

10-29-2015

Driskell, Dana

Driskell, Dana. Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewers: Dr. Mark Naison and Mark Smith

Interviewee: Dana Driskell

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Transcriber: Colleen McCafferty

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): Ok, this is the 45th interview with the Bronx African American History Project. And today we're interviewing Dana Driskell, a former student at Fordham University, an executive with the New York City Planning Commission, is that what it is?

Dana Driskell (DD): [Crosstalk] - - executive. I'm an associate planner, senior planner with the Department of City Planning.

MN: Ok, and - -

DD: - - but I'm a union officer not a manager.

MN: Ok, now you were born in the Bronx?

DD: I was born and raised in the Bronx. I was born in old Morrisania hospital, no longer existing - -

MN: What street was that on?

DD: That was on 167th right up from Jerome. I guess 167th and maybe Girard or Walton. It's now I think kind of a multipurpose facility, women's clinic and that type of thing. And I was born and raised in the Bronx through college. I went to, I guess its PS, I think its 64 - -

MN: What street was that on?

DD: - - starting out. That was maybe 164th and Morris.

MN: Oh so but you were, so you grew up in the other side of Third Ave rather - -

DD: Right. I mean again I lived probably four or five different places in the Bronx, if I can recall.

MN: Now when did your family first move to the Bronx?

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DD: Well, my folks married, lived in Harlem and they probably moved to the Bronx late 40's early 50's. I had two elder brothers and a sister. My oldest brother was born in '47, so I would imagine that they moved to the Bronx probably around that time.

MN: Now do you remember where their first apartment was?

DD: Their first apartment actually was in a building owned by my grandfather. This was on maybe 166th and Brook Ave. That building is no longer there, I think that must be a lumberyard or something like that. But I lived at 165th and Brook Ave then - -

MN: Now was that a two or three family house or an apartment building?

DD: That might have been a small apartment building, maybe eight or ten units. And we lived there maybe, I can remember we moved to actually Morrisania, I moved to 165th off of Boston Road, probably around the time I was eight or nine, somewhere in that area.

MN: Ok, now are your parents originally from the South or from the Caribbean?

DD: My parents are both from the South. My father was from West Palm Beach in Florida. And my mom was from originally - - well she was born in Detroit, but raised in Memphis and [Cough] excuse me, West Memphis. They met actually in Washington State during the war, my father was in the navy. And he was stationed in the Northwest, and they met and then from there came to New York, briefly in Harlem but essentially were living here in the Bronx.

MN: Right, now the grandfather who owned the house, which side was he from?

DD: He was on my father's side.

MN: Right, now had he moved to the Bronx before your parents?

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DD: I believe so. I had a couple of aunts and apparently he had two or three buildings that he owned in the Bronx, including the place that we lived on 165th Street. So he was fairly well, pretty well endowed. He had come up directly from Florida.

MN: Now did he come to New York City with an income and then bought buildings or did he do it in New York City?

DD: I think that, I mean again, I think he came with a stake and was able to purchase a couple of properties. And this was I guess at - - really sort of beginning of the black presence in the Bronx to a large extent. And so he managed the building where we lived and maybe within two or three years we moved into another. It was more like a row house or a, a townhouse/brown house type configuration, that was on 165th Street. So he was, he was relatively well off. I mean he wasn't - - well he was a high school graduate, but he wasn't well educated. But my father didn't go to college; he was a sheet metal worker. He got skills in the navy and so he was pretty much able to get work in the construction trades as a sheet metal worker, construction worker - -

MN: Now at that time there was a tremendous amount of discrimination in the construction trades - -

DD: Absolutely.

MN: - - how did your father break through that?

DD: Well I don't know that he ever - - he always had a lot of problems. He would complain about the union and the lack of fairness that he would get in terms of options to jobs. He would do a lot of free-lance stuff on the weekends where he would do plumbing or roofing or painting. So a lot of stuff he did on his own.

MN: Now was he in the union?

DD: He was in the union.

MN: So he got in the union, [Crosstalk] but he felt there was a lot of discrimination in assignments?

DD: He felt - - right, right and I think that he kind of felt there was a lot of, I guess corruption or what have you in terms of how the union was operating and that type of thing.

MN: Now did your mother work when you were growing up?

DD: She, well she didn't really work until my parents split up. My parents split probably when I was maybe junior high school I would estimate. She was a homemaker until then. When they split up we were - - I, we all, we had - - I had two brothers and three sisters - -

MN: Now where you the youngest?

DD: I was the fourth of six. So after my parents split up we all stayed with my mother. She would work, she would clean offices downtown. She would work in garment centers; she would do sewing of flowers and whatever, and basically kind of entry level jobs. Off and on we would be on public assistance if she wasn't working.

MN: And this was when you were living in Brooklyn?

DD: No, this is still in the Bronx, this is in the Bronx.

MN: So your parents split up while you were in the Bronx?

DD: Right, I mean they would split up and then get back together and then split up and get back together. And so I probably lived, I'm trying to think the different places we lived in the Bronx. I lived in 162nd right over behind the old court house on - - off of Third Ave. We lived in a couple of places on Brook Ave. We lived in I think 1012 Brook, that was the apartment building that my grandfather owned. We lived at 913 Brook Ave, and this was maybe three or four blocks away.

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And I think at that time, maybe, god, I'd say maybe the six or seven of us might have been in two rooms or three rooms.

MN: Right. Now, the neighborhoods you lived in were they predominantly black neighborhoods, or they were multiracial?

DD: I would say they were predominantly black areas. Again 165th and Boston Road that was kind of the central black neighborhood in the Bronx. The Brook Ave locations those were kind of mixed-use industrial areas. So that probably was a little lower in the social scale. I mean there were a lot of Latino, predominantly Puerto Rican, neighbors, but not that many whites. I think that the whites, more or less - - you might have the odd empty-nester, older white families, but most of the families - -

MN: Now what year were you born?

DD: I was born in '51.

MN: Ok so you were born in '51 so your - - this experience is - - your childhood experience is talking about the middle and late fifties.

DD: Pretty much, right.

MN: Now did you remember these neighborhoods as tough neighborhoods, where having an older - - or not particularly?

DD: Yes, I think so. Well again I think my older brother, he wasn't - - I wouldn't say a tough, but he had kind of - - had a little reputation in the neighborhood. He was - - they would get into the fighting, it was more fist fighting. I mean it wasn't - - you hear the stories about the gangs, and the zip guns, and the knives, and what have you, and that was there. I mean I never really felt

intimidated by the area but you had to be cautious; you had to be aware of your surroundings that type of thing.

MN: Now in your household was literacy and reading something that was really stressed?

DD: That was a big thing. My mother wasn't - - I mean again I'd say probably by seven or eight we probably were separate from my father. I mean he was in and out in a part of our lives but we probably never were, weren't really living with him most of the time; so my mother was the head of the household and she was very strict about the books and the homework and the reading and that whole thing.

MN: Now was she also a high school grad?

DD: I don't believe she graduated from high school, she might have been maybe a year or two into high school, but she wasn't very well educated herself.

MN: But she really stressed this?

DD: But she stressed that we had to get it together. I mean I guess there was a point where you got to where she could no longer help us with our homework. So I would say she probably might have gotten maybe up to seventh or eighth grade, I don't think much really beyond that.

MN: Now was your family distinctly different in that respect from the other families you were... did you feel yours was a - - it was a sort of different tradition?

DD: I didn't think so. I mean again on the block front where we were at, on 165th maybe between Boston and Cauldwell Ave, I think it was, we were a couple of blocks west of Forest Houses. But, I mean on that block I don't think that we were atypical. You had maybe half of the buildings were brown - - were row houses, small homes. On the other side of the street you basically had tenement type structures; four and five story buildings. But I think everyone pretty

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much - - You had your few. You had your number runner on the block and you had the, the, the neighborhood slut and you had the wannabe gangsters and that type of thing. But in general I think it was a pretty stable environment at least maybe through mid-sixties, late-sixties. And most of the kids there - - you had to be in school and it was kind of that eyes on the street thing where if you weren't doing right - - say with my mother would be working, she'd get home in the late - -

[Interruption]

MN: Hello? Ok why is it so - - ok now we got it going. So you were saying your mother when she was working - -

DD: When she would be late you'd want to stay out and play in this front yard or the backyard -
-

[Interruption]

DD: And there was always a neighbor looking out the window and if you didn't do the right thing they would report to mom or they would feel its ok to discipline you or warn you away or that type of thing. So it was a neighborhood, a family type of environment. I mean I can remember going - - feeling comfortable going through the basements and the adjoining tenements or what have you. So it would have been a pretty safe neighborhood also in retrospect.

MN: Right. Now what was your - - What street games did you play? Was it a big thing with kids playing street games?

DD: Right, we would play kick the can, Johnny and the pony, ring the leavy-o, what do they call it - - hot peas and butter, the usual type again - - we played stick ball, we played that, what I would call I guess stoop ball - - you pop the ball off of the step. And then we'd play what they

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call - - then they'd do - - that was I guess combined with what they called the single - - how many times it would bounce, if it bounced once it's a single if it bounced twice that type of thing.

MN: Box baseball we called it.

DD: Right we would play - - what is the thing where you would just shoot the - -

MN: I don't - - whatever - -

DD: - - I forget what they called it, but you would get your soda pop cans and then you would kind of shoot the - - I forget what they would call it, but they would draw targets on the street and you would kind of shoot the box. Yes, that type of thing, I forget what they called that. And those were the, basically the type of games we would play. My older brothers were more probably into organized basketball. I had two, my two older brothers both went to Clinton. Clinton was a kind of a jock school at that time. They were well known in the city for the football and the basketball and what have you; they were more into basketball. And I think my brother he might have been four years older than me, and no doubt he kind of cleared a path for me, I would say. I was Michael's kid brother so that would get me out of a few scrapes probably.

MN: Now was this a - - was there a lot of music around the neighborhood and the family when you were growing up?

DD: A lot of music. We would just kind of listen to everything. There was a lot of Latin music, Eddie Palmieri, Tito Rodriguez, Charlie Palmieri. And I can remember a lot of times there would

- -

[Interruption]

Mark Smith (MS): So you want to introduce him Dr. Naison?

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MN: Yes, this is Dana Driskell who is with the City Planning Commission and a former student at Fordham.

[Interruption]

MN: Ok so Dana, we were talking about the music that you grew up around - -

DD: The music, right.

MN: - - and you said Eddie Palmieri, Charlie Palmieri, Tito Rodriguez and the like.

DD: I think I was saying, that there was - - I don't know whether you would call it the ugly American syndrome but it was - - you would be going to the party when someone would want to play what I guess at the time they would call it the Latin music or salsa. And there was the crew that would want to hear it and then there was 'oh take that stuff off' type of thing. I think there were some people who were more open to that multicultural type of thing. Like my godmother is Puerto Rican and we had a lot of Puerto Rican friends in and out of the house. But then there were others I think that felt that these were others. And they - - I guess what do you call it, All-American sentiment or whatever, but they felt some hostility to the Latin, or Puerto - - well, at that time it was mainly Puerto Rican.

MN: Now the other music you were listening to you called Doo Wop or Rock and Roll - -

DD: I was more at the tale end of the Doo Wop. I think by the time I was listening it was more the R&B. Early on my mother was into Ella Fitzgerald - - [Crosstalk]

MN: Ok, so you grew up around jazz - -

DD: Right and also the soul music, the Otis Redding and the Motown types, the New York type groups like Chuck Jackson - - I mean I was into the Doo Wop but the Doo Wop probably was fading out.

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MN: But that was passing. So you were only a little kid when - - [Crosstalk] - - the kids were singing on the corner - -

DD: When the Doo Wops were doing - -

MN: Now do you have recollections of the clubs in your neighborhood? Like where your brothers were going?

DD: I can remember the clubs that were up in McKinley Square: the Blue Morocco and the 845. Now of course I was too young to attend, but - - the Boston Road Ballroom, I remember that was maybe a block or two up from McKinley Square. But I can remember just the impression - - you going through McKinley Square and its Saturday night and it was, not like a Times Square but everyone had their neon lights and some of their music would be coming - -

MN: [Crosstalk] So McKinley Square on a Saturday night in the late 50's and 60's was a scene?

DD: Oh yes, it was a hot spot. [Crosstalk]

MN: Ok because maybe describe what that looked like because no one has done that yet.

DD: Well I mean its just - - its not at the level of a Times Square but everyone had their neon lights, and it was like the music was kind of spilling out from the clubs - -

MN: And were people dressed up?

DD: - - and the well-dressed guys. This was a very - - I mean again, that was when Saturday night - - and you would be clean when you're going out on Saturday night. And so that - - say you're going through, let's say I'm coming home from Crotona Park and coming down Boston Road, and maybe that was one of the days when we didn't want to run on, sneak on to the elevated. That - - we had the Third Ave El then also. But you're coming down and - - it was just

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a kaleidoscope of the different clubs and the neon lights and the music coming out and the well dressed guys and the cars parked in the front - -

MN: So it was exciting?

DD: Oh yes, oh yes.

MN: So that was a scene?

DD: Oh yes, you know that this was something happening. And there would always be the, the posters up and down the blocks during the week advertising this person is coming in. And they would get the - - a lot of the big acts would come through.

MN: Who are some of the famous people who you remember seeing in the posters?

DD: Oh, wow! Jimmy McGriff was one of the jazz guys - - the, Ike and Tina Turner - - So, I mean they would get the, they would get the name brand - - the Boston Road Ballroom that was a pretty large facility so they had the space.

MN: Now when you came back to the Bronx in 1977 as district manager was that still there, or was it starting to be gone by then?

DD: That was pretty much starting to fade I think. And clearly, this was post Cross-Bronx Expressway. The Cross-Bronx Expressway had a large negative impact on neighborhood life and really the economy of the South Bronx. It took out a lot of those blue-collar employment opportunities that - - for example that was the type of thing my father did. So, I guess this, looking back on it I guess this was kind of that deindustrialization type of thing.

MN: Right, now that raises also an interesting question because you mentioned your father was in the sheet metal worker's union but a lot of his jobs were in the informal economy. Were there a lot of black men in that community who worked, were doing painting and carpentry?

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DD: That's the type of thing that they would - - Yes, again at that time you could make a good living whether or not you were - - at that time the goal was to be a high school graduate. So that was your ticket into the formal sector. But if you worked and you could hustle, and you could paint or you could do the plumbing or I mean the roofing, and some of that stuff was a little more technical, but you could definitely get by just on your wits. I mean you have the - - somebody's trying to get in [Interruption] - - you have the ice truck and - -

[Interruption]

MN: Hopefully, hello, hello? Oh great. Ok, we were talking about music and that amazing scene on McKinley Square - -

[Interruption]

MN: - - yes, McKinley Square and how long do you think that lasted? When did it start to fade and finally die?

DD: I would say probably it started to fade in maybe mid/late sixties, probably hung until early seventies.

[Interruption]

MN: Hello? No it's - - one second, this is not working right now.

MS: Want me to take a look at it?

MN: Yes, why don't you take a - -

[Interruption]

MN: Hello? Yes, this is working, ok we've got it. Ok, so you're saying McKinley Square - -

DD: Yes, I'm saying I think that this is partly overall changes in the music industry. I think that in the same way that the neighborhood theatres slowly disappeared, and most of the theatres now

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are concentrated in the downtown area, I mean in the same way those local performing venues also tended to disappear. You had fewer and fewer places really for people to perform. I think it might have had something to do - - this is the 40th anniversary of the Beatles everybody's talking about [Cough] I really think a lot of the R&B acts, the singing acts, they really were kind of damaged. I think they were damaged by the whole switch over kind of to that British thing.

MN: Now the other thing we had mentioned before while we were eating lunch was politics. When did you become aware of politics, Civil Rights - - and that, was that when you were in high school or even before?

DD: Well the Civil Rights probably I became more aware - - You would watch the TV and you would see that Martin Luther King and what have you - - I remember in particular the Freedom Riders, who were this group that was sponsored by this group called CORE, which isn't the same organization; there's still presently a CORE organization. But at that time CORE was one of the five or six largest national civil rights organizations. And I can remember my mother commenting about how important the Freedom Riders were, they would, I guess this had to have been mid-sixties because they were testing the Public Accommodations Act - -

MN: Yes, it was '61, so you were ten years old.

DD: Ok, and I can remember her talking about how important these people were, so I think I did have some perception earlier on of the Civil Rights Movement, not so much as a participant but kind of as a rooting factor. I think the sort of politics, and kind of the Democratic, that side, the Democratic party politics I probably came to later.

MN: Now was anybody in your family involved in the Civil Rights Movement? Were any of your older siblings?

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DD: Not really, no. I think my older, I mean again I can - - my older brothers were maybe two -
- I had a brother who was four years older and a brother two years older. And the, the, the change
and the attitude I think was really different. That two years apparently made a big difference in
terms of the musical taste and what have you. And I also think about the politics - - I think I'm
coming up in the mid-sixties, you're having the riots and what have you, and I guess that was
more at a kind of formative stage of my development. Whereas I think my older brothers were
more into a kind of cool type of sensibility and weren't really that much involved into the
politics or interested in the politics I would say. And so I guess when I was at Science, at High
School of Science, this would have been god, '68, '69, we had a real long teacher strike, I think
that was my senior year, it might have been '68, '69 - -

MN: Right that would've been '68.

DD: - - and that probably was a really politically galvanizing experience for me. And then also
of course the war. I think going in I was probably kind of a - - I can remember when Gulf - - I
can remember Gulf of Tonkin and having a real flag-waving patriotic reaction to the news of the
event. And kind of, I wish I was old enough to register or enlist - -

MN: Were there people you knew who were in the Armed Forces, did any of, any people - -

DD: I knew yes, people coming back and forth I mean again, the Armed Forces at that time was
a viable economic option also. I mean again people who didn't want to go to school - - that was
always an option that people would take. A lot of friends in the area were involved in Merchant
Marine and that type of thing, so there was a kind of a military thing. But I can [Cough]
remember kind of switching over in college - - in high school from Science. I think that strike
kind of really radicalized me I guess to some extent. I remember it was all of the students who

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were seen as the ones who didn't want to go to school, then when the strike came about these were the ones that were pushing to open up the school. And there was a lot of conflict behind Science being kind of an elite or a prestige institution. Stokely Carmichael had graduated from High School of Science a couple of years before I attended. And I guess I was aware of him through that connection. A lot of the teachers talked negatively about him, but then maybe within a couple of years he was in the press because of the whole Black Power thing that he pushed. I guess that would have been '66, '67, in that area.

MN: Now were there any teachers in elementary, or junior high, or high school who were very important to you as a mentor as somebody who - - ?

DD: I would say in high school we had a guy by the name of Don Schwartz, he was a teacher at Science. And he was a little hipper than the regular - - maybe he had a little longer hair - - And he was involved in trying to get the school opened when this whole strike was going on. And he kind of got blacklisted, for lack of a better term, when the strike ended. And there were maybe eight or ten teachers, who tended to be younger, a little more liberal, who were kind of against the politics of the teachers' strike. And they were instrumental in working with students to keep the school open, we had a kind of our own little liberation school, during the strike. And I remember we went on to WBAI, and that was the first time I really became aware of WBAI which was kind of a radical radio station, to try to get people to come out to go into the school. And so I think probably high school, maybe between sophomore and junior year, I started becoming more politicized. I went to a couple of antiwar demonstrations. I remember they had this thing about drafting Cardinal Spellman who at that time was I guess head of the New York Archdiocese and kind of a right wing, pro-military type of guy. So they had this group called

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Fifth Avenue Peace Parade committee. That was based right out of Union Square so that really was probably my first political involvement, organizing high school students for - - we would usually have a couple of marches in D.C., maybe one in April and one in October. And we kind of spaced I guess at the beginning of the spring and just before it kind of got too cold. And so we would organize high school students, we would give out leaflets at Science and or Clinton, Walton to some extent. And we started up this sort of a political action committee, I forget exactly the name, but a group of students that started reading a little more, started thinking - - I had another teacher at Science [Cough] excuse me, an English teacher named Norgeby - - Noid - - Norgerbeyer and we read Soul on Ice, that was Eldridge Cleaver, and that was my introduction to the Black Panthers and that whole political movement and what have you. And so definitely I would say, high school I really kind of changed from more of a passive, good student go-getter, hopefully I was, I still was a pretty good student but I came to be more questioning of what was being taught. Started thinking more independently outside the box and that type of thing.

MN: Now before you got to high school had you done a lot of reading? Were you a reader?

DD: I was a big reader, yes, but again it was more biographies, history, Julius Cesar - -

MN: Now was this stuff you were doing in - - you were getting from the library or purchasing books?

DD: Probably the library. I might purchase a couple of paperbacks but mostly I would say from the library.

MN: And this was at the Morrisania library or also in Brooklyn?

DD: Morrisania library a little, because of the commuting. When I was in high school I was commuting from Brooklyn back and forth to Bronx. And I started going to Schomburg library, in

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the old building, when what was the woman's name? I think Hudson or Houston, Jean Houston was the director. And I can remember they would - - you had to order your book, and they have a little dumbwaiter or whatever where the books would come up from the - - So I can remember seriously reading I guess again probably maybe first year, second year in high school.

MS: Going back to what you were saying with high school students being politically active, what percentage do you think of high school students back then were politically active?

DD: Ooh, I would say a very small percentage. I mean I don't think, I don't think it really takes a large number - - People talk about the sixties as if it was this time when everyone was politically active, but even in the sixties - - I was kind of young in the sixties, I was I guess what 18 in around '70. So even then you were definitely a very small very noticeable minority. I can remember trying to get students to protest. And at that time in Science we had a uniform code, you had to wear a tie, you couldn't have jeans, so we would try to organize around the right to wear dungarees. Or we would have a dungaree strike where students would come in and wear jeans. And you could get suspended for wearing jeans or not wearing a tie or what have you. So when we couldn't get people to focus on the issues of war or racism then we would do stuff like student bill of rights; we wanted a student bill of rights, we wanted the right to wear jeans. And those were the types of issues that we kind of tried to engage the students. But you definitely were kind of an outsider, odd ball, for being politically active. And I would say at best, even in the thick of the sixties, you were very conscious that you were of a narrow minority that was politically involved or politically conscious. And it's only in retrospect that people talk about this huge, kind of everyone was involved - - because definitely everyone wasn't involved. And it was maybe a dozen students. Science might have had 3,000 students or something. It couldn't have

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been more than a dozen or twenty students that were actively, regularly involved or would give up their basketball time or other play time or what have you.

MN: Now when you were living in Morrisania, was heroin an issue in your block or neighborhood?

DD: It was an issue, definitely. You would be made aware of well this guy is a junkie, and the vocabulary of the heroin, the nickel bags and the brown bags and this and that. I always - - you always knew the people in the neighborhood that were either selling - - a lot of times people would have store fronts and they would be selling fruit and vegetables and whatever, and you would be told, this is kind of a front, and what they're really selling is drugs. I never really was in terror. I think the people that were doing the drugs, that was a kind of a depressant - - you would see the people on the stoop, they were nodding or what have you - -

MN: But it didn't make you feel fearful?

DD: I mean again, you had to be cautious, but I didn't really see this sort of scourge of the neighborhood; I just really didn't see it that way. And again, I think that it was really other things. Again, looking back I think that it was really more economic changes. We talk about the lack of jobs and the moving away from a kind of a blue collar economy to a kind of an ostensible white collar. I can remember where they would have the newsreels and they were saying, 'this is the - - there are no recessions in office work' and 'this is the wave of the future,' so you were really kind of getting rid of the blue collar opportunities.

MN: Now this is a question that I've had and I haven't raised that much, do you think that the decline of these blue collar jobs have a lot to do with the men leaving families and a transition to more female-headed households?

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DD: Absolutely, absolutely. I think that again when you had this blue collar economy, you could make a good living and support a family without necessarily having a college degree or even a high school degree. You would work hard, you could find something to do with your hands and you could support a family. And I mean again with working with the planning, in retrospect you're looking back, and it was really a lot of decisions made by the planning commissioners of the sixties and the seventies. We used to have thriving waterfront and notwithstanding longshoreman that provided a lot of employment opportunities. So what I think is it's becoming increasingly harder to support a family unless you're into that kind of white collar thing. And the people that didn't have the educational skills, where they used to be able to go out and work - - You'd work forty or fifty or whatever, however the number required, those opportunities just really weren't there.

MN: Now on that block, which was I guess 165th Street, and this is in the fifties, were most of the families two parent families at that time?

DD: Most of the families were two parent families, absolutely.

MN: And there were fathers there?

DD: Absolutely, absolutely.

MN: And when you came back in the late seventies that had changed?

DD: And that had changed. I think the drugs were a part of it but I really think that the, the jobs were as much, or more, a part of it - - That now, again, when my parents split up they never divorced but they separated, and so my mom had meager skills. She would work the factory jobs and what have you, but we were off and on public assistance. And then you got into the thing where, in some cases, it's harder to get the public assistance if the male is around. [Cough] So a

lot of times the male would be part of the family but they would have to hide out or leave or not be around in order to qualify the female for the public assistance, which - - And at that time they called it Aid to Dependent Children, so the focus of the program was really aid to the children and the mom and the assumption kind of was that the father wasn't around.

MN: So in other words, when the jobs are getting less you have the AFDC there - -

DD: Right.

MN: - - and it becomes an incentive for making believe the father isn't there - -

DD: Right and then that, that, that make-believe somehow kind of goes into the reality. And then, so then now the mom is the, not really the breadwinner, but the money is coming in under the name of mom for the kids and either in theory or in reality the father is not there - -

MN: And it creates tension - -

DD: - - and there's a lot of tensions, there's a lot of tensions.

MN: Because basically what you're saying is from this transition you can see between the late fifties and the late seventies, in those twenty years that's when the family starts to fracture. And you go from a two parent family as a norm to a one parent family.

DD: Right. And then really, you can't really see the whole picture without kind of seeing how the economy was shifting from that quote-on-quote "blue collar" - - I mean New York used to be a heavy, heavy manufacturing center. And I guess in the early sixties this concept of well the white collar, this is recession proof and we don't have all of the dirt and the soot and the this - - but a lot of the jobs were involved with the dirt and the soot. So now we're into a more of a white collar mentality, but you need that college degree. There's probably a lot more racism in terms of the white collar employment. I mean you remember they had the - - what is the guy?

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The guy in the gray flannel suit - - Gregory Peck. And so he was the prototype of the button-down business - - and the black guys without the skills weren't really going to be possible, they weren't really available to participate in that.

MN: Right, wow that's important stuff. One other issue is the Forest Houses; you remember when they first were built?

DD: Absolutely.

MN: Now did you look on the Forest Houses as a dangerous place when they were built?

DD: No, not at all, not at all.

MN: Because this whole question of public was that - -

DD: Well actually, again, at the time - -

MN: The mid-fifties.

DD: - - I was kind of jealous of the kids who lived in the Forest Houses. I mean physically, and again I'm looking back with skills that I didn't have at the time, but physically that was what they called that 'Tower in the Park' design, and so they would have the landscaped areas. We lived on a concrete block front, and there might have been three or four trees on either side of the block, but nothing green! So I mean when you would walk two blocks to the east and you've got these wide open spaces, this is like a la la land - - [Crosstalk] It seemed exclusive, yes. I mean, and then the other thing was, and I mean now this is not getting into the economics, because again my father owned the house that we were in, but in terms of perception I guess it was that 'this is new' type of thing. So I mean I really was like 'gee, golly, this place is fantastic'!

MN: Did you have friends who were there?

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DD: We had friends, yes. And again it was - - they would have the laundry room in the basement, and it was a big thing, 'well if you don't live here you can't come in, you can't use these facilities' type of thing. But at that time, I remember being envious of those people that were living in the housing projects. But I didn't really see them as a safety concern. And again, looking back, I would assume that people that were living in the projects probably were at a lower income range than my parents were, but because of the physical difference you - - it was always 'oh' - - And we would always want to go and play on the grass and hang out and - -

MN: When you came back in '77, had Forest Houses changed and become - - Or was it still a little - - ?

DD: In the seventies it was still a good place to live. But I think again, I mean again just looking back there was a time when blacks weren't allowed in any housing project in New York City. And they were originally designed to be for the quote-on-quote "the worthy poor" and at that time that wasn't thought to be blacks or Latins. So I would imagine, the Forest Hill, the Pattersons, those were probably among the first housing projects where they really would let blacks in. And even today, there are problems with certain housing projects, Astoria and other neighborhoods, where they still won't let blacks into certain projects. So clearly it was these are the black ones and these are the white ones. But [Cough] it was still a physically attractive place to live, and I think that was the main thing. The landscaping really was what I think made it head-and-shoulders above the tenement or the row house, which was kind of the norm in that area.

MN: Now do you, this is before we move to Fordham. Do you have any recollections of Johnson's BBQ on - -?

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DD: On 133rd, absolutely. Well that was when I still was eating pork at that point in the process.

Yes, Johnson's and I think they might have had another facility elsewhere, but I remember there was a Johnson's right across from the projects, and they would have the rotisserie in the window. You'd go past, they'd have the collared greens, and the ribs, and the potato salad; that was my order or whatever. Oh definitely, definitely, absolutely.

MN: Now when you went to Fordham, you were already politicized - -

DD: Yes, I think so.

MN: - - and you ended up at Bensalem College? This will be interesting to mark, an experimental college on 191st Street, right across from Walsh. What was that like, Bensalem?

DD: Well, Bensalem again, I think again I think Fordham had the kind of a reputation, I guess it earned a reputation as a kind of a stayed and a conservative - - I think Fordham was seen as the school for FBI, future FBI agents, or that type of a thing. And so this whole kind of sixties thing is going across the rest of the country and I think Bensalem was to some extent, Fordham's way of trying to respond to change. I mean there had been change overall, and they were beginning with the Black Studies Program - -

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

DD: - - free love and Roman types of attitudes were kind of prevalent. And Fordham I guess saw Bensalem as their way of responding to those trends. So it was a program where, it was a university without walls or ceilings or doors or anything like that. You essentially had to come in; there was no set core curriculum, it was about everyone making up their own educational program. And everyone could do as little or as much as they wanted to in terms of the classes at Fordham. And you had the option to not go to classes and to do what you call I guess

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experiential learning or maybe work-study opportunities or field work opportunities. And they more or less, once you got into the program it was pretty much on you to decide how much or how little you would take in terms of the regular coursework.

MN: So what was it like for you to arrive there?

DD: Well, now interestingly the reason why I wound up in Fordham relates to this strike at High School of Science. Because that was my senior year, I think the strike might have went from September maybe November - - it was ten, twelve weeks whatever, and I think New York City is really still kind of suffering a lot of the racial antagonisms that that strike began. At any rate, when the strike was over [Cough] there had been so many days of school missed [Cough] excuse me, there was a lot of, a lot of discretion as to who would be allowed to graduate because no one really met the whatever the number of day requirement. So there was a lot of discretion on the part of each school as to who would graduate, who would not graduate. Now usually at Science by the end of your third year you had met the requirements to get a high school diploma and your fourth year was devoted to getting what they called a quote-on-quote "Science diploma", which was kind of a, a supped-up version. At any rate, because of the hostilities related to that strike many of the students that were I guess in leadership roles in breaking the strike and the ten or twelve teachers that crossed the picket line, they were kind of on a figurative or literal blacklist once the school year started. And I know with the teachers they literally had a scab table in the teacher cafeteria, and any of the teachers that broke the strike would have to sit at the scab table. And the students that came in, there was a lot of pressure to not allow them to graduate. So part of my being at Bensalem was a fact that I wasn't, I didn't really graduate at the point when I got into Fordham.

MN: So you went to Fordham without a high school diploma?

DD: I hadn't gotten my high school diploma at the time when I - - And I mean again, I was upfront about it. But again because of this sort of open policy [Cough] well I said, 'you know I didn't really get my diploma yet.' And I was waiting for their reaction and the guy, I think his name was Quinn, Jerry Quinn, I believe he was the headmaster and he said, 'oh, not a problem.'

MN: [Laughs]

DD: [Crosstalk] It was that there was a lot of cohabitating between faculty and students. There was talk about using Urdu as the official language of the school. There was a lot of marijuana - - It's an Indian dialect I guess it is, so they wanted to use that as the lingua franca of the school. That if you come in every morning have to learn Urdu, I think one of the early faculty people was a Pakistani I guess. And so that's kind of how things went. There was I think one student, maybe two students and one faculty member that did the interviews and it was more or less by majority vote of those three in terms of who was in or who was out of the program. And I think it was a big headache really for Fordham. And I must have come in maybe, maybe the - - I came in '69, graduated in '72. I think by about '74 - - but before I left they had clearly announced that the experiment was over. I think they added in a little wrinkle to Fordham College where you could have an open curriculum or something, so they put in a kind of a sop to the idea of open admissions, closed the experiment down.

MN: Now did you become involved with, with politics at Fordham, and if so what were some of the organizations you joined?

DD: Well, we had at that time a Black Student Union at Fordham. Al Leonard was the head of the student organization - -

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MN: Now did you find him or did he find you?

DD: I think I probably - - I mean again because we all wanted to take advantage of our freedom from the regular requirements. Al was in Fordham College and was into the more standardized program, and so I probably had, well definitely had more degrees of freedom. And I think that we became involved at the time, that's when we were trying to get a Black Studies Department in the school. We would have demonstrations - - If I remember, I wasn't there, but I think one of the deans had a heart attack - -

MN: Yes, they had, they occupied the administration - -

DD: Yes, did they occupy - - right. And one of the deans or one of the officers had a heart attack while the, the, his office was being sat in. And so after a while that's what led to the creation of the Black Studies. At that time, I guess that probably - - then we had this organization on school, on the campus called Unity House, which was ironically now in the building where the security service is located. But at that time that was just an empty loft building that again as part of that was given to us as a kind of a student outreach, or a black student organization kind of an outreach. We were there [Cough] excuse me; we had a liberation school for kids in the area. We probably had, maybe for about a three or four year period we had an independent school that would run maybe K to 8 or 9. A number of the students who graduated from the program, I've been still in contact with. We had a couple of Ph.D.s and so forth and so on. But it was a kind of a black culture themed school. We would teach black history, and the math and the English and what have you. We did a lot of gang outreach. At that time there was the Black Spades and a lot of the gang-type organizations. We would have dances and invite them up - -

MN: At Fordham? So you had - -

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DD: Yes, I remember once we had a dance and somehow things kind of got out of whack, and the gang members went over and trashed the White Castle. And they busted up the White Castle and threw the cash register out in the middle of Fordham Road. And so that was our effort to try to make the educational experience I guess relevant, or to try to I guess involve the broader community. I guess kind of break down the barrier between ourselves as quote-on-quote “elite” students and just regular members of the community at large.

MN: Now what contact at that time did you and other students at Fordham have with the Black Panther Party?

DD: We had a couple of students that were in the Black Panthers. I don't, I think more of my contact with the Black Panthers were off-campus then on. I don't think there was a heavy presence of Black Panthers. That was more of a Morrisania, there was a strong Black Panther Chapter.

MN: So what was your contact with the Panthers off-campus? I mean how, what did it consist of?

DD: Actually I probably had more contact with the Panthers when I was in high school then when I was at Fordham, I would say. They had, the New York Office was on 7th Ave, maybe in the 130's and at that time we were pushing to try to get this, I guess more an open enroll - - not open enrollment, but we wanted to get more black students in High School of Science. I think at the point when I was there, there couldn't have been more than maybe five or ten - -

MN: Really?

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DD: - - percent of the students. I don't know that it's much more now. At that time the student body was predominantly Jewish. I think today it's predominantly Asian. But again with the anti-war protests we also pushed to try to get a - -

[Interruption]

MN: Oh, ok - -

DD: - - to have the student body at Science more closely resemble the makeup of the city as a whole. I think that was part of coming out with, coming back from the teacher's strike and what have you.

MN: Now when you were in high school did you go down to the Columbia strike when it was going on?

DD: Yes, yes, and City College when they were pushing for the open admissions. I remember spending a couple of nights at Columbia, and also a couple of nights at - -

MN: So you helped occupy buildings?

DD: Oh yes, oh yes.

MN: So this is - - high school students would come into a college strike where buildings were occupied and join it; kids from all the colleges would help out with each others' protests - -

DD: Yes. And at that time, this is when they were trying to get open admissions at City College, at that time I think you had to have an 85 average in order to qualify for City College, and that was when they were tuition free. And I guess again, that was probably in the early seventies that they began to have lobbying and protests and what have you in order to get the open admissions.

MN: Now let me ask you a question, there were rumors that there were a couple of girls who were storing guns for the Panthers in Bensalem - -

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DD: Well I don't know who they - - well there were guns at Bensalem. I don't know who was storing them, or for whom they were storing them, but we did have a situation, where myself - - there was, it was the Bensalem building and then there was another building on the other side - -

MN: Oh right, yes, yes.

DD: - - of 191st. And I don't know, there was talk about one student - - there was this question about whether there was a guy was a kind of an agent provocateur. Because there was a guy that was at Bensalem and one evening I came by and we were in the building and talking and the guy calls up and apparently there had been some sort of a racial conflict earlier in the day. Fordham at that time was seen as a kind of an extension of Little Italy to some extent, back when you really had Italians in Little Italy. And so there was a lot of conflict between the black community and the Italian community and I can even remember that going to Science, there were certain blocks - -

MN: - - like Villa Ave.

DD: - - Villa Ave. The Villa Ave Boys, you knew to go away from Villa Ave when you were coming home from Science. And at Fordham you didn't really want to go into that Arthur Ave - -

MN: If you were black you didn't go into Arthur Ave - - walk through - - [Crosstalk]

DD: You did not, oh, oh absolutely not, absolutely not.

MN: That was off limits - -

DD: That was out, that's right. I even I think they had to, got to the point where they had to actually reroute one of the bus lines that went across Fordham and South, because the busses would get stoned or blockaded or what have you. So there was a high level of tension. And then

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down, when you go down to the end of 191st Street there was a cluster of small homes, kind of an extension of Little Italy, and so there had been some conflict earlier in the day. And me in ignorance I arrived in the early evening and apparently this guy had called and said that, 'well there are police around because of this prior incident' and they had to dispose of a rifle. So I did see the rifle and we came out of the building, I forget what's the number of the building on the north side, myself and a couple of other colleagues. We got detained, one of the gentlemen did have the rifle, I had advised him to just leave the rifle in the street, but he wouldn't listen to me. And we still argue, today, about what was the proper protocol with the rifle. But I argue just leave it there, he for whatever reason decided to carry it with him. We walked out over I guess on, I guess going east as opposed to coming out near the campus and then we were picked up. We spent the night in jail, I think about three or four of us got arrested; the rifle was confiscated. Unfortunately the gentleman that had the rifle also had maybe twenty or thirty bags of marijuana on him, and so we spent the night in jail maybe three or four of us. And just, I don't know exactly what had happened with the legal stuff, I think that there was some violation of our civil rights whereby we were - - The case was dismissed or illegal search or something like that, not for any wisdom on our part I would say just good fortune smiled on us I guess that day. But the guy that really had been the custodian of the rifle never, never turned up again. He had been a registered student - -

MN: He disappeared!?

DD: - - to this day I have never seen the guy again.

MN: What did he look like?

DD: He was maybe 6', 6'1", relatively light skinned and he was a registered student - -

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MN: Was he a guy who wore army fatigues around campus?

DD: Well, there was a lot of guys back then - - [Crosstalk]

MN: Well I was wondering if it was one of the people I hung out with - -

DD: Everybody had the impression that he was an under cover agent. And that he was basically

- - And that was a big problem in that area because there was - - you had that Panther Twenty-

one case in the early seventies. And I mean I think probably about half, 50% of the members of

the Black Panthers were probably FBI agents, police - - all the Nation of Islam - - I mean in his

biographies, Malcolm X talks about so many undercover agents would come and expose

themselves to him. So that was always a big problem. And I think that's part of why I tended to

stay away from the Panthers because everybody knew that they were pretty thoroughly

infiltrated, and that there were always people who wanted to lead you into something stupid. And

those were the people that you wanted to tend to avoid.

MN: Right. Now you didn't have to take serious courses but you did?

DD: I did. I think that at that time the Black Studies was I guess struggling for enrollment and

trying to maintain its credibility. And a lot of the people that had been involved in lobbying to

get a Black Studies department didn't really bother to register for any of the courses. So I felt

that I had to do my part to try to boost enrollment. And that tended to be probably the best part of

my Fordham experience. I would say probably the majority of the courses I took at Fordham

were in the Black Studies Department. I took a couple of the classes in the History Department

and a couple in the Language, but mostly it was in the Black Studies Department. I was a Black

Studies major. I think yourself, Claude, this guy Clinton Wilkes, I guess those, that probably was

Black Studies - - [Laughs]

MN: Yes, we know OJ who was - - [Crosstalk]

DD: And OJ right, and then the guy down at Lincoln Center, Elot Das, Egyptian fellow who has since passed away. Actually he is someone that I had maintained a relationship with after graduating. He had encouraged me to register or to apply for American University in Cairo. And I did apply a couple of times, I was never accepted, but I had been in contact with him.

Ironically, his daughter is now a teacher at Packer, teaching my daughter who is now a student at Packer. But he was into nation-building, and he had a course on nation-building in Africa. And he did a lot of the African-oriented things, he taught about Islam - - I remember how optimistic he was about the Palestinian - - he said, oh this will be over in a couple of years, we'll come to some - - and now thirty years later obviously that didn't happen. But Elot Das was definitely one of the teachers I remember best from Fordham, and yourself, and Claude.

MN: Who were some of the memorable black student leaders and activists from the time, other than Alvin who - -

DD: Well you remember Jamille was here with me earlier. Her late husband who has passed away he was an ex-offender. I think again, because of the kind of loose admission standards, I would say loose, but particularly - -

MN: Was he Bensalem or Fordham?

DD: He was a Bensalem also.

MN: So Gary, he and - -

DD: Gary Walston right.

MN: - - he had been in prison upstate?

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DD: He had been in prison I think in Long Island, he was out in Riverhead. And he was admitted and accepted and he became one of the main student activists. There was this guy, Tony Grant, he was from Trinidad. I think his parents were relatively well-off. He also was involved in Unity House and the Black Studies - - This guy Juan Vieagas, he now is doing social work things, he was also involved. We had a lot of Latin students that were involved in the program also; Jose Gonzalez who kind of is into Bronx politics now in the south Bronx, a couple of neighborhood organizations that he's involved in. Jose Casada, who's now a lawyer, he's got his office over in Westchester Square. So we had a lot of students who stayed in C House, we had a lot of young ladies. One woman, oh boy, oh boy the names, I'm having - - but she's now teaching at Roosevelt High School. She was involved and either they would be volunteers to teach the kids in the Unity House School, they would be involved with the dancers, what have you - -

MN: Now where would Unity House, the kids come from? They couldn't live in Arthur Ave - -

DD: Well there was a small black enclave going down Washington Ave, they have that Terrace building that's on '82nd. And then what's, that's not now but there was a row of tenement houses on - -

MN: Ok, so there was a little black neighborhood on Washington Ave - - [Crosstalk] - - 187th down.

DD: Right, right, and that's where we would draw a lot of the students from.

MN: Now, I'm going to wind this up and then go - - because it's, we've done a long - - and then do the community planning board in a later period. Mark, do you have any questions about the Fordham experience?

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MS: Well I was kind of interested in what you were talking about in having the African American Studies program here. I'm pretty sure that was the initial - - when it started here at Fordham. Was the Fordham community really receptive in the Bronx, maybe the community around Arthur Ave too? [Crosstalk] Did they think it was actually a credible study - - ?

DD: Within the Fordham hierarchy? I think that was more or less - - and again I think that was kind of the mentality that allowed the Bensalem, I think that Fordham wanted to kind of show that they were with it and at one with the times or whatever. But I mean again Fordham I think at that time was very much more conservative slash reactionary, I guess you could say. There was a heavy, much more of a focus I felt on kind of the theology and the Catholic thing. And so I never got the impression, I don't know maybe you had a different impression, but I never really got the impression that they were really committed either to Bensalem or to Black Studies.

MN: Well they tried to get rid of the Black Studies Department program in '74, '75 and we successful fought it. But Bensalem - - that was a different story.

DD: That was a different story. There was just too much wild stuff going on.

MN: Now how much drugs was there in Bensalem?

DD: There was, I mean again, mainly it was marijuana. But there was a lot of drinking - - it was a social thing. It was - - I thought they had more problems with the - - the fraternization I guess you would say. A lot of the faculty people were sleeping with the co-eds. And I thought that that was more of a problem - -

MN: And these were faculty-in-residence?

DD: These were faculty in residence; everybody lived in the same building. You would have maybe a two bedroom apartment with three students or something like that. And so the idea was

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to create an insular, kind of a self-contained community. And I think that probably was more - - I think if students had taken more classes that might have helped. I mean I think people were into positive things, but they didn't really easily translate into your transcript. And it was a lot easier for Fordham to keep track if you were taking a class and getting a grade as opposed to 'well I'm doing something' and you got to kind of give a narrative description of what it is and that's essentially how we had to do our transcripts.

MS: So students were, you talk about how the faculty [Crosstalk] - -

DD: If a student, I mean again I think the students - - I think Fordham, I don't know whether it is, but Fordham was I think a very conservative white bred - - I got the impression, I always saw Fordham as kind of the Midwestern students who couldn't get into Notre Dame. Fordham was the next in the pecking order after Notre Dame, maybe there with Boston College if you wanted a quote-on-quote "a Catholic education".

MN: Now were you brought up religious?

DD: Well I - - not really, not really. My father was a Baptist, my mother was somewhat of a Catholic, but we never really - - I would do a little - - when you were in the public school I would go to religious instruction.

MN: Did you go to church when you were living in Morrisania?

DD: Rarely, rarely. I mean we, in theory we were supposed to go to St. Peter and Paul.

MN: That was the Catholic - - ?

DD: That was the Catholic Church on one, maybe 153rd off of Third Ave. But not - - we weren't regular attendees by any stretch. I don't think I was baptized - - I probably was maybe twelve or

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thirteen before I was baptized. So it was that type. As a matter of fact the priest that baptized me, since his - - last been married, now works with Father Gigante over at Hunts Point.

MN: Ok, ok very good, wow - -

DD: Ok - -

[END OF SESSION]