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Bronx African American History Project Benjamin, Michael
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Transcriber: Samantha Alfrey

Michael Benjamin (MB): Michael Benjamin speaking

Brian Purnell (BP): Hi Assemblyman Benjamin, this is Dr. Purnell from Fordham.

MB: Dr. Purnell, how are you?

BP: Good. Thank you for making the time to participate in this project.

MB: Gladly.

BP: I know that your time is limited, so I can jump right in.

MB: Yes, please.

BP: Unless you have questions for me?

MB: No, no.

BP: I wanted to let you know that I am recording this, if that's okay, sir, to be part of the archive.

MB: Yes, I understand.

BP: Wonderful. So the first question that we wanted to ask—well I just need to preface. Today is March 18, 2009. This is an interview for the Bronx African American History Project with Assemblyman Michael Benjamin, date of birth May 2, 1958, an assemblyman from the 79th District in the Bronx, representing the neighborhoods of Maracena, Crotona Park East and East Tremont. I think I have that correct from the work that I did.

MB: Yes, Crotona Park East and East Tremont. Correct.

BP: Great. Assemblyman Benjamin, could you start possibly by telling us which political leaders or individuals, perhaps from your days on the community boards, kind of mentored and advised you in your development as an elected official and a public servant.

MB: I guess the first would have been my District leader at the time in 1981, which I returned from graduate school to the Bronx. His name is Hector L. Diaz. Hector later became a member of the State Assembly in a special election in 1983, and he sort have been mentoring and guiding my political career for awhile now. I guess him, and I worked a couple years for Jose Serano, who later became a Congressman, and I guess most recently would have been a State Assembly member, Oralia Green, in whose Assembly District I lived in for the last 18 years, until I got elected [inaudible] in 1982, and I also had worked for her for about two years, before leaving to go work at a board of elections, and then getting elected to the State Assembly.

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BP: I guess it's a pre-question. What issues, or what personal experiences inspired you to get involved in public service?

MB: I think I've been interested in public service since I was a little boy. I tell most people I remember the day in which the news report came on television, that President Kennedy had been shot and killed. I kind of found it interesting that a person would be involved in public service and they could lose their life. It got me kind of interested. I've always been sort of a news junkie, watching news every night, seeing the political news and the governmental news and having an interest in it, seeing the things that government could do for you. As a boy, my youngest brother, Vernon, suffered from a couple of ailments, lung ailments, and we were living in a cold rental. My mother wrote Mayor—I forget the name of the Mayor—the Mayor in 1960, it will come back to me.

BP: Wagner?

MB: Wagner. Yes. She wrote Mayor Wagner and told him about the situation, my dad was a veteran, she had three sons, one was very ill, the apartment we lived in was inadequate and kind of cold. And a few months later, she said she got an application back from the Mayor's office for public housing. She filled it out, and about a year later, we were interviewed. In 1965 we moved into the John Adams' houses, which had just opened in the latter part of '64. So we were one of the first families in the entire building, but it turned out because my mother wrote the Mayor, who then had a staff send an application for public housing, and then qualified public housing and move in. So you can see where government can be helpful to families in distress—so that was another thing that struck me as well.

BP: Since you mention it—and this is something that we ask a lot of our interviewees and participants—can you describe, this is about the early 1960s, living in public housing in the Bronx?

MB: Okay.

BP: What was the community like? What was your experience like as a boy in Jane Adams'--?

MB: John Adams' public houses. Up the block was the Jane Adams' High School. We moved in '65. Most of the families there, I recall, were two parent families. Most, about everyone as I remember, worked for a living. You didn't have that many families living there on public assistance. You know, back then, there was the deserving poor, people were working. My dad had a credit to move in because he was a Korean war veteran. I remember one of the neighbors lived on the first floor, everybody sort of scared him, all the kids there, because he was living by himself, the only single person who lived in the building. And he was a Korean War Veteran, and he got his stakes because he was a veteran, that kind of thing. And I remember there being well-kept lawns and sprinklers there. A lot of tenants were involved—they would discipline their neighbor's children—that kind of involvement. Everything was sort of brand new. The building, the complex had a laundry room, my mother would use it for years, until she and my dad bought their own washing machine. It was safe enough for her to leave me in the playground while she went around the corner down one of the buildings to do the laundry, and felt I was safe playing

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with the other kids. So you had that—I know John Adams’ across the street from my building was the [inaudible] Roman Catholic School. So you had a lot of hustle and bustle, neighbors were primarily African-American, some Latinos—primarily Puerto Rican. In the building, in the complex there was a police substation. I wasn’t sure how many police officers manned the station, but I know every night they would have their walking patrols. They would take the elevator up and walk down the stairs and my parents became friendly with one of the police officers. Whenever he was on our floor, he would tap his night stick at the bottom of the door so we’d know he was patrolling. For some reason my dad had to go to the Virgin Islands for a family situation, and every night that he was away, Tommy made sure that he checked in on us, made sure we were okay, reassured us, and he’d go about his duties. So he had that kind of involvement. Kindergarten, the local public school was about a block and a half away, and we could see it from my apartment window because we lived on the 21st floor. My mother used to take me to school, but I think one time she was ill for about a week or so, and she couldn’t take me to school. She told me to take the elevator downstairs, when you get to the corner, ask the policeman to walk you across the street. And so I did that. I got to the corner, I stopped, and he’s in the middle of the road, stopping traffic, even though there was the traffic light, and he signaled for me to come across. I told him I wouldn’t because my mother said he was going to walk across the street. So he walked across, got me, and we both walked across the street. He did that for like four days, until the next week when my mother got well and he told her the story of my standing on the corner waiting for him to come and get me.

[Laughter]

MB: So, I mean, it was kind of an unusual way of living, I suppose, a lot of New Yorkers, at least my Bronx peers, did not have that sort of experience. In our neighborhood, our pediatrician had an office on Prospect Avenue, which was a few blocks from where we lived—both when we lived in the smaller house and in the housing project. Still, our doctor was across the street, and two blocks from him was Prospect Hospital. So it was a sort of an unusual situation where we lived in the housing development that had family doctors that had offices not too far away, and the local, small, private hospital was a few blocks away. So it was an unusual way in which to grow up. But you had a lot of working class families that lived there and took care of the families and the building was—like I said—when we moved in we were the first family to move in. So there was no deterioration because it was a brand new building.

BP: Wow, those are pretty powerful narratives about—that’s very helpful. Along these lines, since we are in this time period, what were your experiences like education-wise—in terms of—you said you went to the local public school?

MB: Yes. It was half-day Kindergarten--

BP: Or even just the general description of elementary school?

MB: The building itself is really bizarre, because it was built I think around the same time I was born, it was ’58, I think it was. 1957. It was the Abrahams Stevens Hewitt School. Stevens Hewitt was a former Mayor, it was PS 130, it still stands. It was sort of a brand new building. So I’d never gone to school in an old building, which is, again, unusual for a lot of Bronx kids to not

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to go to school in an old building. My mother was an active person, so she got to know my teachers, the Kindergarten teacher, the first grade teacher. During the late '60s, during the community control issues, we had a teachers' strike and parental, community school boards, school control, my parents got involved. My mother eventually—well she wanted to go to work to earn an income to support the family while my dad—she heard about the schools hiring aids become paraprofessionals. She went and she applied. The principal knew her. He accepted her, and that started her own career in education. She eventually became a tenured teacher, and when she retired from the system, she retired as a math teacher with her Masters in Elementary Education, all because she started off in a paraprofessional program, as a result of the whole community control issue.

BP: Oh, wow.

MB: And that helped her in our family. My dad was a carpenter, Union carpenter, had a pretty good living working out in Brooklyn. It was unusual, their being together, two income household, managing to send their three sons to private universities. One to Syracuse—my middle brother Lawrence attended the University of Pennsylvania. Today it would be a crippling burden for families to try to do that. I mean, it was a burden then, I think tuition was like \$600-700 at Syracuse, then went it up eventually to about 8 or 9 by the time I graduated. My brothers went in about 8-9, and by the time they graduated in the middle '80s it was maybe 12-15,000 for them.

BP: Aside from having a good encouragement from home—did you have positive experiences with your teachers in High School, if you went on to University?

MB: Yes, yes. Going back to elementary school, at the time the schools had—my mother was active, my dad was active—in making sure we went to the after-school summer programs. I learned to play an instrument during the summer—I forget what year that was. They got us involved in Boy Scouts. The school would open up and they would have nights where you would be able to go and learn about community activities. My mother wanted us to be social, so she took us in and signed us up for the Boy Scouts. We were Cub Scouts for awhile. So those are the sort of things that neighborhoods had for you in the summertime, you would be able to go for enrichment in reading, in math, or for learning an instrument, those sort of things. And one lucky thing was that one of my second cousins happened to be the school librarian, and she was from the Virgin Islands too, like my parents were, and she sort of took us in and we would spend a lot of time in the library assisting her and reading books and getting appreciation for books. So it was very unusual to be in the school where your mother eventually began to teach as a paraprofessional, where your second cousin was your school librarian. And families made sure to take advantage of what was available. That's the other unusual thing, I guess, was I had elementary school teachers who were black. My first grade teacher was a black woman, Mrs. Ten. I think the second and third grade teachers were both white, and my fourth grade teacher was a black male, Mr. Armstrong. So it was kind of unusual, and even I remember third grade, the teacher was a white woman made Mrs. Brahn, whose son happened to be developmentally disabled. Back then we'd refer to him as retarded. And he wasn't in a sense—she kept him mainstream and she had him in our class. And Bruce would raise his hand and make noises and

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all kinds of stuff—be kind of disruptive but he was there, he was her son, and we still learned. Again it was very unusual way to grow up and go to school.

BP: Where did you go to High School?

MB: I went to Bronx Science. I'm going to explain to you the reason why I wound up going there. The teachers thought I was pretty bright and told my mother about the opportunity to go to a program for gifted and talented, back then it was called intellectually gifted students. And there were two programs in school district 8. There was one in the South Bronx portion where I lived, PS 140, and there was one at PS 138 in the Throgsneck section, Castle Hill section of the school district. My mother investigated both, found out that the PS 140 program wasn't as good as the one in the white part of the school district, and knowing the rules, she said she wanted to send me to PS 138, which required me to take two buses to go to school. As a 10, 11 year old going into the 5th grade. So there I wound up going to school in a white neighborhood but in an IGC class it had black kids, Hispanic kids, Irish, Jewish kids—my first really integrated experience over there.

BP: What neighborhood was that?

MB: That was Castle Hill neighborhood. And eventually they built what we now know as Adele Stevenson High School. I saw that being built as I was going to school there, PS 138. Again it was interesting, my dad called our class a "U.N." My best friend Michael Lee was a Chinese-American. Two other friends—one was Cuban-American, two others were Puerto Rican, five or six African American boys and girls, Irish boys and girls, Jewish kids, we had a class of thirty. I think it was 18 girls and 12 boys. Fifth grade teacher, he knew the students because he was a teacher for the fourth grade IGC so they all moved together to the fifth grade and then it was myself and maybe four other students who were new in the fifth grade class.

BP: How was that adjustment for you?

MB: I couldn't understand why in the summertime why my mom and dad took me to visit a school and learn how to get there, they started telling me about white people and not to be intimidated or be afraid of prejudice or discrimination. I was like, "what are you talking about?" [Laughs] Never did it dawn on me until I got to the school and got to the playground, and I'm walking in trying to find my classes—at a time you would always line up outside during the summer, in September when it's still warm. And I remember Douglas Stone was the first kid to walk up to me and introduce himself, and make an effort to try and make me feel comfortable. And Doug is now an attorney in Washington D.C. I've still pretty much kept track of many of my fifth and sixth grade classmates from that time. One of my best friends, Richard Little—I think his last name was Little, he wound up becoming a marine corps major. Last time I spoke to him or written to him, he was fighting—he was in the First Gulf War. And he wrote me back telling me about his experience and he was a combat engineer and part of the responsibility was trying to clear the burns in Iraq, in Kuwait.

BP: Wow, that's pretty amazing that you kept in touch with your schoolmates from that far back. You must have had a very positive experience at that school.

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MB: It was extremely positive. Our fifth grade teacher, Paul [inaudible] was sort of a leftist and he was very much into current affairs, and every class at the time had to do an assembly program. We decided to do one that was sort of premised on the [inaudible] Skip program, and a number of my classmates wrote skits having to do with the war, and was sort of anti-war, and not necessarily friendly towards President Johnson or Candidate Nixon. And I remember two classes we performed one of our skits; two classes got up and left the auditorium. We got boycotted. [Laughs] It was strange. It was a very interesting and strange experience.

BP: I have questions—this is just such a good interview—because you only have until 2:30.

MB: About that time, I have another group coming in, yes.

BP: Let me jump a bit—

MB: I'm sorry for going on so much.

BP: No, this is what we do. I mean, when we have more time, I have about 10 other questions I've been writing down just as you've been talking. But since our time is limited, perhaps we can schedule something another time, but I do just want to ask a few of the things I've planned for today, which have to do with your work as a public servant.

MB: Okay.

BP: So this is jumping ahead a bit from the 6th grade. You're the assemblyman; you represent one of the poorest districts in the city, if not in the country. How does this challenge what you feel you can do as a public servant, or as an elected official?

MB: The challenge has been actually trying to organize the disorganized. That's the difficult—I sit next to a colleague from Brooklyn who has a lot of yuppies that live in her district, and she gets constant e-mails, letters about issues, and I hardly ever get anything unless somebody is in a Union and they are part of a letter writing campaign. But I try to keep people informed as to what's transpiring. They rewarded me with reelection on three occasions—I'm happy at that, at least my message is getting out. But I do try to keep the leadership class informed. I regularly e-mail pastors and mail them information about what I'm doing in the assembly so therefore they can then inform their congregations about me, if they ask questions. So they are involved. My wife Kennedy is my chief of staff, and she also tries her best to keep senior citizens aware of what we're doing and meeting with people in the district and trying to create programs that introduce people to cultures outside of the dominant black and Hispanic culture in the Bronx, and highlighting other kind of cultural activities, things that exist, to open up the world for the rest of the community. She spearheaded in the last two years a Bronx to Berlin student exchange program, and that was important to us to do that sort of things, to try and open up other worlds that exist, so that our young people and their parents, so they can recognize. Even if you're an immigrant, there is still a world outside of my assembly district. There are things that you can and people that you can interact with.

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BP: Two other questions and then we'll get right to 2:30. There is a lot of discussion, though not really concrete research, on kinds of Bronx democratic politics. The question that I have specifically for you at this particular moment in 2001 as well as since you have been active on the community board and on the Bronx board of elections when you were elected in '03. How would you describe African-American or rather black, West Indian African-American, and even African relations with the Latinos—Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, both either as constituents in the Bronx or more specifically, within Bronx democratic politics?

MB: I would separate constituents, ordinary people, from lets say the political leadership class. Leadership class is constantly jockeying for positions for "power" as an influence—so that they have a dynamic where there is sort of a political rivalry, political competition that exists between blacks and Latinos. The Hispanic population has been growing steadily for a long time—I believe they have—let's see, how many percent black—of the 11 assembly districts, only 3 that have black elected officials. Of the council district, of the 5 I think, only 2 have black council members. And I believe the last Senate black population was around 39, 40 percent of the Bronx population, something like that. Maybe a little higher.

BP: So does it facilitate coalition building between black elected officials and Latinos in the Bronx, or is there more competition? Is that dichotomy even not an appropriate one to use to think about this particular moment in Bronx and black politics in the Bronx?

MB: There have always been a level of competition of trying to do [inaudible] for a community—trying to move ahead. You have had others—there was the white party leaders, Cunningham or Friedman, or the other Friedman, you know using the competition between blacks and Latinos—Puerto Ricans primarily—for their advantage, to gain an advantage. They trade one for the other, that sort of thing, to encourage—in the early days, as they are making political districts for the city council or assembly—blacks and Latinos live in the same neighborhood so you would have, naturally, one [inaudible] candidate and one black candidate. And naturally this competition would occur over and over again. So that would lead to some level of conflict. Then as the Puerto Rican, Latino population began to rise, their numbers gave them more of a dominant position to be able to elect more of their people to office. So that sort of exacerbated things. Right now there are some people who would have preferred if I had made myself a candidate for [inaudible] borough presidency so that they could elect a black borough president. So you have those kinds of things that some people want to see as a way of showing that black people are still in the borough. We still count. We're not a vanishing or a dying breed in the borough. Things, I think, are about to change, because we've had the influx of West Africans into the Bronx.

BP: Yes I was just about to ask you that—

MB: --Whom are becoming politically active. Who have voluntarily shared with me their concerns about black-Latino politics in the Bronx—their feelings somewhat ignored by their Hispanic officials within whose districts they reside and work and wanting to create more of a greater black political presence in their borough. So you have that percolating as well.

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BP: Has the immigrant community from the African continent—have you seen that growing in your district? What institutions or organizations have they built that you've been working with over time?

MB: Primarily they build within—those West African Muslims have built within their mosque. Many of the West African Muslims working with the new [Fellman?] apartments, in pushing issues like Muslim holidays, pushing for things that help to assert their cultural identity. So rather than going out and creating their own organizations at this moment, they're coalescing with other organizations that are sort of serving them. Again, utilizing their mosque as well as an organizing base. As you know, many of the West African mosques are organized around their political country of origin, also around language. Most of the West African speak [Solani?] as unifying language. There are others that speak other dialects of course, but you'll find mosques that are predominantly [Agabian?], predominantly Senegalese, predominantly—what's the other one recently I learned—Ghanean, Malee, etc. And then they will [inaudible] as they come together on issues, so that's beginning to percolate. There's a group that's trying to create a—I guess an African, African-American Muslim group—to bring the two strands of Islam together in the Bronx. So that's occurring on a low-key grassroots level as well. And because I have an interest in that community, they have been helpful and careful and inviting me and making me a part of what their plans are. They know they can turn to me for advice. I've been one of their advocates as well as Aurelia Greene. When I worked for her, I brought the Gambians into her office and got her more involved with the West African committee, [inaudible] council member Foster and her father has been working with their Ghanean community as well.

BP: And one last question, and then we can say our goodbyes. What kind of hopes might you have as an elected official for your future and for your constituents' future?

MB: As a future of—I'm sorry, say it again? I didn't hear the question.

BP: I guess what mark would you like to leave as an elected official, as an assemblyman. What mark would you like to leave on the Bronx? What issues do you think you can most impact in this particular phase of your career in public service?

MB: I've been in it for six years, I don't think I'm able to leave a mark just quite yet. Hopefully around the issues of paying attention to some of the greater issues, not just the you know, just the poverty issues. Right now I'm looking to try and get an additional bank into my assembly district that will serve the Maracena, Clairmont community. Working on things like reentry, since so many of our young people, and adults, are at [crescenders?], and need to have various employment removes, so I've been working on legislation to do that, to work to improve our schools, whether it's introducing and getting support for our charter schools who are also supporting our public schools and improving what they do and bettering their mission. For me, being able to talk about things that are—everyone always assumes that the black community is immediately going to be liberal, or aspire to the liberal-democratic themes. I know my community is not liberal on every issue. We have—we're mostly moderates. Maybe socially conservative in some areas, I want to be able to set that in motion that it's okay for us to not adhere always to the Democratic Party, liberal agenda. A person who wants, who is seen as bringing all communities together whether they're Puerto Rican, Hispanic, West African,

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African-American, African-American-Caribbean—bringing people together and not discriminating on one's ethnic origin but working towards a betterment of the entire community and breaking down barriers. [Crosstalk] I said to my wife, I want to have an Imam do the invocation, and have the benediction done by a Christian minister—I decided to introduce something different all the time, so people understand that it's not just about me being black, it's about what this district looks like. The judge conducted the oath of office, a friend of mine [inaudible] Swarez, a dark-skinned Puerto Rican man. So I started to send those kinds of messages to the people, subtly rather than having to beat them over the heads with it.

BP: It's been a half hour, so thank you very much. This is really an extraordinary interview. We really appreciate it all the different facets of it. In the future, perhaps we can schedule time to do a follow-up

MB: Like I said, if you want, we can try to make it regularly, because I know you have the Project. The reason the phone works better for me is we're in Albany four days a week. We are not going to back in our district two days or so, until the end of April, early May. I want to help with the Project to help move it forward, it's something I'm very much interested in. One thing I wanted to mention to you, I think that there's something significant about the number of black electives out of the Bronx, black elected officials, many of them have Caribbean backgrounds. [Inaudible]'s family is from Bermuda I think, Councilman Foster's mother is from Bermuda. A new leader, Carl Hacey, I think he's from the Bahamas. My family's from the US Virgin Islands. So you have that mix of folks—Gloria Davis' family is from Florida, Larry Sebrick's family is originally from Florida.

BP: So there is the African-American West Indian influence. So perhaps at a future date we can do another interview and talk more about those dynamics, both within your family, within the Bronx elected officials dynamics, and also talk—you raised some really wonderful issues regarding your experience with education and housing. This was very, very helpful, so thank you for your time.

MB: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about these things. I probably have been sticking in my head for a long time, wanting to get them out.

BP: Excellent, so we will do a follow-up in the future.

MB: Okay, so feel free to call and schedule it with my office up here and I will be more than willing to sit down.

BP: Thank you, Assemblyman Benjamin.

MB: Thank you, take care.

BP: Bye.

MB: Bye.