



8-11-2005

Brown, Donald

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

Follow this and additional works at: https://research.library.fordham.edu/baahp_oralhist



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brown, Donald. August 11, 2005. Interview with the Bronx African American History Project. BAAHP Digital Archive at Fordham University.

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Bronx African American History Project at Fordham Research Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Fordham Research Commons. For more information, please contact considine@fordham.edu, bkilee@fordham.edu.

Interviewers: Dr. Brian Purnell (BP)
Interviewee: Dr. Donald Brown (DB)

BP: Today is August 11, 2005. I'm interviewing Dr. Donald Brown. Dr. Brown, could you please spell your first and last name for the record?

DB: Certainly. Donald: D-O-N-A-L-D; Brown: B-R-O-W-N.

BP: And do you agree to participate in this? This is an interview for the Bronx African American History project. The audio tapes and the transcription and the video will all be stored at the Bronx County Historical Society and be a part of the collection of the Bronx African American History Project.

DB: I agree, I agree.

BP: OK, Dr. Brown could we start with some biographical background?

DB: Certainly.

BP: What is your date of birth?

DB: February 4, 1948.

BP: And where were you born?

DB: Born in the Morissania Hospital in the Bronx, NY.

BP: And what were your parents' names?

DB: My parents were Lula Moore and Robert Brown.

BP: Let's start with Lula Moore. Where was she born or where was she from?

DB: Lula was born, my mother was born, in Athens, Georgia. And actually let me qualify that. It's referred to as Athens, Georgia, but she was actually born in a little town right outside called Whitehall, Georgia.

BP: And how did she come to live in New York—or where was your father from?

DB: My father was from Charleston, South Carolina.

BP: Do you know their dates of birth?

DB: I do not know their dates. I do know that my father would be over 100 years old and my mother would be probably be somewhere around 85, 86 years old.

BP: What is the story of how they came to live in New York, or more particularly in the Bronx?

DB: My father—and my mother didn't live—I should mention that my mother and father were not married. I don't mind mentioning that. They were not married. My mother had been married before and as a matter of fact, she had three children in her first marriage and something happened between her and her husband in that first marriage. And for a while, my mother did not know where her kids were, where my brother and two sisters were. Their father, to whom my mother was married, took them away. They moved out west somewhere. My mother didn't know where they were. I would eventually meet them a few years later; I would meet them when they came to my mother's funeral. I was six years old at that time, my brother was eight, my sister was five. And I met my brother and two sisters on that occasion. They were at least three or four years older than us. So they weren't married, but wow, I suspect that while my mother was going through—if you will—she met a gentlemen who she was attracted to and they got together and had three kids out of that union: my brother, my sister, and me. And my father was at least, I'm sure, twelve or thirteen years older than my mother. And asked where he was from,

he was originally from Charleston, South Carolina. Did not like Charleston, South Carolina. So as a young man of thirteen or fourteen somehow found his way to New York City and went to work. I don't think that it was too long after arriving that he went to work at the shipyards. He worked on a banana boat down in the lower end. It may have been the banana fruit company; it was a boat, a name that has to do with bananas—he may have worked for that company during the summers. And during the winters he worked in construction—or maybe it was the other way around— worked construction in the warmer and when it was colder he was on the boat he worked for the banana company. Yes, yes. But out of that union came three children; my brother, my sister and me.

BP: You said he didn't like Charleston too much. Was there anything particular that he might have ever mentioned about living in Charleston and living in the South?

DB: The racism. Namely, the racism. And that along with the fact that he was the youngest of his siblings and I guess the discipline; he kind of rebelled against the discipline coming from his parents, so he left. He made a decision to leave Charleston.

BP: When your parents moved to New York, did your parents settle in the Bronx at first?

DB: As a matter of fact, my father, from what I can recall, never lived in the Bronx. He never lived in the Bronx. He came to visit us as our mother was raising us, but he lived in Manhattan. He lived on probably 140th or 141st right off 7th Avenue. And my mother originally came from Philadelphia. Her mother lived there. In fact, at the time that my grandmother died, I guess she had been in Philadelphia for a number of years. My mother lived there for family, moved from Athens, Georgia, settled in Philly, and then some of the family decided, my mother being one of them, that they would make a little bit further up north, so they settled in New York. Some of them settled in the Bronx and then others settled in Manhattan.

BP: What was the first place that your mother lived with you and your two siblings in the Bronx?

DB: Brooke Avenue. Brook Avenue, very first place. I always remember the address: it was 1345 Brooke Avenue.

BP: And that was the Crotona Park Apartments?

DB: That area, that area eventually became the Crotona Park Apartments. Right around that Area was Webster Avenue; Teller Avenue was not too, too far away. As a matter of fact, we went to school on Teller Avenue and it was PS 53.

BP: Did your mother work?

DB: My mother worked in a restaurant. She was a server. She was a waitress in a restaurant.

BP: In the Bronx?

DB: In the Bronx.

DP: What kind of restaurant was it?

DB: I'm not altogether sure because again, I was six years old and I was very, very young. And I don't have that much memory; it's just not very vivid as I think about my mother. I do remember when my brother thought he was superman and he went off of what we called "the mountain" on Webster Avenue, went off something that was akin to a mountain, and I remember him going to the hospital and being bandaged from head to toe. He was a mess. And I remember my mother holding him. I remember him laying down with her. I can remember my sister and me laying down with my mother, but that's the recollection that I have. I don't have others. I remember that and I just remember her being nurturing and I can remember the smile, but aside from that, different interactions I

don't remember a whole lot. She died, again, when I was six years old, and she was a young woman of about 35 or 36 of a tubular pregnancy.

BP: When your mother passed, I remember you had mentioned that you then lived with extended family. With whom did you live and where?

DB: I lived with—it was almost like musical chairs. My brother would live—my father did not live with us, I think I mentioned that earlier, he did not live with us, and so he turned to different relatives. One of them was his nephew. My brother went there first. And actually, let me back up for a bit. When my mother first died, we lived with my grandmother in Philadelphia. Father took us to Philadelphia to live with my grandmother for about a year or so, and while we were there, my grandmother passed away. My father had established a relationship with a woman in Philadelphia and asked her if she would come back to take care of us in New York. She agreed to come to New York. I guess she wanted to come to New York. She agreed to come and take care of us. And she did for about three or four years, and then her son became ill in Baltimore so she left New York to go to Baltimore. She took with her my little sister. I guess we were happy about that, you know, get rid of the little girl. And there was a commitment, however, that she was going to come back; if she had my little sister that she should come back to take care of us. When she left, believe it or not, my brother and I were in an apartment by ourselves in the evenings. My father would come and he would leave after a while. We were kind of by ourselves. And then my brother got into some trouble, got into some difficulty with the juvenile authorities in the Bronx. As a matter of fact, I don't know if it was called Spark Detention Center, but he went to a juvenile facility. When he came out, he went to live with an Uncle—actually it was more of a cousin—my father's nephew. We called him Uncle Freddy. And my brother went to live with him for a spell. He was there for a year, something must have happened, so my father took him from there to his godmother's house. He went to live with his godmother down on 121st in Manhattan. As he left to go there, I then went to Uncle Fred's house. I stayed there for a while, at Uncle Fred's house on Tinton Avenue in the Bronx. Left there to go to the next site. My brother went to his godmother's house, something operated, some went aerie there, he left there, I

went to his godmother's house. I stayed there for about a year or two. And after that, my father became ill. He was dying of cancer. He and his wife, my stepmother, were estranged; she took him in at the time that he was basically dying of cancer. He asked her if she would allow for my brother to come live with them. She agreed. I guess it had everything to do with the fact that he was dying of cancer. So he stayed there.

BP: In Baltimore?

DB: No, that was in Manhattan. My father lived in Manhattan and his wife. He lived with my father and his wife. And I should mention that my father and his wife were estranged, obviously, during the time when my mother and he had gotten together. But anyway, when he was sick, my brother went to live with them. I never lived with them. My father looked for another placement for me and that placement was with an extended family member, a distant cousin on my mother's side, and his name was the Reverend Author William Clayton and his wife's name was Emily. They agreed to take me in. They would provide me with a roof over my head; they would give me a caring environment, and that was in the Patterson projects. I think it was 343 E. 143rd St. and 3rd Avenue, I think that was the building.

BP: How old were you?

DB: I was twelve. I think I was twelve years old.

BP: So for about six years more or less, you moved around with different family members. Did you stay in the same school, PS 53?

DB: No, I didn't. Well, I finished at PS 53. I finished elementary school at PS 53 and then the next school that I went to was the Paul Lawrence Dunbar High School on—and I think Paul Lawrence Dunbar was, if I'm not mistaken—

BP: Middle School?

DB: Middle School—we did not call them middle schools then, they were junior high schools. So Finished at PS 53 and then went to Paul Lawrence Dunbar, not very far from Tinton Avenue, not very, very far from there. I think it was 165th St. or there about. The school was still very much there because it wasn't old at that time.

BP: so in all the residential transitions, you stayed at PS 53 and then went to Paul Lawrence Dunbar?

DB: Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Right. I think I stayed there for about a year or so and then went to JHS 120. And that was down on 121st Street I believe it was and 1st Avenue. That was the John A.S. Roberts Junior High School. I stayed there for about a year.

BP: It's right across the street from the Wagner Houses?

DB: There you go, you know where it is. I have not been there in years and years but right across from Wagner. Stayed there for about a year or so, maybe slightly less, and then came to Elijah D. Clark Junior High School and Elijah D. Clark is right across the street from the Patterson Projects.

BP: I want to move in—well, I do have one question—I'm wondering do you remember any of the specifics of—you said that your brother had gotten into trouble, do you remember any of the specifics about what type of trouble he had gotten into?

DB: My brother did—my brother did things to draw attention to himself and I think was really reaching out to my father. He was reaching out to my father, so he would do things to bring attention to himself. The specific thing that he did was that he robbed someone. And it may have been a simple thing; I can't remember exactly what it was, but it was foolish. He went out and robbed something and I should mention that I saw when my brother eventually went away to the Spark Detention Center or whatever it was called then, I saw that his negative acting out brought attention to himself. My father would

intervene; he would pay close attention to him. I thought I would do the same thing. And so what I did was robbed a bike. I robbed a bike. And not very far from where I went to school and that was PS 53. I went down a cellar of someone's apartment building, helped myself to a bicycle. I mention it; I mention that because it turned out to be for me, one of the best things that ever happened. The reason it turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened was that I was placed in the care—believe it or not—of the Youth Authorities of New York. I was placed on probation. Obviously I wasn't sent away because I was basically a good kid; I had done fairly well in school, I was well liked, I was—I guess I had it going on as a student. But when I was referred to the Youth Authority in New York, I met a gentleman by the name of Mr. Hall. Mr. Hall was a probation officer—a black gentleman. I was on probation for a year, maybe slightly even less than a year. He asked me if I wanted to remain on probation at the end of my tenure. I said yes. I guess I blew him away; I surprised him when I said yes. And I said yes because I received positive reinforcement from Mr. Hall. He encouraged me to be the very best that I very could be, encouraged me to go to school. He showed me the possibilities, introduced me to things that I would not have otherwise been introduced to, which was very, very positive. He believed in me. He gave me the attention that I wanted and that just came through meeting with him maybe once a month, meeting with my probation officer. It turned out to be a very, very positive thing because from that point on, I didn't get into any difficulty and I was on the road to college. So my brother's acting out and doing things, small things that drew attention to himself, had positive implications for me. Yeah, Yeah.

BP: That's very powerful. I wanted to talk a little bit thematically about your memories of both school at PS 53 and Paul Laurence Dunbar Junior High School and [Inaudible] and then move into also thematic memories of life at Patterson. So first, with school, what do you remember about your classroom experiences in elementary school and in junior high school and also the students, who were the students you went to school with?

DB: In elementary school, PS 53, the students I went to school with were students who grew up on Brooke Avenue, grew up on Washington Avenue, grew up in a community—

just grew up in what I saw as a very close-knit community. We were not—we didn't have any money. In fact, all of us were poor. That was a common denominator in living on Brook Avenue, but we were close. Both that lived in my building 1345 Brooke Avenue and we were family. We were family. We would argue, we would have beef with each other, but brothers and sisters do that. We went on to PS 53; we joined the white students at PS 53 and at that time was largely Jews, the majority of the school, Jews.

BP: And Brooke Avenue was predominately—

DB: Predominately black. And I should also add that there were a few Latinos. I'm sure that there were some folk from the Caribbean, I just don't remember very many of my classmates being from the Caribbean. But there were Puerto Ricans that I do remember. So we went to PS 53 and largely Jewish—the teachers overwhelmingly, virtually, were all Jewish. I remember them being very, very caring. Some people are concerned now with teachers having low expectations of students—that wasn't the case at PS 53. I'll always remember Mrs. Newman. I'll remember Mrs. Geiga, who encouraged me, encouraged those of us who were in her class. So these very fond memories of those teachers and the difference I thought they made for me, I can't speak for everyone else, but they were encouraging for me. I remember not having clothes. I tell my son that when I was in school, I guess I was referring mainly to Junior High School, when I was at Elijah D. Clarke, I wore the same pair of pants for the entire year. When I went to Junior High School it wasn't vastly different when I went to elementary school. We really didn't have. But I remember the teachers caring enough about us that they would bring little things that their sons couldn't wear any longer. They would bring them in and give them to us.

BP: In interacting with Jewish students, with white students, what was that experience like?

DB: It was a positive experience. From I what I remember, there was really no difference at all. I mean, we got along very, very well at PS 53—got along very well. I remember

going over to some of my classmates' homes—I don't remember them coming over to mine, you know, they were not coming down—there were some stairs leading up to PS 53 from Webster Avenue. You would go up some stairs by the Coco Rico Factory up these stair to Teller Avenue and it was a world of difference—the black kids going up there. But the Jewish community was not coming down. But when we got up there, things were cool, they were basically cool.

BP: What types of games do you remember playing as a kid?

DB: I remember especially Johnny on the Pony, Ringalevio—you've heard those names?

BP: I have, through this project.

DB: OK, you remember that?

BP: If you could describe a little bit what was Johnny on the Pony and what was the point of Ringalevio?

DB: Ringalevio was just getting from one end of the field to the other without being stopped, without being tagged. That was the point of Ringalevio. The other one, Johnny and the Pony, was for someone to bend over by a wall and others would run and try to pile as high as possible without falling. It was fun. I remember Loadsy's and those were soda tops down on the ground. We would play that. What I remember as well was making scooters. I remember making scooters out of soda crates, you know, you'd have a box with a soda crate on it, we'd put handles on there, there's a little pole that went down and skates at both ends, and we would travel all over the city on that box. [Laughter] You've heard about that, I'm sure.

BP: Oh yes.

DB: It was great. So I what I remember, in terms of creativity back in the day, we were just very, very creative. We didn't have the money, so we made things and we had fun. I remember my father saying you could go all over New York City, you just need to be in the house by dark. When I come over, I expect that you're going to be in the house. So yeah, we had fun with those games.

BP: And the games, black and white kids played together?

DB: Well at PS 53 Ringalevio, Johnny on the Pony, certainly. But again, in terms of coming down Brooke Avenue and Washington Avenue at the light, I can't honestly say I remember white kids coming into our community. We didn't hang out—I don't want to give the impression we hung out after school—no, after school, we went our different ways. In school, we got along just fine and recess, we got along just fine.

BP: You described your teachers being caring. Do you have any memories about some of the ways that they might have encouraged academic success among you and your peers?

DB: I remember having difficulty. I remember having difficulty with some of the subject matter and receiving extra attention after class, at the close of the day, I remember Mrs. Geiga and Mrs. Newman spending extra time with me. I remember at one point they thought that I had—well—I guess I just can't put it any other way: they must have thought that I was retarded. And they referred me on. They wanted me to have a check up and I think they thought I was retarded or something was wrong with me because I would just sit in the class and much like I'm looking at you, I could not hear. I really could not hear what was going on. But they had me...they referred me not to the doctor, but to the nurses' office. The problem that I had was that there was just a build up of wax in my ears. Just a build up of wax. I really—there was nobody to really monitor us when I was in elementary school. My mother had passed away; the woman was taking care of us. My father would come over in the evenings in terms of getting ourselves ready—the habits just were not the best. I just had a build up in my ear. When that was looked into, when that was removed, it was a world of difference; things came alive for me. I just advanced.

I just advanced. But I'm glad they had the savvy to make sure that I saw the nurse and I had that taken care of. I hope this is helpful Brian, I hope this is helpful to you.

BP: Yes, Yes. Very. Feel free to ask for clarification and if you want to stop at any point to write—that's fine.

DB: Thank you so much.

BP: What are your memories of first arriving to Patterson Houses? Also, when you moved in with Reverend Clayton and his family, did he have children?

DB: No, Reverend and Mrs. Clayton were elderly. Reverend Clayton was probably at that time 67 years old. About 67 years old. Mom was probably somewhere around 60 or so and I just thought that they were very, very kind, but they were old. And I wondered whether they could relate to me. I was scared. And I guess I was also very concerned that "Here we go again... I've been moved to another setting; how long?" Once I got there having dealt with the fact that they were an elderly couple, the next big thing was "how long am I going to be here?" Is it just going to be a year like other places? But they provided me an assurance that this was going to be home as long as I wanted it to be, particularly after being there for about a year or so, my father died. My father passed away. And he asked them—yes he had cancer of the kidneys and before he passed away, much like he had asked his wife to make sure that my brother was taken care of, he asked them if they would take care of me. As far as I know, he didn't provide them with any money to take care of me. He didn't provide any money—but the Reverend worked at Lennox Hill Hospital in New York. He was a janitor at the Lennox Hill Hospital. He actually literally mopped the floors and the like and I remember it being mentioned that he made \$40 a week. Mrs. Clayton didn't make anything because she was a homemaker and she just stayed at home. And she was sickly, but she made sure that I had something to eat, that I would go to church on Sunday Morning, that I would go to school everyday. I remember her going to the parents meetings, getting on—walking, first of all, when I was in junior high school at Clarke being at those parent meetings, she would be there.

And then they just assured me that when my father died, this was going to be home. They never asked me to call them mom and dad, that I can remember, they never asked me to do that. It was something that I decided to do because they provided a family for me. They became mom and dad. So encouraged me when I was at Clarke Junior High School and spurred me on to go to High School and supported me while I was at the [Inaudible] high school.

BP: What was the Patterson community like? Who were the people that lived there, what was the social atmosphere like for the kids?

DB: I thought it was good. I think of the names of the kids that I grew up with at that period of time; Milton Sharpe is one, Debrah Sharpe—I remember having a crush on Debrah—Joan Vasser, Gilbert Vasser, Nikki Bonds, Joel Franklin, Brooke Salley, Joseph Curklain, the Polites—Michael Polite and his brother, DJ. We all went to Clarke Junior High School together. In terms of the games I mentioned, the Ringelevio, the Johnny on the Pony and the like—I remember playing those games—we would just gave a great time. We'd have a great time. Spin the bottle was of course another popular one. We just had a good time. I remember, too, being a part—I think I may have mentioned to you—that I was a part of something called Camp Minisink Army Cadet Corps, where we would meet. We would meet I believe it was a Presbyterian Church off of Willis Avenue and then there was another one further up on the Bronx, I can't remember the Church. But then a satellite on Willis Avenue—at Camp Minisink Army Cadet was based at the Minisink town house. I believe it was.

BP: It's called Minisink?

DB: Camp Minisink. Camp, M-I-N-I-S-I-N-K. We were the army cadets. And the army cadets wore brown uniforms, had the white belts, had the specs, had the boots, had the tie—the shirt matched the pants—had the army hat. And a youngster could rise from the ranks of a private first class all the way to general if he or she did what he or she needed to do.

BP: Camp Minisink Army Cadets was girls and boys?

DB: As I can recall, I think when I attended it was largely guys, but I think later on there were some girls involved in Minisink as well. There was also the Minisink Drum and Bugle Corps and I think they still might exist. But we were involved in Camp Minisink. At the time I was involved that was when I was living in Patterson. A good number—and you probably haven't heard of this—but a good number of the young men in the Patterson were involved in the Camp Minisink.

BP: Really.

DB: Yeah, Yeah. And we would rise from the ranks of private first class on up. My rank, at the time that I left (and I think that was maybe in the ninth grade or so) was a sergeant. I had become a sergeant. And I had become a sergeant because I learned—I took first aid—I learned the definition of first aid. I could tell different burns and that kind of thing. I can't remember it now, but what I can remember is the definition of first aid. It was “The immediate and temporary care given to a victim of an accident or sudden illness before the arrival of a physician.” It's always stayed with me—I got that from Camp Minisink.

BP: I was going to ask, what types of values did Camp Minisink instill and what was the culture or the atmosphere like for the kids there?

DB: Respect. And as I understand, if you go to the website and look up Camp Minisink, now it's there. I don't think that they have the Army Cadet Corps any more, but Minisink was formed because urban kids, black kids, could not join the Boy Scouts. So somebody—and the General for Camp Minisink was General Wilbur Bergy. I think he may have been the founder of camp Minisink Army Cadets. If not, he was a general, so he was very much involved. But respect, responsibility, compassion, loyalty, virtues, were the order of the day. Respect for family, love for community, service to your

community, service to your country; those were the values that were espoused to Camp Minisink. And I resonate with Camp Minisink because I'm sure you're going to ask me about derivatives in my experience at the Patterson Projects. One of the things that I will always be proud of is that I've launched an initiative in Boston called Christian Soldiers Incorporated, and it's a derivative of Camp Minisink. In fact, I asked to use the pledge, or aspects of the pledge, that we had in Camp Minisink. I modified it just a little, but the pledge for Christian Soldiers is: I pledge myself to make an honest effort to build a better life, a life pattern after the life of Jesus Christ to help others do the same, always to do my duty; to be ready for service; loyal to my friends and reverent to God. The derivative of a Camp Minisink pledge. So that gives you a sense of some values that were instilled through Minisink. So we would go to the meeting, I think on a Wednesday night and go back to the Project. Go back to Elijah D. Clarke Junior High School.

BP: Among your peers in Patterson, at Camp Minisink, what were the attitudes towards academics and school?

DB: I thought that we wanted very much to learn. And I think that others may have been like me, Brian. Because I can remember vividly as I grew up in the Patterson that I would watch as cars went by and I would daydream as I thought about those cars. I would see cars from Connecticut. I would see cars from South Carolina. I would see cars from California. I would see cars from Massachusetts. And if one day--one day if I would live or be able to visit any of those places or live in some of those places, the world for us, at least for me, and I think I speak accurately for others in saying, that the world was defined by the neighborhood that we lived in. Many of us didn't go to the upper section of the Bronx. We didn't go very much up north. We didn't go down, but we had relatives down in Harlem and a good number of the residents in Patterson I think came originally—

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

DB: --from Harlem, but a good number of us did not go down there with any regularity and some probably didn't go down there at all. And certainly going to places as far as Yonkers and Mount Vernon and Connecticut—we didn't do that. We didn't travel to other boroughs. We didn't go to Manhattan. We didn't go to Brooklyn, Staten Island; the world was kind of defined by the streets that we lived on. We went to school and I think most of us applied ourselves when we were in school, at least when I was there. Never having the foggiest idea that one day some of us would have been afforded an opportunity to go to college, okay? Although as I think about it, that's what Reverend and Mrs. Clayton had in mind for me. Just the little things they did in terms of encouraging me. Thinking again about Mr. Hall, his encouragement of me, telling me I can be whatever it was that I wanted to be. So I guess the seed was planted, I just didn't believe it myself right off.

BP: Were there other elements that kids gravitated towards that did emphasize school and... [inaudible]

DB: Well, I remember vividly—I mentioned one young man, in fact, the young man was involved, I remember him being a distinguished member of Camp Minisink Army Cadet Corps and he had a brother. His brother was actively involved, they were involved in the community—they may have been involved in an offshoot of Camp Minisink called the Featherman. And they wore beautiful sweaters. I remember the sweaters—I believe being burgundy and white—had a feather on the side of it. So their focus was on academic excellence, at least I think because I was never directly a part. But I remember one young man, and I won't mention his name, becoming involved with the wrong crowd, the long in the short of it, he was shot to death. He was killed. He was killed. This was a young man that lived in the projects with us. And then another young man involved—it may have been this same incident—where one young man was killed, this young man was killed, the other was involved—and it may have been a burglary or something that resulted in a murder. But the other young man who went to D. Clarke Junior High School with us ended up being sentenced to life. He was sent away. I think first to a juvenile detention facility and then he was going to be passed along to the adult. I wondered how

he was doing, you know, I wondered how he was doing and of I was looking at—I was looking at the riots at Attica and low and behold, I saw this guy. He was one of the leaders when the riots took place in Attica. He went I think, while we were at Clarke Junior High School. So there were some negative elements in the community. There were some negative elements. There were some guys also who were a little bit older than us, they were the group just above us, who started smoking marijuana, they started smoking reefer, and I think they may have started dealing in heroin. Using heroin. So, yes, that was operating as well; didn't see a whole lot of them, but, yeah, they were there. But the young man that got shot, the brother that got shot, and the one that ended up going to Attica remain vivid in my mind. As you talk to others I'm sure they'll probably mention those young men. I won't mention their names. I'm not gonna mention their names. But the young man that went to—and I say young man because we were about the same age—he's back in the community. He got out. Somehow he was able to get out and from I can gather, doing some positive things. Yeah, Yeah.

BP: When did you start attending Goodwill Baptist Church?

DB: I never really—I didn't attend. I wasn't a member of Goodwill. My Aunt Mildred was a member and I should mention that I had an aunt named Mildred, in fact my mother's sister, who at one point took my sister in (my sister went to Baltimore with the woman that took care of us). The woman came back, my sister came back, but when they came back, the woman didn't take care of us; we were in different settings. She brought my sister back and my sister went to live with an aunt. My aunt Mildred who lived off of Washington Avenue. Aunt Mildred was a member of Goodwill Baptist Church. And What I remember about Goodwill—and by this time, I had—I think I was in high school—no I guess I may have gone to college—that's when I have the vivid recollections, that when I went to Springfield College, I didn't have any money to get home—rather, to get from the Bronx to Springfield, though it only cost \$7 in order to get from the Bronx to Springfield—I didn't have the money. And I remember vividly the church taking up the money for me to go. They would provide me with the money to get back to Springfield College. I remember the meals that they would have after church on

a Sunday that you would think you would be able to go home and have a nice cooked meal but wasn't able to do that—the church provided that. Okay, and I mention my Aunt Mildred, my sister lived with Aunt Mildred—for me, I didn't live there, I had—Springfield by that time had become my home. But when I came back to New York I was able to go over to my Aunt Mildred's. I was able to go over to the Goodwill Baptist Church. I always remember that I had a little cousin—little Rick was his name—Ricky was the youngest of my aunt's children. And I remember him meandering off as a matter of fact over Crotona Park. They had a pool; they had some water over there. Rick went off by himself and he was about 6 years old, just walked from Washington Avenue over to Crotona Park and he died, he drowned. He drowned. And I remember the love that the church showered upon my aunt, you know, the attention they gave my aunt and the family, and then just after that, paying very close attention to the care that the church gave to members of the church and others of the community that were not necessarily members. They just showered affection. And the leadership being provided by a great man: the Reverend James A. Miles was his name. So I remember that, and as I think about it, as I think about the church, the first church that I belonged to was at Gesimoty Baptist Church when my mother passed away. We belonged, we attended Geismoty Baptist Church. In fact, it wasn't too long before she passed away—well, before she passed away she had joined the church and she hadn't been a member too, too long and that church looked after us because we went to Sunday School, we went to the morning service.

BP: Where was that?

DB: That was Gesimoty Baptist Church which was on Washington Avenue, not very far from where we lived on Brook Avenue. And the pastor was the Reverend E. W. Ghee.

BP: Ghee?

DB: Ghee. G-h-e-e. And it was there that I saw a very young man—I guess I was about 6 or 7 years old—I saw Dr. Martin Luther King. He came to visit Gesimoty Baptist Church because he recognized the influence the church had in the community.

BP: Wow.

DB: Yeah, Yeah. So the church was very, very, instrumental in my development. When I lived with the Reverend and his wife, though he wasn't the pastor of a church, I attended church in the Bronx. First down in Harlem and then up in the Bronx, called the New Bethel Baptist Church. So always, there was always an influence in my life and probably one of the reasons that I didn't get into some of the difficulty that others got into. Yeah, yeah.

BP: Can you explain that a little bit? Why do you think the church held—

DB: Oh I think, I think that at a very young age, knowing about the Lord, knowing about God, made a difference for me. I thought... I believe that God is real in terms of turning to God in particularly in times of trials, you know, and that I can do that, and that was something that the Reverend and his wife instilled. And I guess again, before my mother died, our attending Gesimoty Baptist Church. So it played a very, very strong role. And then certainly with going to—attending Goodwill and Goodwill providing for my transportation back to college; it made all the difference in the world. And, while I was at New Bethel, when I attended that before Goodwill, Just receiving encouragement from the members of the church to be the best that I could be. To think big; the members would say you know, we have not been to college but you can certainly go to college. You and others can certainly go to college so that encouraged me very early on.

BP: What year did you graduate from high school?

DB: I graduated from high school in 1965. Oh you know, as I think about it, before we continue on, one of the people in the Patterson Projects that encouraged me and others to think about school, to think large, was a woman who worked in the office, the housing office—black woman, and her name was Mrs. Harris. I'll always remember Mrs. Harris. I don't know what became of her, but I do remember when there were crises, she would come to our apartments. That's when the Reverend and Mrs. Clayton would go over,

mom and dad, would go over to the housing office to meet Mrs. Harris. I always remember the kind words she provided, the words of encouragement that she provided me. So think not only did she do it for me, but I'm sure that she did it for others in the Project. She was a stalwart who believed in education, so I don't want to forget her at all.

BP: That's very important. Very important, very helpful. You graduated from high school in 1965.

DB: I graduated from high school in '65—the DeWhitt Clinton High School.

BP: What was Clinton like during the early 60's?

DB: Clinton I think was largely white, it was largely white, a good number of Jewish students at that time. The teachers were Jewish, and if they were not Jewish, then they certainly were Caucasian. I don't know the religion, but a good number of the instructors were Jewish. They were encouraging; they were encouraging. I thought that they believed in us. The school was 10,000 as I recall, there were 10,000 of us, all guys. There were 2,000 in my graduating class, 2,000 in my graduating class—all guys. We came in in three different shifts. And most of us came on the train—I guess it was the Jerome Avenue Line, I can't remember the letters, but it was a Jerome Avenue Line that we traveled on. The women got off at Walton High School and some of the brightest students got off at the Bronx High School of Science and then the rest of us, the guys, made it down to DeWhitt Clinton. It began at about 6:30 in the morning. Yeah, yeah. I'll always be grateful. I'll always be grateful to Mrs. Resarie. She wasn't Jewish, she was Italian. And she reminded me of my eighth grade teacher because I took Italian when I was in the eighth grade at Elijah D. Clarke Junior High School so I just continued when I was in high school with Mrs. Resarie—Italian. I remember her taking us to a play: West Side Story. I'll always—that was one of the first plays—in fact one of the very few plays—that I've gone to. She took us there. But I also remember Mrs. Resarie. In fact, I say Mrs.; I don't think she was married. Her name was Olga Resarie. I remember her encouraging me to enter into a contest-- an Italian Poetry Contest. I entered the contest. She worked

with me every day to make sure that I understood my lines. To make a long story short, I came in—I didn't come in first in that contest (and this was a city-wide competition). I came in second in the City of New York in this poetry contest where I had to recite poetry. It was really quite something and in terms of bolstering self-confidence, you can imagine what that did. So I'll always be grateful to Ms. Resarie. I'll also be grateful—I mentioned that there were 10,000 of us at DeWitt High School, 2,000 in the graduating class—I'll be grateful to a Jewish gentleman by the name of Doc Bernhard who was a college advisor—I'll be grateful because I think I may have mentioned to you because I took the SATS like everybody my age who would have thought about going to college—I took the SATS at Fordham University. The Rose Hill campus of Fordham University. I was very, very scared of taking those SATS because as I got to the campus, I saw what I'd always seen and that was the fence that went around the campus. And that fence spoke volumes, what it said to me and little black kids out of the Bronx like myself, was that this fence is not so much for keeping the white students in Fordham University, as much as it was to keep black kids like me out. I got onto the campus for the first time to take the SATS in a very dark and dingy auditorium, I think I scored 650 in fact I know I had combined scores of 650 on the SATS. But Doc Bernhard, the college advisor, said that's OK, because I believe in you. I want you to apply to some colleges and in the final analysis, I applied to I believe two: Springfield College and Howard University and was accepted in both universities. I fell in love with Springfield after having come up for a visit. I was very grateful to Doc Bernhard. After I was accepted, I had another major problem and that was I didn't have money to go to school. Doc Bernhard encouraged me again to apply for a scholarship. And the scholarship is only given to two students in the entire city of New York and it was through a foundation called the Joseph L. Fischer Foundation. I applied for the scholarship; I was the beneficiary of one of those scholarships and the amount of \$10,000 so that when I went to Springfield College, I never saw a bill. I never saw a bill. Nothing for the four years that I was there. I'll always be grateful to that Jewish gentlemen, Doc Bernhard, who saw something in me that I hadn't seen in myself, so I owed it to him. And I think he liked the fact that the Reverend—more than the Reverend, Mrs. Emily Clayton—came to the school to inquire about how I was doing. He saw the love that she had for me, the encouragement that she

provided, so he wanted to be supportive. And it paid off. I was accepted, I was able to go to Springfield, and never saw any money at all. At times—there were others that went on to school—one of them you interviewed—Victoria Archibald. I'm not sure where she went. Her brother, the following year, would go to Texas Western, Tiny Archibald. Bubba Dukes went to Benedict College and others went off to college, a good number of others. Although, also that was at the time of Vietnam, others were leaving there to go to the Vietnam War. Some of them did not come back. Some of them did not come back. I'm thinking—I think I was given the understanding that Joel Franklin who I thought the world of, did not come back from Vietnam.

BP: Joel Franklin.

DB: Joel Franklin. He lived in Patterson in the building right behind me.

BP: Contemporary?

DB: Oh, yeah, contemporary. We were all in the same class together. He was one that did not come back.

BP: In listening to your memories, I wanted to ask as you left for Springfield in 1965, did you notice anything, maybe—how—had Patterson changed at all from the time you first moved there?

DB: I think it had. In fact, I know that it had. In terms of the influences of the streets, other parts of the Bronx. I suppose Harlem. Yeah, I noticed some changes. I mentioned those two instances were folk who I thought were unlikely candidates to become involved in armed robberies became involved in armed robberies.

BP: When did—after going to Springfield, how long was it before you went back to Patterson?

DB: Probably about a year or so, a year or two, my first visit. Had it changed dramatically then? No, not then, not in that year's time. But going back subsequently, I noticed that it had. I just heard stories about folk. I remember Wilbur Stepto and I'm not sure what took Wilbur out, but I do remember—it may have been, Wilbur may have gone to the war. I seem to remember him going to Vietnam, but I remember him passing away and that was the beginning of hearing about some of my contemporaries dying, dying very early on.

BP: Was there any one thing that stood out in your mind as to something that was changing or something that was effecting the people that lived in Patterson?

DB: I think more than anything, in coming back, I noticed that some of the folk that were there those years that I was there were no longer there, that the families had moved. And I suspect that had to do with the Project changing. That some of the dynamics in the project they changed, that drugs may have become a part. That youngsters were getting in, that some of the youngsters were getting into negative kinds of things.

BP: Looking back, kind of wrapping up the interview with some last questions, what was your experience like at Springfield College?

DB: It was a good experience. It was a good experience. When I first went, I wondered whether I was going to make it, I wondered whether I was going to make it, particularly at the close of the first year. I believe I had a 1.8 cumulative average at the end of the first year. I had to take courses in zoology, I had to take courses in botany—I thought botany was going to be my undoing, because I didn't see many trees growing up in the Bronx, so I couldn't tell the difference between a pine and an oak. I really couldn't. So I didn't do well. I failed that and I failed that and I failed some other courses. So I wondered about the preparation that I had received in high school. Although I was—I guess I was a C+ maybe a B- student, I thought I did OK—but I wondered about the scores on the SATS, whether I was really college material. But I was blessed; I was able to get that 1.8. I was able to come back. I missed my friend; I missed a very dear friend of mine who came to

Springfield with me from Bedford Stuy. Laudie was a physical education major, wanted very much to be a physical education teacher; he had a 1.6 at the end of the first year. But then he left Springfield. He left in his sophomore year because he was not able to bring that 1.6 up to at least a 1.8. He flunked out of Springfield. While he was home, he decided that he really wanted to be a doctor. He was in a car accident—was in a motorcycle accident—was in the hospital—and decided while he was in the hospital that, “I’m going to give this thing education a try all over again.” So he applied to Long Island University, was accepted; he ended up graduating, I think Sum Cum Laude from LIU in a pre-med program. He applied to Howard University’s medical school. Eventually, he graduated from Howard University. Today, he’s Doctor Alonzo Sherman, M.D. Associate Dean of the Eustatius Medical School, an off-site medical school in the Caribbean, doing very well. It’s devastating, my friend flunking out. My being there, you know, I kind of felt like I was on my own—but a blessing—you know. At the close of my freshman year, I met a gentleman by the name of Mr. White who oversaw a program called Upward Bound. He was in the cafeteria. I had the training—oriented by the Reverend and Mrs. Clayton—to be nice to people. I went over and sat down with Mr. White and the long and the short of it is that he offered me a job as a [inaudible] counselor in his program called Upward Bound. I worked with the program that summer. I made a number of friends in the program; I worked with the students not only in the summer but during the academic year. Just meeting with them and encouraging them. I worked in that program every summer (except one) that I was a student at Springfield College. It was a blessing for me because the Reverend had moved to Detroit. I didn’t mention that when I applied to Springfield College, the last thing that I did before leaving—two weeks before I left for Springfield College—was the sole responsibility for burying Mom, the Reverend’s wife. She died of kidney failure two weeks before I went to Springfield, okay. So I was responsible for working out the details of her home-going ceremony and the burial. Springfield College, in a very real sense, became my home. The Reverend moved to Detroit; I only visited him one time while he was in Detroit. I thank God that during my freshman year I met Mr. White who worked in this Upward Bound program, okay. While there, in addition to working in Upward Bound, I remember being elected president of Afro-Am. I had to come home, came back to New York for a

weekend, when I came back to Springfield, I found out that they had elected me this president of Afro-Am. Very positive experience. I was involved in the community of Springfield. Providing tutorial supports to students, I guess, very much like myself. Well, Afro-Am, like the Black Student Union on campus, we were concerned with increasing numbers of faculty of color, curriculum—there's a whole litany of things we were concerned about—ways that our presence would be felt on campus—a working at creating a welcoming environment for students like us. Black students. So I became very active in that.

BP: So this would be around the time of, I guess, the national Black Power Movement?

DB: Exactly around those times. Around the time just before Dr. King was assassinated. And when he was assassinated, I think it was in 1968 or '69, we had a building takeover at Springfield College. And I was working in the community at that time. I was doing an internship—making, as a matter of—it was a paid internship—I decided to return to the campus. I gave up the money that I was making because I wanted to be involved in the movement. We ended up taking over the President's office and being—in my case, it wasn't suspended from school, but the sanction was that we would have to do 300 hours of community service before receiving the degree. I didn't mind that because what I wanted the college to do was become involved in the community that surrounded it. And it was fine because by that time I had gotten a job as assistant director of Upward Bound. Assistant director. I was going to go. The guy that gave me the job said, "It's OK; you don't have to have a degree in hand, as long as we know you're gonna get the degree." I got the job, okay. And from then on, had been involved in similar work over these years. So Springfield contributed immeasurably to my growth and development both on campus and in the community. It became home because I didn't have any home to return to. My last recollection of the Patterson project was Mom being buried from there and, Rev, my Dad, moving to live with his daughter in Detroit. And I could only visit Reverend Clayton one time while I was in Springfield College because I didn't have the money. So those were the last recollections. Yeah, Yeah.

BP: My last question is throughout the narrative, the story that you've told, mentors have played a very important part. What were some of the characteristics of your mentors over the years that you found to be most influential and important for your development? Beginning with the probation officer and even moving to Mr. White.

DB: He, thinking about Mr. Hall, even before that in the Patterson Projects. In the Patterson Projects, Ms. Harris. The words—and she had college education—she had had some college education as I recall—so just the words of encouragement that you can do whatever it is you want to do if you are committed to applying yourself to doing it. I remember words of encouragement such as that coming from Mrs. Hall. I can't remember at Clarke Junior High School, my Italian teacher, I can't remember her name—it'll come back at some point—Mr. Cousins who was the dean of students over there—the words of encouragement that they gave to me and to us. To think big. The advice that they gave to us around what it is you need to do in order to be successful in high school and to go on to college. The kinds of courses that we needed to take. They laid that out. Just distinguishing between the college track and the vocational track. They laid that out. So the advice was very, very important. The encouragement: very, very important. The nurturing very, very important. All of those things led to effective mentoring. The advice, the assistance, the encouraging, the supporting. Doc Bernhard, probably being the greatest mentor (and I didn't even know what a mentor was back then) but in terms of the advice, the assistance, the encouragement, the nurturing, the supporting—all of that is what he provided me. You know, so mentoring, you're right. Critically important to my success. You know, critically. And that's why today, in terms of the work that I do here, mentoring is so very, very important. We have the Benjamin Elijah Mayes mentoring program that pairs faculty members with [inaudible] students. We have about 160 students involved in a program where about 100 faculty members and some staff members give them their time and talent to assisting these students. So very, very proud of that program. So, mentoring, very, very important.

BP: The final question is: if you...what would be, I guess, a last memory or message you would share about how your growing up in the Bronx, particularly in Patterson, shaped who you are?

DB: I think it laid the foundation for me. More than anything or anybody, I attributed—and every time I have an opportunity to speak, I talk about the Reverend and Mrs. Arthur William Clayton and what it was they did for me. You know, taking a young man in. They really didn't know me. They didn't really know me. They knew me from a distance. They didn't have very much to give. But they gave what they had. Reverend Clayton, making only forty dollars a week, shared what he had. That happened in the Patterson Projects. Just thinking about people on the floor—I'm sorry—in the building that I lived in, thinking about folk in other buildings, just the words of encouragement that they provided to me. And to us. I will always treasure that. So it was a launching pad for me. It was a launching pad. And as I think about community, it was a far better place—at least the infrastructure—than was it the case on Brooke Avenue. The community that was decimated with urban construction. They came in and built Crotona Park apartments, as I mentioned earlier, that community was kind of tattered and torn. Though we loved each other, though there was a sense of community, Patterson—the structure—was far better. It was far better. I had a home. I felt like I was at home in the Patterson Projects. And again, people just being very, very encouraging and supportive. Yeah, Yeah.

[END INTERVIEW]