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Belton, Frank Interview 1

Belton, Frank. Bronx African American History Project
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Mark Naison: Hello, This is the 53rd interview of The Bronx African American History Project. We're here with Frank Belton, who was born and raised in Morrisania and for many years was the executive director of the Claremont [inaudible] Associations and is no president and interim track coach of the Pioneer Club. So let's begin at the beginning. When did your family first move to The Bronx?

Frank Belton: We first moved here in January, 1948, from Queens.

MN: They moved from Queens?

FB: Yeah.

MN: And how long had they been living in Queens?

FB: About a year. Let me just go back, I was born in Harlem at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. We lived in Harlem for about a year then we moved to Queens for a year, then back to Harlem, Manhattan Avenue, 120th Street. And then back in 1944, we moved out to Michigan, where we stayed three years until our house burned down. We moved back to Queens roughly February of 47, stayed there until January of 48, when we moved to The Bronx.

MN: Now what street did your family move to?

FB: Chisholm Street. Chisholm Street was between Jennings Street and Freeman Street, probably, which was one block south of 170th Street, two blocks above 169th Street. I went to school in the neighborhood, PS 54, Junior High School 40, and Morris High School.

MN: How did your family find The Bronx? Did they have friends who had lived there already? How did they find their apartment?

FB: I don't know. I never asked my father that. We bought a house on Chisholm Street, a private house.

MN: Okay, you owned a house?

FB: Yeah.

MN: And what was the structure of the house?

FB: It was a one family house, three bedrooms, kitchen, dining room, living room, backyard, front yard.

MN: Was it wood or brick?

FB: It was a frame house, it was a frame house. And my father passed in September of 92 and mother was told to sell the house and stay in Michigan.

MN: So your parents stayed in the house all those years right up until 92?

FB: Yeah, my father passed. We also had to maintain, even though our house burned down in Michigan in 47, February, my father went back up there and built as we used to call it quote unquote, the Shack, where we used to go every summer.

MN: Were your parents originally from the South or Caribbean?

FB: South. My mother was from North Carolina, my father was from South Carolina.

MN: Did they meet in New York City?

FB: Yes they did.

MN: In Harlem?

FB: In Harlem.

MN: What sort of work did your father do?

FB: For years he worked for the New York Central Railroad, he was a Pullman porter.

Then after that he was Associate Investigator for New York City Department of Social Services. Then he retired as a motorman for the New York Transit Authority. My mother was a nurse' aid at Jacobi Hospital, she retired from there.

MN: How many siblings did you have?

FB: Five. I have three sisters and two brothers.

MN: Did your mother work when you were growing up?

FB: Yes.

MN: So who took care of the five children? Was there - -

FB: We kept ourselves. Better not get in trouble. The twin sisters were born in 49 - -

MN: And what year were you born?

FB: 1939.

MN: So you were the oldest?

FB: No, next to the oldest. We used to take turns baby-sitting while momma, she did domestic work during the day and we used to baby-sit, take turns baby-sitting Pat and Nancy, those are the twins. We didn't get into trouble.

MN: While your father was working as a Pullman porter, your mother was, he was on the road, - -

FB: Yeah.

MN: He was on the road and your mother was doing domestic work?

FB: Yeah, domestic work during the day and working at, you know back in that time, because she didn't start working for the city until about 1955 when they built Jacobi Hospital complex up there in Eastchester.

MN: Did she do domestic work in The Bronx or Manhattan?

FB: Some The Bronx, some Queens, some Manhattan, it depends.

MN: Now, a lot of Pullman porters had a high school education, is that true?

FB: My father, he had a college education.

MN: He had a college education.

FB: But you know back in those days, there were few jobs for black college graduates outside of teaching and working in the post office, and I guess the Pullman porter became available, he was a red cap in New York Central, and I guess he applied to be a Pullman porter and was accepted.

MN: What college did he graduate from?

FB: He graduated from Morris College in Somerton, South Carolina. In 1935.

MN: Your family moved to The Bronx, what was it 48 or 49?

FB: 48.

MN: So you were nine years old at the time?

FB: Yes.

MN: How did The Bronx seem different to you from other places that you had been or you know?

FN: It was a new experience. In Queens, in the neighborhood we lived in South Jamaica, that was mostly at that time a Black community. When we moved to The

Bronx, much to our surprise, to Chisholm Street, first time encounter with Puerto Ricans.

I went to the grocery store one day and the guys were up there talking. I didn't understand a word they were saying [laughter]. I said who are these people? He said they are Spanish, they are Puerto Ricans. I said oh. I found when I entered school, there were Puerto Ricans in the class at that time, it was basically a Puerto Rican population in The South Bronx.

MN: On Chisholm Street, were there more Puerto Ricans than African Americans?

FB: It was a kind of mixed population at that time. You had Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Italians that lived in the neighborhood, a couple of Irish. There was on Jewish family and they stayed there until about, they moved out about 1952. They were the last Jewish family to move off Chisholm Street. But the Italians, they stayed, even up until the time I was in college, there were still three Italian families still living on the block. The Italians did not move, they held their ground [laughter].

MN: Did everybody seem to get along well on the streets?

FB: On my block, yeah. Some of the other blocks, you know, it was a pretty good community. Everybody knew everybody and if you got in trouble, your parents heard about you getting in trouble and either Ms. Johnson down the street told, or Ms. Sneed. But at that time, it's not like today, people live right next door to each other, a few feet, and they don't know each other. They don't communicate whereas back then, you know what I'm saying, my mother stayed in touch with them, friends every time she passed.

MN: Did people leave one another's doors open?

FB: Locked doors, we didn't know what a locked door was back then. It was unheard of because since there was six of us, there wasn't any use in locking the door because we were in and out. We had to go to school, pops was on the road two or three times a week, moms, no telling where she was, so the door stayed open. And for years our door to the basement stayed open.

MN: You have a lot of different groups on the block. Does that mean that you had a lot of different types of food that you could smell coming out of people's houses?

FB: Basically Spanish food, and the Blacks. Eat with some of our friends. We'd go up to their house to eat, or they'd come to my house to eat, and you could smell the aroma, it was inviting,

MN: What kind of street games, was there a whole, did kids play in the street a lot?

FB: Yeah, between that and at that time, Crotona Park, but basically we played stickball in the street, touch football. We were right near two schools, so we were able to play our little games of punchball, softball, basketball, but yeah, the street was used for either touch football or stickball.

MN: What grade did you go into in PS 54?

FB: Second grade, second grade.

MN: And is that where you met Bob?

FB: I met him in 54, I think either third or fourth grade, I'm not sure. I think it was the 3rd grade. I think Bob and I was in about two to three years of the same class in elementary school. That's when we became friends. I guess it was about 1950.

MN: IF you had friends on other blocks did you visit them or were you a little careful of going to somebody else's block?

FB: Some blocks were like that [laughter].

MN: Which was a tough, a block you were reluctant to go to?

FB: Jennings Street, on Boston Road and Union Avenue on the West, and Prospect Avenue, in fact it was the street that our junior high school was on. But that one block, Jennings Street, it was known, it had a lot of people on their and we knew a lot of folks, and we grew up with a lot of guys who lived on Jennings Street, that one particular block, but it was still a rough block. When I used to walk through there I usually was running. I'd be like I'm in a hurry, I'll catch you later [laughter]. But outside of Jennings Street, that one particular block, I'd say most of the other blocks were pretty peaceful. We didn't run into too man, because remember, we went to school and we knew a lot of the people who lived on the different blocks in our area, so you developed a friendship, they knew you, you knew them, and you know we didn't have any, well, we used to have our little fights, individual fights. Although there were a few gangs, but they weren't raising any sand back then. But that wasn't in our immediate neighborhood. The Seven Crowns, which was up on Dawson Street, I used to go up in that area. I knew a couple of guys in the Seven Crowns, so that was cool [laughter]. But basically, I didn't roam the streets.

MN: What were the teachers like in 54? Did you have a pretty good experience in elementary school?

FB: I had a good experience in all of the schools I attended [laughs]. I had a reputation when I was in elementary and junior high school.

MN: And how would you describe that reputation?

FB: You step on my toes to make me mad and I'm coming after you. I remember one time, my teacher was talking to my mother. She said, Frank is a good kid, as long as you don't make him mad [laughter]. As long as you don't make Franklin mad. He's alright, but if you make him mad he's coming at you and he don't care [laughter].

MN: Did that get you into the principal's office occasionally?

FB: Sometimes, yeah. Back then, you didn't scare those teachers. Basically the majority of the teachers that I had were white teachers. Mostly Jewish, some Irish, some Italians, and a couple of Spanish teachers. They didn't want you to know they were colored. I had one teacher Bob, I don't think Bob was in my class, I think that was the second grade. But she was Indian, Ms. Sutriran. And she ended up getting married, and I think she married a Hispanic because her last name was Garcia, so he was Hispanic,

NM: Bob, do you remember Frank's temper from elementary school. Was this a legendary thing in the neighborhood?

Bob: Oh yeah, people knew about Frank. [laughter] Frank was always one to hold his own. Nobody bothered Frank [laughter].

MN: Did this affect your academic performance or was this strictly a behavioral issue?

FB: It was a behavioral issue. I don't care how bad I was in elementary school and junior high school, I didn't care how bad I was, I always did my work. One thing, teachers, I think that was one of the reasons why when sending me to a 600 school was kind of a question mark option. There was no need to call somebody academic - -

MN: They were thinking of sending you to a 600 school?

FB: Yeah.

MN: So that's no joke?

FB: Yes.

MN: Tell them what a 600 school was because they don't have those in New York any more, people want to revive them. You had to be a legend to be in a 600 school when you were growing up [laughter].

FB: I mean it was , I'm surprised, two guys I know, Bob knows them, I'm surprised they went to 600 schools because I had thought, well one of them I was surprised, a guy named Allen Richardson, who I saw a couple of years ago at our neighborhood reunion. He went to a 600 school and it must have been because of his behavior because Allen did his work. We all did our work, it was just our behavior. And the other person was Owen Davis. Owen Davis, his reputation was worse than mine. [laughs]. But, okay, and I'll say this, but, even though we had behavior problems, we did not let this affect our academic performance - -

MN: Now when you say, what sort of things would be like, punching another kid - -

FB: Probably fighting, cursing out the teacher - -

MN: Cursing out the teacher would be the main thing?

FB: Yeah. Usually they would used to come up with some kind of oh, he's a behavior problem. If you act up once, he was stereotyped as a behavioral problem. He needs to be tested. The so-called familiar thing is today, the first thing when a kid acts up, oh he needs to be tested, or he needs to be referred to counseling. I don't think they had all of those supportive things way back in the late 40s early 50s. But that was the stereotype. I

know some teacher thought I was going to become a hoodlum, end up in jail some place.

That's the tag they put on me. Even going from elementary school, I remember when I was in elementary school in PS 54, we had I think one Black teacher and one Hispanic teacher. When I went to junior high, which was, the elementary school was about a block and a half down Chisholm Street, the junior high school I went to, Junior High School 40 was right around the corner, Prospect Avenue and Jennings Street. Then I was put into quote unquote, a lot of people didn't know what it was, I went into 7.16.

MN: Bob was in 7.1?

FB: Yeah, Bob was in 7.1. But bob didn't have a behavior problem, Bob was not a behavior problem [laughter].

BOB: I was a socialite [laughter]

FB: I was a behavior problem, so this is what they did. I had exponent classes, like 7.16, I think they had 7.16, 7.17. Then when I was in the eighth grade, I was in 8.13, that's right, because 8.13 was the girl's, an all girl's class. And then when I was in the ninth grade, I was in 9.12, you know where they put all the uneducable kids.

MN: So you were put with the uneducable, the behavior problems. Now did anybody learn anything in those classes?

FB: Well let me just say this. It wasn't so much about you learning, as about the system maintaining you.

Anonymous Voice: Were you allowed to go up in exponents, could you go from 9.15 to 9.12, - -

FB: Remember I said, the higher the exponent, the slower the class is, the behavior problems, the uneducated students were put in those classes as I remember, maintain. It'd keep you out of trouble, you always used to get the baddest teachers in all these classes, and they didn't take no [inaudible] or anything. These teachers made a low salary back then, they were making no more, a starting salary back in 1951, 52, was probably no more than 4,200 dollars. - -

MN: That's right, my parents were teachers.

FB: But, the teachers came to school clean. Everybody wore a shirt and tie. All the teachers wore shirt and ties, and some suits, but also, they had second and third jobs outside of being teachers too. Because a lot of them used to work the afternoon programs in school and sometimes the evening programs. I remember one of my teachers, when he'd get out of PD 40, he used to go to the after school program at PS 54.

MN: What did your parents think about you being a behavior problem?

FB: Back then, parents used to tell you go to school and be good, behave yourself, and the teacher is always right, in some cases my mother found out the teachers weren't always right. That used to save me from getting my butt beat because my father used to wear me out sometimes. The teacher used to slip home little notes, writing your father or mother to come up to school to have a session with them concerning me. The funny thing about it, through all this, my younger brother and sisters caught grief after I left. Oh here's another Belton, you're Franky Belton's brother? You're Franky Belton's sister? But they weren't on my level in terms of discipline. The funny thing about it is that, I don't care how bad, even some of the baddest guys in my class, I wasn't bad, I

didn't consider myself bad. Maybe once a month have to curse out a teacher and out a teacher in the place, but they all did their work, it was sad though. Out of 29 of us in my 9.12 junior high school graduating class, 29, as far as I was able to determine, two of us got a high school diploma.

MN: So if you were looking at the people in those classes, most of them dropped out of high school?

FB: Dropped out, some ended up in jail, some died, used drugs, or did some stuff on the street. One guy was killed trying to hold up a, they didn't call them bodegas back in that time, they called them, - -

Bob: Candy stores.

FB: Candy stores, yeah, before the Spanish grocery. I think bodega didn't start coming around until the 60s and 70s.

Anonymous Voice: What was the graduation rate of your class? In terms of, how many people graduated with a high school diploma?

FB: I don't know. You have to remember, in 9.1, 9.2, 9.3, those classes, people were pretty literate. Whereas in the high escorting classes, it was like the dumping ground for kids who had behavior problems or education problems, or both. Also there was another class beyond that. It was called the CRMD classes.

MN: CRMD.

Bob: What does that stand for? I don't remember.

FB: I think it was Corrector Remedial something - -

MN: Mental development or something. That was for kids who were developmentally -

-

FN: Larry Natham was in one of those classes, did you know that?

Bob: No.

FB: Yeah

Bob: How would I know that? [laughter]

FB: I figured because he lived across the street from Bob. [laughter]

MN: Now you just self described the behavior problem, could you have done the work in 9.1?

FB: that was one of the reasons I used to get mad all the time. They put me in the class and I used to tell the principal, I said you know what, if you put me in one of those other classes, in with the girls, - -

MN: These were all boys?

FB: Yeah, these were all boy classes, the ones at the bottom, no higher up, remember now, the higher up, the 16s were all boys [inaudible] . And I used to tell him if you get me out of that class, I wont be a problem, but you put me, a good egg in with a whole bunch of bad eggs, so what do you expect? [laughter] I used to tell the teachers this you know and - -

Anonymous Voice: What did they say?

FB: You continue being good okay? Because I remember on time, Mr. Janson, he was the vice principal, and there were two girls outside of the school at 3:00 fighting and he had come, good old mild mannered Mr. Janson, now girls stop fighting, I went over there

and said get out of my way Mr. Janson. And pried the two girls away and what not, and he praised me. The next day he came up with the principal, no he called me down to the office, no, what did he do? He came up with the principal to the class, Mr. Lofton was my teacher at the time - -

Bob: One of the few Black teachers in the school.

FB: Yeah, in fact, he had just come back from the Korean War, he was a lieutenant in the Korean War and he had just came back and took over my class. And they all came to the door and “tell Mr. Lofton I want to commend Franklyn for helping me out yesterday” and I said oh crap. [laughter] I have got to save face with my boys. If it wasn’t for that, them girls would have ended up beating him up. [laughter] But I used to go off, but when I went off, everybody hurt. That was mainly the reason, I used to get mad.

MN: Did kids in those families come from poorer families than you did, or families where people weren’t as educated as your parents?

FB: Not necessarily so. Most of the parents back then worked. They worked, they had a job. I don’t remember any of the guys I hung out with ever receiving welfare. Our parents, they worked. They worked. They maintained themselves by working, and that was in our bringing up. I’ve always had at the time I was in eighth grade junior high school, kept me a little part time after school job. The work ethic was built into you. Go to school, get a high school diploma, come out and get a job.

MN: Bob said you were always doing jobs in the neighborhood.

FB: Well I delivered The Bronx Hound News for about two years. That was a paper in The Bronx. I probably had a large route then, I probably had a large route then, I had

about 150 customers. My route ran from Boston Road on the North to Holmes Street on the South and from Union Avenue on the West to Intervale Ave on the East.

MN: You did that by bile or by foot?

FB: by foot, I couldn't do it by bike, they would have stole my bike.[laughter]

MN: Who is they? The Jennings Street guys?

FB: Not particularly Jennings Street guys, some people they had larceny in their heart. If it wasn't nailed down or chained down, it was theirs. We had some thieves in our neighborhoods. We had some car thieves, and we had some stickup artists and what not, we had some purse snatchers. You had your category of guys. It cost my father \$13 what was it \$13 for a deposit on your route. Then there were problems where a lot of people who were getting the newspaper, they weren't paying up every week. I had some customers that say hey you don't bring the paper, and I'd say well you don't pay, you still owe me for two weeks. If you don't pay me for two weeks, I'll stop delivering your paper. I really got mad. There were customers in Bob's house, but my father got tired because that cut down, I wasn't able to meet my weekly finances to pay the - -

Bob: Distributor?

FB: Distributor, and I was using my money to make up. My father one day, he said hey, what you got? Give me my 13 dollars. He took back his thirteen dollars and I did it for a couple of more weeks after that, and just threw up my hands, the people just weren't, you know, for thirty-five cents a week, that's all, and they couldn't pay it. Plus it became overpowering. It was really a three and a half hour job delivering all of those papers up

and down up and down. There weren't no elevators. I think one elevator building and I think that was 1366 Lionel Place Bob [inaudible]

MN: Was the elevator on the one next to [inaudible]

FB: [inaudible]

MN: One thing I wanted to ask you, was there a numbers thing on Chisholm Street?

FB: What do you mean a numbers thing?

MN: Did you have a lot of people play the numbers. Was that a big thing?

FB: That was a neighborhood thing. That was city wide. [inaudible] Friends ran numbers, were number runners. Not everybody, my mother and father didn't play numbers but I knew some of the other people who did - -

MN: And it was a pretty peaceful operation, non-violent?

FB: Yeah, it didn't become violent until the number runners back in the late sixties and seventies started using the money to purchase drugs. That's when it became violent because if you were a number runner, cops didn't bother you that much. You'd get busted once in a while, the same thing with the number joints, they'd knock them over once in a while because back then they used to pay, and there was nothing said about it.

Bob: How'd you get caught by the cops for running numbers? Did they check your pockets and you got all the numbers in there?

FB: Well they'd keep an eye on you. Back then you had the community police and you had a lot of foot patrolman, not like today where they ride around in a patrol car. So they got to know who you were. And I guess they'd through your name out there and tell their people to keep an eye on you. Sometimes they used to hook you up, hook you up in a

building, go through your pockets and see all these number slips. Some people were able to develop a memory with their customers though - -

Anonymous Voice: When did you see that change from foot patrolman to you not seeing that police presence in the community that you were just talking about, to your best recollection?

FB: I think it was somewhere around 1966, 67, because there was a period of five years they were [inaudible] in The Bronx, I left New York City I went away to school.

MN: Where did you go to college?

FB: I went to Morgan State College at that time, it's Morgan State University now.

MN: To go back to another subject, here you are in 9.13 or whatever it is, and you end up, there are only two kids out of 29 who go to high school and you end up in college.

FB: They all went to high school, I said 2 graduated with a high school diploma, out of 29 kids.

MN: Of that group, yeah. What is it other than the fact that your father was educated and you had good skills, did sports make a difference in directing you in a place that would send you to college, was that important?

FB: As I said earlier, running track saved me.

MN: When did you start running track?

FB: Well I was running a little bit in junior high school. One of the problems was I couldn't compete all out in junior high school because the PAL used to have, you'd run according to your weight, and I wasn't a light weight. I was pretty stout. I was pretty fast, but I couldn't run with some of the other lighter guys that ran faster.

MN: Where is the PAL located that you began going to for track?

FB: They used to sponsor track in city-wide, the New York City Police Athletic League, where is their office now?

Anonymous Voice: Twelfth Street I think.

MN: How old were you when you ran your first actual race, organized race?

I think I was in the eighth grade then.

MN: Who put you there? Who said you're fast Frank, you should run this race?

FB: My cousin, although he lived in Queens. He told me I ought to go run in some of the PAL races that they held around the city. Of course at that time, Mr. Roberts, who was one of the teachers in Junior High School 40 was trying to form a little track team. I ran pretty fast, but my weight put me in a different running category, which did not benefit me.

MN: Were there any teachers in junior high who took a particular interest in you and tried to mentor you?

FB: Only one, but that was shortly lived. Not shortly lived, but he was only there for about 6 months, Mr. Lawson. He came about February of 1954, he took over my class because the teacher who had my class, Mr. Hoss, he got appointed to Assistant principalship, so he left and I took over. And Mr. Lawson and I became very good friends. I used to wash his car, I used to run little errands for him, but I think one of the things I tried to do to some of the other guy in the school who wanted to challenge Mr. Lawson, I used to say leave that man alone. Leave Mr. Lawson alone, don't mess with

him because he'll beat your butt. He will beat your butt then go home and tell you to bring your father too.

MN: And you used to tell the other kids that?

FB: I used to tell the other kids that, so those guys wouldn't challenge him. I remember this one guy, a guy named John Henry Johnson, he lived on Union Avenue and I told Johnny, I said Johnny, leave Mr. Lawson alone. I said you can't even beat me, why are you going to go mess with him. He didn't listen. He didn't listen. He talked back to Mr. Lawson and Mr. Lawson snatched the young man against the wall. And I said Johnny I told you to leave that man alone. Didn't I tell you. I said you up there talking back you better watch who you talk back to. You can talk back to some of these other teachers around here, but you isn't going to get away with Mr. Lawson. After that, I think one of the real true things, well I knew Mr. Lawson before, he lived in the neighborhood, he was a school teacher in Junior High School 40. He live, well his mother still lived there, he used to go by and visit her. She lived on Bristol Street, I thing it was 1412 Bristol Street, just off 170th Street, because sometimes I used to run over there for him, of course it was only about two blocks from the school anyhow, but I think the one thing I really took a liking to Mr. Lawson, he took a likening to me, I didn't challenge him, is that one day, way back then in June, they used to have two half days that you used to call - -

Anonymous Voice: Field day?

FB: No, two half days for teachers to do paper work. And it was a Tuesday and a Thursday afternoon we used to get off. So one of those days, I decided to go back and mess with Mr. Lawson, since I lived right around the corner from the school, and I went

to the classroom, he was in there, and he had all the records out, he was busy erasing and changing grades and what not. I said Mr. Lawson what are you doing? He said, I'm trying to help some of these guys out. Maybe if they get this little junior high school diploma, maybe it might motivate them to go on and complete high school. I said wow, really, he was trying to help out some of these knuckleheads. And I remember the next day I saw some of these guys and I said, let me tell y'all something, Mr. Lawson is on some of you guys side. I didn't say no more, I just said he's on your side, some of you guys need to relate to him, he's trying to see some of you guys graduate from junior high school and hopefully it will motivate you to go on and do bigger and better things.

MN: If somebody was a tough kid, was there a look that they cultivated, like today, there's sort of a thug sheik look, with the baggy stuff. Back in the day was there a thug look?

FB: You had your thugs, they haven't changed. There were some thugs you knew, and you knew not to mess with him. There was one guy, one main guy who became well known, a guy named Norman Butler, name ring a bell? Norman Three X Butler. Does that ring a bell?

Anonymous Voice: [laughs]

FB: Norman went to junior high school with Bob and I. He was a, we were in a boxing club together, Norman and I. I had enough sense, Franky Belton was bad, but Franky Belton knew Shirt Pete and he wasn't even going to think about going up against him. And Norman Butler was warned. The best thing that happened to Norman is I became

his friend [laughter]. Norman was, I wouldn't want this on the tape. Norman was one of the few guys that was involved in the assassination of Malcolm X.

Bob: Alleged.

FB: Alleged. And I think after he spent about 22 years, it was somewhat cool, it came to light that he was not involved with this, it took 22 years [inaudible]

MN: They had a boxing club in the junior high school?

FB: Yeah, Mr. Roberts, who was one of the physical education teachers, he was also a professional boxing manager. He had a couple of boxers that he managed. I remember this guy, last name was Mills. He lived on Holmes Street and he used to box at Bobby Gleason's gym down on 3rd Avenue, there's a, he used to train and sometimes I used to go see Mills, I had to take him a note and tell him Mr. Roberts wanted to see hi, come over to the school. Mr. Roberts, like I said earlier, he tried to form a track team, he had developed a boxing team, but once a year we used to put on a boxing exhibition in the school, in the auditorium, we had the auditorium program, and - -

MN: Was there a boxing ring in the school?

FB: No, we just used, they had some mats, and they had a gym on the 4th floor we used to use in terms of practice and what not.

MN: Did you get involved in music at all?

FB: I tried to in high school. As I said, I went to Morris High School.

MN: Did you try to sing?

FN: No, that wasn't me. [laughter]

MN: You never tried to become a Doo-Wop singer? [laughter]

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FB: No, nope, I remember when I was going to church Ms Patrick used to tell me, Frank, just hum. [laughter] Because I used to go from tenor to baritone to altos. [laughter]

MN: Was your family a member of St. Augustine's Presbyterian?

FB: Yeah.

MN: Did they join that church as soon as they came to the neighborhood?

FB: Yeah, my mother's father was a Presbyterian minister, he graduated from Lincoln University in Oxford, Pennsylvania. It was a Black college funded by the United Presbyterians.

MN: Had they heard of Reverend Hawkins before they moved to The Bronx?

FB: Yeah, because years ago before my mother, when she was living in Harlem, she used to attend this church - -

[END OF SIDE A]

[BEGINNING OF SIDE B]

FB: yeah, yeah, yeah.

MN: And that was Reverend Eugene Calendar or - - ?

FB: No, that was after. Reverend James Robinson was the minister. He was one of the most, I'd say, one of the great Black orators. He just had a way. He sounded just like, or should I say, Martin Luther King sounded just like him, he was much older than Martin Luther King. They used to get up there and talk for an hour and without even using, without having a sheet of paper in front of them. Reverend Robinson, my mother knew of him because he was at Church the Master for years, Reverend Hawkins also was out of there.

MN: So Reverend Hawkings came out of the Church of the Master in Harlem?

FB: Did he? I think he was a guest speaker. And Nat Robinson. When that church became available in The Bronx, and it was looking to, pressured to look into giving it over to a congregation, nine people stepped forward and they decided to hire Reverend Hawkings at that time, whose, I think two or three years at a union theological seminary to become pastor there. He started way back I think in 1941 with nine members. And it grew to about 2,000.

MN: Wow. What was it like going to that church?

FB: It was a family affair. It was a fun church, a lot of things happening in that church. It was a church that the doors were open seven days a week, not like now where they are only open on Sundays. But it was a community church, in fact there are churches in that neighborhood back then were fully utilized. Around the corner on Union Avenue, you had [inaudible] Baptist Church, they had a full congregation. Down the street 166th Street, you had - -

MN: St. Anthony's.

FB: St. Anthony's, the Catholic church, that was full, a lot of my friends went there. You had Thessalonia Baptist Church on Stevens and 163rd Street that was full. The churches were well enforced. People –

MN: So you had a community where there were strong families, strong churches, and schools which were - -

FB: Yeah.

MN: When you got to Morris High School, you had this whole history of being somebody who was in trouble a lot. Did you turn this around quickly at Morris?

FB: I think one of the things that helped me, I always wanted to run track, and this guy Ubana, he lived in Bob's building, we always trained because Marty Williams was in my cousin's class, Wally Rhine's class when he was in 6th grade. Wally ended up moving to Queens and running for Andrew Jackson High School. Marty ended up going to Marsh High School, and sometimes I used to go running with him, I used to go to Van Cortlandt Park and run around Van Courtland Park with him, and I used to go to some of the track meets where not only him, but I would see my cousin running who was a pretty good little distance runner for the New York City public school system. And Marty was a great cross-country runner and he got me involved in running. I think once I got to high school and started running, as I said it saved me because if not for running, I would have had all of that idle time and I'd be getting in trouble. A couple of times I did get in trouble in high school, I had to curse out a couple of teachers. But track saved me and one of the things, there was a cross-country coach called Ann the track coach at one time, Mr. Ron Kemp, he was also dean of boys. And I remember the two times that I got in trouble with him was because I cursed out teachers.

MN: What is it like to curse out a teacher?

FB: It felt good. [laughter] You get something off your chest, this guy [inaudible] every year, when I tried it again, I was a general course student, way back then, Morris High School was an academic high school, and you had a three track system back then. You had a general course program for kids who are somewhat slow, or had no projected future

were in the general course program. They went in that program and sat in June of 54 and came out in June of 57, at that time, I entered Morris High School, as a sophomore, some schools, you had an eighth grade graduating class and then the ninth grade. At the end of June 57, you graduated with a general course diploma. All that showed you was that you had a diploma and that you could now go downtown and get you a little slave job, as I used to call them. And of course, the other tracks, we had the commercial track, was either commercial general, or commercial academic, then you had the academic program, where people took the New York State Regents and what not, and I found out that was the only requirement if you wanted to go to college in New York state at that time. Because Regents credits were not required if you went out of state, and I found that out. Although I did go to night high school and get a couple of regents credits, one in history, the other one in biology, - -

MN: They put you in the general track?

FB: Yeah.

MN: Is that because of junior high?

FB: Yeah, it was because of junior high school and where I was in junior high school.

At first they wanted me, I originally, I was supposed to go to Manhattan School of Aviation Training. That was down on, becoming an airplane mechanic, that was down on 64th Street and Third Avenue. And I went down there and took the test. And coming back, I was so depressed, because that building was depressing. It was a hospital developed way back in 1861 to service the Civil War casualties, and that was a dreary building. And I said Jesus Franky. You want to come down to this every morning, and

get on that crowded subway, and come down and [coughs] and I passed the test. And I remember the guidance counselor called me in, Oh Franklyn, you passed the test for Manhattan Aviation, I said yeah. That's bad. She said why? I said I don't want to go there. I'm tired of being in all boy classes, it's sickening.

MN: [Laughs]

FB: I don't want to be in another all boy's class. I said I either want to go to Andrew Jackson High School in Queens, or Morris High School. I said I know I'm out of the district for Andrew Jackson, but I can use my cousin's address. Oh you can't do that so you're going to have to go to Morris. I said well then I'll go to Morris. And I saw my friend Monnie, I said Monnie, I'm going to Morris. He said good, good, good, then you can start working and training with me during the summer. I think it was a good move on my part in that I was able to run track and it kept me busy. At times, I was too tired to do anything else, although I did at times have a little part time job in High School as a messenger downtown.

MN: Did you ever get in trouble out of school, or it was only in school.

MN: That's interesting.

FB: The thing is, my father, he beat me, he didn't understand why I was always cursing out teachers and getting into trouble and what not, I suppose, because I cursed out teachers.

MN: Did you ever curse out a teacher Bob?

Bob: No:

FB: No, let me take that back, I wouldn't curse them, I'd talk back to them, but I didn't -

-

MN: But you cursed them out.

FB: Yeah, I would curse them out loud and didn't care.

MN: Can you give me an example of what your curses were, can you do a little theater here? Since we've got the camera here, maybe we can put this on the documentary.

[laughter]

FB: I can't.

AV: I am a little bit unclear about something that was said earlier, I was talking earlier about the schools that offered 9.1 through 9.7 music.

FB: No, no, no, okay let me go back. In certain classes that are like 9.1, all your ones, nine one, eight two, nine to, one two three, there's the way, as they classified and categorized your smart kids were in those classes. And most of the smart kids were in 9.4, 9.5, 9.7 was art class if my memory serves me correctly. I think 9.1, 9.2, 9.3 there was a music class somewhere in there.

AV: My question relates to the boxing that you were involved in - -

FB: Well that was just an activity set up for the school. In school of course, some of the youngsters, Mr. Robinson was probably looking for some maybe future champions.

[laughs]

AV: Was that independent of the track system, I mean the numbers system, not the running, but the numbers, the tracking system, was that independent?

MN: Was the boxing, would there be any kids in the ones, twos, or the threes who were boxing?

FB: Yeah, yeah, yeah, a lot of the guys, they weren't just from 9.12.

MN: Was it hard to make the track team for Morris, were there tryouts?

FB: As long as you wanted to run, you could run.

MN: Were there girls on the track team?

FB: No, not back then at that time. There were no girls, as my memory serves me, there was no outlet for female sports back then.

MN: Did you also play basketball?

FB: Outside.

MN: You were a good basketball player?

FB: I was descent, I didn't raise no sand, but I played basketball. We had a little neighborhood, we called ourselves the Bombers, and we used to, I forgot how we used to raise money, I think we used to give little dances or house party dances to raise money to buy our uniforms. And our colors were blue and orange. And some of the guys in the neighborhood, we made up this basketball team. And not with just one block.

MN: And where did you play the games?

FB: It was either at PS 99 community center which was a well known community center in our neighborhood, everybody went to 99 - -

MN: After school and evenings?

FB: Yeah, a lot of the teacher in the schools usually held jobs at this place.

MN: Did you know this man Vincent Tibbs?

FB: Yeah, Mr. Short Tibbs.

MN: Powerful guy

FB: Yeah, he was a short, he was at 99 for years, he was the director.

MN: Howie, did you know Howie Evans coming up?

FB: Yeah, he knew his brother. His two brothers were in our classes, Herbie and John, and both of them went to high school with me, and Howie graduated from Morris, he was a pretty good basketball player, he went to Maryland State, Eastern Shore, played there for two years before he became a colonist for - -

MN: Amsterdam News.

FB: Amsterdam News.

MN: He says that Mr. Tibbs saved his life in a gang fight, he was about to go out with a local gang he was in to fight the Slicksters, and Mr. Tibbs kept him from coming out the door.

FB: It might be true.

MN: When you were at Morris, were gangs a big deal?

FB: There were some gangs there, but they weren't, like I said earlier, they weren't raising any, probably the most well known gang was The Seven Crowns, they were on Dawson Street.

MN: Now where is Dawson Street around the [inaudible]

FB: I would say that was south Morrisania, off of Longwood Avenue - -

MN: Yeah, down there.

FB: One and a half, two blocks.

MN: Were there certain neighborhoods you knew not to go into because you were black?

Somebody I was speaking to the other day said you didn't feel that comfortable in the 50s going onto Fordham Road, you didn't feel that comfortable going to the Concourse. Do you have memories of that?

FB: Yes. Well we knew because Fordham Road, this area here was considered a Fordham Baldies area. The Fordham Baldies. I guess around this area which took in Arthur Avenue, this was a heavy Italian, it still is, Italian neighborhood, especially [inaudible], especially 187th Street and - -

MN: Right, right, right.

FB: Mount Caramel church, but this was a Fordham Baldies Area and we didn't, at least I didn't come, I had no reason to come, [laughter], but there were certain neighborhoods, Fordham area was one. And there might have been little blocks, Dawson Street, Seven Crowns area, although I had no problems with the Seven Crowns because I used to go to Lynch PAL center, and that used to be 156th Street and Beck Street, and I used to go through Dawson Street a few times, of course I knew a couple of people that lived on Dawson. A friend of mine, she grew up on, she had attended St. Augustine's with me, Pat Robinson, and she lived at [inaudible] just off of Longwood. But I also knew some of the guys, a guy named, what was it Spidey, was one of the Seven Crowns and somebody else, I can't remember now. But I'd just say hey what's happening, you know, hey my man, you know [laughter]. Because if that was true, Lynch PAL center was way out of my neighborhood. We used to play basketball down there in a little cheesebox center, plus there was a teacher there, he worked for the PAL, but he later became a

teacher, Mr. Thompson, who was a, he was one of the assistant directors there, way back in 51, 52, Lynch PAL sat at the back street on 156th [caughs]. But, one of the real things about back then, you know a lot of people and that was, if you was on good terms, usually that was safe package. As long as you weren't a member of a gang, you had somewhat of a free access to walk through certain blocks and what not. Only if you were a member of a gang, then you had some problems. I was never one for the gangs, so I met a lot of people.

MN: What was it like running track for Morris, was it a lot of fun?

FB: It was a lot of fun. It helped motivate you, develop confidence in you.

MN: What was your distance, or distances?

FB: I ran cross-country during the fall. We always had a great cross country team, we won The Bronx championship. The three years I was there in fact, they had a record, 15 years in a row, Morris High School won The Bronx championship. I ran indoors, usually I ran the 600 and usually a mile relay. And I think I only ran about a half a mile.

[TAPE BECOMES INAUDIBLE]

MN: Now when did you start to realize that you were going to be a college level track athlete and that this might be something that would get you into college?

FB: I knew running would get me into college, but the academics wasn't because when I was in high school, the academic program did not prepare you to go to college, and because you had that stigma attached to you about being a slow learner or whatever, you weren't considered college material. And this is one of the reasons I remember I cursed out Mr. Bloomingthal, who was my grade advisor and he kept telling me be good Frank,

be good, keep working and we'll put you in the academic program. And I got to the point, I got tired of him, he called me down to just to advise me of my program for the following year, and I said where's my academic program Mr. Bloomingthal. I said I came here three months ago to discuss it with you and you said don't worry, just be good and do your work. I said I've been good, and I've been doing my work, and I have about an 80 average and you still won't put me in the academic program. Why? Oh, look, here, we got - - I said Mr. Bloomingthal, you see that program you're holding of mine, you take it and shove it because I am not going to deal with your, take me in the general program. I said I wanted to go to college and being a general course student is not going to allow me. So you take that program and you shove it. And he went and saw Mr. VonKemp, who was my cross-country coach at the time, and he was also the dean of boys, so he - - Don't you come back to school just for that! Don't come back to school until you bring your mamma! I said Mr. Vonkemp, why you going to do that? You know I was right. You're just saving face with him because I cursed him out and told him what he could do with that general course program. I said I don't think that's fair. I said I want to go to college, and you know darn well I'm not going to go to college from a general course program. I said I want an academic program and I said, let me tell you, if you cant give me an academic program, then I'll go to some other school where I think I can get it, okay, thank you.

MN: So how did you eventually end up going to college? Did you go straight out of Morris, or did you have to go to additional classes?

FB: What I did in 1957 after graduating from Morris and it was pretty good - -

[TAPE BECOMES INAUDIBLE]

FB: Some college, I ran a 49 to a quarter mile, and I remember that, I ran against one of the best quarter milers in New York City at the time, Ralph Bass from Boy's High School, Billie Ray from [inaudible], I remember in the PSL track championship on Randall's Island, I was in their heat and, the two baddest quarter milers, especially [inaudible], and I got third and ran 49.2. Any other that could've gotten me a medal, or won the race in a track meet. And then the following week, after that, the following week, was the first time that they had the Eastern State Championship, I ran the half mile, I snuck into that race. I said come on let me run. Let me in. He said Go ahead. So, he said, I said, I got this college coach I told him I could run a 158 half, so he's [inaudible]. So I ran, I ran with this guy, Tom Carol, who went to Fordham Prep here. Tom later went on to Yale University, but at that time in that race, Tom tied the National Scholastic High School half mile record at that time, he ran a 150.6.

MN: Jesus! That's a good time.

FB: I think he only ran that twice better, a year after he had went to college, he only ran better than that twice. I got eighth in that race, I ran 158.2. When that happened, then that really motivated me. I went back to night high school. At that time, a very good friend of mine who ran with me, Jimmy Brown, he was able to squeeze enough, and he got into NYU University. He was in the same bad shape I was academically, he barely reads, he couldn't write, and, because he was in one of those high exponent classrooms, we came into junior high school together, and because he was older, he went to Catholic high school and you know what, they leave you back in Catholic high school, so I guess

he was left back a couple of times. So when we came into junior high school together in 51, somewhere down on the end of that same year, I think they put him up a grade.

MN: You're being in all of these classes with all of these kids who are being warehoused; did it affect your ability to function when you finally got into serious classes?

FB: No, I had studied. I was so far down there was only one way for me to go and that was up. I learned to study. I remember when I would go to night high school at Morris High School, after getting out of my two classes on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, after I would get off from work, I would rush up to the classes, do my studying, and come home. I would go to class and come home. I set up a little study room downstairs in the basement of my house where I could go down there and study. It was another thing that motivated me because I knew I had the potential.

MN: how many years of night high school did you have to go to before you went to Morgan State?

FB: I went to two and a half, I went to night high school for two [inaudible] and a half years.

MN: And what sort of work were you doing during the day?

FB: Menial work, I think. I held jobs down in the garment center.

MN: What were you doing in the garment center?

FB: Stock boy, one of the jobs was stock, I worked for Ms. Arlene's Negligees, they used to make negligees for the different - -

Bob: Department stores?

FB: Department stores, here in New York and elsewhere. Then that was at 40 East 32nd Street, that was Arlene's Negligee. Then down the street I worked for a girdle company, that made girdles and braziers. Then I worked for, when I was in high school, I worked for Rapid Messenger Service, which had a little office on that block, where I used to deliver messages. There was messages between the time I got down there three o'clock to five thirty in the afternoon. They used to pay me 75 cents an hour. The first couple of weeks I worked for them I worked for 65 cents, then we got a minimum wage increase and it went to 75 cents an hour. And it allowed me some little spending money. I learned something, Black men growing up in the South learned to treasure a dollar and my father was one. All the Black men that I knew who grew up in the South, they treasure that dollar. They treasured that dollar. They let you know, a dollar is hard to come by. But I was able to save some money too. I was able to put five, ten dollars away in the bank because I knew some day I was going to college. Maybe not here in New York, at NYU, but I knew I was going. But what happened when my friend Jimmie got into NYU, a couple of other guys I went to high school with, a guy named Tom Hanis, Bob was there, they got into NYU, but they were academically you know, I later became a better track runner than Hanis, but when I talked to Joey [inaudible], he was the coach at NYU at that time, track coach, I saw him and he said "look here Frank, I don't have any more scholarships for next year, but if you come [caughs] and you produce, I'll give you a scholarship for the following year". At that time I had about \$2,000 in the bank and I said, I'm not going to take all of my money to pay my way through NYU and then for him to come up next year and say "I don't have any more scholarships, the

scholarships have been cut". I said hey, so I started applying to schools outside of New York, knowing also that I didn't need to have all the academic credits or regent credits that you needed.

MN: Right.

FB: So I applied to several schools, in fact the six or seven that I applied to, just on my general course, I applied to North Carolina State College, North Carolina A&T College in Greensboro, and Winston Salem, the Teacher's college in Winston Salem, North Carolina. And they accepted me just on what I had on the general course. And then in 59 after I had tried to master English writing, I got two and a half years of math in, algebra, trigonometry, and a semester of trigonometry, and two years of a language. Language and math along with the English, history, and the sciences, those were your five - -

MN: So you didn't have any of that in the general courses at Morris?

FB: Just history, social studies, English, and the so called applied sciences.

MN: You didn't have any algebra?

FB: I didn't have any math or language.

MN: WHAT?!

FB: No. As a general course student - -

MN: You didn't have any languages?

FB: No.

MN: You didn't have any algebra, trigonometry, geometry?

FB: No. I only took that when I went to night high school at that time. And I was able to, after I took a semester of trigonometry, I thought I wanted to be a math major. That had kind of stopped short with that because some colleges required you to take two languages as a math major and what not. You had to do good on proficiency exams, and then I decided well hey, let me forgo that. I said hell, I'm going to catch hell in English. I don't need to take another language to catch hell in that too because I'm going to have enough problems with trying to master the English language on the college level.

MN: Now Frank, I think we are definitely going to need two interviews because that whole Claremont experience is going to - - I want to sort of move to the end of this phase. When did you start to notice things in your neighborhood starting to fall apart a little?

FB: A lot of things happened. You see some of your friends going to jail, on drugs, strung out on drugs.

MN: When did you first notice the heroin?

FB: If I wasn't in elementary school, then definitely when I was in junior high school.

MN: In junior high, you were already seeing heroin?

FB: Oh yeah.

MN: This is like in the early 50s?

FB: Late 40s, early 50s yeah. It was known, we used to call them junkies. You used to see them fall you know.

MN: On your block?

FB: Not only on my block, in the neighborhood. You knew certain guys were strung out. I remember one time I saw this guy, he was - - I said what's wrong with him? Ah man he ain't nothing but a junkie, he's strung out on dope.

MN: And this was in the late 40s and early fifties when you see this?

FB: Yeah, I tell you some of my closest friends, guys we grew up with. They O.D.ed and some guys had some good heads on them shoulders.

MN: And they O.D.ed, when was this in the 60s mainly?

FB: Fifties, fifties yeah.

MN: Really, so this is when you are in high school guys - -

FB: Junior high school, yeah - -

MN: There were guys in junior high school - -

FB: No, no, no, no, no, we were in the neighborhood. Most of the drug addicts back then were in their twenties - -

MN: in their twenties.

FB: Teenage addicts didn't come along until the mid 60s late 60s. Most of the guys who strung out were older guys.

MN: Did they make the neighborhood dangerous or not really?

FB: It was dangerous, I mean if they had to get their money they didn't care where they got it - -

MN: Wait a minute, in the beginning, you talked about people being able to leave their doors open.

FB: And when did that stop?

FB: I'd say late, probably nineteen, late fifties, late fifties.

MN: So after you graduated from high school?

FB: Yeah, mom came home one day and found that somebody had lifted her radio and her iron, so she decided to - -

AV: Start locking the doors?

FB: Start locking the doors.

MN: Did you see this neighborhood as a place to get, when you were graduated from high school and getting ready to go to college, did you see yourself, this is a neighborhood I want to move out of because it's going down and I'm moving up? Or it wasn't quite that?

FB: It wasn't quite that. Our neighborhood really didn't start turning until the late sixties, early seventies when a lot of abandonment of housing took place and what not and the destruction of houses - -

MN: Right.

FB: Yeah, the late sixties, early 70s. I know some neighborhoods, or some block areas like over night deteriorated, desecrated through fires and [inaudible]. People blamed it on the welfare system in that in order to get better housing, we had to be displaced so a lot of people used to say or get some new furniture, the government used to pay for all of that back then. People just set fires.

MN: Your cohort of people your age, when did people in that group, bad things start happening to them like going to jail, going up state, getting hooked?

FB: I guess here again, it started in the fifties. Some guys strung out, got busted for car theft or what not, shot for something, and then when the sixties rolled in, it like really started blossoming to drugs and what not, selling and dipping and what not. When the 60s came in it took off. Even in the 60s when the school system started changing, I think two things, I think Blacks started asserting themselves as far as Black image, Blacks understanding their blackness, and beginning to assert themselves and what not. There wasn't nothing white people could do with that; especially teachers. And there was a mass exodus of teachers who had been in school in the South Bronx for 25, thirty years, decided hey, let me look for greener pastures. So what happened, you had a lot of young teachers coming into these schools, and they would come in, there were mixed feelings, scared because instead of Frank Belton just coming to class sitting down and being good, you had kids coming in not caring who they are or where they would go and just don't give a damn. They stopped going to class, you'd find more kids hanging out in the hallway or outside the school than in the classroom. It was a change in attitude with the Board of Ed. With a lot of your teachers born in the suburbs that were the new teachers, they were young, inexperienced and they were really overcome with the new quote unquote Black Power that the kids were beginning to expound on. Then again they developed a I don't care attitude and became lost in the public school system and that's the kind of attitude they had.

MN: Okay, this is, before we move on because Mark has to go and Dan you also, any questions to wind up this phase which is basically to the late 50s, and then we are going

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to do another interview for the 60s and your experience in Claremont Houses. Daniel,

Mark, do you have any?

[Daniel]: No not right now, I'll probably have some later.

FB: Just write them down, I'll try to answer them.

MN: Okay well thank you very much, this was fascinating, and we are going to bring you back soon, in fact let's - -

[END OF INTERVIEW]