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Greene, Aurelia

Greene, Aurelia. Bronx African American History Project
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Transcriber: Kaitlin Campbell

I: Today is April 23rd, 2009. We're in the offices of Assemblywoman Aurelia Greene to interview her for the Bronx African American History Project. And Murray Archibald and Peter Derrick are also present. So, thank you for having us. If we could begin with some of your biography: What neighborhoods--?

Aurelia Greene (AG): Will you put that on hold – and let me just get a copy of my bio – that's what I'm just looking to see if I have a copy in here. Open that door a second please. Joy or Fran [calls to others] give me a bio please. Because I think it—[tape cuts]

I: Could we start with, perhaps, your memories of your childhood? What neighborhoods did you grow up in?

AG: I grew up in the Morrisania section of The Bronx: Third Avenue and 171st street when the old 'L' lulled me to sleep at night. [Laughs]

Murray Archibald (MA): That's where Alfred E. Smith's wife was from, you know—

AG: Really--? [Laughs]

MA: I heard 176th Street and Third Avenue. He used to come up here from the Lower East Side when he was going out with her. This was in the 1890s. He got married in St. Augustine's—

AG: Really? [Laughs] Wow—

MA: In 1897 or 1898. And his wife was the daughter of an Irish contractor—

AG: Yes, yes, and it was very much Irish, yes, very much Irish—

I: I was going to ask—you were born October 26th, 1934, so most of your memories probably come from the late 30's or early 50-40's. What was the neighborhood like at that time, in terms of who lived there?

AG: It was a very racially mixed neighborhood. It was a few African-Americans, mostly Irish I would say, some Italians, and some Jewish.

I: Do you remember, perhaps, stories from your family as to how your parents came to live in that area, or your family?

AG: I don't remember them talking about how we moved there. I think after I was born, there was a need for a bigger apartment and we were able to get the apartment we were in. My building was 3781 Third Avenue.

I: Where did your family live before moving there? In the Bronx?

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AG: Yes, they lived on --oh gosh where did she tell me they lived -- was it Minford Place? I think it was on Minford Place. Now, that I'll have to ask my mother again. It was in the Bronx, yes. They lived several places in the Bronx: they lived on Fox Street, they lived on Minford Place, they lived someplace else over by Westchester -- I'm not quite sure. I don't remember the street. I don't remember the street off-hand -- off Southern Boulevard they lived, also, and I don't remember the street.

I: Could we talk a bit about your parents or your, kind of, family on both sides?

AG: Basically it's my grandparents. My grandparents raised me. My father and mother separated when I was about 2 years old, and my grandparents, my maternal grandparents, took me in as theirs and they raised me. My mother worked --she worked out on Long Island -- and she would come home maybe a couple of times in the month to see us. But, it was basically my grandparents.

I: They raised you in Morrisania--?

AG: Mhm.

I: Where did you -- what type of work did your mother do?

AG: Gee whiz -- well, she was in theatre -- didn't make much of a go of that, and she worked as a hostess out there, and don't ask me what it entailed, I don't know. Later on she became an assistant buyer for some of the -- I'm trying to remember the store now -- Burlington Mills. Before Burlington Mills it was a part of another corporation, and she worked for that corporation. She didn't go with the Burlington part, she stayed with the other corporation.

I: Your childhood was mostly shaped by your grandparents--?

AG: Yes.

I: Where are their origins?

AG: My grandmother was from Trinidad and my grandfather was from St. Vincent.

I: Any memories of a story of how they came to come to the United States?

AG: My grandfather was a merchant seaman, and when he came here he liked it, and he sent for my grandmother, and they re-located here.

I: Did your grandmother work?

AG: Yes she did. She worked as a domestic.

I: In the Bronx?

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AG: No, at the hotels downtown. At that time, it was hard, because when I was born it was during the Depression, and it was very hard for Blacks to get employment. And so she was Mullato and she could pass for white, and that's exactly what she did. That's how the family got fed.

I: So she worked – she passed for white—?

AG: She passed for white—

I: Downtown—?

AG: That's right. In big hotels.

I: Did the downtown hotels not hire Black women to work in?

AG: No. They didn't hire Blacks at all.

I: Wow. What were some of the – did she ever talk about that?

AG: She was very conscious of it, and she instilled in us to realize that we were of value, and to not let others shape who we were or what we were going to become, but rather, that we had to know that we were as good as anybody else, and so therefore – that was what she made sure we understood. And she also – she was raised, by her African grandparents. So, she could tell us about History in Senegal. So she took us back to the Motherland.

I: Wow. You said that her work downtown kept you fed. Did your grandfather work as well?

AG: Yes, he worked. He worked – after he left the seas, he worked in various kinds of jobs. The last one he worked in was as a – was in a laundry. Fact it was – the last laundry he worked in was here in The Bronx, I think on **Spoffard**.

I: But being able to pass for White and work downtown gave the family a substantial--?

AG: Well it gave us enough to be able to eat and to have a roof over our heads. And I do believe at the time – [Crosstalk] At the time that we moved to Third Avenue, because of the Depression, there was a need for people to take apartments or housing wherever you could get them. Don't forget: at the time, The Bronx was not welcoming Blacks to live here. So we, we were in here. They worked initially as supers over in the East Bronx. I know on Fox Street they were supers, and I believe on Minford Place they were supers. But, somehow in the transition, we finally wound up on Third Avenue.

I: They were supers, your grandparents--?

AG: I'm talking about my grandparents. That's who I will talk to you about because they are the ones who really—

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I: So that was how they got their housing? They got their housing because they were also working as supers?

AG: Right, and it was rare. That's how they got into The Bronx in the first place, because, you couldn't get in an apartment. After the Depression hit, then of course there was a preponderance of apartments, and so landlords would take anybody who would be – who would and could pay the rent. And so that's how they got the apartment on Third Avenue.

I: So prior to that, African-Americans had a real difficult or impossible time—[Crosstalk]

AG: Absolutely. Absolutely.

I: Do you remember – well, since you lived in the Depression or the late 30's, kind of your earliest memories. Did you have Black neighbors?

AG: I can't remember [Crosstalk] Not at that time, I don't know. Because I was really a toddler, so I don't know. Ultimately, the building became Black, and the whole neighborhood became Black – the immediate became Black but, it was a transitional kind of thing. As we moved in, others moved out. The Whites moved out.

I: I'm going to ask some questions about that in a minute. But you said something that's actually pretty incredible that we've never heard and I think it's rather rare – so you're grandmother's grandmother shared memories with her of life in—

AG: Africa—

I: --West Africa or Senegal, particularly. Did your grandmother ever recount any of those stories--?

AG: Oh many, many. That's how I know about my heritage.

I: Can you recall any that stand out?

AG: She told us about how they had been brought, how they had been captured. She told my grandmother that her father was an African chieftain, and he was waylaid by some of his own people and brought to the coast, and they were all brought there – the whole family was brought there. And that's when they were put on these ships. But they had a village; he was the head of the village. And that was basically what she told us about. So, long before we started understanding our history, I was given a true lesson on History. In fact, let me share something with you—at that time, the main source of entertainment was the movies. And – we used to— when you went to the movies you saw these pictures, and they had the African zombies. My grandmother took offence at that, and wouldn't let us watch those movies because, she said that that's depicting a people not as they truly are but one that Hollywood wanted to really make people think that they were like. And, she was very conscious of her race, she was very

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conscious of her background, she was very proud of being Black, she suffered because she was Mullatto – because very often she wasn't accepted – she *wasn't* accepted by Whites if they knew she had Black blood. But she was also very often not accepted by her own – because she had White blood.

I: Was your grandfather a darker complexion--?

AG: Yes he was. Yes he was – he was about my complexion.

I: Did that dynamic – her, fair skin and he, the darker complexion—

AG: Yes. Yes it did. Yes it did. That's why when he could not find employment, she went out and got the employment. Because when they denied him work, she was able to get work.

I: What were their names?

AG: Her name was Maud, M-A-U-D, Beatrice, B-E-A-T-R-I-C-E, Russell, R-U-S-S-E-L-L. And her maiden name was Paris.

I: And your grandfather's name?

AG: He was Harold James Russell, R-U-S-S-E-L-L.

I: I'm just curious because again this is something that – in this project we have not heard about. I guess this is your thoughts or your impressions: what do you think, 2009, maybe if you even had memories or thoughts of this as a young woman or as a child – what do you think it was like for the experience of your grandmother transitioning in between these worlds? How did she do--?

AG: It was, it was quite difficult. It was quite challenging for her. When she came here, she came in November, and at that time November had very wicked winters, and she developed pneumonia and almost died. So that was very difficult for her; adjusting to the life here and what she was accustomed to was very difficult for her. But they did have friends and family members who were already here, who helped them with the transition, and so ultimately she was able to fend for herself. And she did quite well!

I: You know, there's kind of this theme in Literature and even in some movies talking about light-skinned Black people who can cross over in and out of the worlds – and always part of the trope is that their darker-skinned children or relatives or what not, can't go into that world with them.

AG: She experienced that. Especially my older uncle and my mother were more fair-skinned, but, my youngest uncle, the younger, he was dark like me. And, when he went to school, the teachers were amazed that she was his mother – she, they-- [Laughs] And she read one teacher, I

remember the story about her reading this teacher because the woman would not accept the fact that this could be her son.

I: What does that mean – ‘reading’?

AG: In other words, she really called her down, and told her, you know ‘How dare you, you think that I could not have a Black child.’

I: Wow.

AG: She became very active in the Parent’s Association by the way.

I: I was going to ask if your grandparents were politically, or politically active in the community--?

AG: While we were in school, my grandmother was, up until the time that – I think when I got into Junior High School, she became less active. But, my uncles were all older than me, in fact, there was only one that was close to me, and that was the youngest of her children. I have a cousin who was later born and –but she wasn’t active with her in the schools either.

I: How long did she work as a domestic--?

AG: This was just during the Depression, because she – they were very staunch believers in the fact that she needed to be home with her children and my grandfather, he, as long as he could work and they could pay the bills, that was all they desired.

I: And then she stayed at home--?

AG: Mhm, mhm.

I: So perhaps we could talk about the neighborhood transitions – but more so from your, kind of, memories from your childhood and, you know, teenage years. Your playmates – when Morrisania was a mixed race neighborhood, did you have a mixed race group of kids that you played with?

AG: Yes. It was, it didn’t stay mixed that long. I remember in Elementary School --and I went to PS 42 –In Elementary School, I had more of a mixed friendship with other children. But, as I grew, as I grew into the teen years, I would say that that became less and less – in fact, it was less.

I: And where did you go to High School?

AG: I went to Central – what was then Central Commercial High School, and, down on 42nd Street. Now, Thomas – what is it? Thomas, something Thomas –

I: My mother went there when it was Central Commercial.

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AG: Yeah. But – and met the founder of the school, when he was still the principal there, Mr. Marggel, when I went. And he was very strict, very strict, and told us what a privilege it was for us to be able to come down to his school. And if we misbehaved, we would ‘go back to Harlem where we came from’—

I: That’s what he said?

AG: [Laughs] That’s exactly – that was our orientation.

I: I was going to ask – growing up in the Bronx, in the 1940’s, when you were a young girl – were you conscious that there were parts in the Bronx where African-Americans were OK to congregate and shop and walk and socialize, et cetera, and there were other parts where they weren’t?

AG: I don’t think that hit me so much. I don’t think that was so prevalent. My church, which at that time was St. David’s Episcopal Church – was mixed. Later on, we went to a Church that was closer, it was right around the corner from our house – that was St. Paul’s Episcopal: that was mixed. So, it did not really impact me. I think my first encounter with real racism was when I went south. My mother had re-married, and she was in North Carolina, at Fayetteville, NC. My step-father was in the – Oh gosh, what do you call them? It’s a special troop of para-troopers, at Fort Bragg.

MAN IN ROOM: National Guard?

AG: No, no. [Crosstalk] 101st Airborne, he was in the 101st Airborne. And my mother moved to Fayetteville, and I went down to visit her and I remember my real first encounter. She took me to a store, and I was thirsty and started over to the drinking fountain I saw on the wall. And, as I’m on my way there, she yelled at me, and said ‘Stop!’ And people are looking at me, and I’m saying ‘What’s the matter?’ [Laughs] I turn around and ‘What’s the matter?’ And she said ‘You can’t drink there!’ And I’m saying to her, ‘But why not? It’s a fountain!’ [Laughs] I had no idea, no clue, never saw the sign. And, then she showed me where I could drink.

I: So, in New York – I mean—

AG: I didn’t see that here, no. But, it existed. When I went to High School, we were across the street from Tudor City. We could not go to Tudor City.

I: Well there was no sign.

AG: There was no sign, but, they weren’t going to let us. Even where I live now – as I child I remember coming. I lived on Third Avenue, I’m up on Teller Avenue at 168th Street and there’s stairs going down to Clay Avenue.

I: This is where you live now?

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AG: That's where I live now. And I remember my friends and I walking, and I don't remember where we were going. But we walked through 168th Street, up those stairs, and I got to my corner, and we ran into one of my schoolteachers. And she said 'what are you all doing up here?' And we said we were on our way, wherever we were going. She said 'Don't you know, you're not allowed up here.' She said, 'you go back to where you came from.' And that teacher was Mrs. Tepper, I never forgot her.

I: She was White--?

AG: She was White. We didn't have Black teachers. I cannot tell you I had a Black teacher.

I: Ever?

AG: Not in Elementary, not in Junior High School, and not in High School.

I: So, what were the relationships like – your relationships with your teachers?

AG: I had very good relationships with my teachers, my teachers were good. And, I was always curious, and they liked that so – I would do extra work to get extra credit. I was a goody goody two-shoes! [Laughter] But that was the thing to do then! You know, you were supposed to – that's right. And, I might add, my grandmother also taught us that we're only in this situation because of the color of our skin. But we have a way of getting out, and that's through education, because if we're educated than we have an avenue to move to other sites.

I: When you were in school, in Elementary School at PS 42, you said it was mixed. By the time – well when you went to Central Commercial, I'm sure it was—

AG: It was mixed there too.

I: --It was mixed as well. So did you ever experience in your education a time where you were one of a few, or one of the only Black students in the class at school?

AG: Mhm. Yes.

I: Did it ever transition to where there were nothing but Black students in the class or the school, or that was a different generation--?

AG: No, no. No, that was a different generation, yeah.

I: So you attended, kind of, mixed or predominantly White schools--?

AG: Right, they were all predominantly White.

I: And the teachers – since you, as you said, were a goody-goody, the teachers encouraged you academically--?

AG: Mhm.

I: Did you ever work during your teenage years?

AG: My last year in High School, we got a chance to work at Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. And that was my first job, and after High School I stayed there. I became a pool Stenographer.

I: So at Central Commercial they trained you as secretarial--?

AG: Right, that's right.

I: So, a few more questions about The Bronx during your childhood and adolescence – After the Depression, kind of during the World War II era, did you begin to notice more African-Americans moving--?

AG: Well that's when it really grew. That's when – by then, it became Black. And there were a scattering of Whites, a very few scatterings. And the store owners were all White—[Crosstalk] in the 40s.

I: What are some of your memories of, just, the neighborhood: what it was like to go shopping, or what it was like to go clubbing--?

AG: Well we had Bathgate Avenue which was the Shopping Hub. [Laughs] And it was predominantly Jewish and we would go – my grandmother knew her merchants and she loved them and they loved her, and we would go and get the Dairy stuff and we would get the live chickens in the meat market, all of that – the fresh produce. And they all knew us, so it was good. We were able to get along with them. At the start of, or facing Bathgate Avenue was the Ice Cream Parlor, or “The Sugar Bowl”—

MA: Sugar Bowl—

AG: Remember that? [Laughs]

MA: Yes, yes, yes.

AG: And, we would go there and get our ice cream and sodas and all that. A little ways down we had the Fenway Theatre on Claremont Parkway. So, we had – the neighborhood was great. There was camaraderie about the neighborhood that doesn't exist today. And that is that – as a child, everybody who lived in the neighborhood was my mother and father when my mother and father wasn't around. So that if they saw me getting into trouble, if they saw me going somewhere or doing something that I shouldn't be doing, or saying something that I shouldn't be saying – I got reprimanded on the spot, by them. And then, they would go back to my parents and tell them what I had done.

I: And then what happened?

AG: You got it a second time [Laughs].

Peter Derrick (PD): That's what a lot of younger people said [Crosstalk] Exactly the same thing.

AG: And it was such a close-knit community. It became a close-knit community. If someone had a need – if there was a death or anything – we all rallied around. We had a fire, I remember, in my building – one of my neighbors got burnt to death. And, we brought him into our house, what was left of him. And – but the support system for his children, because he was a single father raising these boys – the support system for his children where neighbors said 'I'll take care of them, I'll help take care of them,' and ultimately they stayed there! They stayed there, they lived with the families, and we all contributed, and the wind-up was – that they all became grown-up men, moved on, got married, and had their own families. So that was the kind of thing that went on, it was very good. We had a very elderly woman downstairs named Granny. We would check on her every once and a while – even as children we would check on Granny, and make sure she didn't need anything, or, if she wanted us to go to the store for her.

I: This is when the neighborhood was solidly Black?

AG: Black.

PD: A lot of the people that have been interviewed for the Oral Histories talk about also Puerto Ricans moving into neighborhoods and living close with Puerto Ricans and, in fact – there's this word that I'd never heard of, "Voodooricans." Where if a Black married a Puerto Rican, they were called "Voodooricans," I'd never heard of that—

AG: [Laughs] Oh really? Well we had such a couple. We had the Diaz's, Johnny and Sandra. Johnny went, was in World War II, and his wife Sandra was home, she took care of the children until he got back. But they later divorced. But – we had a scattering of Puerto Ricans who had moved in, but it was basically Black.

I: What were your experiences like working at MetLife?

AG: It was OK – it became boring to me. Cause I like challenge. And, it was nice, I worked as a pool Stenographer and that meant that the underwriters would call us in to take dictation, they would dictate to us, we'd go back, type it up and take it back to them to sign-off and do whatever else they needed to do. And after a while it got very boring, so I was looking for something else that was more challenging, and, my second job – I wound up working for a doctor in Harlem, on Amsterdam Avenue. And, I didn't stay with him that long and I don't remember why I decided to leave. I don't know why – I really, that was not my area of where I felt comfortable in working. I wanted something that I could really get my hands in, my teeth in, and so – then the door opened for me to – I kept looking for work – and the door opened for me. And I wanted to

work in the Bronx. And I wanted to work – I wound up working at this plastic manufacturer. The name of it was A.J. Siris.

I: In The Bronx?

AG: Here in The Bronx. You remember that company? [Crosstalk] Yeah. And, I went there to work for the office manager which would give me a whole new wealth of exposure to various jobs. One of the things – another thing my grandmother taught me, was: when you go on a job, you learn everything that you can, not only about your job but everybody else's, because you never know when the opportunity will present itself. And so, I went there and it so happened that Mr. Simon, who I worked for at the time, lived on Sheridan Avenue and 167th Street. I live on Teller Avenue, 168th Street. So, in the mornings, rather than take the bus to get to work. In the mornings we made arrangements where he would pick me up at 167th and Morris, and he would drive me to work. And in the evenings, the same thing – he would drop me off there. That way I didn't have a problem getting back and forth to work – especially in bad weather. And, I got a chance to talk with him, and he got a chance to know me better and know what my ambitions were, and he started exposing me to more and more stuff in the office – so that I was not just his secretary, but then I started helping out in accounting, he ultimately made me – put me over accounts receivable. And, as I – he got into some sort of conflict with the owners, and up and resigned suddenly one day. And he left; the wind up was that – the controller for the company had to assume his duties. So, he then, the controller must have known what I was capable of and he upgraded me to being the Assistant Office Manager. So, I now looked over not only Accounts Receivable but Accounts Payable and worked with him and with the auditors to audit the stock and what have you, and the books and all of that. So, it gave me a much broader – and you know what, my major in High School was not only Stenography but it was also Accounting. So I had an Accounting background and it all fell in line, and I loved it. I loved it. I was there up until the time I got married, and then I got pregnant afterwards and that's when I left. I had a miscarriage, and I that's when I left.

I: Did you start working there in the mid-1950s?

AG: No, wait a minute – I graduated from High School in 52, so yeah it was probably mid to late 50's when I started working there.

I: And when did you get married?

AG: I got married in – Don't ask me when I got married, I don't remember any more. But, my daughter was born in '62.

I: Ok, so you worked there until '60, '61—

AG: Yeah, a substantial amount of time. And even after I left, after she was born, when the auditors came in, I always went back and helped out.

I: What was the name of that original--?

AG: A.J. Siris Corporation.

I: No, the supervisor, the gentleman--?

AG: Oh, Mr. Simon. I don't remember his first name because he was just Mr. Simon to me. But he opened that door. [Laughs]

I: And was there ever any question or concern about an African-American woman working in this--?

AG: No, no. And you know what? There was one African-American young man who worked there. I don't remember what he did. I don't remember what he did, but he worked there also. So there was the two of us, who worked in the office. There were African-Americans in the plant itself.

I: This is interesting; we also don't hear much about -- kind of, The Bronx's industry or manufacturing economy. So this was a Plastics--?

AG: Manufacturer.

I: And where was it located, again?

AG: It was on 134th Street and – I can't remember the Street.

MA: It was in the South Bronx.

AG: Yes, it was East, Southeast. It was in an industrial area on the Southeast Bronx. I don't remember the street –it's almost coming to me, and not quite.

I: Was it a big company?

AG: It was big, yes. Very big building, very large building.

I: And you said there were African-American males that were also, kind of, working in the plant at laborers--?

AG: Mhm, mhm.

I: We don't hear that much about them. If I could just ask maybe two more or maybe – three I think come to me. Could we speak a bit about St. David's Episcopal and St. Paul's churches--?

AG: I don't remember that much about St. David's because we left there when I was relatively young. St. Paul's: we were there – gosh what was Father's name – we were there – I remember I was confirmed at St. Paul's.

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I: I was just going to ask what the church community was like. You had said that it was mixed—

AG: It was mixed. It was mixed, and, to my recollection we all got along well. We got a new minister, and I don't remember when – I was a teenager when he came in – and he was very very conscious of creating things for teenagers. So he started giving us this Friday or Saturday night – I don't remember – social time in the parish hall. And we would do various events and activities to keep ourselves occupied. But by then it was all Black.

I: Well I guess the only question that I had – when you got married – well, you don't have to answer this if you don't want to: did your grandparents let you socialize with young men as a teenager or as young woman? Did you date?

AG: No, not really.

I: That wasn't normal—

AG: Not really, not really, not really. It wasn't until I was out of high school that I started actually dating. It was not – they didn't want any problems or any additional charges to take care of. [Laughter] So they didn't encourage it, and it was fine by me because I had a mission and I think that's what it was—

I: What was your mission--?

AG: --And my mission was: I wanted to be the best that I could be. I really wanted to accomplish things. I had a desire to just—achieve things that I knew Blacks were not achieving, and I always wanted to do that. So, I think that was my motivation – a lot things that – I would go to parties, I would socialize. But, it wasn't that great a priority. As an older teenager, I hooked up with some of my Church sister and we started a club, a social club. It was six of us. We started a social club and we then just hung out together, visited things together – but even there, one of our friend's brother, her oldest brother, would take us wherever we needed to go. And he would gather us up so that we can get into any kind of situations where we were compromised.

I: Did the social club have a name?

AG: Yes, we called ourselves “Club Cagne,” and it was the first initial of our first names: Carol, Aurelia, Gladys, Nettie, and Ellie or Eloise. [Laughter]

I: Was it all African-American women?

AG: We were all African-Americans, yes.

I: Club--?

AG:--Cagne.

I: How did you meet your husband?

AG: Oh, that's a very interesting story [Laughter]. I met my husband – I heard about him first. [Laughs] And, the stories I heard about her were not nice. It was negative stories. I heard about him from the principal – I was a Parent Association President, brand new parent to the school, went to the first Parent Association Meeting with my friends and lo and behold they asked me, [Answers doorbell ringing] Is that Paul? Excuse me a minute. [Silence] Maybe it isn't. They asked me—

I: I'm sorry to interrupt –so you had a child before meeting your husband or marrying your husband?

AG: Yes, both of my children are from a previous marriage, yes. And the principal of my daughter's school, the children's school, had told me about this man who was working for the anti-poverty program, and, "You don't want to go over there to them--" They were over in the Claremont section and, you know, "I got the home back on the hills situation" again, you know, "that you're up here with us." And I said, well, "that's all well and good but I'm going to go and see what this is all about."

I: So wait, so now you lived on the hills where you--?

AG: Yes, yes, yes. I didn't tell you that. We moved, we bought our house – Let me re-cap: my stepfather was killed the Korean War – I'm going to call it 'war,' not 'conflict'—and, my mother bought a house on Teller Avenue. And that's where we moved. I was about 18 years old when we moved there. After I got married and had the children, my daughter became old enough and they enrolled in the school across the street. And I was starting to tell you my first encounter with the parent association. I went to a meeting with my friends and lo and behold I'm hearing my name being offered up as the PA president, and I'm saying "What?!" And the wind up was: parents voted me in because they didn't want the woman who was already there. And, so I met the principal and we started talking about revitalizing the Parent Association and the state of education and what have you. By then I'm learning from a Presbyterian Minister, who was on the school board at the time, that the state of the school system was in chaos –it was terrible.

PD: This is the early 60s?

AG: This was the early 60s. And he asked me to attend this meeting with the –what was it—the CPC then—

MA: Yeah, Community Progress—

AG: Community Progress Center that the Morrisania Community Progress Center was sponsoring because they're trying to organize the community to become more active in terms of

making sure that the system – the education system – showed improvements. This was also a part of mayor **Lindsey's** – what were they called?

MA: [inaudible] [Crosstalk]

AG: **Lily Ajaye**, they were called – the Urban Action Task Force. [Crosstalk] The Urban Action Task Force. He had created this Urban Action Task Force and-- [Crosstalk] Yeah, and he had arranged for some of the community activists, or the people who would be more outspoken, to – be a part of this team. And they were to organize various people, or various groups. The wind up was that they sponsored a community meeting at Claremont Center and I went to the meeting and I heard this big hubbub about my husband – that he was there in the audience, and everybody's talking about him, and I'm saying "Who is this man?" But I didn't see him that night, but, somebody got up and said – I think it was **Saul Herbert** – said that "I'm going back to CORE now." Saul said "come to Reverend Greer's church on Boston Road, that Saturday that Jerome Greene was going to have an education meeting because he was establishing an education council for the three school districts" – and that was 8, 9, and 12. And, so I went back to the school and I'm hearing more stuff about what not to get involved and not to do down there, and I'm saying "OK, ok." So I went to this meeting with an attitude, because now I'm programmed against this man. [Laughs] And after the meeting – and he was very sincere and he was telling everybody what—

[End of Side 1]

AG: --he wanted to do and – after the meeting, I said, "may I speak with you?" And he said, "yes." I said, "I'm Aurelia Greene, I'm the PA President of PS 53, and I understand that my school is in your **catchment** area, but, I want to know why no one notified me that you exist and that I wasn't invited to this meeting." And he said, "I apologize, but, this is my secretary, make sure – could you give her your name? And, we do apologize." He said, "We're very limited with staff and so we have not been able to get around to all of the schools." And he asked me to please forgive him, and I'm saying "Oh, OK." He said, "but you know—" I said, "But why can't you get additional people? You can get volunteers!" You know, Miss Know-it-All. [Laughs] The windup was that he said, "Oh wonderful! I'm so glad you volunteered, because I do need you!" And he said, "I want you to come to my office on Monday and you can help us out, and—" "And, I was stuck! I had to go and do it! So, I go with one of my other parents, who drove, and so we drove over there and --that's how I happened to meet him and got to talk with him. The next thing I knew, he was calling me and offering me a job. So, I started working for him, worked that summer, and—Then, later on – it was summer program that I worked with him for. And then, that winter, that December, he asked me if I would be his secretary – when he found out that I had secretarial skills. Because, when they couldn't write, I wrote. [Laughter] But he's the one who sent me to back to school. I went back to school, got my B.A., and he was a very staunch believer in education, especially for adults, and he felt that that was our way of achieving our goals. And, he has proven that very correct.

Interviewee: Aurelia Greene

Interviewer: N/A

Date: April 23rd, 2009

I: I see. As an aside you mentioned a Saul Herbert, and going back to the CORE days--?

AG: Yes, we did have quite a few activists at that time, and, we had a branch of CORE in the area. And it was headed up by a young man by the name of Saul Herbert, and –what was Bonnie’s last name?

MA: The name was Barrett.

AG: Bonnie Barrett --and Bonnie Barrett. And, the two of them ran Roughshod. We had the NAACP that was headed up by Harold Dicks. So we had—

I: This was in the late 60s?

AG: No, this was in the mid-60s. The mid-60s [Crosstalk] Right—

I: There were still talking about the Morrisania--?

MA: Yes.

AG: Right, right. [OLDMAN muttering]

I: What kind of things did CORE and NAACP do that you remember?

AG: They were there – well, CORE was there as a back-up to some of the things that we did, because we got very deeply involved in education. At that time we were demanding the – Galanisen, from Brooklyn, Reverend Galanisen’s boycott had occurred, so that started or motivated everyone to want to change to the system. Lindsey had put together a commission to review the education laws and the policies. We wanted community control –we wound up getting decentralization which was a whole different thing. But, we launched a big campaign in education. We also started --that’s when we started getting Blacks into the school system, because we held a sleep-in at IS 145 on Third Avenue. No, 148, on Third Avenue. And we were in there for a while, sleeping in, because they had – [Woman enters and interrupts] OK, ask her to – I was late, ask her to give me some time. [Woman leaves] They –what did they do? She distracted me. Oh! They wanted to –the Board of Ed. wanted to put in a German principal. We went down, some of our parents, went down to the school that he was an assistant principal at, in East Harlem, and talked with the parents down there. We found out that he really used Gestapo-type tactics with them and the children. And, they did not want him. [Doorbell ringing in background] And they’d warned us against him, they said if they had to come with us to the Board of Ed. meetings to talk about what he’s done, they would do so. The Board of Ed. didn’t want to hear about it and we decided we were going to hold –do the sit-in, and block him from coming in. And that’s exactly what we did. It wasn’t just a sit-in; it wound up being a sleep-in! And, we blocked him though.

I: Now this was parents groups, PTA groups, and CORE?

Interviewee: Aurelia Greene

Interviewer: N/A

Date: April 23rd, 2009

AG: CORE, the NAACP, and just community activists from all over. There's the Urban Action Task Force. [Laughs] Yeah.

I: So I guess in meeting your husband – your first marriage had broken up?

AG: Yes, we were lost—[Crosstalk]

I: --At the time you started on the Urban Action Task Force?

AG: Right.

I: It sounds like that kind of moves your—

AG: It moved my life into the career, the career path that I've since followed, yes.

I: So we could – because I actually have to, I have to teach, so—[Crosstalk]

AG: Yeah, I've got other appointments—[Crosstalk]

PD: A lot of the interviews had multiple interviews—[Crosstalk]

AG: Then, you know what, why don't we come back, and we can pick it up from there—
[Crosstalk]

PD: You've got a whole story—

AG: I've got a whole history—[Crosstalk]

PD: Right, and we want your whole political career also—

AG: That's right, that's right —[Crosstalk]

I: I'm going to turn this off.

AG: OK.

[End of Tape]