup> St., best looking boys I ever saw. They were in Central Park, oh they were pretty, they hot!

MN: What years were those?

HGB: Oh, I guess between '36 and '40.

MN: So, that's, and what about in Morrisania?

HGB: I was a big girl by the time they moved up there. They're late comers; they weren't there when I was a girl.

MN: Right, and do you recall any Puerto Ricans being members of St. Augustine's?

HGB: I would imagine that there were Puerto Rican families, in fact a deputy minister there was a Puerto Rican.

MN: Ok, well I think I've run out of things to ask.

HGB: Sorry I couldn't give you anything startling.

MN: No, you gave me a lot of interesting information. Anything else you would want to say in retrospect, anything I missed?

HGB: You know, recollection is a very interesting thing, they did a piece, one of the papers on old Bronx sites, and they did it on a family named Seabrook. They were friends of my mother's, they came to the Bronx around WWII from, I think it was Wilmington, North Carolina. Martha went to work for the state of New York and Victoria worked for the Mission Society, that's how my sister and I ended up going to Minisink, and their brother, Edwin, I think he worked, he was a sleeping cop, porter. Very well educated, very nice people. They lived on 167<sup>th</sup> Street and lived there until Edmond died. Martha and Victoria, do you know where St. Margaret's is? Have you had occasion?

MN: Yes.

HGB: Well, they owned one of those brownstones. When I sold it, I think Martha had paid \$6,000 for it, what did we sell it for, about \$60,000, I guess it's worth about \$200,000 now. They were very active, the Seabrook ladies and they did quite an article on them in one of the Bronx newspapers, old Bronx sites.

MN: Was Rev. Hawkins from a Caribbean family or a Southern?

HGB: Oh no, no, southern, I think maybe old New York more than southern.

Remember, we were here before nine out of ten of the people who live here, so he may have been old New York.

MN: so a church like St. Augustine's drew from, you know it was a polyglot group of Caribbeans, and African Americans.

HGB: Well, that's who lived in the community. People who had originally come from the West Indies, and people who came from the South, not too many people were native New Yorkers, that was interesting.

MN: Now do you have any recollections in any neighborhood you lived in, of gangs?

HGB: Never, we didn't have that sort of, I was gonna use a bad word, that didn't go on. It it was there it was very quiet. Up on Arthur Avenue you may have had gangs with the Italian boys, but Jewish boys were pussies, they didn't get into gangs, and black boys were busy, their parents – I remember my girlfriends' brothers would shine shoes so they'd get enough money to go to the Yankee games, who had time to have a gang?

MN: Ok, well.

HGB: No, gangs came later, much later.

MN: Ok

[TAPE CUTS OFF]

HGB: - - The seventies.

MN: Well, Gene Norman, I don't know if you know, he was somebody I interviewed who grew up on Kelly Street.

HGB: Well that was another part, you see, your lower east Bronx had four different neighborhoods where people of color - -

(TAPE CUTS OFF)

HGB: Well, no I'm just trying to tell you they didn't mix. The kids that lived over on Southern Boulevard that was another, you met them in high school or stuff, but you hung out with the people who lived right there, you know.

MN: right, cause he remembered gang activity on Kelly, not gangs but the drugs hitting in the late '40s.

HGB: Really?

MN: Yes.

HGB: Well, I was in law school; I guess I was so busy I didn't know what was going on. And none of the, I guess it would be fellows then, because girls weren't involved in that stuff then, none of the fellows I knew got hooked, if they meddled with drugs, maybe they smoked weed. But I didn't even - - you know when I discovered what a reefer smelled like, I went into the hallway of a house we lived in once and I said, "Somebody's burning rags in there." That was reefers. And I guess the guys thought they were really bad when they smoked one. (Laughs).

(PHONE RINGS.)

HGB: Pardon me.

(END OF SESSION)