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Bowman, Willie Interview 1

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Brian Purnell (BP): Today is October 26, 2007, in the home of Mrs. Willie E.P. Bowman. Mrs. Bowman, thank you for agreeing to participate in this. If we could please start by you saying and spelling your first and last name?

Willie Bowman (WB): My name is Willie, E is for Ella, P is for Paschal—which is my maiden name—and my married name is Bowman—B.O.W.M.A.N.

BP: And how do you spell Paschal?

WB: Paschal—P.A.S.C.H.A.L.

BP: And Ms. Bowman, Mrs. Bowman, what is your date of birth?

WB: I was born November 30, 1931 in the, I always speak about it as the home of the Civil Rights movement, in Montgomery, Alabama.

BP: I should also mention before you continue that we are also here with Mr. Leroy Archible. No stranger to these recordings, but I just need to make, mention that he is here.

WB: Right. And my mother left Montgomery when I was two years old and came to New York City. And she came to her aunt who lived in Harlem, and in the middle of Harlem she was one of the Glamour Girls from Alabama and was able to start her life as an entrepreneur. She got into business right away. And as a youngster, I was taught how important it was to be involved in your community. And we lived in Harlem on 133rd St. In 1936 my mother moved to the Bronx, 165th St. and Prospect Avenue. That was when she remarried because she and my father separated. My mom and my biological father separated before she left Alabama. And she moved here, she remarried to a Charles Williams, who was from South Carolina. And he was into the service and we moved back to Harlem, and we lived behind my mother's grocery store on 133rd St, just two doors from the Harlem Boys Club—25 West 133rd St. In 1942, when my

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stepfather came out of the, well, before he came out of the service, my mother bought a house on Fulton Avenue—1196 Fulton Avenue—and we moved there and that's when she purchased two more stores. One at 454 Lenox Ave. and one at, I think that was 35 W. 128th St, right near Father Devine's Kingdom. She also bought her first car. It was a black car that was so old that it had a green door on the side of it and leaned to one side [laughter]. One of the most interesting things was one Sunday morning we came out to go to the store because we were traveling from the Bronx back to the store in Harlem, and found that somebody had stolen the car. And we couldn't imagine anybody stealing the car—a black car with a green door that leaned to the side [laughs] of it. My mother reported it to the police and they found it later on that it had run out of gas with whoever had it [Laughter]. And they had dumped it. But in the meantime I was enrolled in St. Aloysius Elementary school there on 132nd St. So I graduated from St. Aloysius Catholic school and also, and then I went on to Cathedral High School. My first year that I was at Cathedral I went to St. Joseph, down in the area of the Village, and then my second year I was transferred to the main building on 51st and Lexington Avenue. And I used to travel everyday from Fulton Ave down to 51st St. and Lexington Ave, by the 3rd Ave El. I'd take the El there 166th St. and transfer at 149th St, and take the Lexington Ave train down to 51st and Lex. In 1949 my—by the way my stepfather was in construction and there wasn't many blacks in construction, so a lot of his Italian friends who were in construction lived in this area and-

BP: In which area?

WB: In the Willaimsbridge, Northeast area.

BP: Right

WB: And my mother had a lot of friends up here too, because we used to, even when we were on Fulton Avenue, we would come up, especially during the holidays when her friends lived on

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223rd St. and we would come up here late at night and go to midnight mass there at Our Lady of Grace. And they didn't have that big church up top. The church was in the basement of it and it was flat! It was in the basement and we used to go to midnight mass there. And then when my stepfather—I call him my father—he met the man who was building this house. The man who was building this house built this house for his wife, but his wife died.

BP: You're talking about 960 E. 218th St?

WB: 960 E. 218th St. So he, my father came here and the man had two sons [Beep], thank you, had two sons [beep]. He said you could bring him the water.

Unidentified Man: I don't have any cold water.

BP: That's okay.

Unidentified Man: You sure?

BP: Yes, thank you very much.

[Crosstalk]

WB: So my father decided when, my mother and father decided they wanted to move up this way. And since the man was willing to sell this house because he no longer needed it since his wife had died, my father decided to buy this house and part of the house was not finished, but since he was in construction he came in and did a lot of the internal work. And we moved up in this area around 1949.

BP: Mrs. Bowman if I could just interrupt right there for a minute, because I do want to ask some other questions going back a bit [crosstalk]. First, your mother, what was her name?

WB: Veola, V-E-O-L-A, because a lot of people get it mixed with Veola, it's Veola.

BP: And she was Veola Paschal?

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WB: She was Veola, no, her maiden name was Lucas. And there was a big Lucas family in Alabama. My, her father, was a, they owned a lot of land down there. I don't know if you want to put this on the tape?

BP: I do if you do.

WB: Well I don't care, because they said to me, I remember on my job someone asked me, "how did your father, how did your family get all that land?" In Alabama because of the Lucas family, they own most of the land in Mt. Meigs, Alabama; this is eight miles outside of Montgomery. Mt. Meigs, Alabama.

BP: That was the name of the town of the County?

WB: Yes. We moved there. And I, of course, how did their family own this white boy down in Alabama? And "I said his wife, his white father gave it to him."

[laughs]

WB: Although my grandmother was, not this one but my grandfather's mother was almost the color of these pants. My grandfather was fairly new, so I made a note. We had always been sort of mixed.

BP: I knew that. [laughter]

WB: Well as you can see, my mother's mother was Indian. And my great-grandmother was full blood. But anyway, sort of digress.

BP: But that show's the Lucas family had land and that was your mother's people.

WB: Right. My biological father, also they had—the Paschal's—had land. And they still have land, because when my father died he left me 150 acres of land, which I still have in Alabama. I just told my son this morning we got to send the tax on it. I refuse to sell it because everybody, all of the people down there sold the land. And I rent it out to a hunting group now, and they've

been trying to get me to sell it. And, but I want to put, eventually, I want to put up a medical facility. My granddaughter's a nurse with her master's. My daughter's a nurse. My granddaughter, my other granddaughter has her master's in sports medicine. The son that lives out here is an accountant. My other son he's in Atlanta, he has a restaurant down there. He's a business man. This one was in nutrition and counseling. So I figured that if they get together they can put up a facility and it would be more mixed, what do I want to say, in memory of the family. Keep it in the family. Like as I've made a commitment, I've got Hugh working on it now, this house will be turned over once I'm deceased, for a domestic violence program. So that's what we're working on. [crosstalk] Hugh's working on that for me.

BP: So part of the stories and the history that we're getting from people is to see how they, their families came to the Bronx. So my next question, now that you've spoken a little bit about the Lucas family, is why did Veola—you're mother—why did she and you come to live in New York? To settle with your aunt, who was already here? How did they leave? Why did they leave?

WB: Well one of the things [laughs] when my mother—now I can only go by what she says because I was very young, my mother was working—doing domestic work—making something like \$3 a week in - -

BP: Outside Montgomery?

WB: Yes, in Montgomery, and—thank you baby—and she wanted a better life. And her aunt lived here in New York. They were living here. They were living over there where all of the 233rd St. on Madison Ave, and then my mother's cousin had a store, wait no; it was a shoe shine parlor. And they used to take those pictures, the kodaks, the pictures in the little machine. So when my mother, came here, she came here to try to better herself, and she moved in my aunt

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and worked with her cousin down there in the shoe shop and being that she was such a pretty woman, I got some beautiful pictures of my mother, because they used to call me the real ugly girl in the way I got it because I had red hair when I was younger. “Where’d Veola got this little ugly girl from?” [laughter] But anyway, she, my cousin I understand, and I have some of those pictures, used to have her taking pictures with some of the celebrities. My mother took pictures with Cab Callaway, with Louis Jordan and all of them because they used to come in the shop, down there on 116th St.

BP: Right. Earlier you mentioned Glamour Girls from Alabama.

WB: Right.

BP: What was that, was that just something that- -

WB: No, you know when my grandmother came up, and I remember one summer my grandmother came to visit us, and my cousin said, “lord thus now, they said you and Veola were the prettiest women in Alabama. Now that you here in New York you the prettiest women in New York.” [laughter] And my mother’s sister was a very beautiful woman.

BP: This brings me, since you’re speaking about your aunt and she owning this shoe shine and photographs—a place that was frequented by people in Harlem—now you mentioned that your mother was an entrepreneur and she opened up grocery stores, it sounds like several of them- -

WB: Yes.

BP: - -where did this kind of entrepreneurial spirit come from?

WB: I think it came from, I really think it came throughout, because my grandmother had a store in Alabama.

BP: Your grandmother had a store in Alabama too?

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WB: Right! And my grandfather had a store. And I don't know, well you can edit things out anywhere on this.

BP: You want me to stop it?

WB: You can. Well, my grandmother, well [crosstalk and laughter]- -

[Unidentified man]: I want her to be able to talk honestly [laughs]. Some of this I know [crosstalk]- -

WB: So that they have always been entrepreneurs whether it was legal or not [laughter].

BP: Right, so it comes from, you have a, there's a larger history of being an, of being in business.

[laughter]

WB: Into business alright.

BP: So your mother opened grocery stores and your father, Mr. Williams—Charles Williams—worked in construction.

WB: Right.

BP: I just want to hear, if you could describe a little bit, what were the, what are the grocery stores like? Now she owned one at 133rd St?

WB: Right.

BP: And then you said she owned one on, no then you moved to 156th and Prospect. What were the stores like? What did she sell?

WB: She sold everything, sold everything. I mean, neighborhood grocery store. What happened is my mother was also one who always believed in helping her community and helping people. There were people who didn't have, I remember one lady whose husband had left her and she had three children. My mother would let her have groceries—because a lot of it was on

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credit by the way—and when this woman joined, not David Grace, what is it they had church.

The one that's down, they had the church finally on 7th Avenue and 124th Street.

Leroy Archible (LA): You mean the storefront up on there- -

WB: He had a church there on 133rd St. between 5th and Lenox. And, as long as the members could pay put money in church it was fine, but then, and this woman used to come to my mother and get groceries on credit. But when she, when they finally opened the welfare case and she started getting some money, then she started going to the other stores. And we had a lot of that—people that end up owing my mother money—but my mother always felt—always felt—that she had to help people out who couldn't help themselves. And I think that's why God blessed her to prosper as well as she did. And she always taught us to give back. And as I said, even when we were at the store on 133rd St. for years before we moved back to the Bronx, we'd give them three rooms behind the store. And my mother's brother came up from Alabama and stayed in the back of the store with us—both of her brothers—and what she did as she bought other stores she put her brothers to run the stores. So she helped out family that way, and when we got to the one where she bought the store on 128th street, she had my Uncle Robert to be in there and she had his wife, and that's when she found out the wife was stealing from her. And sometimes you can trust family and sometimes you can't, but she was able to prosper. Then until she moved to up here, she bought the store up here in the Bronx, but before we were in, we had the stores in Harlem even when we lived on Fulton Avenue. And see I was going to school, back to St. Aloysius then Cathedral, my son, my brother went to St. Augustine's there on 167th street and Fulton Ave.

BP: This brings me to another question I'd like to ask, were you and your siblings and your family were you raised Catholic?

WB: Yes.

BP: When you were, when you attended St. Aloysius in Harlem, that was a predominantly black school, Catholic- -

WB: Yes, and the nuns took me in because, I don't know, I'm, I guess fortunately I was a goodie-goodie child. And they used to call me their Easter child, because Paschal is- -

BP: Right

WB: But I was raised a very strict Catholic. Mass every day, even during the winter, walk to mass every day. And I was Catholic up until, they were, until they just about finished school because they went to Catholic school. He graduated from Our Lady of Grace and St. Helena's High School, and that's when I thought I'd leave the Catholic Church.

BP: Alright, I'm going to ask about that a little bit later when we get up to Williams Bridge. But your father, Charles Williams, you say he worked in construction, and as you said, at the time, there were very few black men who had steady work in construction or could even get jobs in the unions. So- -

WB: Right.

BP: - -Did he have consistent work in construction?

WB: Yes, because he had dump trucks, and he would do construction, he would do demolitions, really. And I remember when he said he would go into these buildings, and when he start, really making—this is when he came out of the service, by the way—and he would go to, he had jobs downtown all over New York. But I remember one day he said he walked into this store, and he was a generous person, so he went in and he saw this beautiful dress, and he wanted to buy it for my mother. And he walked in with his dirty clothes on and things, and the woman looked and him and, “what are you doing in here?” And apparently the owner knew him because he had

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done some work for him, and he says, "Oh, Mr. Williams, how are you?" And he says, "Fine, I want to buy that dress for my wife." And he bought it, and he says that woman was shocked that he could come in a buy that kind of -

BP: Did he own his own his own dump trucks?

WB: Yes he did. And by the way, when he was killed, I drove some of the dump trucks to finish jobs that he had started.

BP: So he basically had his own demolition company.

WB: He owned two dump trucks and he, the back yard, one day when you come and the weather isn't too bad, you can see where he had started building a garage back there for the dump trucks before he died.

BP: Yes. When you moved to 1196 Fulton Ave, your mother had bought a home there in 1942, so I want to ask a few questions about that period. You're about 11 years old, 10 or 11 years old and you move back to the Bronx, what was that area like in the early 1940s? Who lived there and who were your neighbors?

WB: It was a mixed neighborhood at that time. We had, it was said, the, on the outside of the street, right behind the church, was a health station.

LA: The health station's still there.

WB: Yes, and we I'd tell him though, Archie, the milk come that used to come in and bring the milk out there, and the people would come in and buy the milk in the morning. And we were, there was a house there, and we were the second house from the health station. All there was some private houses on that side, but it was apartment buildings on the other side of the street.

LA: They're still there. That's Willie Davidson's piece.

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WB: Right, and of course the hospital was the next block up, but it was a mixed neighborhood at that time.

BP: And were relationships with your neighbors cordial?

WB: Well as far as I know it was because we used to travel back and forth to Harlem most of the time, because we were in school down there—I was in school down there—and my mother's business was down there. So she would travel back and forth there each day to Harlem.

BP: Did as a young girl [ringing in background] up until this point or even before, did you socialize with other young kids, other girls?

WB: Yes, and I was- -

[WB on telephone: Hello? Ok Rowling, give it to Greg because I wont be able to talk to you right now.]

WB: - -I had friends but up until high school I wasn't really around that area too much. In high school though, we used to—I had friends around there, I remember Frankie and some of the others and they had I don't know if you remember the Damerons used to be down there and the movie theatre was on Boston Road- -

LA: Yes, yes.

BP: What is the Damerons?

WB: Yes that was a gang, well corps of fellows, and we were the Oriolettes.

BP: So the Damerons were the boys, and the Oriolettes were- -

WB: Yes, well [laughs] the Oriolettes really was a fan club for the Orioles and I was the president of the Oriolettes.

[laughter]

BP: What did, so these are teenagers?

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WB: Yes, so then, a lot of my friends around that way at that time, but before then most of my friends were in Harlem.

BP: So you mostly, did you, you mostly socialized with other African American children in both Harlem and the Bronx?

WB: Right, and I used to go when—by the way I was cripple as a youngster. And, because in 1940, must be '42 or '43, I was hospitalized at a joint disease hospital, I had surgery on one of my legs. So for a while I was on crutches. [doorbell rings.] And- -Robbie's at the door Greg could you get that please? Greg? Could you get the door?- -so I went to camp from the Harlem Boys Club.

BP: The Harlem Boys Club?

[crosstalk in background]

BP: It was a boys club?

WB: Right, in Harlem [crosstalk in background].

BP: It was called the Harlem Boys Club?

WB: Yes, but anyway- -

BP: Do you mean the choir? The Harlem Boys choir?

WB: No, no, the club.

BP: The club, yes.

WB: So anyway, they sent me to camp, I went to camp Wakiln, and then I went to camp Vanderbilt. Each year they would send me to camp and I have it when you asked about socializing, and I remember when I, one year I went to camp and my mother did my hair before I left because at that time I had beautiful long hair—it all fell out since I've been taking Chemo, but anyway [laughs]—but when I would go, and then my mother had my hair done before I left

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and I knew how to roll it up. So when you go in swimming there were some other, a few black kids in Vanderbilt—camp Vanderbilt—so the other little black kids you know how you're hair's been braided they couldn't fix their hair. It was curly, not nappy [laughter] but I always had my hair looking nice on the, I was young at the time, I must have been about 12 or 13, and so I remember the white kids asked me, "Willie, why is your hair different from theirs?" I said, "because I'm half white and half black." [Laughter]

BP: Did they get the humor?

WB: No, they didn't know anything. [laughter] Thinking back over some of these things you really realize, but, I've always been ornery I've never been very shy. [laughter]

BP: So how was your experience at Cathedral High School?

WB: Well that's a different story. They tried to put me out a couple times. [laughs]

BP: So you went from being at St. Aloysius- -

WB: Which was predominantly, was all black

BP: All black; you went from being a regular student at a—they called you the Easter child.

WB: I went the first year I, most of the kids from St. Aloysius went to All Saints because they tutored you the first two years. I did not go to All Saints, I went to St. Joseph's down in the Village, and it was predominantly white down there. And I remember having a little difficulty with the Latin, because I wasn't interested, and the nuns were, they were ok I mean, down there, but some of the girls were not as friendly. Because it was full. There were so few black girls down at St. Joseph's, but I guess I got them all working pretty well, I didn't think I had too much of a problem.

BP: Does anything stick out in your mind as that represents how they were unfriendly?

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WB: No, because, no not really, but then when I moved to the main building I got involved in a missionary society.

BP: This was at Cathedral now?

WB: We're at Cathedral in the main building. I also had there was one of the, I guess programs you could say, but if you wanted to bring, for Christmas, they had children from the orphanages that you could bring home—the family—you could invite them, and I used to do that. We would bring home some of the children to the Bronx, to our house in the Bronx for Christmas dinner and gifts and everything, but some of the white kids were not as amenable to taking the bright kids. Also I remember we had a program and I brought, I'm hoping that I can pronounce it right, Imosomous Album, it used to be- -

LA: That's the Asian, that's the Chinese and Japanese music

WB: Music, music that she had this unusual music. And I remember I brought the music, the records, to school for the program and one of the white girls said, "We might be stinkies, but we're not inkies!"

BP: [laughs]

WB: Yes, and also I remember that one time my mother came to school, because I had pulled a little trick—I was trying to get out of school and I had called my girlfriend to call and to say I had to come home, but the nuns were listening in. [Laughter] So they called my mother in to talk to the soc. My mother was talking about what high hope she had with, and one of the things my mother and I had discussed was that I wanted to go into medicine. And my mother said she would hope that I would go to Germany to study medicine. And I'll never forget this letter, said to my mother. A sister of Charity, I can picture her now, she said to my mother, "these girls come in with their high ideals, but they weren't meant to be anything but common housewives."

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It crushed me, it really crushed me. And I don't know, there were a lot of things that went on at Cathedral. I know that one time that in our arts class I was doing a picture and I had this, I drew this picture of this girl, black with blond hair. And the nun said to me, "whoever heard of a black girl with blond hair?" I said, "my cousin, she has blond hair and blue eyes." [laughter] No black girl had- -it was things like this that got to me at Cathedral. I graduated out of a class of 830 girls, there were only 31 graduates the year I graduated. And we graduated at St. Patrick's Cathedral.

BP: Wait so out of 831 in the whole school?

WB: In the whole school.

BP: There were 30 in your class?

WB: 31 African Americans.

BP: 31 black. So 831 in your class and 30 black students.

WB: Right.

BP: Right.

WB: So you can see where we were anyway. I'm still friends with some of my classmates. One of my classmates just died this year. She was out of New Mexico, but and then Holly and I we still communicate she's in Florida. But- -

BP: So 1949 you graduated from high school around there right? That's also the same time your family moves up here to Williams Bridge.

WB: Must be in 1950 because Gregory's born in- -

[crosstalk]

WB: 1950

BP: That's when you moved up here?

WB: When I graduated.

BP: That's when you graduated. So when you moved to Williams Bridge with your mother and your father Charles Williams, what was this neighborhood, this area like?

WB: Well- -

BP: In terms of who lived here and even too, what did this area look like in terms of the houses and the streets?

WB: We were here, Greg—Jerome Greg—lived on the corner, his mother was, I didn't know his father but his mother was half, she was half and half—half white. Anyway, she looked more white than she did black. He was a fireman and they were living there.

BP: Was he African American?

WB: Yes, well, he didn't consider himself but he was, yes, he was very fair. [phone ringing] Across the street was all the Taggards. They used to, I know with my father, they used to hang out because they, we had- -[WB on phone: hello? Yes Pauline, nothing too tough, I'm busy right now, alright you going to come by later we have to talk.]

BP: [laughing]

WB: Pauline is crazy but anyway I love her. It was predominantly Italian, but I'm trying to think. There was Jerome on the corner. There was up the street, there was one other, I don't know, yes, I think there was one black family there. They were the only, nobody got, everybody else, now all this was vacant lots. I have a couple of pictures showing, I remember my son, Benjie, used to play out, he'd play out there in day, and he'd come in with these little green snakes, there was snakes out there and everything. And Brooksie lived, there was another mixed couple right behind us, Brooksie was there because those were all, that was vacant lots all over

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there, all down. Then, because there was one house up there, do you see a big red house there?

That was the only one, and then, I don't, don't be putting your hands in my mouth! [laughter]

[Unidentified Man]: You finished or not?

WB: Wait a minute.

[Unidentified Man]: She don't even like cold coffee son.

WB: And all on that side was vacant, because they used to have pigeon coups up, and then they'd let the pigeons out and they'd fly up and around. It was a whole pigeon coup. I remember one, right after he was born, there was some dance I was going to, and my brother in law was going to take me. It was so darn cold—that was when we had cold winters and things—we started down to the subway. The wind was blowing because there wasn't no houses and stuff, but the wind was blowing so bad by the time we got to the Bronx River Avenue we was back to the house. [laughter] It was a lot different up here then.

BP: So it was mostly Italian, and Italian American. You said that you had attended midnight mass sometimes up in this neighborhood because your father knew some people from here, was that church predominantly Italian?

WB: Yes, it was predominantly Italian. They had mass [crosstalk & laughter] that's part of the problems was when he was in school up there they, it was mostly Italians- -

BP: At Our Lady of Grace, it was called?

WB: Yes, when he, when we had them in school, the nun said, "what you trying to do? Give him a school up with your children?" All the nuns were something else. Those nuns were very prejudice. I was so angry with them and I took him out of the school up there his last year, in the eighth grade and sent him to Mount Saint Joseph's up in Newburgh.

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BP: When your family moved here, you're a young woman at this time, recently graduated from high school, what were your relationships like with folks in the community?

WB: Well very good because being that my father was in construction and a lot of these guys were in construction in the- -

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE]

[BEGINNING OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

WB: - -In the back and they had great Harvard's all around here, and they made wine together and they would drink so that they would drink wine. And our kids would play, Gregory played stick ball with the kids out in the street—a lot different from here, from now a days. But we got along much better with them than with these folks.

LA: With the Caribbeans [laughs]

WB: Definitely much better.

BP: So what did you do after you graduated high school? Did you start working immediately?

WB: No I went to college.

BP: Where did you attend school?

WB: Well quite a few. I went to Tuskegee Institute.

BP: So you went back home so to speak.

WB: Yes, my grandfather had graduated from Tuskegee.

BP: Did he?

WB: And my cousin, who was a lieutenant colonel in the air force there in Alabama, came to New York to visit, and she convinced my mother to let me go to school at Tuskegee.

BP: Your cousin was a woman who was an officer in the air force?

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WB: Yes, so she retired as a lieutenant colonel in the air force, but she's the one that convinced my mother for me to go to Tuskegee. And I attended Tuskegee school of nursing and got married—met my husband—got married, started having babies, came back home.

BP: Came back up to here in the Bronx?

WB: Yes, here.

BP: What year did you return?

WB: In '54, because that's when he was born.

BP: So he's the oldest?

WB: Greg, yes, he was born December '54. In the meantime my mother's, she was still here.

BP: Did you continue your education in New York?

WB: Yes.

BP: Where?

WB: Yes, I went to the New School, Fordham University, I even got a health administration certificate from Hostos; I got a master's from Fordham and I got a master's from the New School in social research.

BP: So you worked in the field of nursing?

WB: Yes

BP: That was your professional life for all of your working life?

WB: Well, I worked in nursing for about a year, and unfortunately I chose the wrong area to work. I worked in the cancer hospital, James Ewing, downtown. And to see some of my patients who came in looking healthy, well, and to see them deteriorate, it got to me. So then I decided to go into social work, and from that I went into health administration. So that's when I

retired I was the health administrator with corrections, in the New York City Department of Health.

LA: Can I ask a question?

BP: Sure.

LA: Were you involved with Marshal England at the time?

WB: Yes.

BP: Marshal England, who was that?

WB: Lord, one of the loves of my life, and I say that in terms of—Marshal was a person who was devoted to the betterment of mankind and strictly in the field of health and education.

BP: His name was Marshal England?

WB: Marshal England. I still get from the North Star Program that he was involved in.

BP: Was he in the Bronx?

WB: Yes, [crosstalk] Marshal was, he was an advocate for his people, for humanity, not just blacks, but strictly in the field of health. And I always think of Marshal also in conjunction with Arthur Eves. These are two people, two men that I think so much of—two standup people. So, yes, I was very much involved with Marshal.

BP: So this could be a good time, speaking about your professional work, first in social work, health administration, you're living in the Bronx up here on 218th Street, you're married, having children, when did you begin to get involved in community activism or community work?

WB: I guess, if that said I started from the time I was at Cathedral—working, doing missionary work and stuff. And when I came here, my children were in Our Lady of Grace, I volunteered, I worked at Spofford Juvenile Center, and I decided to, you know what there's a period in between there, that I wasn't here in the Bronx. There was some family still remained in the Bronx, but

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when I got married my husband was from, well he was originally from South Carolina but he had moved to Washington, D.C. so after I, after my, after Gregory was born and we started, I decided I would go and try to make a home with my husband in D.C. So I moved to Washington D. C. and there I worked at Children Village, and there I started doing a lot of community work. Work with the Catholic Church and there. And then when my husband and I, when I decided that I was lonely for my family, I moved back, I left my husband and came back to New York. And I got a job at Spofford Juvenile Center, and I started working nights so I could be with my children [honking in background] during the day and to participate in their schools, so that I would work during the day and night. And during the day I would volunteer at the school—I was a class mother—and I was the first female and African American to call Bingo up there at Our Lady of Grace. It was all of them Irish and Italians up there. So I started working Bingo and calling Bingo, I was the first one.

BP: Right, and was it—I have a few questions—so you started working at Spofford in I guess the mid 1950s?

WB: I started- -

BP: It was when you come back to the Bronx in 1954?

WB: Right, I started working Spofford, when did I start working? I was there for 20 years.

BP: That's when you said you retired from doing health administration in corrections that's where you were?

WB: No.

BP: You moved on from something else?

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WB: Right, I went to, when I left Spofford I went to Riker's Island. And from Riker's Island I went to the Bronx House of Detention, I went to Brooklyn House of Detention then I went through the main office and I retired from the Bronx House of Detention.

BP: What was, so Spofford was your first work in a correctional facility?

WB: Right.

BP: What type of work did you do and- -

WB: Well I started as a counselor and then I became a senior counselor, I became the head of the night, I became the head of the night unit, the head administrator on night. Then I went on to become, I'm trying to think, I became unit director- -

BP: This was all at Spofford?

WB: At Spofford. Then I became director of staff development and training, I opened their first staff development and training unit. And then I came back as assistant to the executive director at Spofford—I came back from the main office—and then I became director of operations, which was over all the educational, recreational, and house, the counselors.

BP: Did your work, were you in contact with any of the young—it's all boys, right?

WB: No, no, it had girls and boys. I was injured a couple of times. [laughs]

BP: Well I didn't mean, when I say direct contact I didn't mean, I didn't only mean that, though.

WB: No, but I'm saying I did counseling with it, and if there was a problem of course many times they'd have to be brought to my office and I'd work with the kids.

BP: So what were the kids like in the '50s who went to Spofford? I mean, what were they?

WB: We had some of the worst kids in New York. We had one young, one boy they brought in who had tunneled from one apartment to another and killed a couple of seniors. We had a lot of people. But you know what we found too, that it was mostly us. It wasn't, if there was a Jewish

kid that was brought in the night before, believe me, before the midday the next day they had him out of there. Whatever organization, Jewish organization, they had those kids out of there. If there was an Asian kid, they weren't in there very long, you can believe this. There was groups or organizations that got those kids out of there. So you had a few white kids who stayed in there, these were- -

LA: No connection kids we called them.

WB: Right, but most of them were African American kids. And we had kids who were in there for homicide, we had kids who were incorrigible, we had kids in there who were there for robbery. We had kids from- -it was only later when they had this juvenile offenders where these were kids, PINS—persons in needs of supervision—and then they had, they took them in places like, what's the? We had a couple of facilities. There was Zurega, there was Manida, I was at Manida.

LA: Yes, I worked at one too. Bronx mental health thing over here, I worked at that one for a while. And our relationship was I was with the LTT unit—the Long Term Treatment Unit—of the New York State Division of Youth.

WB: Yes, so that, we had some children who were not, really did not need to be secure in a facility, in a secure facility. And those kids were, of course, usually put; we tried to move them out. But we had some children who were really out of whack, I'll put it. Some were emotionally disturbed, and yet there were children we had, I remember one incident where the girl came in and wanted to come back. She had been discharged from court that day. And we could not take her up, take her back in, because she had, we were you know, only unless she had been arrested. She broke the windows out in the rotunda, because there was a rotunda on the side, she broke the

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windows out in the rotunda so she could be rearrested to come back in. And so you know what it must have been like for her on the outside if she was that desperate to get back in.

BP: Well what was it like on the inside for young people at Spofford?

WB: Well, you know what, I can only speak from the time I was there.

BP: Right so this is about the mid 1950s, for 20 years you worked there.

WB: I felt that, no, it was '60. I went there in '62.

BP: That's when you started? So from- -

WB: I'm trying to remember from my kids now. [Laughter] Dora's born in '64, must have been '64. I always looked at those children as being, could be my children. And I worked with my staff in the way that I wanted them to treat my child. But I remember when I first, I started at Manida, Manida was the girls facility, on Manida Avenue, and then- -

BP: How do you spell that?

WB: M-A-N-I-D-A.

BP: M-A-N-I-D-A.

WB: Right, Manida was the girls' facility. Around the corner was Spofford, the big facility.

LA: Where's the men's room?

WB: Just go right in that hallway there. Turn right, turn the light on right there, then there's a string over the top, you'll see the chain when you get inside.

LA: Right.

WB: And there was Manida, Veriga, and Spofford. Veriga Avenue Facility, it was boys, those kids did not need quite the secure facility, security that Spofford had. And I was at Manida and I remember the girls trying to break out, and I remember one day I had taken my daughter with me. I hadn't gone to work but I had gone by there to pick up my check, and when we got in,

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right after we got in the building the girls broke out, some of the girls broke out. And my daughter, being that she, they didn't know her, they locked all the doors and she was in the room with some of the girls who was, had been inmates there. And she heard them talk about what they were doing and where they had gone. So when we, after it was all over, she mentioned, she told me and I was able to tell some of the people [ringing in background] and they picked the girls up. But anyway they would, some of the girls were pretty rough. And I remember when I, by the way when I first started at Spofford I was a size nine, a little small girl. And I was working, and by the way I had been working with the Peola Divore, of Ofigy Divores who was the modeling agency, and- -

BP: What was the name of the agency; it was, the name- -?

WB: Ofigy and Divore

BP: Devoy

WB: Devoy

BP: D-E-V-O-Y

LA: That was one of the big top modeling agencies.

WB: R-E

BP: D-E-V-O-R-E

WB: Right. And that, so I was this cute little thing, thought I was something to, anyway, but when I got there, these big old girls, and they were bad- -

BP: The young people who were- -

WB: Inmates! [crosstalk] Well, the residents in care. So I remember this big girl, first they hang out on the floor, they had visiting. And this girl was, she was so nasty to her mother, she cursed her mother out, and so of course I said, "oh my lord!" I'm getting nervous now.

[crosstalk and laughter] Yes, this big old- - So I said, “What am I’m going to do here with these girls?” Well, I start working with them and every time I turn around, I walk in the place; they would take over the dorm. So one day though I went to work and there was the girl, Ms. Green, who worked with me. Young woman, well we were all young, but she was a little younger, and the girls said, had cursed her out, and told her, “F you Ms. Green,” they used the word. I don’t know, I guess the Catholic upbringing, I got so mad I had my keys, because you had the keys, I walked that floor I said, “every one of you sit down!” I walked that floor I said, “I will F you but you won’t get your kicks behind it.” [Laughter] I raised so much hell there I shocked myself. The girls got scared, they all ran and sat on their bed, and honey I had no more trouble. The next day I walked in the door all the counselors, some of the counselors because I was working evenings, and the day counselors said, “Girl, we didn’t know you used to work at the House of D.” [Laughter] Look, I said, “I didn’t either.” [Laughter] But it, I don’t know, it just upset me to hear [crosstalk] right, the kids being that disrespectful. From that day on, I walked their dorm those kids were scared of me. They thought I was the baddest thing [crosstalk and laughter] and do you know I was injured a couple of times. Only by, because I got involved, but- -

LA: Doing restraining?

WB: Well in restraining, and then one time when I had a massive, they had a massive breakout. The girl gave me a karate chop, one walked up behind me and gave me a karate chop, but I didn’t know I was injured until later because there was a group of them and they had put a sheet out the window—climbing out the window. And I stopped them, and I got a broom handle, a mop handle, and I start whaling it because they were all coming at me. And the girls said, “Put that stick down and fight fair.” I said, “Hell, there’s five of y’all against me and this stick I aint doing to drop it.” [Laughter] “It’s as fair as it going to be today.”

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BP: In your work as a counselor and as a social worker, 20 years is a, just at that one facility- -

WB: That one facility and another what, 12 years before I retired.

BP: It sounds like clearly there were some, a lot of instances that stick out in your mind for I guess, I don't want to, for negative reasons. Do any stick out in your mind working with young folks- -

WB: Yes.

BP: - -Anybody come back and ever say, "Mrs. Bowman"- -

WB: Let me tell you, this, the young lady I told you that cursed her mother out that first day? She became so close to me, and her mother came to me one day she said, "I don't know what you did to my daughter, but she's a changed person." And later on that same girl came back to me after she had left and had her own child and thanked me. And believe me, when I moved to Rikers, I met some of the fellows that I had been with at Spofford. I remember one boy that I met in the hallway at Rikers and he said, "Mrs. Bowman, we done moved from the little house to the big house." [laughter] But he later too came back and thanked me. And there were, there're a lot of them who've over the years have come back to me. Also one fellow at the Bronx House of Detention, this was after I, some years later, because I used to hold sessions and I also participated in the Scared Straight program and- -

BP: This was at the Bronx House?

WB: - -The Bronx House.

BP: Bronx House of Detention. And where was that or is that? Is it still the same place?

LA: It's still there.

WB: Well you know they haven't torn down the Bronx House they just tore it down this year.

[crosstalk]

WB: With they're near corrections, over there by Yankee Stadium.

BP: By the courthouses.

WB: Right, yes. Now there was a young man, there were a lot of guys used to come because I'd bring them in my office. I always had good relationships because they would, when I walked down the hall the correction officers didn't show respect the inmates would tell them in a minute, "Don't you see Mrs. Bowman walking down the hall?" Because I tried to treat everybody like I would want to be treated, or I want you to treat my children. So fellows used to come and talk to me about their problems. If they had family problems I'd, there was, I don't want to call names, but there was a well known minister who's son who was in there and who had problems, and I helped to get him into a treatment program. And he thanks me until today. But there was, fellows used to come and talk to me, some would tell me they were innocent. Everybody's innocent, it was good. But there was a young man, who I, I was really concerned. Robert Johnson came and because I used to bring different speakers in, and I brought Robert Johnson in to speak to the inmates. And I introduced this fellow to Rob, and I said, "Rob, I believe, I really believe he's innocent." Robert Johnson [phone ringing] went back, reopened the case and investigated. A couple of weeks later the young man met me outside of the jail as I was going in that morning. He said, "Mr. Johnson investigated and found out that I was innocent and had me released." And that's why I know Robert Johnson is a standup guy and I will support him right, because he didn't just take my word, and he just didn't take the fellows', but he gave him a chance. He investigated and found out the fellow was innocent. So these are things that I do feel good about. And I also started doing the voters registration in jail with the inmates, because as long as you're not a convicted felon, you have a right to vote. And once you've been cleared and did your time, you have a right to vote. So I started doing the voters registration and also there

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were guys who were registered at their own home address who were still eligible to vote, and I started doing the absentee ballots in jail, so that the guys would fill out the absentee ballots, I got them to the board of elections, let them vote on their absentee ballots, got them back. And they voted.

BP: You know I do want, there's one question that I do have, is, and then I, perhaps we could go slow, well, I want to end today leading into community and political involvement. Just beginning with it not- -but I'm just curious, there's a lot of time, so, your background and educational experience is quite a contrast to [crosstalk and laughter] where you worked. Catholic school background, missionary work, etc. and being very effective with some people who others had probably written off or were afraid of, so I'm very curious to hear from you. What were some, what do you think some of the things were that you learned working at Spofford, right? Or what were some of the things that, because there's book smarts, there's street smarts, and then there's I'm sure a whole other type of smarts that you pick up from, from Spofford.

WB: I don't know. I guess one of the things that I've learned that we're no, none of us are different.

LA: We're all human beings.

WB: That's right, and whatever and we all yearn to have someone who takes an interest in us. You can call it love, you can have, you can call it concern, you can have I guess empathy, whatever you want to use. We all need somebody to take an interest in us, and I don't know, I've found that most of the people I had dealt with, whether they were the juveniles at Spofford or the adult inmates at Rikers and at the Bronx House or wherever, that most of them respond to your interest or kindness or whatever way you want to put it. I rarely and I don't recall a time

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feeling threatened walking down the halls in jail. I've felt safer in jail than I do out on the street.

I trusted more the inmates than I did some of the correctional officers. Not because I felt that the correctional officers would harm me or do anything else, it's just that some of the things I did, I saw them do to the inmates bothered me. Because I said, "there goes my child except for the grace of God." And as I said, I have known the time when these guys, the inmates, have sought to protect me against, if something's going to break out or something happens. And if they hear somebody cursing, they'll, "don't you see Mrs. Bowman walking down the hallway?" Because I showed them respect and people usually respond. And if you respect them they'll respect you. And I didn't see myself cursing at anybody. I didn't think I was too good if one of them needed me to go in to see a doctor. I was the, I worked the clinic. I tried to get doctors who would respond to their needs because I was in charge of medical service there at the Bronx House. I tried to make sure that we would have clinics open at different times in the evenings. I know that I would go there after, I've spent the night, many nights there myself. I'd go back to check out, to make sure, I didn't take a report, just a report—a written or verbal report—I would go and check things out for myself. I remember one inmate said to me, "Mrs., please, that doctor fell asleep with the needle in my arm." One of the things, the man was working two or three jobs and he was sleeping on the job half of the time. He was also using needles, more than, on more than one inmate the same needle. And when I checked it out and found out that, I wrote him up. These are things that we have to look at as not so outstanding, it was part of my job. And, but I felt that it was part of my job and that I should take it seriously. I was entrusted to do the job and I took it seriously.

BP: Could we schedule another time to continue this conversation because I do want to talk about politics and it will, maybe perhaps one question on that. It sounds like you're working at

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night. It's pretty incredible that you go from working at night at a, at Spofford or a place like Spofford, the women's, the young girls, and then you go to calling bingo at the church.

[Laughter] That's kind of what we're talking about right? Because at night you're doing your job and in the day you're taking care of your family, and taking care of your family has involved, makes you get involved in the things that your family is doing I would think. With your children, you're always at the school. So how did you go to your involvement with your children's school—being a class mother and being involved in their life at school—to other types of community involvement? And then eventually political involvement was it, how did you, where did you go after helping out and volunteering at the school?

WB: Well, I volunteered at school and I guess I was always a joiner because I had joined the NAACP when I was in college, and I did some outreach work at college with the NAACP.

BP: This was in, at Tuskegee?

WB: At Tuskegee. And then I, while I was in D.C. I was with, I joined the National Council of Negro Women and I used to put on fashion shows for the national council there in Washington. I had, I probably got some of those pictures too. I had him modeling and my daughter all in modeling doing, when they were little. Doing fashion shows to raise money for the National Council of Negro Women. So I've always been doing a little something here and there.

BP: This might seem self evident, but I want to just ask it to get on record, I see the connection, but why did you join these organizations?

WB: I don't know I guess because I just see the needs to being involved and give back and also if you can't expect to get nothing if you don't give nothing. How can I expect the community to protect my quality of life if I don't support it, if I don't be out there and do something to insure it?

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BP: You want me to turn it off?

LA: When I came out of the military that's where most everybody was, in the '60s. So then they slowly migrated up here, meaning the Coop City Housing.

BP: Based on the information that you've been sharing—you're working, you're volunteering with your children, you have been involved with the NAACP and the NCNW, at one point you mentioned you were doing voter registration with your, with the residents where you were working—what would you say in your memory, what was the kind of the first organization or the first moment when you kind of became active in the public and active in the community in a different way? Was it a particular election or was it, did you become involved in one specific organization and you spent a lot of time with that group or -? How would you, if you had to say, if someone said, "Mrs. Bowman, when did you start your political activity in the Bronx?" What would you say?

WB: When I start politically, I remember one day that I was walking, no, even before then. George Sands, Walter Wiggins, Clarence Edwards—Clarence is in Brooklyn now but he—Clarence Edwards, what's his name, anyway the whole, Henry, what's his name, and Joan Jackson all of us- -

BP: Joan Jackson?

WB: Jackson, all would get together and started the Independent Voters Club, up on 233rd.

BP: That's up here in Williams Bridge.

WB: Right. And we used to do, and that was when mostly the white folks controlled all the politics in the clubs up here. And I will never forget when the, all of them—Ruth Caster, you know her husband just died, yes Jimmy died about three weeks ago.

BP: Ruth Caster?

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WB: Yes, she's in Florida now but she brought his body back up here to tomb up at McCall.

Ruth Caster and all of them belonged to the democratic club up there. And I remember they were saying that they went to a meeting [phone ringing] and the white folks got, was discussing, had a discussion and locked the black folks out. And George and them decided that we would organize our own club.

BP: So the political club around here which was all white did not allow black members?

WB: Well they had black members, but for this particular meeting they locked the black folks out.

BP: What was the name of that club?

WB: You know what I can't think right now but it was, and I can get it for you, but they were right there. They met upstairs on 233rd, you know where Chase Bank is?

BP: Yes.

WB: That building right there down from the fire department they met upstairs there.

BP: This is on White Plains Road?

WB: No, 233rd before you get to White Plains. [crosstalk] But anyway I can get, and so George—and by the way I had some, I think I hope I can find those old pictures of us when we were, we used to, when we gave our first fundraiser and that's when some of the white politicians and all of them came—but we decided to open our own club.

BP: The Independent Voters Club?

WB: Right, and it was in the storefront there on 233rd right off of Bronx wood Avenue.

BP: What year was this?

WB: That was back in, must be around '70.

LA: That was probably when Larry was jumping out.

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WB: Yes that was a, that was because I ran with Larry back in '82.

BP: This is Larry Seagram?

WB: Yes, must be around 1970 something. I'm sure I have the records around here somewhere.

BP: This could, this is a really place where we could pause and we come back we jump right into the Independent Voters Club and what that was and if both y'all don't mind, I would, I think for the oral history, I'm just going to ask some questions the next time like, "who was George Sands?" And you could share what you think. Because he's somebody that does come up a lot, and so since he has passed on, I think it's important that those who worked with him and knew him preserve some history about him, even if it's just from your memories. But that's a good place where you come back; if it's all right with you we could come back and start right at the Independent Voters Club.

WB: Yes.

[END OF TAPE; END OF INTERVIEW]