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Thome, Marie

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Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Marie Tome

DATE

Mark Naison (MN): Hello. This is the 43rd interview of the Bronx African American History Project and we're interviewing Reverend Marie Tome. And what's the name of your church?

Marie Tome (MT): Bright Temple AME Church.

MN: Bright Temple AME Church, and is it here in the Bronx?

MT: Yes it is. It's on 812 Thale St.

MN: 812 Thale St in the Bronx thank you. OK my first question is when did you first move to the Bronx?

MT: I came to the Bronx right after I got out of high school. I graduated in '32 - - June '32 and then in September I was on my way to my grandmother who lived on 3rd Avenue in the Bronx.

MN: And this is in 1932?

MT: That September of 1932.

MN: How long had members of your family lived in the Bronx?

MT: My grandmother had probably lived here for quite some time. I don't remember when she moved here but my earliest recollection of her was that she was always up north.

MN: OK. When we were talking before, you were talking about segregation in South Carolina. What was it that made you decide to move north?

MT: Well, I guess I had just finished high school. And so my father was raising five children because my mother died early and I think he was happy that there was someone to help him, so I helped him with the little ones. As soon as I finished high school he went out and got me a job to work in the city in the country part of Chelmsstead because I had finished what they called normal school, oh you know about all that - -

MN: That's to train teachers right?

MT: That's right. And so he immediately got me a job in the country part of Chelmsstead and I was scared because I didn't want to live - - I had lived a very sheltered life because my father was a brick mason.

MN: Oh so he was a skilled worker.

MT: Yes.

MN: And he owned his own home?

MT: Oh yes. He may have owned several homes. And very smart man. And he went out and he thought he was doing something really good. So I asked him please, don't make me go to the country because they were hanging up black people on trees.

MN: So this was a really frightening part of - -

MT: In my life, yes.

MN: Now, when you say the country, was this near the Sea Islands, that country?

MT: Yes. [Crosstalk] Because I was raised in the city.

MN: You were raised in Charleston?

MT: Charleston, South Carolina.

MN: And you were being sent to be a teacher in the rural area where the prejudice was more raw?

MT: More intense, yes. And I guess I didn't want to leave. Looking back I didn't want to leave that home with my father who was such a great man who had been sheltering us and helping us through. So, I asked if I could go to his mother after maybe [Inaudible] of my education - - asked if I could stay with her and so he said yes I could go - - and that's how I came to New York.

MN: When you came did you have a job?

MT: No. They didn't admit [Inaudible]

MN: Yes I know.

MT: And he wasn't aware of it because my grandmother used to continuously send him a little dollar or two in an envelope and I guess he thought she was getting on great, but she was doing on the streets - -

MN: Oh the domestic work, that's what they called the Bronx Slave Market. So she was doing day labor where she would get out on the street and then somebody would pick her up.

MT: And then she'd get 25 cents an hour.

MN: So she was doing domestic work. Do you remember where she was standing, which corner she would go to?

MT: I don't remember but she lived on about 37/13 3rd Avenue.

MN: And what was the cross street?

MT: 170th St and 3rd Avenue between 170th St and St. Paul Place.

MN: Was that a predominately black area at that time?

MT: I'll tell you, all of the blacks were all in about that area, say from 160th - - I don't think as far back as 161st St, they came up half way.

MN: Yes I know the area very well. There's a housing project there now, the Claremont Houses.

MT: Oh yes it's all so different now but it was terrible then. They had - - I knew my father didn't know how my grandmother was living because they were all cold-water flats.

MN: Those were the railroad flats?

MT: Yes.

MN: It was a very poor neighborhood.

MT: Yes cold-water flats - - no hot water, no steam - -

MN: No heat?

MT: No steam - - but it was better than living in the south.

MN: OK now were these houses brick houses or wood? They were brick buildings - - Now here you come up, you have a high school education, it's the middle of the depression, what kind of work did you try to get?

MT: Anything that would take me. And it was - - I sewed from a child, I loved sewing. And I'd make a dress for somebody for \$2 just like that. I guess it would have been my grandmother.

MN: Did she let you go out onto the streets to do domestic work or she said no?

MT: No sometimes if she wasn't feeling well she'd ask me to help her out, but not to take the job - - you see what I did was, I found out about the factory district down in the 30's.

MN: The garment district.

MT: Yes and I went down there I learned how to upgrade the whole machines and I did. I supported myself.

MN: So you got a job in the garment district. Did you join the union?

MT: Oh yes.

MN: So you were in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union?

MT: Oh yes until I got sick. I got sick in '53.

MN: So you were in the Union for 20 - - more than - -

MT: I was in the Union for a long time and - - because I had to help my grandmother too. Her nephew was living with her and my brother - - because they had sent my brother up to keep her company.

MN: What sort of work was your brother doing?

MT: My brother was younger than me, he was going to school and he went to school until he finished - - I think finished all of high school. But a good while after I - -

MN: OK so you got a job in the garment district and joined the Union. Did you ever get a chance to go back to school to go on to get some college education?

MT: No. What I did was, well many years later, I got into the ministry.

MN: This is after you left the garment industry?

MT: After I left - -

[BREAK]

MT: In the late period?

MN: In the 30's - - they spoke of it as the Bronx Slave Market. Because today you have a lot of Latino/Mexican workers line up on the street corner and get - - yes all over New York. In Brooklyn especially, there's a whole stretch of 40 blocks where you can - - yes

so which is interesting. In those days in the depression getting a job in the garment district was a good job.

MT: Yes. But it wasn't - - anything was better than working in South Carolina. But it didn't pay that much because even when I got sick - - I got sick in 1953, I had a mastectomy and I had to [Inaudible] until I recovered and then I came back to New York. But to go back to what we were talking about - -

MN: Were you able to get your own apartment?

MT: Yes.

MN: With the salary you were making - -

MT: Oh, no. Not until I got married.

MN: What year did you get married?

MT: 1937. My grandmother wouldn't allow me to 'till - -

MN: Where did you meet your husband?

MT: I think it was just a lot of young people my age on my block. And when my brother would be here all the time I guess my brother introduced me to some of them.

MN: Did you belong to a church when you came to New York?

MT: Yes.

MN: Which church?

MT: Oh we founded our own church.

MN: You founded your own church?

MT: I didn't. But they call me one of the founders - - but I wasn't founding anything at 18 years old.

MN: What was the name of the church?

MT: The same church that I belong to.

MN: Your family founded an AME church?

MT: My grandmother was one of the founders.

MN: At which - - was it at the same location it is now?

MT: Oh no. We were on 163rd St and - - what's the name of that Avenue, right off 3rd Avenue - -

MN: Not Boston Rd?

MT: No, this way.

MN: It cuts across?

MT: East of Boston - -

MN: Not Prospect.

MT: The next little avenue that didn't quite - -

MN: Not Melrose?

MT: Oh shucks. Anyway, they were giving bread to the people and my grandmother was really proud, she never got the bread. So they were giving loads of bread to the people and we walked from 170th and St Paul's, the place where I told you - - they say the nickel coffee - - down to 163rd St and Eagle - - It's Eagle Avenue!

MN: OK it was 163rd St and Eagle Avenue is where - -

MT: It was on Eagle when - -

MN: Was this a church building?

MT: Yes Thessalonia Baptist Church owned that building, and they rented that building from Thessalonia Baptist.

MN: So your church was renting from Thessolonian Baptist, which had moved to another building. Had your family been AME in - -

MT: No, my family was always ME, Methodist, United Methodist. But they wanted a Methodist church and the nearest Methodist church was on Marsh Avenue, it's still there - - they wanted to start one so my grandmother and Mr. Parish, the one of the gentlemen and Ms. Akin, another lady, and some others - - that started the AME Church there on Eagle Avenue and they - - giving out bread used to walk from 170th St and 3rd Avenue all the way down 163rd St for a loaf of bread. The kids today would laugh at that, to think that they would actually walk that distance for a loaf of - - but in talking together then they started this AME church out of that and they had a lot of hassle - - but they persevered until they got our church started and we went on until 7 years we moved and after several other moves we finally ended up in Home St. and Union Avenue, where the city bought that whole block and now they have a school. So we stayed there for quite a few years until we finally had to move because the city wanted to build.

MN: And then you moved to Faile St.

MT: And then we moved to Faile St.

MN: Which is where you are now.

MT: In 1966.

MN: When you and your husband got married, where did you get your first apartment?

MT: We didn't have an apartment. [Laughs]. We got a room. We got a room in Harlem and neither one of us had ever lived in Harlem and we just couldn't - - I think our people were afraid of us living down there because it was a little too fast for us.

MN: And then did you eventually come back up to the Bronx?

MT: So my mother in law decided we better come and live with her but she had 7 children, so we lived in that room for a while and I went out and found an apartment on Wilke Avenue and 164th St and we stayed there a while until I found another place on 167th St and we moved there where I stayed until - - I got married again because I had two marriages. After I had the mastectomy I had to divorce my first husband - - he wanted a divorce so I gave it to him. And almost several ages later, I met - - another man joined our church and thought I would never get married again but I did.

MN: Did you have children in your first marriage?

MT: No, none in either marriage. That's the story of my life I guess.

MN: I want to ask a few questions about the neighborhood you lived in on 3rd Avenue, was that a neighborhood where people looked out for one another?

MT: Yes. You could hang your clothes up on the roof; nobody had a washing machine or dryers at that stage. We could hang our clothes up on the roof and not even think about it.

MN: Could you leave your doors open?

MT: No - - I guess we always had keys. But there weren't that fearful of people - -

MN: You weren't fearful of being robbed - -

MT: No.

MN: Or if you came home from work late at night - -

MT: No. Not at all.

MN: Was there much – you came from a place where there was a lot of discrimination and even violence; was there much discrimination in the Bronx?

MT: No. Not at all because you worked together. See I was sewing and most of my life that's what I did, was factory work until I got sick and then when I got sick I started studying. I had been studying before that for the ministry.

MN: Where most of the women you sewed with Jewish or Italian?

MT: Some of them, yes.

MN: And did everybody get along?

MT: Yes. One Jewish lady I owe my life to because when I went out to have lunch one day, she was working on the machine right next to my machine and we got into some sort of conversation and I had to move up on the lump in my breast and she said oh, and she was much older than me, she said when you go to lunch don't come back into work until you call the hospital and see if you can make an appointment. And I did. I did just what she told me to because her daughter had a lump and she found it was nothing. She said it was probably nothing but go and find out. But it was something, she was right, it was something. And I don't remember the ladies name but I'm indebted to her because she made me think twice about that lump.

MN: Did you and your friends ever go listen to music in the Bronx? Did you go to nightclubs or places to dance?

MT: That was one of the things about my first marriage that wasn't so good because I was just a little bit too religious and he liked [Inaudible]. In fact that caused a lot of friction.

MN: Where did you study to become a minister, was it a particular school?

MT: In Manhattan, Bible Institute. I went down there for about 10 years at night because I couldn't go in the day time because I had to support myself so that was the

whole thing - - all of my way through my education I had to support myself. Things are so much better today than it was then, because these kids can borrow money and go to school and pay that money back after they finish. We didn't have that money so we couldn't go.

MN: When you became a minister, were you the first woman minister of your church?

MT: I think so.

MN: How did people - - did they accept you as a woman?

MT: Yes. Well I had been at that church since the school days, since I came up through the sun school and I served [Inaudible] after my husband died, after my second husband died - - so all along I've still been in that church.

MN: Wow. When you're the minister is that a big responsibility?

MT: No. I'm not the pastor. See, I can afford to be the pastor - -

[BREAK]

MN: Can you explain to us the difference between a minister and a pastor?

MT: Oh yes. A pastor is like the person in charge of a project you know? And the minister is one of those people that you can rely on to do the work. And if it's a good minister, a good supervisor, then she can really get the ministers and the people in charge to do different things like one minister's good building or knows something about building, another with something else - - she can really get to work in different fields.

MN: Right. As a minister did you preach in the church?

MT: Oh yes.

MN: So all the ministers at some time or another would preach.

MT: They have to. In order to be a minister you have to preach. We are ordained for that.

MN: So is the pastor also a woman?

MT: Our pastor - - in many years we do have a female pastor.

MN: OK so you have been both the pastor and the minister.

MT: I've been the assistant pastor. I never wanted that job because I had to support myself. The pastor is the one who gets the funds - - she's paid, she's paid a salary.

MN: The ministers are not paid salaries?

MT: No. So I couldn't afford the luxury of being a pastor.

MN: How many members of the congregation were there in the church?

MT: When it started or now?

MN: Let's say now.

MT: Well I guess we have about 200.

MN: And was it ever much bigger than that or that was about the average size?

MT: I don't think it was much bigger than that.

MN: So it's basically been about 100 - 200 people.

MT: Yes.

MN: Now there's a picture of Avery - - is that the school that you went to in Charleston?

MT: It is the school my mother went to too. My mother was also [Inaudible] institute?

Most people don't use the word normal and they don't know what it means - - but he knew it.

MN: My mother was a teacher. And my father was a teacher; I come from a family of teachers.

MT: And you see how they're dressed in that picture on the side here? Well my grandmother graduated after [Inaudible] because I remember the pictures of her graduation. Of course when I came along it looked better but I often think about the College of Charleston bought Avery Institute. Now when I was growing up, I couldn't even sit on the steps of the College of Charleston because I'm black. But now [Inaudible] when young people let them know, that these people from Charleston, the colors of Charleston, seems to be something almost every week letting me know what's going on in the College of Charleston.

MN: So you get all this mail from the College of Charleston where you weren't even allowed to sit on the steps at one point.

MT: Yes. But of course I am when they want money. [Laughter]

MN: Now when you were in the garment workers union, did you ever go on these picnics or did you ever go to their resort, tenement? You didn't participate in any of the social events of the union?

MT: I'm not a social being - - not too much of a social being.

MN: Daniel, you wanted to ask Reverend Tome a question?

Daniel (D): I've seen those pictures in the books of the garment workers, they had them in a big room and there's hundreds of women working, was that the - - that was the scene that you - -

MT: Yes. I did so well, Daniel, until I got sick. I had owned a couple of thrift shops, one was a [inaudible] where we had about - - I think that was had about 20 missions, it was called [Inaudible] shop. I was contracting, the [Inaudible] was downtown, remember

that? The [Inaudible] was downtown, and we'd have the dresses already cut to the Bronx areas - - wherever the small contractor was. We made dresses like that.

MN: So you were also making dresses up here?

MT: Yes.

MN: As well as down at 30th St?

MT: Well that was long after yes.

MN: So wait a minute, after you left the garment district - -

MT: Not after I left the garment district, I was still in the garment district. I didn't need the garment district until I got sick.

MN: Right but you were still working up here at the second job?

MT: The only reason why I left the garment district was that the doctor told me if I wanted to live I couldn't sew anymore. So after I had the mastectomy in 1953, that was it.

MN: So were you still working or did you stop working all together?

MT: No. I think how could god - - I had taken an examination for the city and my niece, she used to tell why do you work so hard? I'd work in the day and then if somebody wanted someone to work at night, I'd work at night, always sewing. She said why do you work so hard with your education? Where you could do something better. And she kept after me and I finally took an examination for the city and well I was in the hospital sick, the test scores came out, oh wow I never meant to - - but I was determined wasn't going to leave sewing to work for the city because I didn't like doing - - working for the city, I liked sewing and I was doing alright sewing. But finally I couldn't work anymore; I had to take the job.

MN: What department for the city did you work for?

MT: Lord help me. I knew so well. The first job I got for the city was in the department of hospitals. I went to Bellevue Hospital and I worked on the morgues as a water clerk. I stayed at Bellevue in the rehab department - - see now, I was sick with this mastectomy - - wasn't sick but I mean I wasn't that well - - I learned how to drive a water car and drove down to Bellevue [Inaudible]

MN: Now where was your apartment when you were driving down to Bellevue, what streets were you living on then?

MT: I was living on 168th St, 760 168th St.

MN: And that's between where and where?

MT: That's between not quite Boston Rd - - Forest Avenue and Tinton, 716 - - the building is still there. And well, when I got sick I was living there. And I kept that apartment with my partner while I was sick for a year, paid my rent, and [Inaudible] And I stayed there until I started working down in the [Inaudible]

MN: Which center?

MT: I'm sorry, I made a mistake. Until I started working for the city.

MN: OK. How long ago did you buy this house?

MT: Well, I married my second husband - - let's see, he died in '65 so - - I think we were there [Inaudible] maybe two years, a year and a half and he had a sudden death.

D: As a minister you must have done a lot of counseling to people, did you ever counsel people who had come to you about drug problems or being involved in - -

MT: Sometimes.

D: When did that counseling happen?

MT: Not later - - maybe a couple years I even had a prison [Inaudible]

MN: In what prison?

MT: In Falhallow.

MN: In New York. Was this prison a women's prison?

MT: Women's prison. So we had all sorts of problems. I found a lot of [Inaudible] some of them were having a rough time you know?

MN: David do you have any more questions?

D: I just - - you know, two things I've been reading about recently are the fires in the Bronx, do you recall?

MT: No I don't.

MN: So you were living here in the 1960's?

MT: '65.

MN: So this neighborhood wasn't hit by the fires, it was further up by Crotona Park. This neighborhood never burned.

MT: No. Because this - - it all remains the same as when we came here.

MN: What sort of work did your first husband do?

MT: My first husband - - well, we were - - he was a shipping clerk - - one time, because we got married young, and he elevated himself to the fact - - and then he died, he was working for the trains.

MN: Right for the transit authority. What sort of work did your second husband do?

MT: My second husband had his own business.

MN: And what sort of business was that?

MT: Radio and TV.

MN: Daniel any more questions?

D: What were your experiences like with your landlords when you first got to New York?

MT: Before I owned my house?

D: Yes before you owned your house.

MT: Very good. I had no bad experiences with them. That's why I tell them easy on [Inaudible] don't try to beat the system, pay your bills. That's right, pay your bills and you'll find out. You can manage. That comes first, pay your bills, pay your pastor to your church, and pay your bills. [Inaudible] You think of him as far away but he isn't. He's with us all the time, there's no place you can't be and he's protecting you. Always protecting us, always. [Inaudible] Well, you didn't come to hear me preach.

MN: Well, you can preach to us a little bit; we'll take it all. [Laughter]

MT: It comes out.

MN: Do you still find that young people listen to you when you preach?

MT: Yes. I'm still - - I've always been in this Sunday school part of the church, I've always loved working with the young people, and then come, some of them come to me and I don't even remember them and it's just so good to see them.

MN: Now what do you think - -

MT: Just like Sharon. And Edy, her daughter. I taught music to Edy.

MN: Was there a lot of music in your church?

MT: Yes.

MN: Do you play an instrument?

MT: Not anymore, this is the only thing that I play.

MN: Do you still play the piano?

MT: Very little.

MN: Could you play for us?

MT: Very little. [Laughter]

MN: Did you learn to play in South Carolina?

MT: Yes.

MN: And would you play in church for people?

MT: Yes.

MN: You would play the piano and sing and preach at the same time?

MT: I don't sing.

MN: You play the piano for the choir?

MT: And now you know what is so remarkable when I was ill? I lost my voice and I never sang that well, but now I can sing hardly at all. And I can't even talk but it's coming back, I'm talking more now than I did maybe last week. It's coming back.

MN: Good, now at your church is there a choir?

MT: There is a choir.

MN: And what do they sing, what sort of music, Gospel music?

MT: Gospel. Yes. And the church is going towards Gospel music more than - - you know the church used to have the old hymns - -

MN: The old spirituals and - -

MT: Yes the old hymns. You don't hear that anymore, everything is gospel.

MN: Does the choir travel to competitions or anything?

MT: No, no. We have about four or five choirs in that small church.

MN: Four or five choirs?

MT: Yes in that small church.

MN: When you preach, do people talk - - if you're preaching very well do they say things to you to encourage you?

MT: Oh yes.

MN: So what do they say to you? If the pastor is preaching, what do the congregation - -

MT: Amen. And - -

MN: Do they every clap their hands?

MT: Oh yes.

MN: Can you get them really clapping or - - is this church emotional as in Baptist church where people shout and - -

MT: Yes the Methodist church is getting very emotional.

MN: And do you have a - -

MT: But you're thinking of the Pentecostal church.

MN: Oh the Pentecostal's where the - -

MT: They're very - - they talk in tongues - -

MN: You don't talk in tongues?

MT: Not any more. I remember talking in tongues once and that was when I received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. You see, I was baptized in the river Jordan too you know.

MN: You were baptized in the river Jordan?

MT: Yes. I went to [Inaudible] and I'm so glad I went and believed in it.

MN: Wow. Now in your church - - I've been to a few churches since I've begun this research and I've seen them with an organ and drums and a guitar, does your church have the drums and the guitar?

MT: Yes.

MN: So there's real music there.

MT: All of that now that they never used to have.

MN: When did they start having an electric guitar and drums in the church?

MT: I don't know, I couldn't put my finger on exactly when. But I know they do have.

MN: And do the young people like the music?

MT: Sure.

MN: Can you play an organ as well as a piano?

MT: It's the same keyboard.

MN: What kind of organ do they have in the church?

MT: I'd say a pipe organ but they don't have regular pipe organs in the church, they have an electric organ. [Inaudible]

MN: Do most of the people in your church live in the Bronx or do they come from all over?

MT: No they come from all over. We had a family that I spoke to and a young lady that I've known for a long time. Her family has come to - - she'd come all the way over here from Staten Island. [Crosstalk]

MN: Do you have a copy of a flyer or anything from your church that I could bring back to Fordham? Because one of my colleagues is a minister and if you have anything about the church that I could bring back to show Reverend Chapmen - - He's an ordained

congregational minister. His father was the pastor of Grace Congregational Church in Harlem and he's a professor in our department. He would love to meet you and see your church.

MT: He can come by the church.

MN: It's on Faile Street near where?

MT: It's right on the corner - - Faile and Lafayette. We've been there since 1966.

MN: Because I might drive by there. What's the number?

MT: 812 Fail Street. Right on the corner Faile and Lafayette. It's an old manor house.

MN: Daniel, do you have a good memory, 812 Faile St Lafayette?

MT: [Inaudible] We haven't done much with it since we bought it. We were disappointed that we haven't done much, because we've been there since 1966, but it looks like a church.

MN: Any more questions Daniel?

D: When you first came up from South Carolina, did you encounter a lot of African Americans - -

[END TAPE 1, SIDE 1; BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

MN: - - that neighborhood on 3rd Avenue, were there a lot people from South Carolina in that area?

MT: From all over. My first husband was Bermudian.

MN: OK he was West Indian.

MT: Yes. His mother - - what a wonderful, wonderful mother he had.

MN: Now were many members of your church West Indian or they were mostly African American from the south?

MT: Mostly African American - - at that time they were mostly African American. At that time it was mostly African American - - even now. This is a [Inaudible] African Americans Episcopal.

MN: OK well I don't want to keep you too much longer, but thank you so much, this was very valuable.

[BREAK]

MN: Was this the first AME church in the Bronx?

MT: That I know of, yes. A few Sundays ago one of the sons of one of the members that I told you who'd [Inaudible] when that started off - - he came into church and it was so wonderful that he came in and he was in my Sunday school. Of course, he's an old man now.

MN: He's an old man. Can I ask how old you are?

MT: Oh sure. I'm 89.

MN: 89?

MT: Yes. I'm going to be 90 in March the 9th.

MN: You're going to be 90 years old.

MT: March the 9th.

MN: God, you look like 70. Daniel's father's a minister.

D: He was. He was a minister for 15 years.

MN: In what church?

D: He was a teacher. It was non-denomination, Protestant minister.

MT: That's good. So many people are going out of the denominational churches for some reason. They can make more profits in the non-denominational church - - don't they have to pay - -

MN: Now let me ask you another question; do you happen to have by any chance an extra picture of you around? Because a lot of times we come with a camera or video but we didn't this time.

MT: You didn't this time? I think I have a picture that somebody showed me yesterday, course you don't want a young picture - -

MN: Oh young picture's fine.

MT: I'm not going to give you that one though. [Laughter]

MN: Any picture is fine, young/old - -

[END INTERVIEW]