



10-29-2015

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Bronx African American History Project  
*Fordham University*

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Interviewer: So let's get started. Could you say and spell your name please?

Christopher Hayes: Yeah, my name is Christopher Hayes. C H R I S T O P H E R, H A Y E S

I: And when were you born?

CH: I was born February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1979 in Albert Einstein Hospital in the Bronx.

I: So you were born in the Bronx, did you immediately start living in the Bronx from day one?

CH: Yeah, my parents lived... I want to say.. I can't remember. The apartment that my parents lived in when I was born, we moved out of later so I can't remember the address of it. It was roughly near Montefiore hospital in northwest Bronx. My parents were living there at the time and I was brought home from Albert Einstein hospital to there and we were living there for 9 months to a year. Then we moved to an apartment on Wayne Avenue across from Oval Park which used to be the reservoir. Before it was the bigger reservoir it [inaudible] into Clinton. I lived in that apartment on Wayne Avenue which was this great building. It was a court-yarded building. I lived there until I was 11. So we were on Wayne Avenue for about 11 years.

I: Oh wow. And you said it just around six months in the first apartment?

CH: Something around that.

I: So your first early memories were in the Wayne Avenue apartment?

CH: Yeah, exactly.

I: So tell me a little about that apartment and what your home life was like. Any siblings?

CH: Yeah, so it was a really beautiful apartment. It would be interesting to go back to it now because obviously your sense of proportion when you're that small is different. I remember my now wife, then partner, I took her to see the building at one point and the courtyard that I remember being this massive stadium sized thing is kind of this small set of walking paths. It's very funny to think about this child sized proportion. But it was a beautiful apartment. Pre-Warn, wood floors, molding.. there was 2 bedrooms. I shared a bedroom and my parents had gone along with me insisting that it be painted green. Which was my favorite color. I shared a bedroom and a bunk bed with my younger brother who was born 4 and a half years after me. My mom stayed at home. She had been a teacher in the south Bronx in a New York City middle school. And left work when I was born. Stayed home with me then got pregnant with my younger brother, stayed home with him until he was about 4 or 5 until he went to school. Both most of those years of our duration on Wayne Avenue she was home with us. My dad was a community organizer.

I: Really?

CH: Yeah, yeah. He sort of helped found the Northwest Bronx Community Clergy Coalition.

I: I knew that he studied to be a Jesuit at Fordham.

CH: yeah, so the way my parents met was my father was a Jesuit, seminarian... and bounced around as Jesuits sort of do. He was at Xavier, university of Detroit, Peru and ended up in Fordham. My mom grew up in the Bronx on Mariana Avenue near Southern Boulevard by Arthur Avenue. Her father owned a little mozzarella shop across from Mount Carmel Church.

I: were your mother's parents immigrants from Italy?

CH: yeah, not her parents, but her grandparents. And so my dad along with a lot of other people in his Jesuit cohort, when they were at Fordham finishing up their degrees, rented an apartment in the building that my mom grew up in... that was she was living in at the time because she was going to Lehman.

I: I see.

CH: This is all very Bronx-centric. So, he was going to Fordham. He was in full collar when they met, and they became friends and then evolved from there. My father had also done a lot of community organizing, getting more and more involved in local community organizing, working for a group called Morris Heights.

I: Okay

CH: and that was around '74, '75. Well I guess a little earlier because they got married in '74. And you know it was a period where the Bronx was going through tremendous turbulence. And Morris Heights was this attempt to stop the incursion of the epidemic of arson and devastation that had leveled much of the South Bronx as it headed north. And Morris Heights was sort of digging a trench in the furthest fire kind of thing to try to hold a line against some of the practices that were promoting disinvestment and destruction. So my father was a community organizer, he's actually working for a small non-profit downtown called People's Housing Network by the time I was born... I think he was no longer at the coalition.

I: in those early years in that apartment with your parents and your brother, what were your first memories of family in that apartment life and what was the world outside your door?

CH: so we had people over a lot. We would have Thanksgiving dinner... my mom is an amazing cook so we would always entertain there. Two of my father's siblings lived in New York City, one of whom lived in the Bronx as well at the time. They would come over for Thanksgiving. My mom's parents who were both alive at that time lived in Co-op City, and they would come over. We would go out to Co-op City all the time. My parents had a circle of friends in the neighborhood. A big part of that were 2 things. One was the organizers, many of whom had cycled through Fordham had gone out to work at the coalition.. we were living in this kind of friendship, social network. Someone named Bill Fry who lived in the neighborhood, Meg and Charlotte Powers who died tragically about 2 years ago was part of that circle. So it was a whole group of people. We would have big events and people would come over for those.

I: so this sense of community organizing was in your household from a young age.

DR: yeah that was the big social circle. The other aspect of that, my mom was part of parents who started a nursery. A cooperative called norwood nursery. Which is on... I want to say Gun hill Road. Where was it? I can't remember now. I can see it in my head. There's a pizza place that had a silhouette of a gangster painted on it. It was just off Mosholu Parkway. Anyway, there was this cooperative nursery called norwood nursery and that was a really amazing place and they kind of built it from scratch.

I: how old were you when they started working there?

CH: so I think I was in the first class and it was 3 and 4 year olds. So I think it was Pre K.

I: so who were the other kids in the nursery school?

CH: kids from the northwest Bronx. A lot of them the kids of this group of people my parents were involved with. But we had kids from all over the neighborhood too because there was a real need for it which is why they got together and made it happen.

I: so we're talking about early 80's now in the Bronx when you are a young child and going to nursery school. What was your experience in the Bronx in those early years of the 80s?

CH: so I had a strange upbringing because my school was not in the neighborhood so I always had a weird sort of alienated relationship with the neighborhood because I didn't go to the neighborhood school. My parish was in the neighborhood so we would go to St. Brennan's on Sundays. There was an amazing park across the street where we would go to play catch and shoot hoops. That was a really great place. But I went to school on the other side of the Bronx, in the east part of the Bronx at a place called P.S. 83 because they had a gifted program that I had tested in to as a kindergartner. So everyday I would drive over. And what it meant was my upbringing was all over the Bronx because the kids in that program were all over the Bronx. Some of them were from Morris Park, others the west some of them Co-Op city. Some of them were my friends, so my mom was sort of shuttling me all over the Bronx. But mostly they were happy memories. I had a great group of friends. They were incredibly diverse, like a really almost racial ethnic utopia, the grade school.

I: so many of the people we interview say the same thing.

CH: it was amazing. My grade school was literally close to a quarter white, a quarter black, a quarter Latin, and a quarter Asian. Almost exactly 1/4<sup>th</sup> of each. It was really amazing. I had friends who was the son of Pakistani immigrants, a friend who was the son of Caribbean immigrants, African American, white Jewish white Italian. And I went to their houses and saw all of these different images into life. Different smells different kinds of cooking. Like oxtail on the stove at my friend Richards house. One of the things that was amazing about my upbringing in the Bronx was the diversity and the somewhat different class strat that I was exposed to because we were all sort of mixed together.

I: so at what age did you get a sense of this sort of devastation of parts of the Bronx?

CH: you know, that's really funny. The neighborhood that we live in by Montefiore Hospital, Norwood for better or worse was pretty stable. I don't remember feeling unsafe as a small kid. I do remember crime

being this kid of dominant atmospheric presence in the sense of things adults talk about. I remember hearing gunshots as a kid, I remember the crack epidemic being a big deal on the nightly news and what people were talking about. Not that people were dealing crack outside of my place, but just that I very strongly have these memories of a child as perceiving this neurosis and fear of adults about the fact that there was a constant threat of time, there was a building epidemic of crack, this gun violence in the 1980s. I remember this march we did to kick the drug dealers out. I remember a lot of the community groups that my father had worked with really tuned to doing a lot of organizing around crime and police presence in the 80s particularly the crack epidemic. I remember us doing a big march around our neighborhood and marching past drug houses to show that we had sort of strength in numbers kind of thing. But my own particular experience as a kid particularly was feeling kind of safe. But I perceived adults' anxiety about it. And I knew that the South Bronx was synonymous with a sort of economic devastation. I went to a [12:36]