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Bowman, Willie Interview 2

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Interviewee: Willie E. P. Bowman

Interviewer: Dr. Brian Purnell

Date: 2 November 2007

Dr. Brian Purnell (DP): Today is November 2, 2007, this is the second interview with Mrs. Willie E. P. Bowman in her home at 960 E. 218th St. in the Bronx. Thank you again Mrs. Bowman for agreeing to participate. In our last conversation, we left off with you beginning to tell us about the Independent Voters Club and your political organizing work. I do want to step back a bit and ask you just a question or two about this neighborhood of the Northeast Bronx. You spoke about when you and your husband moved up here in the early '50s, that- -

Willie Bowman (WB): No, no, no, me and my mother and family.

BP: That's right your family moved here in 1954 and then you, no I'm getting it mixed up with something else I'm sorry. But you're, what I wanted to ask about was that you mentioned that your family, your father had good relationships with his neighbors because he had worked in construction, even though it was a predominantly white area, predominantly Italian American area. But you mentioned that it was when your children went to school that you first kind of came in contact with some resentment from residents?

WB: It was not so much residents but I found that some of the nuns were racist or prejudice or what have you to the point that when my oldest son was in the 8th grade, went into the 8th grade, I took him out of Our of Grace and sent him to Mount St. Joseph Military Academy—semi-military academy—upstate in Newburgh. And I remember the nuns saying to me that if, I can't remember the exact words but it was not very complimentary. And I, he wasn't doing well as he should, he was, his grades were fair, but when I sent him up there in less than a year he went from a mediocre level to getting one of the highest scores in the state in math. So that I know a lot of it was the lack of maybe attention or the feeling that he was not acceptable as well as some of the other children. At that time most of the kids in the school were white, and all of the nuns

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of course. Also, I remember my daughter—she was very heavy and dark—and the nun was using her to help control the kids in the class—would leave her monitor and the kids were, and she would report and the kids were afraid of her and that type of thing. And I remember one time that they were playing in the schoolyard and one of the girls she got in a fight with one of the girls—one of the white girls—and the nun came over and slapped her. And Anetta responded and slapped her back, so the nun, well they sent for me, and she says, “Oh Mrs. Bowman, she hurt, it hurt!” I said, “Well don’t you think you hurt her, slapping her? And especially when you slapped her because she had gotten in a fight with another child, did you discipline the other child?” Instead of slapping her they should have been properly disciplined, both of them. Also one time when Greg was talking, I understand he was talking and the nun walked up behind him, and she explained that she went to hit him, she was going to him in the back of his head, and he turned around just as she got there and her ring hit his glasses and broke his glasses on his face. And the only thing she did was send him to the bathroom to wash it, wash the glass out of his eye, get out of his face. And he was afraid to tell me when he got home because he had been talking and he knew he had been told he wasn’t supposed to talk in school. But one of his friends came and said, “Mrs. Bowman do you know what happened to Greg? His glasses got broken.” This was just before he got a chance to tell me. So I went up to the school the next day to see the nun and ask her first of all, “why didn’t you call me? Why didn’t you report it to me?” And she said, “Well I figured he would tell you and that he was misbehaving in school.” I said, “That does not, as far as I’m concerned that doesn’t leave you because it’s your responsibility to have called me and notified me because also the glass could have gone in his eyes.” But these are the little things as far as the community, the school, and unfortunately it sort of changed my whole attitude toward the Catholic Church, which I was a very devout Catholic.

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As I said when I was growing up I was doing daily mass and head of the missionary society at my school. It was just, it sort of changed things. As far as the community is concerned most of the members at the church and at the school accepted me, I was a pious mother. I was one of the first women to call bingo there because we had bingo. And it was all men, all Italian men up there [laughs] and we had a few other Irish people in the neighborhood [phone rings]. Turn the thing down.

BP: [Laughs]

WB: So- -

BP: You were saying?

WB: But, as I said, most of the people at the school were congenial. I had, I was accepted. There were a few people that I knew from, there was one Loveen we had gone to, her husband had gone to grammar school with me at St. Aloysius, they were up here now. And her children were in the school, there were a few other African American families and we did very well. As far as this neighborhood was concerned, as I mentioned there were the Gray's here on the corner, Jerome and his mother, and mailman moved over there a little later. These were all vacant lots out here. And there was, up the street I'm trying to think of the name of that family, but there was only one or two, maybe one with Jerome, two African American families right in this area. Behind us there was Brooksie, Mrs. Brookes and her family over there. And all those were vacant lots even behind and next to Brooksie.

BP: When, in the early '50s or even in the mid '50s, were there people from the Caribbean in this neighborhood?

WB: Yes! Down the street the Regman's, they were very close friends with my mother and they were from Jamaica. And we, I know that, we used to talk about on Regman's passport from

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Jamaica she's listed as white, but she was, I guess might have been a little lighter than I am, but she and my mother was about the same complexion. But her husband was dark, and but I understand years later that he had taken the name Redman—that was her name—that he had another name. He was a little short black guy. But they were from Jamaica and they were living up here. My godmother also was from Jamaica. She lived over on the other street—on 217th St. Now I know I'll be 76 at the end of the month, but I hope I'm not getting completely senile [laughs].

BP: No, please, no.

WB: I'm trying to think of, yes, my godmother lived over on 217th St. and she was from the island.

BP: I guess instead, if you could remember specific things that's great, but I'm more curious to just try to get a feel as to what this neighborhood- -

WB: Well what it was, those people who were, it was like a family. Especially certain, everything, well I went to my mother and father mostly, even after I got married. They were, if they went to an outing it was, we all went together as a family. Dances, it was a family affair. My, we had the big backyard with the big barbeque pit there, the barbeque pit. So everybody came if we, if there was a holiday and they had to barbeque all of the people here in the neighborhood came here. Christmas maybe we went over to, oh! Come on! Well we'd go to another house, and the same thing with the Redman's. And I, and people didn't do, it wasn't that individual thing. It's always was like, people were closer, friendlier in the neighborhood.

BP: When people would come over to your home for a barbeque or you would go somewhere for Christmas holiday, would it be all black people hanging out, socializing together? Or would there be white neighbors socializing?

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WB: Most of the blacks were together and most of, you know you had some mixed but it wasn't this many.

BP: Right, and your children, when your children attended Our Lady of Grace, they were, were they friendly with- -

WB: Yes, they had, there friends were it was always a mix.

BP: Right

WB: They got along very well with the other kids. Kids they still, sometimes now they still friends with kids that were across the street that they used to play with out in the street. So they were, they were all- -

BP: So it was really just the nuns.

WB: Yes.

BP: If you don't, if you could, as somebody who grew up so much a part of the Catholic Church, you said that this really had a powerful impact on you.

WB: Yes it had an impact on my religious, not just beliefs because I don't think anything changes that, but my participation [beeping in background]. Now I, as my sons say I've been in every denomination there is, because when I left the Catholic Church I became a Muslim.

BP: Now this was around the time of, your son was in about the 8th grade, 7th or 8th grade?

WB: No, no, it was some years later. No I continued to go to church and I continued to participate in the Catholic Church but I wasn't as close. And it might have been what made an impact on me when I happened to be, go downtown and stopped at a bookstore and I met this young man who I had worked with at Spofford. And he said, "Mrs. Bowman"- -

BP: Was he a coworker? Or was he a resident?

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WB: He had been a coworker, and he said, "Mrs. Bowman," he says, "Come out Sunday, the minister going to have a message for you." I said, "What?" So he invited me to the Mosque number 7, that's on 116th St. and I said, "The minister has a message for me?" So I happened to mention to Greg who was a teenager at the time- -

BP: What year was he born?

WB: 1954, so he said, I told him about this invitation and that this minister was minister Farrakhan. So I said, he said, "Oh Minister Farrakhan!" And he got excited about it. And so I mentioned to my mother who said, "Oh no no no don't you go there, those people." So anyway I dressed up that Sunday, put my hair, tied my hair up and everything, and snuck in. I told her sneaking in because I didn't want nobody see me go in. And I was very impressed with his message. And eventually decided to join in the, I made Hodge but that's jumping ahead. But anyway I'll show you the, I don't know how old, I really didn't feel isolated, except I guess that it wasn't that many people up here anyways, so [laughs] no more isolated and we were all a very close family, and the friends were pretty close.

BP: So later on when you were starting to, [phone rings] sorry, excuse me one second. When you and others attempted to participate in the local political club and you were turned away and you started the Independent Voters Club- -

WB: Prior to that I was not that much involved in politics. I've always been an activist as far as the community, doing things, but prior to that I was not that much involved politically.

BP: What made you want to go to this local political club meeting that day?

WB: You mean when everybody was turned away?

BP: Yes

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WB: I didn't go. I wasn't involved in that. There were others like Ruth Caster, Walter Williams and some of the others, but I was not a part of that group. How I really got more involved was through George Sands.

BP: Right. So perhaps two questions then before we continue, your parents were they, did they participate in political clubs or were they politically active in any way?

WB: No, not, my biological father was active, but he was not here in New York.

BP: He was in the South.

WB: Right, but my mother, my mother was a hard working woman who was more interested in making money [laughs].

BP: Right. Did your parents ever talk about Marcus Garvey or any type of black political organization of any kind growing up? Or was it just the church, the store, the family and that was it?

WB: Basically that was it. My mother as I said was more interested in making money. My stepfather was, who I call my father who I grew up with basically, was not a well educated man. When I say that he was not ignorant he was more street wise, I guess not, using the word street wise is not the correct way, but he was a man who was self-educated. He didn't have a lot of book knowledge, hold a conversation with anyone as I said and he knew how to make money. But as far as—and pushed us in terms of getting an education—but as far as being involved even in black movement or any type of political movement, no, I did not get most of my inspiration or my activities from them.

BP: So George Sands was an influence?

WB: Yes I think he was the catalyst to which, well I, not all together because even when I was in D.C. I was involved, I got involved there. But- -

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BP: Right, you said you had gotten involved in the National Negro- -

WB: Yes

BP: - -The National Council of Negro Women.

WB: Right, and I've always been one who joined any type of movement.

BP: Right, and the NAACP. So maybe we could start with your involvement in the Bronx. It seems like Mr. Sands was a catalyst you said.

WB: Yes

BP: Could you spend a little bit of time, who was George Sands? How would you describe him to people who didn't know him? His personality, his appearance, his, how you met him.

WB: To tell you the truth I don't even remember how I met George. George Sands was a tall, lanky, African American who could have been of a mixed ethnic background, who had it looked like a lot of ax to grind—especially with Caucasians. Sometimes he could be very hostile, sometimes he could be charming. But he was a man of conviction. Whatever he believed in he worked towards. George over the years fought many battles, especially when it came to the, for the betterment of the community, for our race. He was, he's been out there with the best. We used to go to Brooklyn, I guess I got started following him along with Marshal England who was a man I idolized at times [laughs] but George was out there. He introduced me to a lot of people, such as Sony Carlson, these are the people he was more alike, Elombe Brath, and- -

BP: Harumbe?

WB: I mean Elombe Brath.

BP: Elombe Brath, right.

WB: Along with him and Reverend Dortree, all of us worked very closely together on the, when we gave a black summit in Brooklyn, and we brought Arthur Eve down from Albany to speak.

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BP: Do remember what year was this; I guess this is in the '60s?

WB: This was, no, I think late '70s. But George was the type of person as I said, he would go to any level, to, not only to further what, the movement he believed in or to protect anything or anyone he believed in. He didn't back down for anybody, but he also learned to work with all races to get what he wanted too. So that when I met George, I'm trying to think how did I meet George? I don't know whether he came into my mother's store or - -

BP: Was he from the Bronx?

WB: Yes he lived in the neighborhood. He lived over on, Douck - -

BP: Bout?

WB: D-O-U-C-K

BP: Right

WB: And I remember the day that he first asked me would I run for office. I was going in to vote there at 121 there on 225th St. I had parked the car and was going into the poling site. And he said, "How would you like to run for the city council?" I said, "Why not?!" [Laughter]

BP: Do you remember now was this in the late '70s as well?

WB: No that was in, around 1980. So I said, "why not?" Never ran for office before never even thought about it, but at that time in talking to George he said, "Jerry Chris Feeny isn't doing anything, nobody in Harlem even know who he is." So we decided why not, let's go for it. But we had been, that was way after we had formed the Independent Voters Club. Bill Hamilton lived on 225th St, Walter Wiggins was right there on Carpenter and 219th, Clarence Edwards, Clarence Edwards and what's this other guy I'm trying to think of? Henry, what's Henry's name? I have it right before my eyes. Anyway, and Mrs. Pointer, and a couple other people

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decided we're not accepted in the regular democratic party and they felt, and George did, that we need our own party.

BP: Was this in the 1960s or?

WB: Well in the, I guess it was in the '60s. I'm trying to think of when we started and I, I'm sure I have this stuff around here somewhere. Parline might remember more than I. We got the club together and then they started looking for a place and we were able to rent a storefront. A store up there on 233rd St, right down the street from where the other democratic club had been, and we even set it up where we could have meetings in the front. We set up a bar and, to try to raise the money for the rent and there were times we had to come out of our own pockets for the rent, because trying to get our people together for any movement we'll buy everything you want other than, more than we'll buy freedom. [laughs] But anyway we got together; they convinced me to come join the club.

BP: But you hadn't, you had known George Sands before this?

WB: Yes, and I'm trying to think I know that Bill Hamilton used to, well he was right around the corner and his brother became the pharmacist right there near my mother's store. So some of these people I knew from just the neighborhood.

BP: Right

WB: And I'm just trying to think, they should be able to tell you more than I can- -

BP: Well it's okay, I'm- -

WB: As I have it come back to me.

BP: Just a little bit more about George Sands. So it sounded like he was a charismatic leader of sorts and he was connected with other people around the city?

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WB: Yes, George was the type of person that people, how should I put it, you could easily hate George as well as like him.

BP: [Laughs] well what were some of the things that he advocated for?

WB: [Laughs] black power—having your own say, building your own bank. We fought very hard to get a credit union through the NAACP. He was, he worked very hard to try to get a credit union in the NAACP, because he felt the banks were redlining against us, that the community, that they were not being fair to the community. And he felt that we would have more control over our money, our own destiny in terms of loans, etc. So he worked very hard for that. Unfortunately we were not able to get the credit union through like we wanted to. We were talking about that at a meeting not so long ago how George had worked so hard for that. He also was with the, with Al Tueth in the, with the Black Concerned Citizens, IPI. And he put out, and for a long time he put out a news, a neighborhood newspaper.

BP: Do you know if, do you have any old copies of that?

WB: Lord, I'm almost sure his son does.

BP: George Sand's son.

WB: Right.

BP: What is his name?

WB: George [laughter] and his sister says he's just as crazy as his dad.

BP: Is he in New York?

WB: He's up there with Judge- -

BP: Davis?

WB: Yes, I was asking about him, she said, "Oh he's about to get worse than his father now."

George has had I know two wives and both of them have been Caucasian.

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BP: George Sands?

WB: No, the son. However, she say he's up there fighting the same battle his father, against white people. And, which is sort of contradictory as far as I'm concerned. But I'm just trying to think of some of the other. I'm sure I have material. George Sands by the way ran for district leader back here a few years, and I have some information on that too, I have around here. He became the district leader for one term, anyway. If he had gone I'd have really worked in the campaign he could have won the district leadership again. Because he one of the, he was the one that introduced me to Mario Saybrook. He knew Larry. And George, by the way, was known throughout the city because as I said we used to go to Brooklyn every Sunday morning to meetings over there with the group over there, with the December 13th movement and some of the others. Wherever there was a radical group fighting for the betterment of the, he was there.

BP: Now the, so he was also, but he was also involved in the Independent Voters League?

WB: Right he was one of the main leaders or whatever. Not development but putting the club together.

BP: What was the purpose of the club, what did it do?

WB: Well, one of the things we were, we met with many of the other political people, especially from the other side, from the regular Democratic Party. We- -

BP: So this group was predominantly or all black?

WB: Yes

BP: And it interacted in that way- -

WB: Right. With the others. I have some, I was looking for those pictures when I went upstate this weekend, where we met with many of the political leaders and we of course did voter registration. We went out and tried to get people involved in the political process. One of the

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things we supported candidates, who we felt and was mostly, I remember Parks, I'm trying to think of his name, he was one of the first we promoted, we supported for the assembly.

BP: Pogs?

WB: Parks.

BP: Park.

WB: He was African American.

BP: Park with an s?

WB: Yes, P-A-R-K-S. And I'm trying to think of his first name. I can picture all these people in my mind. And people that we really had good, we had good relationships because although we—the club—was all African Americans or black, we had fairly good relationships with the regular Democrats, the regular politicians. One of the things though that we were working, to get more blacks involved in politics and tried to do the education—do political education.

BP: So this, the Independent Voters League- -

WB: The Independent Voters Club.

BP: Club, sorry. Independent Voters Club. Do you become involved in that, in the 1960s or 1970s?

WB: More in the 1970s. But everybody was involved in the '60s in some movement with- -

BP: You just anticipated a question. What was going on around here in the 1960s? Do you have any memories of demonstrations or important organizations in the Bronx that were active and organizing and doing things in the 1960s?

WB: More in Brooklyn. And a lot of us went, spent more time in Brooklyn than we did in the Bronx.

BP: What was going on in Brooklyn that- -

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WB: Well the people seemed to be more active or more aggressive, more knowledgeable than- -

The people in the Bronx seemed to have been more laid back, like, “Ok we have made it. This is the neighborhood.” Because for a long time people didn’t believe that there was a need for welfare up here. And yet we found that there were more welfare families from, and many of them were from the other [phone rings] ethnic groups. Whereas most of the blacks who moved up here felt they had arrived, that they had their homes up here or that they were more, I think more homeowners up here than renters. So that they didn’t see the need for, to get out there and rally, and then along came a George Sands who agitated and started pulling the wool, as Booker T. Washington, pulling the veil of ignorance from there [laughs].

BP: Did you yourself go to Brooklyn in the ‘60s to participate?

WB: Yes.

BP: Anything stick out in your mind as any event or any people? You mentioned Sony Carson earlier.

WB: Right, and the, I’m just trying to think of some of the, because they used to have meetings over there and we would go to those meetings and get involved. As I said with the, which I was very proud to see Viola still hadn’t—Viola Plumber—still was out there. Because she was one of the people we had, we were involved with from the December 13th Movement and, I’m trying to think of the other group she was involved in.

BP: Viola Plumber?

WB: Yes Viola Plumber. You know recently she was the one that Quinn tried to get fired.

BP: Yes

WB: She was one of the people that we were in the- -

BP: She’s currently I think Charles Barron’s assistant.

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WB: Right, yes. So there were always some activity that when you get involved, to participate in, if you're looking for it, I just felt, I've always felt, that along with George that things are not going to change unless you make them change. And George was the type of person who believed in change.

BP: How about some of the others folks you mentioned—Clarence Edwards, Bill Hamilton- -

WB: Bill is deceased. Clarence Edwards I haven't spoken to him in over a year. So he was in Brooklyn the last time I spoke to him.

BP: But were they all of a similar- -

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE]

[BEGINNING OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

BP: Clarence Edwards, Bill Hamilton- -

WB: Bill is deceased. Clarence Edwards I haven't spoken to him in over a year. So he was in Brooklyn the last time I spoke to him.

BP: But were they all of a similar mindset as George Sands?

WB: Yes. And the only thing, George was always a little more aggressive than the rest of them. More outspoken, more, he had more anger.

BP: Did you know him well? Were you and he good friends?

WB: Yes, we were good friends. When I said, we became very good friends. He lived over there on Bount and he used to be in and out of our house all the time. George's wife had, George had- -

BP: You can keep talking I'm sorry.

WB: George had been married a couple of times. Now this is not something that you can put on the record- -

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BP: Let me turn this off.

WB: I just didn't think it was necessary, but as I said if he loved you or believed in you there was nothing he wouldn't do. He would move mountains for you. But if he hated you or you did anything that offended him or anybody that he cared for he would go to any length to destroy you.

BP: Well he must have been effective in politics [laughs].

WB: And- -

BP: What type of work did he do as a profession?

WB: Alright, George had some, I think that was part of his problem but I mean he worked, he was a chauffer. But he worked for Nabisco company. Now during that time, I'm not sure exactly what his, what he did for Nabisco, but he worked on Percy Son's campaign. He was very active with Percy. He was very active with the Dinkins, with Dinkins before Dinkins even—long before Dinkins became mayor. He was one of the organizers and got Wendell Foster elected to office and they became enemies [laughs]. But Foster can tell you about George Sands.

BP: That's right he's still living.

WB: Yes, Wendell Foster. Because also his daughter is the city council woman and I've been working with her. And you know she's the New York State organizer for Obama. So- -

BP: So Mrs.- -I'm sorry.

WB: No go right ahead.

BP: So George Sands he was just, he was very, he had a political mindset and he was very involved in politics.

WB: Yes, right.

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BP: Now do you ever recall, you said earlier that he was very active. You said he had an ax to grid. It sounded like he was, he fought against racism and racial discrimination or he was advocating for black people to have power over politics and business etc. Where do you think that came from? Did he ever, was it something that he just believed it or was it something that-

WB: I really don't know. I mean he believed it. God knows he believed it. I have no questions [laughs], but what motivated him from the beginning, what caused him to, I don't know.

BP: So it was just as long as you knew him, for as long as you knew that was just- -

WB: Yes.

BP: Alright.

WB: See I can truthfully say that a lot of my attitude, behavior, beliefs, philosophy, whatever you want to call it, came from my experience with the Catholic Church. Not just here but as I had told you I went to Cathedral High School and I had some incidents there.

BP: Right

WB: My father, I went to, and I don't know if I told you, I went to visit my father in Alabama.

BP: Your biological father?

WB: Right, and I don't know what I was about, 13, 14? And daddy worked for the railroad, however he did handyman chores and stuff for different families.

BP: Let me just stop it for a second and start it again. Okay.

WB: And I went, so I went down one summer, and daddy was taking this family—the Rice's—they were a doctor and, to their cabin in, out on the lake. And they, so my father loved to fish, a fisherman, and so he would go fishing and I was, I would sit there and watch him. And I remember when this, they called him; the family went in to eat. They would cook it and had everything set up. And I never forget, we were out there and I was sitting outside—they never

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called me in the house—while daddy was fishing. So when the time to eat they were all sitting at the table and they brought food out to my father and I told them “no thank you,” because you’re not going to feed me out the backdoor. And daddy say, “Girl you better go on and eat.” And I said, “No.” And I remember very well on the way up there we had stopped and bought some candy canes and I had an orange. And that’s what I was putting in the candy cane in the orange and that’s what I, and that’s all I had to eat. And they said, I remember Mrs. Rice said to daddy, “Walter, don’t this girl understand how we do things down here?” He said, “Yes she knows how” [laughs]. I said, “Yes I do.” And I let it go at that, but I refused to be fed out the back door—to bring food out the back door and they were sitting at the table to eat.

BP: How old were you at the time?

WB: Must have been about 12 or 13.

BP: This is going back a little bit, but since this is part of this memory, did your stepfather and your mother or even your father—your biological—your parents, did they talk about racism in the South or even in New York or - -?

WB: Daddy, you know what my father was part of the Civil Rights Movement. Now he was like Reverend Abernathy’s right hand man. He was the superintendent of the First Baptist Church.

BP: Mr. Paschal?

WB: Right. He was the superintendent of the First Baptist Church and he was the treasurer of the First Baptist Church when Abernathy was pastor there. So he and, as he called Rev, he and Rev. and he was right in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement with King and Abernathy. So, but that was long, well I wasn’t raised with him, but when I would go there we would talk about it and we would, I would go to whatever rallies they had down there. Now my stepfather was

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not a man to get involved in. However, he used to talk because his mother's father was white, and what he used to get angry about is that her father had children by his white wife and those kids were educated, where his mother was not educated. I remember grandma Minnie, because she came and stayed with us for a while, she would, and I remember I used to, when I would go to South Carolina to visit her as a kid, how this white family would walk in and Minnie, and they'd walk right in and go in the kitchen and eat what they wanted, but in terms of respecting her as an equal was not there. Even we were not respected as part of the family and there were some resentment on the side of my stepfather about that.

BP: So for you to be with your, with Mr. Paschal and the Rice family- -

WB: Am I too loud because I know I get loud.

BP: No, am I?

WB: No.

BP: Because I'm the same.

WB: [Laughs]

BP: For the Rice family to say, "Does she know how things happen around here?" And for you, "Yes I do" [doorbell rings] and to leave it at that, you- -

WB: Could you open that for me?

BP: Of course.

[Pause in recording]

WB: Mama lived at 256th South Jackson Street. Minnie my grandmother, my mother's mother. And they were on this side of the street and I can picture those houses now, it was all colored folks at the time [laughs].

BP: This is in Montgomery.

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WB: But across on the other side were white people, white families. And those kids used to come out and play. And then right straight down the street, because the street, my grandmother's house was here and there was a street that ran right into because it didn't go all the way through. On this side there was Nistuds Boarding House. And at that time there was no black hotels. So Nistuds House was the place where everybody, anybody of importance came to Montgomery stayed at Nistuds Boarding House. And on this side was where the whites were. And I remember those kids coming out and playing and I don't remember an incident with them. So I guess it was wherever you were at the time and the mentality or, and I'm beginning to believe more and more, not believe but know that children are not born with prejudice. That people push, adults foster this stuff into children. So I do remember some times when we've had positive interaction. I won't say they were long term relationships, but interacting.

BP: So I guess as a young girl, as a 12 year old girl sitting there with your father, Mr. Paschal, fishing, how did you know to resist that type of discriminatory treatment? I assumed you were hungry [laughter]. I assumed you wanted to eat.

WB: But I've always been a very stubborn person who I felt I didn't let anybody take advantage of me; and I just felt that I was above that. I am not, I'm a very humble person, however I do believe that people will only do what you allow them to do to you. Now the Rice's son, by the way I always say that I wear glasses because of him. We played together, I remember, and I was ever younger then, must have been about 8.

BP: How often would you visit your father?

WB: Most of the time I would go down and visit my grandmother. I would stay at my dad, maybe go and stay a few nights with him.

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BP: You would visit your mother's mother but then you would go say hello and spend some time.

WB: And he would come and get me and pick me up. We were at the Rice's playing- -[person walks in the room] come over here Parline and sit, he wants you to sit over here- -he would, we would play, we were outside playing and I will never forget that day and we were playing croquet. And he picked up the stick and tried to throw it over my head and he threw it and hit me in the eye. Of course they took care of the medical bill and that's when I got my first pair of glasses, and I was very young then. I never thought of it, and I even could today with this person, I've never thought of it as being a hostile or- -

BP: It was just kids.

WB: yes, kids playing. So that I guess, and I never became angry with him, and by the way he became a big television producer up here for a while up here in New York, but.

[Pause in recording]

WB: Before you came in about George, his participation, I was telling him a story about how George had fought, how we all tried to get the credit union through the NAACP and some of the other things that George- -

Parline Wilson (PW): We could have had it too because I was chairman of the NAACP, I mean chairman of St. Anthony of Padwook Credit Union, I supervise the chairman. Then we going to mix it up, but they got it all mixed up till we couldn't do that. But George Sands tried to do his best for this area.

BP: We just added, so I just want to introduce, we've been joined by Mrs. Pauline Wilson, and Mrs. Wilson if you could just say and spell your first and last name?

PW: Alright, my name is Pauline, P-A-U-L-I-N-E, Wilson, W-I-L-S-O-N.

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BP: And what is your date of birth?

PW: My date of birth is 03-25-32.

BP: Alright I just wanted, I just needed to get those two things and then we could continue. So you both worked with George Sands in community and political work?

PW: Because he, yes, because he was the backbone of our youth. From the projects on George Sands was.

WB: I don't think I mentioned that he organized the youth group over here in Edenmore.

PW: Edenmore Houses.

WB: At Edenmore Houses and he even set them, started them in a business. They, he started a Laundromat over there and had the youth running it.

BP: Now how old was he? Was he your age?

WB: George was- -

[Crosstalk]

WB: George was about four years older than I am.

BP: Four?

WB: Three to four years older than I am.

BP: So he's your contemporary.

PW: Right.

WB: So yes, he was very much involved with the youth and they had something here a couple years back acknowledging him and they are still, Sr. Betty is over there in- -

PW: Betty Murray?

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WB: Yes, Betty was one of the youth that he started out over there. And then he also started a newspaper from one of the kids who had gotten killed over there. And he named the paper, remember he had that, Pauline do you remember the name of the paper with the Gat?

PW: I forget the name of the paper. He really was an informant for us in this neighborhood now, because he cared about our youth. Trying to keep them together.

BP: So if we could maybe jump into the Independent Voters Club a bit. You said you got, that the group did- -were you involved in that group as well? You did more work with banks and housing. Alright, so maybe we, but I just want to hear, we can talk a little bit about the Independent Voters Club. You said you would do voter registration and supporting of candidates and things of that nature?

WB: Right.

BP: And this was starting in the late '60s and moving into the '70s.

WB: Right it was around that time, right Pauline?

PW: Yes

BP: Now you also mentioned that they tapped you on the shoulder to run for city council.

WB: Right

PW: Yes

WB: But that was some years later, because I ran back in '82, '80. Must have been about 1980, '81 somewhere in there.

BP: So it was after the political group had been going on for about 10 or 12 years or so.

WB: Yes.

BP: What would you say was the impact of something like the Independent Voters Club? What was its impact? I mean it just seems like it went from a handful of people, right, yourself and,

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well you said you came in after Ruth Caster and George Sands and a handful of people who started it- -

WB: Well Ruth was more involved with the regular Democratic Club. But Walter, Bill Hamilton, and Clarence Edwards, what was Ruth's friends' name? Pauline?

PW: I don't- -

WB: You know, the one that my niece she'd go with us, I mean married to his nephew.

PW: Where they live?

WB: They moved to Delaware.

PW: Carter Perry

WB: Carter Perry was- -

BP: Carter Perry?

WB: Carter Perry, and he was kind of involved more with the Democratic Club.

PW: Yes, a lot of things yes he was.

WB: Carter was very active.

BP: So what would you say was the impact of the group?

WB: I think it made the community more conscious.

PW: Recognition

WB: Yes, of what is going on.

PW: More than Democrats and Republicans you understand?

WB: Right, because one of the things that people, and I wish it had more of an impact but—a lasting impact, I think it had an impact because we used to give affairs and we always had a good turnout—but it made people more aware that they were being taken advantage of in terms of the established parties. Because when any time the Democratic Club could block blacks out of a

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meeting, it made people more conscious that we don't have to take this, that's there's a better way. That if you become involved and active you can change things. Also it made people aware too that if you support a candidate, they have a right, you have a right to go to get favors and maybe that's not the word to use, but if I need help, if I'm a constituent, I should be able to come to you. A lot of people were not aware of this. For instance, when Pointer's son got in trouble, she went to Calandra to help.

BP: Who is Calandra?

WB: Calandra to me was one of the greatest Republican senators that we had up here.

PW: Senator, now what's that other guy that died on 233rd St? I forgot his name. He was an assemblyman though.

WB: Yes

BP: So Calandra was an elected official?

WB: Yes, he was a white, but they seemed to realize that now we have someone to recon with, that we can not just take people for granted.

BP: Right, and so what was there, what were the elected officials response to something like the Independent Voters Club after it had showed its power?

WB: Well I think they started, they recognized the club and they also as I said, they also responded when you needed something. For instance I know that Calandra saved my job for me once. These are things that without the Independent Voters I don't think that we would have been able to get the recognition.

BP: Could you explain what happened in that instance with your job?

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WB: Well, that I was being, what, unjustly fired, terminated I use the word, and he called, he made a few phone calls and the whole thing turned around. There were also certain benefits brought into the community which we were not getting.

BP: Such as what?

WB: Well you had, well, some of the, in terms of schools, in terms of, I think that one of the things is I mentioned earlier that many of the people felt that this was an area that didn't need some of the resources that other, the South Bronx, because people had arrived since they moved up here. So that with the Independent Voters and the impact that they were having by bringing people together and getting information out there we were getting more resources into the community. Even to think like garbage collection, that was another thing that people fought for, we were not getting once a week garbage collection. Not being, the streets not being cleaned and the sewage lines and stuff even thought it's still, they're working on it now, that for years we had a problem up there.

BP: So if you could, just for this oral history interview, what was the process, what would be the process for the Independent Voters Club advocating for something like improved garbage collection? How did the group do that?

WB: Well you had, especially our leaders, would meet with the politicians and bring to their, well I'm sure they knew, but really bring to their attention the lack of services and what the people wanted. And one of the other things that we used to do which we were bringing up at the meeting here recently, we got up to the churches. And you'd go to the churches, you'd meet with the pastor, and you really got out there and made speeches at the churches to try to recruit members. Sometimes you didn't always get them, that many, but at least people knew what was

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happening. And a lot of people, even to today, they come and bring you their problems because you've been advocating over the years so they still figure that you can do- -

BP: So did you ever, Mrs. Bowman, did you ever have ambitions to hold public office?

WB: Yes and no [laughs], I'll put it that way. When I was asked to run, and I did run unsuccessfully a couple of times to the point that I was appointed commissioner on the Voters Assistant Commission. I was a Bronx representative on the Voters Assistant Commission for 13 years.

BP: Is that a city wide commission?

WB: Yes, it was a commission that was set up during the Koch administration to really, to increase voters' registration and voters' participation. It was chartered under New York City charter, and it was to support the underrepresented community. And we held hearings and we would also go out and whatever groups that tried to get out to the different community groups to support their, any interest they had in terms of increasing the voters' roles and participation. I was appointed by Koch because one of the things they didn't want me to run against Crispino, the city councilman, because for every pole in site that I had pole watchers I won.

BP: And you were running against a man named?

WB: An incumbent, Jerry Crispino.

BP: Jerry Crispino

PW: Is he still working for- -

WB: He was a judge; they made him a judge after the second time. But the, and I only, I did not run against him the last time because, as I said, they knew I would beat him because I got something like 42% of the votes for my first time out. And- -

BP: And you were running, this was an election for city- -?

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WB: City Council. And what happened is that Dinkins, when Dinkins ran, the county leader told Dinkins I understand, I wasn't pretty, but I was informed by Dinkins and his administration, that if I ran against Jerry Crispino the Bronx County would not support Dinkins' candidacy. So he sent Bill Mench to talk me out of running for the City Council, and I said well, that New York City needed a black Mayor, more than they needed me at the City Council. So I withdrew and didn't run the next time around. So although I had run, and I think I would have been a very effective City Council person that was not my ultimate goal in life.

BP: So this was during the end of the Koch administration and beginning of the Dinkins.

WB: Right

BP: Is there any, are there any specific, it's kind of hard because you did, you were involved in so many things at so many times- -

WB: Don't mix that [laughs].

BP: - -I'm wondering if there's anything that stands out in your mind, any particular project or particular organization or particular moment in your community activism that kind of stands out as something that really you thought was an important or a memorable instance in your work.

WB: I don't, there are things and maybe it would come to me later, but do you know the most important thing I felt, feel in my life—outside of family [laughs]—was the years I worked at Spofford, because I feel that I have more of an impact on the lives of young people. And many adults who I've worked with and trained and developed, because they're, I still get, I'm still contacted by some of the workers I had. I was not loved by everybody because I tried to be fair, and there were those who felt I should have given more recognition or let them get away more than others. I was a union person however I believed, I didn't believe that the unions should control a job to the fact, or a position to the point of protecting someone who is not worthy,

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because I've always believed even as a union member if I'm wrong I don't need your protection.

I need your protection if I'm right and I'm being unjustly crucified or whatever. So there were times where at Spofford when the kids have rioted or whether things went wrong, I'd, by administration, those above me have been upset because I protect my staff. But I believe that if I protect my staff they're going to protect me and do right by me, and when I was director of night services, I would stay there day and night to make sure that- -

PW: When you were at Spofford?

WB: Yes, that I was covered, that my staff was covered. Or write up reports to justify if they were wrong I took action, if they right I'd justify it, I stuck by them. And I remember my administrator said to me, "How could you do this, protect this?" I said, "When you go home it's me and my staff against all those kids. I will not see one of those children mistreated, but I will not see them take advantage of my staff and then try to cover it up." All of the, a lot of the so called abuse that people used to say staff did to those kids I've seen kids do things to staff that I could justify a staff taking action. So all of the years I felt that- -

BP: I'm sorry, with something like that, do any examples stick out in your mind? What were some of the things that would happen between residents and staff members at Spofford?

WB: There were, I've seen kids have taken staff, have grabbed staff and held them hostage and we've had to go in to rectify the situation. And if this means whipping the child's butt, excuse the expression [laughs] to protect that staff member we've had to do it. But I would not let a staff member abuse a child above and beyond what was necessary to put down the situation. For instance one night we had, there was an incident and they called the police in, because the place was just being torn up. And the police came in, and when they come in they didn't care they just started beating, and I remember one child was asleep and the police ran in the door and pulled a

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gun on the child. Well I went off and I wrote it up, and the next day at a, when we met at the administration, I put in a complaint against the police department. And they told me, “Well when you call the police in they take over the situation.” I said, “But they don’t come in a pull a gun on a sleeping child.” I said, “I cannot justify that. I cannot justify the police coming in when my staff is not allowed to touch a child. But the police can come in with their batons and things and beat up a child. So I cannot justify that.” So what I’m saying is that there are times when I’ve had to take a stand on both sides. And I think that’s where I build up my relationship with the children, because if anything happened, they know that it was that if any way possible, I was going to make sure they’re treated fairly. I set up a special unit for those children who we felt needed special care—children who had problems that needed a unit where there was a special social worker and they were given special psychiatric treatment, etc. That unit was decorated differently, there were special staff assigned to that unit, and we, I worked very hard to do that. I also worked to promote those people who were overlooked, people who had been working for years and they were not always the favorite of the administration. But if I felt that they were capable of doing the job I worked to get them training and to get them promoted. So that I really feel that in all the work that I have done over the years—my work in college, doing missionary work, work with the National Council of Negro Women, work with the NAACP—I feel the greatest thing, I won’t say the greatest because none of the things I have done is great, but I think that, I feel better about the years that I spent at Spofford and the work I did with young people there and the work I’ve done with many of the staff to develop them.

BP: That’s really important we haven’t, you’re the first person who’s spoken from experience about- -

PW: How they’re being treated?

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BP: Well just about Spofford, about this institution in the Bronx in general. No, we've never interviewed anybody who's either been there or worked there, so that's, those are really important testimonies. I did want to speak a bit more today, especially since Mrs. Wilson is here, about the NAACP in the Bronx or even in this neighborhood and the NCNW. So perhaps if you both could speak about that?

PW: Elaborate about that, yes.

BP: Let's maybe start with the NAACP up here in Williams Bridge. How long has the NAACP-

PW: It's going to be 50 years next month, next year. We got our 50th Anniversary next year, this year was our 49th. 50th year next year. Remember Burnett? Burnett started.

WB: Yes Burnett, he just died. The first person who- -

PW: You don't have a journal here do you?

WB: I have a, yes I have a journal.

PW: Yes he just died. He started it up here.

BP: What was his name?

PW: Boy you don't know where your book is do you?

WB: I don't know, you know I wasn't here for Freedom Funds

PW: Yes, you surely wasn't.

WB: What is Burnett's name?

BP: Burnett was his last name?

WB: Yes

BP: B-U-R-N-E-T?

WB: N-E-T-T. Because his mother and my mother were very good friends. Where is, we just had it.

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BP: Well we could, I could find it out. So a man named Burnett—last name was Burnett—he was the first founder of the NAACP branch up here?

PW: Williams Bridge NAACP

BP: In 1957?

PW: Would it be '57?

WB: Wait a minute.

BP: '58, you said it was 50 years ago next year.

PW: We are going to have our 50th anniversary next year.

BP: So what was some of the, now when did you get involved in the NAACP, when did you get involved in- -

PW: Well when I moved up here I was living in the South Bronx and I was in the [crosstalk].

WB: What was the year that the NAACP was founded up, the Williams Bridge?

BP: [Laughs]

WB: She said- -[WB on phone: You got a fax? Fax it over to me]

BP: Who was that?

WB: That's Phyllis Booth, that's- -

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

[BEGINNING OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE]

BP: So what was some of the, now when did you get involved in the NAACP, when did you get involved in - -

PW: Well when I moved up here I was living in the South Bronx and I was in the [crosstalk].

WB: What was the year that the NAACP was founded up, the Williams Bridge?

BP: [Laughs]

WB: She said- -[WB on phone: You got a fax? Fax it over to me].

BP: Who was that?

WB: That's Phyllis Booth, that's- -

BP: Phyllis Booth, that's another person's name that of- -

PW: That came up?

BP: Yes, Phyllis Booth.

WB: Yes that's our secretary.

BP: So it, when it started in the, but now Mrs. Wilson you got involved in it after you moved from the South?

PW: Up here, yes, I was already in it down in the South.

BP: Now see that's something if we could, if you'd like, if we could schedule an interview to talk about that.

PW: I done forgot about a lot of different things [laughter].

BP: Well when you came, when did, Mrs. Bowman and Mrs. Wilson, when did each of you become involved in the Williams Bridge branch of the NAACP. I know you said you were involved in the NAACP in D.C. and you were in the NAACP down in the South Bronx, when did both of you, when did you come into this- -

PW: Well I just started coming because after I moved up here it was kind of hard to go down. I would drive my, and they children would- -

[Unidentified Man]: Excuse me I have to go to the rest room.

WB: You want some water or something Brian?

BP: Yes, please, thank you.

PW: And I, so I just stayed, I just stopped going down there and- -

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WB: I'm not much of a hostess [laughs]

PW: And I just started, so I thought it was too far to go down there. Albert Goodman, we have a house named after him down in the South Bronx from the improvement council, he did a lot.

BP: Albert Goodman?

PW: Albert Goodman, yes. And he had an organization called the Improvement Council which is still going on today and I'm still in that improvement council. The improvement council, we build houses for AIDS and their patients. Their families, that's what we do with this, and independent living, we just built a house on Steadman's Avenue not too long ago. But mine really started from down in there, I can't even remember in the 19, I must have joined that in 1950 something or '60 something.

BP: This was the improvement council?

PW: No this was the NAACP, that was part of, came out of NAACP because I, then I moved up here and everybody was saying, "Why did you come here, over here to the Williams Bridge branch?" Trying to understand and what have you not. But that's when I -

BP: That's when you, you came after you moved up here?

PW: I started up here, yes.

BP: Let me just changed this tape. So when you first came up to, when you first started getting involved in the Williams Bridge NAACP branch, what types of things did the chapter do?

PW: They, in those days they had the lawyers to come in. This time they really did lots of things, and it's a daycare center.

BP: Now it's a daycare center?

PW: Yes, it was a daycare; they got a daycare center started. They had lawyers every Tuesday.

I remember years ago before the lawyers separated themselves, our lawyers for the NAACP

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they're on their own. They a part of NAACP, they fight in the Supreme Court for us everyday, but they're not, they're affiliated but it's never the ones that used to be more than one, so people could come with their problems to the branch, and they would be there Tuesday nights. What do you call when you give up your time, what's the word?

BP: Pro bono

PW: Pro bono. People who had problems would come to our branch and work with our branch and whatnot and help the people.

BP: What kinds of problems did people bring to the, and about, around what year was this that you started going to the Williams Bridge NAACP branch?

PW: In the '60s, the later '60s.

BP: Later '60s.

PW: Yes, because in the branch- -

BP: Thank you Mrs. Bowman.

PW: In the branch, that was when they really, and they organized this, they organized the daycare center and people, they had- -what's his name that got- -Campbell and?

WB: You talking about Rodman.

PW: Rodman was the president and he- -

BP: What was his, that was his first name?

PW: Well that, he was in- -

WB: No, Rodman's last name. Al, what is it?

PW: I forgot his name. I forgot his name I've been forgetting now I'm getting old. We can get those names for you.

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BP: Well I guess for the conversation I'm more curious, you said so people would, lawyers would come- -

PW: Pro bono, they would come pro bono and work with people, talk to people. Prejudice, right up in this area when we first started there was lots of prejudice because of a lot of things. We just had started coming up here.

BP: What type of, what was the prejudice, what was it like? What forms did it take? What did people do?

PW: Well, especially landlords with housing, didn't want to rent to blacks, you know what I mean? It wasn't so prevalent then like it's now. It was prevalent then but it's not brought out the way, now you can just call up to downtown and say, "I was applying for this apartment and they didn't rent it to me."

BP: What would happen back in, I guess the 1960s, when, if that, if somebody couldn't get an apartment or couldn't buy a house or- -

PW: Well we would try to go to the name of the organization and, McHenry a word for it.

WB: Neighborhood housing or, no- -

PW: No, not neighborhood housing, it's still going but it's not up this way yet.

BP: McHenry? Is that the person?

PW: Yes, Ms. McHenry, yes.

BP: It's a woman? What was her first name?

PW: Leslie, she's a reverend now.

BP: Leslie McHenry.

PW: Yes, and all these things then people would, all the neighborhood organizations on the tip of my tongue.

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BP: So I'm just wanting, so people in the 1960s if they couldn't get an apartment or if they were being discriminated against, they could go to the NAACP?

PW: They would go to the NAACP and they would help them hear their cases and whatnot.

BP: And then what would they do?

PW: Well they would work with the people to hear if they had to go to court with them. The lawyers would go pro bono to court. We had a lot of things going up here in that particular time you know what I mean, and whatnot. And they, with the schools, there was discrimination in the schools up here also.

BP: What was that like? What were some of the ways that black folks- -

PW: Well I know there was discrimination in the Catholic Church. People couldn't just go and get their kids in Catholic schools.

WB: Yes, that's what I was telling him, because she belonged to the same church.

BP: Our Lady of Grace.

PW: Yes, they didn't handle us, they way, knowing that we were going to be the one to save the Catholic schools and churches up here. It was very prejudice in those days because they'll tell you they didn't take blacks. Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of Grace, all these churches.

WB: And I tell you when I put my children there, the way they tell my mother, "What you trying to do, going to church help with your children?"

PW: Yes, now, it's really, in those days we really struggled, we did, it was a struggle in those days and whatnot. When we went to the march on Washington in 1963 it was a different time. Thurgood Marshall he fought for that law when he was in, civil rights for us, and who took advantage of it? Those other folks took advantage of it because we're still down. We're still down on totem pole. He's the one. I'm not saying that they shouldn't have had the rights, but,

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that everyone now would say, "Oh, that's you're infringing on my civil rights." With gays and just lonely whites and poor whites, they've got the rights to more than we got the rights to, you understand what I'm saying, and whatnot. So we tried everything we could do. All those things we march, we went downtown, we went to the convention when we had convention, we spoke that laws our lawyers went to the convention. They drew their conclusion from the convention as whatever they've heard, because when they did come together they'd tell you, "We have to work on this for this part of the country or here," because they're still discriminating against us, would you believe that? When they, Bush signed the act, the Voters Registration Act, that we still got it for 25 years.

WB: Voters Rights

PW: Yes, that should be forever, they shouldn't have no years on it. And these are the things that we're fighting and still fighting for.

BP: Right, were there any specific campaigns that you remember the NAACP in Williams Bridge initiating or participating in in the 1960s or- -?

PW: Well, you see when something happened, we all participated, all the branches. I mean still more branches have formulated since then, but we all, we had one, we did one, we did it for Long Island, we did it for, we all came together.

BP: Were there any specific campaigns that you remember participating in?

WB: You know I don't remember- -

PW: The schools.

WB: - -yes, but the schools too, but remember when they had that march up from across the country with the casket and Williams Bridge, I thought I got those pictures somewhere, where

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we met the people coming up from the South, we met them at the George Washington Bridge and marched with them. And we're -

PW: We have to gather up a lot of information. I'll have to go into the office and get lots of those things because Shirley and them were not involved then.

WB: No, they just got involved recently.

PW: They just got involved in this NAACP.

WB: But Phyllis will be bringing the history over, she said she was going to- -

PW: Lord, maybe next year.

WB: She said she was going out, I told her to fax, I could get it from the fax machine I have.

BP: Well why don't I stop this here now, I think, let me stop it- -

[END OF TAPE TWO; END OF INTERVIEW SESSION]