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Braithwaite, John

Bronx African American History Project
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Transcriber: Colleen McCafferty

Mark Naison (MN): Hello, this is the 63rd interview of the Bronx African American History Project. We're here with John Braithwaite who grew up on Kelly Street in the South Bronx and came from a family of artists and photographers and political activists.

John Braithwaite (JB): That's correct!

MN: Well, we try. When did your family first move to the Bronx?

JB: 1945.

MN: And did they move directly to Kelly Street or were they - - ?

JB: Yes, yes. We had lived on, in Manhattan I think it was 128th Street and then we bought the house in 1945. And I was born in '43 and I was told we moved in there when I was about a year and a half, so that would be about '45. And we were there up until my mother passed.

MN: Now how - - have you heard about how your parents found the Bronx?

JB: I think that they had friends who had moved there. And you sort of go places where your friends are, in some kind of connectivity and so that's how we got there. Because a friend of my mother's from - - her childhood friend had lived across the street, so I don't know if we preceded them or the other way around but we all seemed to know one another from a distant past.

MN: Oh so there were a number of people in the neighborhood who were part of your family?

JB: My mother and father are from Barbados. The lady - - the family across the street they were from Barbados, and there was another family named Braithwaite as well which

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were two doors south of us, they were from Barbados as well. So it was a little, a few people were at least from that area - -

MN: Now was your family affiliated with a church?

JB: St. Margaret's Protestant Episcopal Church in the Bronx.

MN: And were a lot of the families they knew were also members of that church?

JB: Yes, it was just - - it was the next corner. So St. Margaret's is on 156th Street and Kelly and the next block over is Longwood so it was just like one walk - - to go to church you had to cross one street. Just - - so it was very easy.

MN: Now do you know what church your parents belonged to in Harlem?

JB: I do not.

MN: Cause I'm wondering if the Harlem church was - - those networks - -

JB: I don't recall anybody recommending or recalling anything like that. And I know I have family from Brooklyn and they may very well have been - - that they had attended church in Brooklyn as opposed to Harlem.

MN: Right. Now what kind of work did your father do?

JB: My father was a tailor. And his past time was art, he was a - - he painted. And that was his passion. So as it turns up my oldest brother he is a painter - - not a painter but he's an artist. He was an artist for ABC for many years. And this is interesting, my son who never saw his grandfather just got a BFA last year from Rochester Institute of Technology. So it's in the blood.

MN: And was - - did your mother work or was she a homemaker?

JB: She did not work; she was a homemaker.

MN: Was there a lot of political discussion in your house as well as artistic activity?

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JB: We talked about events of the day. I don't recall much talk about so much politics when I was coming up other than the events of the day. It wasn't till later when my oldest brother became an activist and started finding out things, we'd discuss those issues, but for the most part we would hear news on the radio and discuss that.

MN: But it wasn't like there were meetings at the house or that sort of thing?

JB: No, no, because my same oldest brother, he had - - they had formed a jazz society, which did a lot of promoting of jazz in the Bronx. And that was what he had done for quite a long time. They had an organization, that met at our house and they discussed things about jazz and promoted jazz things.

MN: Now what are your first recollections of the neighborhood on Kelly Street as a child?

JB: First recollections?

MN: Like the street life and all that kind of thing. Do you remember if it was a good place to grow up?

JB: Oh it was great, it was absolutely great. I don't know the Bronx has gotten a bad rap. Back in the '40s and '50s it was a real nice place to live. Parents looked out for one - - the children in the neighborhood, there was always somebody watching over who's - - what's going on in the neighborhood. And we played all sorts of street games, which you probably have documented already.

MN: Yes, but you might as well mention them.

JB: I had written this down in my own autobio - - but I didn't know if I should bring it - - but there are all kinds of games depending on the season of the year. You could either

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roller-skate or there was playing skully, the thirteen box thing. The girls played

hopscotch, but there was also box-ball - -

MN: Right, we did that in Brooklyn, too.

JB: - - and we had a thing called five tell me about, throw the ball against the stoop and you'd do a counting game - -

MN: Yes, we called that stoop balling.

JB: Yes. There are two of them, because one where you bounce it against the wall and another one where you hit it a different way - - we played, depending on the time of day there was different games to play because in the evening there was ring the leavy-o and devil with a pitchfork, which I don't know if they played anywhere else - -

MN: No, devil with a pitchfork, explain this to me - -

JB: Okay, what happens is you're supposed to pick a color and the person who's it is the devil and there's a little rhyme to it they said, "knock, knock" and the respondents go "who's there?" "It's the devil with a pitchfork flying through the air. What do you want?" "A color." And he'll say, "green" and somebody who's picked green has to race him to the corner - - it's a tag game. And we'd play ring the leavy-o. And - - oh, this was early fifties and stuff and there was another game, a running game across the street called three steps to Germany. Where they'd take three steps into the street and then there was a tag, tag [Indiscernible] - - And then there were other games like - - those we played - - and hide and go seek of course at nighttime. In the daytime there was of course marbles, and skully, and spinning tops and roller-skating, and they would draw in chalk a track on the street and that would become a roller derby rink and you'd be knocking one another about. And so - - in the hot summer they would direct the - - open a hydrant and direct

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the flow of water with either a cut off can or even a milk carton. It was cut off and it redirected water and so on. Basically they would make scooters if somebody broke a skate they would make a scooter out of it. And that'd get - - that got really creative because they would then go scabbing through the neighborhood and find the soda bottles, the soda bottle caps and then they would be the decorations on the scooter - -

MN: Made from like milk cartons and stuff?

JB: Yes, the milk crate and a plank, ok and then there was roller-skates on either end of the plank. And what they'd do is they'd try to get a Chicago brand skate because they had a rubber cushion inside and they'd knock that out to give it play and nail it to the board and then decorate it and put some handles on it. And then you could run; if you twisted the skates as the rubber was out it would give you a little directional steering on it. What else did we do - - all kinds of things. There was a million games, a million games - -

MN: Now what was the ethnic composition of your block and neighborhood? Was it - -

JB: It's what you would call today diverse. There were people of every stripe in the neighborhood, Italians, Jews, Spanish, black - - and all - - I was just talking to Henry Miller about this last night, Dr. Miller and we remembered that - - we were recollecting that it didn't start to change until the Cross-Bronx Expressway divided the Bronx in half. But before that time there were Italian and Jewish, and Hispanic as well as black - - and not only just black but black from South, from [Crosstalk] - -

MN: - - the Caribbean, right.

JB: - - everywhere - -

MN: Do you have pictures of, of - - from your block?

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JB: I have some; I'll see what I can provide you with. Turns out that most of my pictures are pictures of people, so I don't - - you have the one of Henry Miller and Stephanie, but I don't have a lot of landscape scenes.

MN: But do you have pictures of like groups of kids that would show that diversity?

JB: Oh yes, I've got that; yes, I do.

MN: See that's the kind of thing I think - - because people almost won't believe you when talking about some of these things - - the Bronx there, because a lot of the portraits of the Bronx don't leave place for this narrative.

JB: Well it's their loss because it was a very, very interesting place. The schools also were diverse.

MN: What was your elementary school?

JB: PS 39 which is at the corner of Kelly, Kelly Street and Longwood Avenue.

MN: Ok is it still there?

JB: It's still there but it's been recommissioned to something else, I don't know what it is now, it's a community center or something but it's not a school any longer.

MN: Now what was your school experience like? Was it as positive as the neighborhood block experience?

JB: Yes, it was. Our school was very diverse, a lot of white kids in school and teachers as well. And we went on to - - well if you went to 39 you evidently wound up going two blocks the other direction to PS - - Junior High School 52.

MN: The famous Junior High School 52.

JB: Correct. That was a very positive experience. I remember that we had three boys in school, **Martin Nashganozi, Benjamin Esconazi, and Whoopi Ashganozi**, and there

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was a teacher there who's also - - name is **Ashganozi**, it was very close - - And the teacher was a brother to the younger boy. And they - - it was very interesting, I thought it was very interesting for me because while there's all this talk about performance of black kids versus white kids and stuff, there in the environment we were in you could see how well you were stacked up against kids of other groups and stuff. And it was gratifying to know that you were as good as or better than some of the other kids from other groups, because you don't have that anymore because everybody's so - - it's so lopsided the way it's been - -

MN: Right, so were you and your brothers in the one class or - - ?

JB: My brothers are six and seven years older than I so, which is another interesting point. So we had some of the same teachers because hey the teachers didn't move around that much and so almost everyone in that neighborhood had a teacher - - I think she's - - I guess you might say she was Indian, she looked like she might be Cherokee, long black hair and dark skin, her name was Miss Fischer. And she was a very, very strict and tough teacher. And I don't know of anyone who ever was in one of her classes who did not go into college.

MN: Wow! And this was in - - ?

JB: Junior High School 52.

MN: 52, ok. And what was her subject area?

JB: Social Studies.

MN: So she was an incredible Social Studies teacher?

JB: Absolutely; best teacher I ever had. I remember she wanted us to learn the Harvard outline procedures. So she started and did the - - a presentation. And the subject was **coal**

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- - she broke down **coal** and subdivided it more ways than anyone could imagine and the thing went around the classroom, all the way around. And she said that's how I want you to do a report, and if you do a report for me you have to have more than one source. I think she wanted five sources for a report, because you can't take one man's opinion of anything. And what is funny about that is I went on to high school, college, and so on and no one ever asked me for that outline, either they assumed you knew it or what, it was never considered important, but it was very useful, I use it to this day.

MN: Did you begin to show artistic inclinations when you were in school?

JB: Well no, I think even before that. Because what would happen is as kids, my father had this dry cleaners, he was a tailor - -

MN: Now was this store in Harlem or - - ?

JB: It was in Harlem. 2281 7th Ave so - - at that time they didn't have - - they didn't put your clothes in a plastic bag, you got paper when you got your clothes from the cleaners and what we had to do was we'd fold them and wrap them in paper and fix it with pins, you just take it out like that. Then sometimes for suits they had the form thing. So we always had a large roll of brown paper so my father would rip off a big sheet of paper and take it; that was drawing paper. And we'd come home, we'd draw battles scenes and airplanes and all kinds of things like that and practice drawing. And you want to learn how to draw this and my older brother he was a very, very good artist and he'd show me how to draw an airplane or how to draw this and - - I would practice them just like he does, just like he does, and so on. And so that's how you got it. I learned how to draw before I went to school because I was trying to be like my big brother.

MN: Right, now was there - - were there arts programs in the school?

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JB: They had arts programs and stuff like that, yes.

MN: In elementary school or mainly in Junior High?

JB: I think they had it in elementary school but it was not - - I don't remember that much about it. But I'm sure we had art up through high school, I'm sure we did. As a matter of fact I was speaking to Dr. Miller last night and I said, we had all kinds of culturally rich things in school, you had music and art and music and all those things, which because of budget cuts I suppose later on they would take it away, but we did have those things.

MN: Now did you participate in music programs as well as art programs? Were those - - ?

JB: Yes and no. When I got to high school - -

MN: Which high school did you go to?

JB: Morris, Morris High School. What happened was this. I knew I was going to be a great engineer so I was going to have an academic program in high school and I really loved school and I had more subjects, more academic subjects than they allowed. And I had - - I figured you had to have a language to go to college, but you didn't have to have music, so I dropped clarinet. I was taking clarinet - -

MN: How old were you when you started playing clarinet?

JB: That was '57 so I was 14.

MN: Did you start that in school?

JB: In high school. And I had to drop something, they wouldn't allow you to have that many major subjects, so I had to drop something and the only one that wasn't a college preparatory was the music, so I dropped the music.

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MN: Did you have opportunities for supervised activity outside of school? Were there community centers, after-school programs - - ?

JB: They were all over the place. There was an HTAL at Beck Street and 156th Street, I went - - I was a member occasionally there, I wasn't that crazy about it but it was ok. Then the church, St. Margaret's Church - - St. Margaret's Church is a mission church which meant that they were sending ministerial candidates there to practice on the poor folks, I mean that's what it was. And they had all kinds of programs there. And one of them for general kids was called YPF, Young People's Fellowship. And then they had another program for girls called Girls Friends and Society. And what they would do to keep kids off the street they would have one Sunday a month or something they would have a dance at the parish hall of the church, supervised and everything so you - - the kids from the neighborhood would come there. And since they only did it once a month you'd find another church that did it another Sunday and you'd sort of roam around the city to find a dance. But that was the kind of supervising things you had. The schools had after-school stuff but I didn't do much of that.

MN: Now did you participate in any of the theatre programs at St. Margaret's?

JB: No I did not. Wait excuse me I did. You said theatre but it threw me. I was the narrator for the Christmas pageant and other times I did things like that. That's the extent of it. Oh there was another I guess when I was in cub scouts I did a - - they were doing - - I did a skit.

MN: Now one of the interesting things that I thought about as you were saying that St. Margaret's was a mission church, talking about the poor folks, was the neighborhood you lived in considered a poor neighborhood from the outside?

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JB: I think it was. It was actually a lower middle class neighborhood but I think that it was considered borderline so the diocese had put this church there and yes. Because a lot of pastors came through there and a lot of them were I guess still in seminary, the seminarians.

MN: Right, right. Now your portrait of this culturally rich nurturing environment certainly fits with a lot of what other people said. Were there things going on which in retrospect, this is in the forties and fifties, prefigured some of the things that would happen later? Were there things that were disturbing or scary going on when you were growing up?

JB: Yes, there was gang activity, some gang activity there.

MN: How did that - -

JB: It always seemed a little remote, a little distance. Like if you didn't go on that block you wouldn't be - -

MN: Ok so the gang stuff was very territorial? Would you say so?

JB: Yes, yes cause there was a - - I remember, I don't know all the names but there was a group of kids in this area up here called the Fordham Baldies - -

MN: Fordham Baldies. Everybody right - -

JB: Everybody knew about the Baldies so, but you didn't go to Fordham Road so - -

MN: That brings up another question as growing up as African American, Afro-Caribbean kids would was there an explicit or implicit understanding there's certain neighborhoods which were kind of difficult to go into? Or was that not - -

JB: I think that well most - - at that time people didn't go over to the Grand Concourse. You didn't use anything over there kind of attitude, there's nothing over there for you. So

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we didn't just go there, there was no place to go to hang out. But you would get to those neighborhoods like that occasionally when the churches threw dances as a fundraising thing. All the churches had dances with live bands back in that time, and so it would be a fundraiser and people would dress up and go to these ballrooms which were in other neighborhoods. So there was one the Embassy Ballroom and there was one over - -

MN: That was what one hundred - - what was Embassy? 161st?

JB: Yes it was. And there was another one further over - - I forgot the name of it now over by Yankee Stadium that was a very beautiful place. And they had - - they would have dances there with live bands.

MN: Now were you exposed to Latin music when you were growing up was that part of it?

JB: That was part of it. Yes, there was a lot of Latin music.

MN: Was it on the block or was stuff you were just in - -

JB: On the block, because a lot of guys would play congas on the street for entertainment. A lot of kids liked to sing what they call doo wops today, and other kids would play bongos and all. There was a good mix because the Hispanic kids intermixed very well and so one day they'll be playing bongos and singing back and forth.

MN: Now was there much West Indian music? Was calypso part of this mix or not - - ?

JB: Not in the street, but like if you went to a dance there would be a lot of calypso at the dance.

MN: Who were the calypso artists of that time who were most popular?

JB: I don't know, I guess who was it, Lord Kitchener and Sparrow and a couple of others, Lord Melody but I can't remember them that well.

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MN: Now was your house - - what kind of music did your parents listen to?

JB: Radio, not especially classical just whatever was on the radio. A lot of pop songs.

My mother used to love to sing in the house and she had a good singing voice. And so I learned all about Bing Crosby and all those guys cause that was all that was on the radio.

MN: Did you start doing photography when you were a child?

JB: Yes, what happened was my uncle was a photographer and he use to - - he stayed with us several times, living in our house. We had a three family house so he'd have an apartment.

MN: Okay, so it was a three family house, your family owned it. And then what floors did they have?

JB: Well initially we had the ground the floor and then we took over the whole house because one family moved out and we needed the space, and so we just took over the whole house. And at that time my uncle had moved in and he took the middle floor and we just shared it cause sort of sleeping was way upstairs and **eating** was down.

MN: So describe the house to me, how many stories was it?

JB: Three family, I guess not a brownstone, flagstone it was a grey stone with a basement. And interestingly enough that's where I spent a lot of my teenage years in the basement because I built the model railroad in the basement. I had an entire town in the basement. [Crosstalk]

MN: You have pictures of that by any chance?

JB: None. Me and another kid we had built this though - - we learned a lot about electricity and wiring and the history of railroads, scale models, and all kinds of things - - a very good pastime for kids, keeps you out of trouble too.

MN: Now what about backyards, did the house - -

JB: We had a backyard because Kelly Street is one street over from Dawson so all the houses had a common backyard. Not a common backyard, a backyard separated by a fence, separated your property from theirs. And our backyard was interesting because we had a garden, we had two grape vines, an apple tree - -

MN: An apple tree that worked?

JB: Yes, well we had crab apples but it would grow. We had currents and mint and morning glories in the front, a couple of roses - - it was kind of nice. A little small thing compared to my house now I could fit the whole thing in the corner of my backyard but it was nice.

MN: Now when you went to high school your goal was to be an engineer?

JB: Yes.

MN: And did you end up going to engineering school?

JB: Yes. And then I discovered I didn't have any talent for engineering, so I became a - - I graduated economics. But yes, that was my goal so in high school up until college I dropped out of engineering I was inundated with mathematics. Everything in math I could take I took. I didn't take calculus - - they did not offer calculus, pre-calculus the year I graduated, 1960, so they had - - solid geometry I took that.

MN: And what college did you end up going to?

JB: City College of New York.

MN: Ok, at that time City was very selective and tough to get into.

JB: Right and my average was not quite good so I had to go at night to begin with. And then after I matriculated I was in day session.

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MN: Now you mentioned that your brother and I guess Bob Gumbs they were all involved with trying to create a jazz scene in the Bronx. What were the clubs?

JB: The only club I can remember is 845, on Prospect Ave at the corner of I guess Union. [Crosstalk]

MN: How far was that from your house?

JB: Five blocks.

MN: Five blocks; and did you ever go there, or were you too young?

JB: Yes, I did go there even though I was too young, I didn't have anything to drink so I sat there. And I remember there was quite a few musicians that played there who amazingly enough would turn out to be really, really significant. Betty - - I've seen Betty Carter sing there and that was like wow! Back then she was called Betty Bebop Carter, I'll never forget it, she was amazing!

MN: Betty Bebop Carter.

JB: That's what they was - - they called her then. She was young and she was really, really good. Who else I saw there? There was a guy, I think he played slide trombone, named George Braithwaite, no relation. And a few other guys, musicians, who turned out to be - - **Rudy Bengert**.

MN: Did you ever go to the Hunts Point Palace?

JB: Yes I did.

MN: And what were some of the - -

JB: I didn't go to any of the major things at Hunts Point Palace, but I do remember that at one time and it had to be after 1959, 60's time frame there was a big rock and roll concert at the Hunts Point Palace. And it was interesting because a lot of white groups

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had come through; the guys that sang “There’s a Moon Out Tonight” and so on - -

Smokey Robinson and the Miracles came.

MN: They played the Hunts Point Palace?

JB: They played the Hunts Point Palace. If I ever talk to Smokey I’m going to tell him - -

I remember talking to him when he played the Hunts Point Palace in about ’59. At that time I was following the Miracles group around because they sang the songs that made the girls swoon. So I liked to be around then.

MN: Man well yes, they did in the ‘60s too. So that’s incredible. So this was like - - I guess you’d say Hunts Point’s Palace was a major venue.

JB: It was a major dance - - the big ones were Hunts Point Palace and the Rockland Palace and the - - in the Bronx the Savoy Ballroom. But the Hunts Point Palace is like a big, major - -

MN: Do you know if anybody has saved flyers from the events, from those events.

Because I got one off the internet that somebody sold for like two hundred seventy dollars with Lloyd Price and James Brown as number two billing. But do you - -

JB: I don’t know who has what but I’ll have to ask, because my brothers may have it.

MN: Save some of the flyers from the events they promoted. Did you ever go up to Sylvia’s Blue Morocco or Goodson’s or those places?

JB: I never went to Sylvia’s Blue Morocco I always wanted to go but I never did go there. And then they had a big hit with “Love is Strange” and they were Mickey and Sylvia. [Crosstalk] But I never got a chance to see them. I think I might have seen them perform at the Apollo which became a favorite spot of mine. But I don’t remember going to the - -

MN: What about the Boston Road Ballroom?

JB: Neither. It was like too distant for me.

MN: So people in Hunts Point didn't go that much to the upper reaches of Morrisania.

JB: Yes, they didn't. I guess others might have; I didn't.

MN: What about the shopping near your house? Could you get pretty much anything you wanted in that neighborhood or not?

JB: There was an A&P at Southern Boulevard and there were drug stores along the Longwood Ave, but for - - and if you went up to Prospect and Union, that area, there was a kosher market there. They had an entrance on Union and turned out, went around to the other side. And they had all kinds of fresh food in there. And it was a kosher fish monger there and you'd pick a fish and you'd kill it and all.

MN: These were live fish?

JB: Yes, they also had live chickens and stuff in one of those places there too. We didn't get those. But I remember though that in the neighborhood you would sometimes see somebody would throw out chicken feet and the kids would get it. So if they grabbed the chicken foot and you pulled the skin the thing would - - you'd go chase the other kids around the block with - - [Crosstalk]

MN: Oh, right, I got it, yes, yes - -

JB: The shopping, most of the shopping, and I remember very - - I must've been four or five years old, we used to go to Third Ave, 149th Street to Hern's Department Store. And Hern's was like the big one, because I think Hern's was there before even Alexander's opened. And you'd go to Third Ave, 149th Street just to shop at Hern's. And they'd go in there and you'd buy your clothing and your - - all this kind of stuff. Then around the

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Christmas season they would open up another place called the Annex and they had all the toys over there; so that's where I always wanted to go. But I remember taking the trolley with my mother from Prospect Avenue down to 149th and going to Hern's.

MN: Now do you ever remember a place on Prospect Avenue called Hollywood Clothes?

JB: Yes, vaguely.

MN: You didn't shop there?

JB: I don't recall. I used to shop on Prospect Ave, I don't recall them specifically.

MN: What about movie theatres?

JB: RKO Franklin, because of the Teatro Prospect, RKO Franklin and the Loews' Berlin. And they all, to drum up business, had serials on Saturdays. So you'd go to one or the other to see the serial of your choice. One had Rocketman, one had Superman, and one had Batman, or something like that.

MN: So movies, going to the movies was - -

JB: That was a big deal.

MN: Did you ever go to Yankee games or Giant Games - - ?

JB: I have never gone to a Yankee game. The only games that I ever went to was - - I saw the Dodgers play once. I guess I'd go to the Polo Grounds for that, because they were national league; I don't ever recall going to Ebbets Field. So I'm pretty sure I went to the Polo Grounds.

MN: Now was, was, was baseball a big thing with kids when you were growing up?

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JB: I was a dye-in-the-wool Dodger fan until I was about - - till the Dodgers left New York. And I was so heart broken. I had my little blue Dodgers jacket, and I could - - it's amazing - - back then I could, I could, I knew all the stats and I was a real fan.

MN: Were there a lot of Dodger fans in your neighborhood?

JB: Yes. Dodgers were real - - because of Jackie Robinson; everybody loved the Dodgers. And Ray Campanella - - There was another family that was very close to mine and they lived further toward 156th street, the Larias. And Burt Laria, god rest his soul, was an avid Giants fan; we used to always argue who was better, the Giants or the Dodgers? And he was much older though and he used to always give me a hard time - - no he's **just dodging it** [?] - - and it was back and forth like that. Also, regarding baseball - - of course they'd play stickball in the streets, but sometimes because - - there was a little alley between the houses we'd put, draw a big - - like a square on the wall and right in the alley and hit the ball.

MN: Yes that was also in Brooklyn. We'd play stickball with the box as opposed to self-hitting in the street.

JB: Yes, Yes. But we did self-hitting and all and of course if you could hit a ball two sewers you were quite famous.

MN: Now did anybody in your family play sports in high school, going out for the teams at Morris or they were more - - ?

JB: Well I was the only one who went to Morris. My older brother went to High School of Art - - well it's now called High School of Art and Design. And my other brother went to - - I think he went to Commercial Art, which was on 42nd, I think he went there. I don't think they went out for sports. But might have because, well, I don't recall, but I do know

that we have a - - I gave it to my brother, which is probably lost now but I have a photograph of my oldest brother playing basketball at the church with Colin Powell.

MN: Now this was - - ?

JB: St. Margaret's Church.

MN: Did they have a gym?

JB: No, the parish hall was every - - the multifunction place, and so you played basketball - -

MN: They set up - - now how did they set up - - ?

JB: [Crosstalk] - - a hoop in the - - on the wall in the parish hall.

MN: Oh it was nailed into the wall?

JB: I guess so; it was mounted.

MN: So Colin Powell was a member of that parish?

JB: Yes. Colin Powell was an acolyte in that parish. I know of it because he was older than me and we would always want to - - got like that guy because he was really cool.

MN: Now he was in your brother's cohort or - - ?

JB: Yes, he was my brother's age group, so they're both like '67.

MN: Ok now there's also a guy I interviewed named Gene Norman, does that - - who was from the same block in Kelly Street as Powell.

JB: I don't recall Gene Norman.

MN: Joan Tyson - -

JB: That name - - !

MN: She's now Joan Tyson Fortune, but it was the Tyson family. I think they were also in that parish.

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JB: Yes, that's funny because I'm wondering - - there's a Joan Tyson that goes to my church too, I've got to ask her if - - [Crosstalk]

MN: She lives, she lives - - She's Joan Tyson Fortune, she doesn't go by the Tyson, but she lives in Concourse Village now.

JB: Ok.

MN: Now when you went to City College were you still living at home?

JB: Yes.

MN: And how long did you live on Kelly Street, you personally?

JB: I lived on Kelly Street until 1969. No, that's interesting, I lived on Kelly Street - - I moved into my first apartment in 1969, I thought it was the end of '69 - -

MN: Where was that located?

JB: In Harlem.

MN: In Harlem.

JB: Yes, they had just completed a group of houses; they'd remodeled them, like they're doing now. And I was the first to occupy the apartment, it was real nice.

MN: Now was there any heroin problem when you were growing up that you were aware of in your immediate area?

JB: Yes, yes. There was a man who was a son of the family across the street, the Guys, which was my mother's friend's family. And one of their sons, or might have been a grandson, because there were many generations involved, he was addicted to heroin. And he expired on a rooftop.

MN: Now what, was this in the '40s, '50s, or '60s that this, when this happened?

JB: That was the '50s I believe, late '50s.

MN: Now was this in the, now were - - you lived in a row house, were there also apartment buildings on the block?

JB: On the corner; there were two apartment buildings on the corner of Longwood and Kelly, but the rest of the houses were all private houses.

MN: So he died on the roof of an apartment building?

JB: I guess it was an apartment building.

MN: Right. But was, was - -

JB: And you'd see people nodding out on the street and stuff like that, it was a terrible thing, but you knew that hey they're doing something wrong and you didn't want to be a part of that.

MN: So this is even when you're growing up with all the street games and all this there was still - -

JB: Yes, you could see that. I guess St. Margaret's Church kept a lot of kids away from things like that, but you know not everybody but it was a pretty important - -

MN: But it's interesting, so it didn't destroy the sense of security in the neighborhood to have that going on?

JB: I think people worried about it but - - I guess they would rail against it when, over the dinner table and all. But hey, the family across the street, which is similar to our own, they had the problem right in the family.

MN: Now what about police, did you grow up where, where - - did police, was there much of a police presence in your block and were they disrespectful to the local people or they weren't much of a factor?

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JB: They were always there, in a sense. But most of the times you'd get in trouble for playing stickball in the streets, which was - - But there was a story about a kid who was killed by a police officer beside PS 39, I think on the Kelly Street side. And that was a very big disturbance for a long time. There were people very - - [Crosstalk]

MN: Where was that located? I mean - -

JB: On Longwood and Kelly.

MN: And what year was that?

JB: I do not recall but I know I was very young, and they said the police they shot this kid. And so that was a really - - pretty awful.

MN: Was there a concept, like you have today, police brutality or racial profiling that described - -

JB: I don't recall as such. You knew that the police - - I don't recall it as such, and it's funny to articulate it. You were wary of the police because they throw people in jail, and they take you downtown and beat you up; so - - but I don't know - -

MN: It wasn't something that hung over your childhood and in quite a powerful way?

JB: Not in that sense, not for me at least.

MN: When did you start - - when did your - - the block your mother lived on become dangerous or did it ever become dangerous?

JB: I'm not sure. It's very interesting because there was always some measure of respect for all the people there. I don't think people - - I don't recall any older people getting hurt or anything like that, so she was there all the way up until she died.

MN: Now what year did she die?

JB: 1980.

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MN: Ok, so even for all the years that the fires were all - - she was treated with some respect.

JB: Yes and other elderly people too. But yes, people were concerned; and I mean it was a concern. I now that my uncle who was living by himself, he was beaten up in his apartment. And what happened is - -

MN: Was that in the same area?

JB: It was the same building. And what happened was - -

MN: Oh, so it was in your building.

JB: Yes, what happened was I mean - - after **Arthur** passed, my uncle was occupying the basement apartment because - - I mean just to be a presence there, and he needed a place anyway. He had been, I think assaulted in another place, moved out of there for his own - - he lived over by Forest Avenue, he was living in the Forest Houses, so he moved over to us and then helped us, helped me while he was - - he needed a place, I needed somebody in the place.

MN: So he was living in the Forest Houses for a while?

JB: Yes, then he got - - I think he got beat up in the Forest Houses and so when he came out of there, instead of going back there he moved into our house.

MN: Ok, was this in the '60s, when he got beat up in the Forest Houses?

JB: Seventies.

MN: Seventies, ok because then it was already a pretty rough place.

JB: Yes. It was getting dangerous because on that particular block people who lived on the block sort of didn't trouble the old people but he got, he got hurt.

MN: Now were there any buildings on your block that were abandoned and torched as they were in some other parts of the Bronx?

JB: I don't recall buildings being torched on that block.

MN: What about adjoining blocks, were there any - - ?

JB: Other blocks I think there may have been, but I don't know for sure. I think that well Kelly Street and Beck Street in the 700 block I don't think they had those, the same - -

MN: Were those mostly the row houses - -

JB: Row houses.

MN: - - owner-occupied houses.

JB: Yes.

MN: Because most of the fires would have hit the tenements.

JB: Well the tenements are over there on Longwood Avenue. I had left the area after my mother passed and I finally sold the house I didn't go down there; I had no need to go down there. Friends of mine have a little reunion at St. Margaret's Church the last Saturday of April every year, so I'd go down there once a year. And I was pleasantly surprised to see that Longwood Avenue has been redone, and it looks very, very nice. It is in fact more attractive than it was before. Before the renovation it had been - -

MN: So you were on Kelly Street between Longwood and 156th?

JB: Right.

MN: Right, but and so none of the surrounding blocks were really devastated?

JB: I think they were but that's why I think they got rid of the 800 block of Kelly Street because that's now a park.

MN: Oh, ok, so the 800 block of Kelly Street - -

JB: - - is no longer there.

MN: And is that were Colin Powell lived or - - ?

JB: I do not know exactly where he lived, I just knew he went to our church.

MN: So you had - - so that's between Longwood and - -

JB: - - and Intervale.

MN: - - and Intervale - - is now a park.

JB: Yes, it's like - - adjacent to PS 39. It's a very interesting area to go to, it's attractive and everything, it's a very nice area.

MN: Yes, I've driven through there because I worked at a community center at 156th and Prospect.

JB: Ok.

MN: Now when you moved to Harlem, was that the last time you ever - - you never moved back to the Bronx?

JB: Moved to Harlem in I think the last - - in '69, it might have been the end of '70, I can't remember now, I really don't remember. And I had this apartment; young guy, single, apartment, had a lot of fun. I had a walk-in closet for my photography and it was big enough for one kid. And I enjoyed it. And my wife, who I was dating at the time, she made curtains and all this kind of stuff. But we got married in '72 and pretty soon after that we realized that this ain't going to work; it's too, too cramped in here for two people. It was a [inaudible] but not for two. And we start looking again. And as a result of that, in '74 we moved to 800 Grand Concourse, on the Concourse. It's 158th Street and Grand Concourse, it's a corner.

MN: Now people have told me that in the fifties if you were African American you wouldn't have been able to do that.

JB: That's correct.

MN: And was that a sort of known fact?

JB: That's a known fact.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1; BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

MN: We're saying that African Americans could not rent on the Grand Concourse in the fifties or even up into the early sixties.

JB: That is correct.

MN: And - - but it changed by the seventies.

JB: Yes, it's changed.

MN: Now did you become a professional photographer or - -

JB: Never, never

MN: It was always - -

JB: Because my brother was a professional photographer and it's a struggle. You chase after somebody you're getting contacts and stuff, and I didn't want that for myself.

Instead I had a job and I decided that I'd rather shoot pictures of what I wanted, when I wanted to and not when I didn't want to.

MN: Ok what was - - what work did you do after college?

JB: I graduated February of '68 and so my whole thing was to take pictures that's all I wanted to do. So to keep myself in film I went down and sat down for a test to become a case worker. Took the test, of course I passed it, and became a case worker for - - at

Melrose Welfare Center. And so I'd be a welfare case worker in the morning and then - - and take pictures all of the time.

MN: Now what was it like being a welfare case worker in those years? Because that's a whole other discussion - -

JB: [Crosstalk] That's an amazing discussion. That was the year the system - - the city almost went broke. First of all you started as a welfare caseworker they gave you a lot of easy cases and real nice old folks and stuff and real nice pleasant people and then they turned you loose on the real cases and it gets ugly. But what happened was this in the summer of '68 VISTA came to the Bronx, came to New York, not to the Bronx to the whole city. And VISTA had a proposition that said if you are on welfare and if you never had a cot - - oh no, no, no - - if you're on welfare and your house got burned down they'll pay you if you lost a cot or a chair or a spoon or whatever, therefore you're entitled to that. And they came up with long lists of paper, legal size space over four five pages long itemized items. All these things, Mrs. Rosato never had **[interruption in tape]** and because she's a case she's entitled to that so she's got to have it. So people, people became a bit, a bit contentious there. There were fights in the welfare lines, the welfare office was surrounded four or five deep, people tried to get in and get their cut. It was sad too because I had some nice people, older people who said, "Look, I'm not trying to be trouble, I swear to god - - I don't - - really I never had a chair - - could you get around to it." And so the things - - most had - - some would walk out of the welfare center with checks fifteen hundred dollars and stuff like that. So one day, I'll never forget this it was a Tuesday morning we came to the centers and they took up the [inaudible] line and the lady said all the checks that are processed as of yesterday will go though, that's it; and

they cut it off just like that, in a blink of an eye. And the poor lady looked up at me, she asked me - -

MN: Now what street was the Melrose Center on?

JB: 161st, was it 161st I think it was 161st and Melrose Avenue, so over by the courthouse.

MN: And that's - - Ok, right, right.

JB: Oh, where were we, so that was the first [Indiscernible] early in the summer I went to a Richard Clark job fair to try to find another black professional for these jobs that were around. And I spoke to IBM and they wanted me to go to Kingston, New York and I said, "No I don't want to go to Kingston, I want to stay in the city," so I went back to work. But then later - - latter summer, September - October timeframe I got a call from George Schaffer at IBM in Brooklyn; what IBM in Brooklyn? And George said that they had a project that he wanted to talk to me about it. So I went down to Brooklyn and it turns out that they - - Bobby Kenny was friends with Tom Watson and Tom had asked about me, look you got to - - Bobby asked Tom do something in the city so IBM put up a demonstration project in Bedstuy and [Crosstalk] - -

MN: Oh yes, Bedstuy Restoration.

JB: No, this was IBM - - there's a warehouse at Nostrand & Gates in Bedstuy and IBM bought that building and converted outside it looked like a factory or warehouse, inside it was pure IBM same everything. And what they did was they took guys, inner city people, who were - - who had no skills, never had a job. It was biased towards males and biased to, to - - for head of household and they gave them a shot and they would get a job with IBM. And they were doing cable reclamation. And what happened is IBM, who had not

really given a lot of these old people a shot had brought guys in from Endicott, Poughkeepsie and other places and let them become managers, they were black who never got [Indiscernible] - - and they became managers by coming down to Brooklyn and they got a chance to become manager for the first time and have somebody to manage. The thing was rocky for a while but it finally succeeded. I was hired to become an interviewer, you're young you're black you know how to talk to these people, it was that kind of a thing. The other guy who was my mentor was Don Sandals a Jamaican fellow, brilliant guy, and the manager was a white man, George Schaffer. Anyway I got hired for that job, which is incredible because it's the kind of job you get at the end of your career not the beginning. But I was what 25 years old, and I was interviewing people for it because I had this experience interviewing so I was interviewing professional, technical and other people for pre-employment interviewing. And that's what I did. I was there till '74 when I transferred out to become a techie and I've been a techie ever since.

MN: Oh in IBM?

JB: Well I transferred there to become - - for a technical job in IBM which I stayed there till '79 and then I left IBM altogether.

MN: So when you say a techie that means you fix systems?

JB: Software wise; I work what they call a PS - - nobody ever heard of but at that time the mainframe machines when they had an error would spit out a stack of paper about this high that was called a standard loader dump, a **dump of - - memory core** dump. And we had to analyze that and figure out what was wrong, it was very, very - - man, it was complicated. Extremely complicated work and I did that for five years and I moved off of IBM.

MN: Now, the photography work were you doing?

JB: All the time.

MN: Now were you - - did you have special areas that you like to focus on as a photographer?

JB: Yes. What happened was my brother was a photographer - - My brother opened - - they had a studio in Harlem for the jazz efforts and stuff. So they had a large back area that was - - my brother used for a studio, he would develop the rolls of paper and stuff and clip it. And we would photograph models. At that time it was a big thing for black women to become models.

MN: Do you have any - - this is what they call Naturally Yours - -

JB: No 1962, they did that show - - my brother my brothers right in that studio there created a whole Naturally phenomenon in this country, they did that.

MN: Yes, I know.

JB: But, but - - and we do, I think we have posters of that. But I was trying to become a fashion photographer so I'd do a lot of fashion, I'd photograph a lot of young girls and everything. And besides that I did a lot of photography of kids in the street. And then any other miscellaneous things I came across, so I have a lot of musicians, a lot of - -

MN: Now did you ever put together books of your work - -

JB: Never books - -

MN: - - or a website or - -

JB: A website; but books of my work, no. But I was included in the Black Photographers Annual in '75 or '76, I think it was '76. And what is interesting is that when I was living in Harlem I took this picture of these young Muslim girls jumping rope on St. Nicholas

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Avenue; that was in the Black Photographers Annual along with another picture I did, that I took.

MN: Now do you have enough material to sort of do a sort of photo exhibit of some of the things we talked about growing up? [Crosstalk]

JB: I have to look and see, reclaim it and stuff. Some of the pictures are worn out - - refurbish it - - no problem there.

MN: Because it would be really interesting to sort of do a photo exhibit from those early - - document the neighborhood in those years.

JB: I, I, I'll have to pull it together.

MN: Is that something of interest to you?

JB: I think I'd like to do that; you know I never thought of it as that kind of a project - - mostly as pictures of my friends and stuff but yes, there's other things there.

MN: I might even be able to find a student to assign you to work on this who is both a historian and a photographer. I have a brilliant young man who is both a photographer and he's going to end up being a historian so - -

JB: Sounds interesting. We shall talk about that.

MN: Right, right, because it sounds like you've got all this - -

JB: Yes, I'm looking though because I'm looking to see well is this just pictures of family or - - and I have to do a lot of digging. But anyway, that picture traveled, those two pictures "Harlem on My Mind" so - -

MN: Oh yes, oh right!

JB: "Harlem on My Mind" and "Mad Blue Street" and that traveled the world as part of the - -

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MN: [Crosstalk] That's all over the place, that's incredible. Isn't there a book - -

JB: There is a book.

MN: Is your photograph in there?

JB: Yes, I got that. Now what then happened was in 1990 Essence called me because they were doing their 20th Anniversary and they wanted the picture for their 20th Anniversary issue. So it went into essence 20th Anniversary issue. And a few years later I guess five years ago I got a call from a young lady who says, "I'm doing a film on double dutch and I saw this picture; I'd like the picture for my film. And by the way, would you like to be in the movie?" So now I'm on television some place. So the picture was there in the movie. And then as a result of the picture being shown I guess it had to do with the film house in [Maiute?] a guy from the East Village called me and said, "Look I'm doing this thing on women in sports and I'd like the picture." So I didn't make the book the picture was in the Smithsonian exhibit - -

MN: Wow, so this picture has just reinvented itself - -

JB: And it's now currently at the World Financial Center in a show there; so that's my lucky picture.

MN: Right, right, now I've pretty much run out of questions, are there things that you would like to say in reviewing all these subjects that - -

JB: Well, I don't know, I think that - - the thing that struck me was that growing up in the Bronx, it's so different the way I see it projected. It was - - I think people saw themselves as being very much similar because of - - your economic situation being the same, it was not so much a racial thing. Of course there was, there was racial stuff going on but it was not - - maybe I was lucky because my father owned his own business,

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owned a home, he had a car - - I mean you couldn't get slighted too much because you had more than most other kids so maybe insulated me from some of the stuff. But there was a lot going on and looking - - thinking back on it, it was quite an exciting time. So many interesting things that had happened at that time. I can't think of any specific things, I'll probably go home and say "oh yes, we could've talked about this." But the street games were interesting.

MN: Now you mentioned that you were writing an autobiography.

JB: Yes, I got about fifty pages. I just - - I was trying to, to recap some of this very same stuff. But not from the Bronx, this is how I came to be how I am.

MN: Oh, ok, because I'm going to send you something I actually wrote an autobiography which got published - -

JB: Oh ok I'd like to see that because we'll see well maybe - - because I'm certain that I've overlooked certain things - -

MN: When we get to my office I think I can access the first chapter on computer for you. So, ok well, we'll talk more because I'm very interested in working with you in this photo exhibit - -

JB: Oh right, yes.

[END OF SESSION]