



5-15-2008

Fleet, Michelle

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

Follow this and additional works at: https://research.library.fordham.edu/baahp_oralhist

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fleet, Michelle. Interview with the Bronx African American History Project. BAAHP Digital Archive at Fordham University.

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Bronx African American History Project at Fordham Research Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of Fordham Research Commons. For more information, please contact considine@fordham.edu, bkilee@fordham.edu.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

Transcriber: Danielle Jakubowski

Mark Naison (MN): Hello. Okay. Hello. Today is May 15, 2008. We're at Fordham University and we are here with Michelle Fleet who is a dancer with the Paul Taylor Dance Company, who grew up in the Jackson Houses in the Bronx. So, let's start off by - - would you please spell your name?

Michelle Fleet (MF): M-I-C-H-E-L-L-E. Fleet, F-L-E-E-T. My full name, however, is Michelle Patterson-Fleet.

MN: And what is your, your date of birth?

MF: Nine twenty-four seventy-seven (9/24/77).

MN: Okay, so Michelle, could you tell us a little bit about your family background and how they ended up in the Bronx?

MF: Okay. It's, you know, bits and pieces here and there. So my grandmother, her name was Josephine Hinton, she grew up here in New York and my grandfather, Augustus, no sorry, Eugene - -I'm thinking of my other grandfather. Anyway, Eugene Costello grew up in Florida and came to New York and they met, **you know yada yada** [laughs], and my mom grew up in the Bronx, her name is Robin Fleet. And yes they - - I actually never met my grandmother. She passed away when my mom was about twelve and then my [background noise] okay - -

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: That's okay you're [inaudible]

MF: - - my grandfather actually, crazy story is that my grandfather re-married and then had a whole other family and my mom and her sister, my aunt, went and lived with a family friend. So that whole family, that part of the family, separated. And then my mom ended up being adopted into another family and so yes. My mom had a crazy life growing up, just kind of random things happening and - - but she met my dad, Gregory Patterson.

MN: How old - -

MF: She had me when she was twenty.

MN: Did your mother grow up - - did your mother grow up in the Bronx?

MF: She did.

MN: And - -

MF: She grew up, they- - yes, Jerome Avenue.

MN: Okay.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: All around yes. So yes, she grew up in the Bronx. My dad grew up in the Bronx and then they had me. She was twenty. So my mom and I pretty much kind of grew up together.

MN: Did your mother graduate from high school?

MF: She graduated from high school.

MN: Do you know what high school she went to?

MF: I want to say she went to Satellite Academy or something. Something like that. And they married, they got divorced. My mom re-married when I was about four, five years old. And that's when she met, met, she met Francis [inaudible], got married. So yes.

MN: Now how did your mother end up in the Jackson Houses?

MF: That's where she moved and she lived there - -

MN: Did she move, did she move - -

MF: She moved from - - she - - I want to say she briefly lived in the city, like in Manhattan but -
-

MN: This was after she had you?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: After she had me. Like maybe for just one year, she lived in Manhattan. I can't remember where. And then I remember us living in the, in the projects right across the street from St. Anselms. Not on the same block, but across the street. I forget what those projects were called. Maybe St. Mary's or something like that?

MN: St. Mary's Houses, yes.

MF: Something I - - I think.

MN: Yes, no. I know the St. Mary's Houses, right.

MF: Yes, and I remember living on the twentieth floor or something and I clearly remember my mom cleaning the windows and my dad screaming at her because she was sitting on the edge, and we're on the twentieth floor and [laughs] you know - - but then we moved. We moved across the street to - -

MN: To the Jackson Houses, right.

MF: Yes.

MN: And how big an apartment were you living in at Jackson?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: Not big. It was a two-bedroom, you know, bathroom, living room, kitchen. It had two entry ways. And to me it was huge when I was growing up. And it's so funny, after I moved, and when I came back it was so tiny [laughs] and I was like "Oh my God." This was my entire world and now - -

MN: And what was, what number was your building and what number was your apartment?

MF: Seven twenty Westchester Avenue, apartment 2H.

MN: And how big was the building? The - - was - -

MF: That building I think went to the fifteenth floor or something like that maybe.

MN: Okay, now what are your earliest memories of the Jackson Houses as a place to live?

MF: Oh, it was okay. My - - as a child my mom, well after she divorced my dad, he had a crazy life when I was a child, during my years growing up. And - -

MN: So he was [inaudible] - -

MF: - - he was not around, not really. He was like, I'd see him once in a blue moon. But, I had my Pop so it didn't matter, because she was re-married. I had my father; he was raising me.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: And how old were you when your mother re-married? Or met - - or met - -

MF: I was five.

MN: And they had been together?

MF: They had been together from that time all the way through to college. And then they separated.

MN: Oh, so they had known each other before - -

MF: They had - - they were married, they got married about when I was five so I'm sure they met each other and knew each other when I was like four.

MN: Okay, so your mother ended up going to college while you were - - after you were born?

MF: Yes she - -

MN: Or was she in college when she had you?

MF: - - she, I think she was in college when she had me and she - - then she left.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Now what college was she going to?

MF: That I don't remember. I remember her getting her Associates Degree. And then let me see, so that was that. Growing up there crazy because my mom was like, "Oh no, you're not going outside. I'm not letting you outside unless I'm outside with you."

MN: So she was one of the - -

MF: She - -

MN: - - a power parent?

MF: - - she was very strict as far- - strict, but in odd ways. Like, while everyone was letting their children run, play in the back park **or whatever**, run around, have fun, my mom was like, "No way, no way." So instead, which was a great thing, instead she - - we had trips, we took trips downtown into Manhattan all the time and - -

MN: What were some of the places that she took you?

MF: Oh, she would always take me to all of the museums.

MN: Which museums? What were your favorites?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: Oh, the Museum of Natural History, that was my favorite. We would always go there. We would take trips to Central Park and just, she would make me walk [laughs] the entire park. We'd pack our lunches and walk the entire park and I would be tired for the rest of the day. And so she had no worries [laughs].

MN: Now did you have any siblings?

MF: No. I'm an only child.

MN: An only child? Me too.

MF: I am an only child. I grew up as an only child. My dad however, he did have more children so I have siblings in that sense.

MN: From the Patterson side?

MF: From the Patterson side, yes.

MN: So you were being brought up very, by your mother to make sure that you were insulated from whatever - -

MF: Was going on, yes.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Now as a child, I mean I know the year that I was actually there in the early eighties. Did you know notice the abandoned buildings?

MF: Oh yes. The - - **all**, all those lots now that are filled with all those new homes and stuff. I remember all those just being vacant. And I mean, it was, it was dangerous. My mom would be like “okay in by this time” and we were - - you heard gunshots and stuff. My - - my - - we lived on the second floor and my window faced the train, because the Jackson Avenue is the first stop outside on the two and the five trains. So, the train went by [laughs] all the time. That’s what my bedroom faced. That’s what I slept through. So now when I sleep and it’s completely quiet I’m like “Okay, hmmm”. I need a little bit of noise.

MN: So you grew up, you heard gunshots?

MF: I did. There were times where we were like “Okay, hit the deck” because you just don’t know what’s going to happen. But, it was okay, it wasn’t terrible, it wasn’t terrible. I - - I had a pretty good childhood I would have to say.

MN: Now, how - - did you, you went to Catholic school?

MF: I did.

MN: All the way through?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: All - - from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade I was in Catholic school, St. Anselms Catholic School. And yes, I was there, and on the weekends I had dance classes.

MN: Now what was the exposure to music and dance and culture in your house? Was this a very major presence?

MF: Very. Well, my Pop, Francis Fleet, my Pop - - I always call him Pop [laughs] - - he was a musician.

MN: Oh.

MF: Yes, a musician, just like his dad. And so he played the bass guitar and the electric guitar, everything.

MN: Now did - -

MF: And - -

MN: - - did he practice in the house?

MF: He practiced in the house. I would sit next to the head of the guitar and listen while he was playing. And he would practice all the time. He would have his band mates come over.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet
Interviewer: Mark Naison
Date: May 15, 2008
MN: His band was practicing?

MF: They would practice sometimes.

MN: Now what, what style was it?

MF: Mostly Alternative, actually.

MN: Alternative?

MF: I - - it was Funk-Alternative kind of music at the time.

MN: Did he, did he do any recording?

MF: He recorded with some people. He - - this- - a group, Twenty-Four-Seven Spies, is what they were called.

MN: They were called Twenty-Four-Seven Spies?

MF: Yes, and they did a lot of stuff in Europe. And that band was mostly - - that was like his best friend and a whole group of people and he just played with them from time to time but never really didn't anything major with them. But yes, he would record with different - - he would have shows in different places.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Did you go to watch him play live?

MF: When I was older I saw maybe a couple shows here and there.

MN: Did your mother have any musical training or - -

MF: No, she did a little bit of modeling and dancing. And then she had an injury and then she stopped.

MN: And what sort of dancing was her - -

MF: Modern dance, ballet all that stuff.

MN: And so she did a lot of that as a child and then - -

MF: Yes, as a teenager - -

MN: - - and then performed in school?

MF: Yes.

MN: Did she have any professional - -

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: No.

MN: - - dance training?

MF: No. Well, I mean she would take classes, but she never danced professionally.

MN: But so, but she had you in dance classes?

MF: Yes. She decided to put me in dance classes because she was, she said it was the only thing that truly made me tired [laughs]. So I had all this energy and I, I wanted to go into gymnastics and - -

MN: You would have been great in gymnastics.

MF: - - [laughs] and my mom was like "Oh no. You'll get injured, you'll get hurt. You'll get hurt all the time. No." [laughs]

MN: She's right.

MF: So instead, she put me in dance, which well, you still get hurt [laughs]. But I guess she felt, she had a little more of a relation to that. So yes, she put me in dance and yes we'd come after - - we'd stay all day long.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Now, were you sent to dance classes in the Bronx?

MF: Yes. I went to Five Points Cultural Arts Theater in the Bronx.

MN: Where was that located?

MF: That was, oh my gosh, where was that? That was at - - what was it called? [Inaudible]
Community Center. That was - -

MN: Was it anywhere near you? Or is it a different name?

MF: Near, near but not - -

MN: I'm sure I can look this up. It was called Five Points - -

MF: Cultural Arts Center.

MN: - - Cultural Arts Center.

MF: Yes.

MF: And, and - -

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: It was directed by Lee Aca Thompson, L-E-E A-C-A Thompson. Yes, and he's worked with Bernice Johnson [inaudible], I think that's out in Brooklyn, I'm not sure, I don't remember. But, yes, he was my teacher from the time that I was five on. I remember the first dance school that I went to was - - oh what was that called, it was in Harlem somewhere, oh my goodness it'll come to me. But when my mom re-married she, she met the Fleet the family and William Fleet used to dance too.

MN: Wow.

MF: Not - - yes, James Fleet musician, but William Fleet I think, the oldest of them all, yes he's the oldest, he used to dance too and told my mom to put me there at - -

MN: At, at the Five Points place.

MF: - - yes, because he went there.

MN: Wow. Now so this is - - so did, did other professional dancers come out of this program?

MF: I think that yes. Yes there have been, there have been.

MN: Does it still exist?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: I know he still teaches and I think he usually - - he teaches mostly in different communities, like at different community centers. He builds these programs for children to go to, and I know it's still there, under what name [Crosstalk]. I feel like he's changed the name.

MN: But this was within walking distance - -

MF: Well, walking distance meaning it took at least twenty to thirty, it was like a twenty to thirty minute walk and we did it every weekend.

MN: So you, you went on the weekends, but not the weekdays?

MF: No weekdays was no, not until I was older and that was incorporated into my schoolwork. But on the weekends it was from, I'd say ten in the morning and we finished at like maybe five.

MN: So this was serious stuff.

MF: It was serious. It was every Saturday. And then when show time, when our recitals came around in the winter-time and in the summer-time, that's when we had rehearsals during the week.

MN: Now was it your, where the other young people in the program from your community or did they come from all over the place?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: All over the place, really. I mean mostly in the Bronx, but all over the place in the Bronx, I would say.

MN: So this was like - - it attracted very serious - -

MF: It attracted - - yes I would say that, but I would also say that it, it attracted parents that wanted their children to be involved in the arts. And also, the teacher, he was amazing. To this day his is still like a mentor to me.

MN: So you're still in touch with him?

MF: Yes. Off and on, yes.

MN: Oh Brian, we should interview him.

MF: Yes. [laughs]

MN: Tell him about our program. I would love to interview him.

MF: Yes.

MN: That would be wonderful.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: Yes. He - - he has inspired so many.

MN: Oh yes, this is a definite. Let's - -

MF: Yes. And he's just been such - - so - - he's amazing.

MN: So it's - - so how do you spell his name? I'm going to right this down.

MF: Lee - -

MN: L-E-E.

MF: Yes. Aca, A-C-A. Yes, Thompson. Yes.

MN: Now were you somebody who liked going to school?

MF: I enjoyed it, but I - - I was not very focused [laughs], I would say. My focus was on many different things, as it is now.

MN: [laughs]

MF: I - - I love being able to do like fifty million things all at once.

MN: All at once.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: And I eventually, I get them all done, but - - [laughter]. Eventually. But, yes, dancing is the one thing that I will, I will definitely just block everything else out and completely focus in on that.

MN: But what was your, your school experience in, in Saint Anselms?

MF: It was okay, boring [laughs].

MN: It was boring?

MF: Boring mostly. I truly enjoyed English class. My English classes I loved and there - - specific teachers that helped to influence my idea of the - - within the arts. I remember my fifth grade teacher, Miss Desmond I think her name was, yes. She would always - - she had this huge closet filled with videos and they were all musicals. And so she, and she would let me take them home and watch them and so I was I addicted to musicals for a long time. I was watching *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* as a fifth grader just like, in a complete trance [laughs]. I was watching tons of Shirley Temple - -

MN: [laughs]

MF: - - and Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse and all of them, you know, it was amazing.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Now, now was it fairly, did you - - were you distinguished among your peers as “the dancer” fairly early?

MF: Yes. Yes.

MN: And at school - - so they would, you know, have you dance?

MF: Yes. There was a time, I think it was maybe my seventh or maybe seventh or eighth grade, kind of embarrassing, but I did it anyway. I was going to dance classes in the Bronx still and we had this whole tap routine, it was on a double-sided staircase, and I had this double-sided staircase at home [laughs], and so they were like “Well, bring it in **da da da**. We want, we want to see you do the routine.” Okay. It was like one of those sharing experiences or whatever [laughs]. And so I had that thing driven into school, all the way upstairs, and I did the routine in the hallway [laughs] during class. And they were like - - I was in my costume and everything doing old tap.

MN: Yes. This was show and tell?

MF: Yes, in eighth grade [laughs].

MN: Now, did you have - - were you - - did you have friends in the Jackson Houses whom you played with?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: I did, I did. Well, as I got older my mom did let me hang out a little more, in the back park or whatever, as long as she could see me in the window. And then when I befriended some of the people, their parents new me too so she felt good about it.

MN: Now was, were there a critical mass of families there like your family or the other kids were, were very different?

MF: I would, I wouldn't say they were very different. They were, I don't know maybe just raised differently [laughs].

MN: They didn't have the same individual attention from, from the parents?

MF: No, well they, they weren't only children. Yes, definitely yes. I definitely had more attention coming from my mom and she was very focused on the things that I was doing and somewhat liberal with me as I got older, in ways that their parents weren't. Yet, when it came to oh, having the keys to the house, like that was not going to happen [laughs]. You know little things like that.

MN: Now what's very, very interesting is your, your growing up in, in public housing in kind of one of the worst times in Bronx history in terms of the fires, the disinvestment. And then as your older, the crack epidemic. So how did you kind of come out with a smile on your face - -

MF: Well - -

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: - - you know and, and so successful?

MF: My mom created, my mom created this world for me. She created a world where I never knew that we were poor. I never knew that. It hit me when I was much older. I was like oh my gosh we were struggling, but she never made that apparent because she worked her behind off so that I could pretty much have anything I wanted and we could go on these trips and do different things here and there, and it was wonderful. So she never - - and each of my birthdays were spectacular. We would do amazing things.

MN: What was, what would she do on your birthday to make it special?

MF: Oh my gosh well I had a sweet sixteen - - you know this whole super sweet sixteen thing they have on TV or whatever, well I had - -

MN: [laughs] It's so bad.

MF: It's so bad. It's horrible. But, I'm part Puerto-Rican and Black and Indian. That was my background.

MN: From your mother's side?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: From my mother's side. And so she was like "Okay well you have to have a sweet sixteen **da da da**", all this stuff. So I was like "Okay, fine." So I had a sweet sixteen, a huge thing at this center and all of my friends were there.

MN: And which, what center was this in?

MF: This was in the Grand Concourse because my little brother at the time, my half brother, his mom lived over there in the Grand Concourse projects over there and they had this huge community center and so we held it there. We had that. I mean my mom wasn't renting homes and stuff [laughs].

MN: Now, now was your - - when your mother said she had Indian ancestry was she - - is that family from the Caribbean?

MF: I'm Seminal Indian from Florida - -

MN: Seminal Indian. Oh, American "Indian".

MF: American "Indian".

MN: Right, okay so they're from Florida originally.

MF: From Florida, yes.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: And you also have that Italian name - -

MF: No, Puerto Rican.

MN: Oh it's a Puerto - - what was the name?

MF: Puerto Rican, but Costello.

MN: Costello.

MF: But I think it was probably changed, that's the thing. It was probably, probably like Castillo.

MN: Castillo and they changed it to Costello to make life easier.

MF: Yes.

MN: Now you have - - did your friends from the neighborhood come out of their situation as well as you did?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: I think maybe one or two that I know, that I know of. But they're happy and have a family and working and everything is fine. And then I think there is some that it's kind of you know, it's not that great.

MN: One of the things in, in looking at the year you were born in 1977 - -

MF: Oh I know. There was a huge blackout that year.

MN: - - Oh yes.

MF: Huge [laughs].

MN: And there were blackout riots in the Bronx actually. But also, you were coming of age in kind of almost the golden age of hip-hop.

MF: Yes.

MN: And you aware of that going on in the community?

MF: What's so funny is that no, I always have to say no because my mom didn't expose me to that. My Pop was more exposed to it because he was in the whole music field and all that stuff and so I would listen to things here and there. Like I know the music - -

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: But you never saw like Grand Master Flash in the school yard?

MF: No, no - -

MN: Or like the Cold Crush Brothers?

MF: I never got to see these people.

MN: Where there block parties taking place?

MF: There were tons of block parties. Oh my gosh, forget about it. Summertime it was insane, block parties everywhere. But was I allowed to go to them - -

MN: Oh so what was [laughter] - -

MF: There was, there was like - - we had this, there was a park in the, within the projects. It was always a huge park and a huge basketball court. And right there were tons and tons of parties all the time, in the summertime but, no. My mom was like "I don't think so." [laughter] "I don't think so." [laughs] "We can go to the movies, we can [laughs] - -

MN: And she would go with you?

MF: Yes. Yes. She would go. My first date she went with me to Whitestone Movie Theaters.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Oh, so that was your first date?

MF: Yes. My first date I went on, to the movies. And I was like this little kid, like you know, pre-teen, on a date. And my mom is sitting way up there and we're just sitting watching the movie [laughs]. Crazy.

MN: Now what was the ethnic composition of the Jackson Houses? Was there - -

MF: Puerto Rican and Black mostly, that's it.

MN: In what combination would you say? Or was - -

MF: It was half and half.

MN: Half and half?

MF: Yes.

MN: And was there any tension between the groups?

MF: I never noticed any tension ever. We were all in the same boat [laughs].

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Now that - - and that was that was the instance - - that was true in school as well that - -

MF: In school, not so much, because you had - - I mean you had - - there was mostly Black students, Puerto Ricans, and Dominican maybe, and that was pretty much it. But then there were moments it was just separated and moments when it mixed. It - - I guess it really truly depended on what grade you were in because it changed as you got into the higher grades and so I guess - -

MN: Now if you have Puerto-Rican ancestry, how does that affect you in relation to all the politics?

MF: Oh it was weird. It was so weird growing up and it's still kind of strange. I mean it's not strange so much now, but growing up it was like okay we're going to do family history time. And I'm like "Okay". So everyone had their whole tree and I have such a mixed up [laughs] kind of tree, and there's a lot of information that's not there also. So it was very interesting. They were like "Really? That's where you're from? Okay, that's how you got brown."

MN: Now did you speak Spanish growing up at all?

MF: Yes. My first language was Spanish.

MN: Wow.

MF: Very first, but it stopped. So it got - -

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Now so your mother is fluent in Spanish?

MF: No, no. This is the thing; I had a babysitter [laughter]. The babysitter [laughs]. And so from the time, when I was born my mom had to get a babysitter because she had to work. So I had this babysitter for a very long time and - - but my first words were in Spanish and like “la luna, luna, luna”. I was like screaming at the moon and all this stuff [laughs]. And when she was married to my dad he was like “I don’t understand what she’s saying.”

MN: [laughs]

MF: I was saying all these things. She was like “I don’t understand what she’s saying. No. No. You need to speak English.” So I lost a lot of it. So now most of it is “Spanglish” and I understand more than I can speak now, which a lot of people for the most part. I’ve been to Puerto Rico. I love it there. I promised myself that I am definitely going to have a house there -

MN: Oh.

MF: - - [laughs] and I’m going to find the rest of my relatives [laughs].

MN: Now do you have pictures from your childhood that you brought with us if you could - -

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: I have some.

MN: - - show, hold them up and - -

MF: This is my grandmother and my mom - -

MN: Oh wow.

MF: - - and I swear that I look a lot like my grandmother. People swear by it and I'm just like [inaudible].

MN: Was this taken in New York City or - -

MF: This is in New York. Actually, my grandfather took this picture. He was a photographer.

This is my mom and I.

MN: Wow. That's a great picture and where is that taken?

MF: Oh that's by the river. Where is that? That's over there by the, what is it, the FDR.

MN: The FDR right, okay.

MF: Yes. Can you see that?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Yes.

MF: Okay. [laughs] This is a, you know those pictures they have at Sears that you can take when you're a little kid?

MN: [laughs]

MF: It's me. [laughs] That's me. That's funny. That's hilarious. [background noise] Oh, I'm sorry.

MN: That's okay.

MF: And this is my grandmother and all of her friends. This is her right there. That's my grandma.

MN: Wow and where is this taken? In New York?

MF: This is in New York at a club. I can tell you what club. This is so crazy. This is - - I don't know if it's behind the picture I can't remember - - oh no it's not. I want to say - - oh - - not the Cotton Club, but - - it might have been the Cotton Club - - but, famous, famous nightclub and they're just, they're hanging out, so funny. And then we have all these other things, articles, whatever that - -

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Okay, we'll do some of that stuff at the end.

MF: Yes.

MN: Now, at what point did you start thinking you would be a professional dancer? At what age?

MF: Oh I never thought I wouldn't be honestly. My mom every year, she would always ask me the same questions. She was like "Chelle, look, this field is very competitive you know, and you can't play around. Do you want to do this as your profession?" And I said "I think so. I love doing it." And she was like "Okay, alright, so you'll keep going to classes. No problem." And this is every year from the time that I started. Every year she would always ask, "Do you still want to do this? Do you still want to do this?" And I was like "Yes. Yes." Finally high school comes around, she was like "Okay Chelle, do you want to go to an arts school or what? What do you want to do because the Catholic high schools don't offer dance."

MN: This is know.

MF: And so I applied. I was like - - I applied to Spellman and Mount Saint Helen and all those public high schools, I mean Catholic high schools, and I got accepted to all of them no problem and then came the auditions for the dance. So there was LaGuardia and there was Julia Richmond's Talents Unlimited, which is where I ended up going. And my mom was freaking

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

out. She was like “Oh my God. You’re going to go to public school. I don’t know about this.

[laughs] I don’t know about this.” So - - but I ended up going there and - -

MN: Julia Richmond Talents Unlimited. Was it a small school?

MF: Yes. Julia Richmond was completely on the opposite side of where LaGuardia is. So

LaGuardia is on the West side - -

MN: Yes I know - - I know - -

MF: Yes, on the East Side. And it was Julia Richmond and Talents Unlimited was the program in Julia Richmond.

MN: Right. I see.

MF: Now Talents Unlimited it’s - - is it’s own high school.

MN: Right. In the same building.

MF: In the same building. Yes.

MN: And how many students were in your program?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: Oh my gosh. It - - in the dance program?

MN: Yes.

MF: Or in talent?

MN: In the dance program.

MF: In the dance program I want to say there were maybe a total of fifty-something.

MN: And were they talented?

MF: Some were [laughter]. Some were and some weren't as focused. I think everyone was probably talented, but some weren't just as focused.

MN: Are there any people other than you still going [inaudible].

MF: Yes. Yes, there are actually. One of my good friends Marlene Ortiz, she - - we were there and she was maybe a sophomore or something like that when I joined, but yes, we both ended up actually going to Purchase. And she left Purchase because she ended up doing a Madonna tour, doing like all of these concert tours.

MN: Oh so she became a Pop dancer.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: She did well. She did **background**, then she went Broadway. So now she's, she's an awesome dancer, and so now - - she, she did Tarzan for a little while. She did - - now she's doing De La Guarda. Well she was doing De La Guarda but now they have another show called Fuerzabruta and so she's in that.

MN: I love, I love the Madonna dancing.

MF: Yes.

MN: I mean they, they do some crazy stuff.

MF: [laughs] Yes. So she's done well. She - - and we stay in contact with each other all the time. Yes, there were a few here and there that have continued. And it's just interesting and then I hear from them from time to time.

MN: Now when you went from going to your school in the Bronx to Julia Richmond, what adjustments did you have to make?

MF: Oh my goodness, just all the people. There was just a lot more people [laughter] and definitely - - and they all came from different boroughs. I think that's what really got to me because in the Bronx, we're all from the Bronx, it's fine. But at Richmond, it was crazy. "Yes, no I live in Queens." "No, I live in Brooklyn." I'm like "Whoa." I've never been to these

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

places because I was always in the Bronx. I never went to Brooklyn. I never went to Queens or Staten Island or anything.

MN: Now did you, coming from the Bronx, feel like there was a stigma attached to it or that people were afraid of it or it didn't really come down that way?

MF: It didn't come down that way. It came to that when I went to college though. That's when I felt that the most.

MN: But not in high school?

MF: Not in high school because everyone is from a different borough and not from a different state. But yes, in high school it was fun. In high school we were also worried about different gangs. That was mostly - -

MN: Now what was the gang - - how did that gang thing come down?

MF: Oh there were - - I had no idea about gangs until [laughs] I went to high school too [laughs]. When I got there, I mean I knew of them, but the reality of it - -

MN: But what were the names, some of the names?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: It was like the Crips and the Bloods and all that stuff. And I'm like wait a second, isn't that West Coast? [laughter] They're like "No, they're here too." I'm like "Whoa."

MN: Where they in the school or - -

MF: Yes they were in - - and there were all these announcements, "Oh your not allowed to wear this or that." And then also during that time it was all about people getting robbed for their shearlings, you know the shearling coats - -

MN: Yes.

MF: - - and they're jewelry and stuff.

MN: And this is in the like early nineties?

MF: Yes.

MN: Now that was, that was also a pretty rough time in New York in terms of - - because you know the crack hit. Did you, did you see any manifestations of crack in your neighborhood? Was this something that you - -

MF: You know, I saw empty bottles and stuff like that out on the streets and like on the corners and stuff like that. And I would always take the stairs up to the second floor because why, why

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

take the elevator? [laughs] But, and so, we'd be like "Whoa, okay." Sometimes I was like "You know maybe I should take the elevator today." [laughs]

MN: But what's interesting is that you were able to live around a lot of things - -

MF: Yes.

MN: - - that you know, took a lot of people out, but you had your own - -

MF: I had a focus. I had a focus and I had a family that really involved themselves in my life and loved me to death and wanted to see me succeed.

MN: Now how much time did you spend with the Fleet side of the family?

MF: I spent a lot of time with them. I mean anytime we had holiday, family time. All holidays were always over there.

MN: Where were they living at the time?

MF: Well my grandmother, she lived in Patterson Houses.

MN: So she was still in Patterson?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: So she was still in Patterson, so family would always get together there [inaudible].

MN: Have you ever felt like unsafe going to Patterson?

MF: Never, never felt unsafe.

MN: [inaudible]

MF: A, it's, it's wild I know because everyone else would say "Oh it's was bad during that time," you know, but family really did protect me and they had my back all the time [laughs]. There was never any worrying.

MN: So you visited your grandmother there. Where else did people live?

MF: Well I would visit my little brother, and that was in the Concourse, over in the Concourse, Grand Concourse. And, and that is pretty much it. And my aunt would come and visit us, my mom's sister that is. And from time to time as I got older people moved to Brooklyn and so we went out to Brooklyn once in a while, but not that often really.

MN: Now did your mother ever - - and Pops ever say "We got to get out of the Bronx"?

MF: All the time but - -

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: [laughs]

MF: - - they never left. They separated and my mom stayed in the Bronx and then, what happened? Well, honestly not until a few months ago, now my mom's gone, now my mom is in Seattle.

MN: In Seattle?

MF: Of all places. My mom is in Seattle now.

MN: That's crazy.

MF: It's crazy.

MN: So she was - - so where - - she stayed in the Bronx.

MF: She's been in the Bronx since I was born, basically [laughs]. From the time - -

MN: In the same apartment?

MF: In the same apartment.

MN: So she's been in the same apartment in the Jackson Houses - -

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: For about thirty years, I would say. Twenty-nine, I'll say twenty-nine years.

MN: And how often would you visit her?

MF: I would visit her a lot and then after graduation, after I graduated - - you know of course I visited my mom because that's where I was living too throughout college and then I graduated and got my own place. I was like "I'm not living in the Bronx." I swore of the Bronx, I did. I was like "I'm never going to live there. I lived there my whole life. That's it; I'm done." [laughs]. Then, so I moved to Washington Heights [laughs] and then I lived there and then I moved, I moved a bunch of times, but I refused to move to the Bronx [laughter]. And so I stayed in Manhattan, upper Manhattan. But now I live in Harlem, but then - - but I would always visit my mom from time to time. I would be like mom you got to get out of here, mom you got to leave, you got to leave, you got to leave. And she was like "I feel fine here. I'm safe here. I know this place" and I'm like "Ugh."

MN: Does she have friends in the building?

MF: She - - she did, she did. But now she's got a whole new life and she lives in Seattle, very happy. She's finally - - it clicked, she was like "I got to get out of here." [laughter] I said "[inaudible] I've been telling you this forever." And so she was like "I got to get out of here." But now of course I'm like "Hmm I could have a huge loft in the Bronx."

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Right [laughter]. So you're going to come back [laughter].

MF: I think about it. I think about it all the time. I'm like "hmm - -

MN: I know all the places [laughs].

MF: - - I could have a huge loft in the Bronx. It's not looking so bad." [laughs]

MN: And all the, all the burned out areas have been rebuilt.

MF: Exactly.

MN: Now what sort of work did your mother do?

MF: Oh, my mom, all kinds of things goodness. She mostly, like retail and merchandising and all that stuff. She worked at Lord and Taylor for a long while, that's where she met my Pop. She worked for this company, **Computer Business Forms** - - this couple that had this company - - worked there for a long time and then she just stopped. And then she did some, she was like a manager, she was like "Oh I'm just going to do a little side job." So she decided to become a manager at this restaurant. I was like "Okay, alright, whatever." [laughter] And then, and then finally she was like "You know, I'm done. I'm not going to work. I'm done." I was like "Okay, fine, whatever." So I think now that she's out of the Bronx and she's in a new place she really loves she, I think she wants to work again and go back to school and do something fun that she

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

loves. Because for the most part she worked so that I could have all this stuff and now it's her time. And I've been wanting her to do this for - -

MN: Cool.

MF: - - a long time so I'm so proud of her that she just made that decision. Yes.

MN: Now what were - - was the dance program at Julia Richmond a positive experience for you?

MF: You know, I made it a positive experience for myself because I realized that everybody there didn't want to be there and some people knew that it was a good program. And I made a lot of friends and some enemies, whatever, [laughter] but I think I made those enemies because I realized the opportunities that were available to me and so the teachers were willing - - they were there so I used them for what they had.

MN: What were some of the opportunities you were given in - - when you were in high school?

MF: Well, well, I mean there many, tons of contests and different ceremonies that I could perform at and different awards that I received. I even wrote some poetry.

MN: Do you have any of your awards with you?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: Oh no. I didn't bring those.

MN: [laughs]

MF: I didn't bring those. I received some kind of award surprisingly for a poem that I wrote in high school. I was like "I'm a dancer, I'm not a writer, why am I getting this award?" But, it happened.

MN: Now did you have any trouble keeping your grades up growing up?

MF: They were average. So you know, it was B's, some C's here and there. But that was me not focusing, so when I did focus it was no problem. I didn't have much - - I was in a whole bunch of advanced placement classes in like Science and English. And so my mom would be like "Okay, I don't get it. You're in these classes, but you're bored?" Is that - - she's like "Why aren't grades - - why aren't they higher?" I'm like "Well, I'm just not focused." [laughs] She's like "Okay. Well we need to figure this out." But she knew that - - she just didn't worry. She was more so worried, she was worried that I would become a statistic because of what was around me. And so I told - -

MN: The statistic - -

MF: Being that I was in a public high school, I was a teenager dating, and that I would somehow become pregnant and then to not get, get a job or something [laughs].

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Now - - oh okay - - now what were the guys like that you were spending time with in those days?

MF: Oh, too fast for me.

MN: Yes. [laughter]

MF: They were too fast for me. But somehow I was dating - - I don't know I dated popular guys that - -

MN: In the school or in the neighborhood more?

MF: Both [laughter]. But it, but it happened in a way because I - - okay, how do I say this? In the neighborhood, I ended up dating a very popular guy and that was because he was a really nice guy and all the girls wanted to date him. And I really didn't want to date him, but they were like "Oh you'll really like him. He's nice."

MN: [laughs]

MF: I'm like "**Whatever, anyway.**" But people wanted to like fight over this guy and I was like "Oh no. I'm not fighting over a guy," you know, because my mom put these values in me and the way that I grew up I was like that's not my whole world so I'm okay. We dated for a

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

brief minute and then I broke up with him and I was like “Sorry, I don’t need that drama.”

[laughs] And then in high school same, same thing, really. It just kind of that happened that way I guess. I don’t know it’s like the nice girl kind of “oh she’s motivated” and you meet kind of like the popular kind of bad boy. Typical, right? So typical. You know, whatever, typical.

MN: Sound’s like my wife’s experience. And your mother was worried?

MF: My mom was worried that I’d get caught up in it. And I was like “No, no I promise.” But she made it clear that she was worried and my Pop did too so once in a while they would take them by the collar and be like “You’re out. Bye.”

MN: Literally?

MF: The guys, yes.

MN: [laughs]

MF: “You’re done. Bye.”

MN: She would, she would - - they would go up to them and say, “You’re out of here”?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: Yes. One time I think because one guy came over to my, to our apartment and he got there early. They were coming, but they got there early so my parents weren't there and my parents were like "Don't let him in. Do not let him in." But I did anyway.

MN: [laughs]

MF: And so I did anyway and so I was sitting down, chatting it up, whatever. My - - they came through the door and they were like "Hmm." But I was like "Well I wasn't going to leave him in the hallway - - [END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE; BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

- - come on, that's rude". And so here's my dad in the kitchen, he's like [makes banging noise] with the knife, chopping really hard on the counter so that the guy could hear the knife [laughter]. I was like "Oh my God." And so I was like "You know what, I think you should probably leave." [laughter] So, I mean there are little funny stories like that but all in all though I knew, I knew what they expected of me, you know, my parents. And so I knew what I had to do and I knew that they - - I didn't want to let them down or become like every other kid that grew up in the projects. I was determined not to let that happen to me so I think that was a huge driving force [laughs] for me.

MN: Now did you get a lot of support from your teachers at Julia Richmond?

MF: Yes. I did, I did. It was one of my teachers - - I mean they always put me into the performances, that was great. They always gave me tickets to go see these [inaudible] on

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

Broadway and different shows. They would take me to - - they would, if they had an extra ticket, they would take me to like the Bessie Awards and things like that.

MN: Oh wow. So you got to go with the teachers at [inaudible].

MF: Yes, yes. It was awesome. They were so great to me because they felt like they saw something you know, that could come from it so I was like "Great, thanks, no problem." And one of me teachers, he had graduated from Purchase, and so he was like "Look, they are going to actually - - the schools are going to come here, they are going to present the school and there is going to be two days of performing. Ask them questions. I went to this school. It's great, you should think about going there after graduating from here". So I said "Okay, no problem." And they were like "You should also apply to Julliard and all the other schools." And I said "Okay."

MN: So you were going to go to a school which fore grounded dance and the arts?

MF: Yes, yes.

MN: And you never - - nobody tried to get you to apply to like an Ivy League school or Rutgers or - -

MF: No because they were all very - - they knew that I wanted to dance. They were - - it was pretty clear and - -

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Now did professional companies go into the schools to try to recruit people at this point?

MF: No, no. It was mostly the colleges of course, would come and try to recruit but no, the only recollection that I have of any recruitment going on at our school was from colleges. Yes.

MN: And did you have to audition for Purchase?

MF: I did. I did. It was so funny. Well, my teacher, Mr. Thompson, this is a different Thompson, not this one [showing picture]. Paul Thompson, he, like I said, he went to Purchase. So he was like "You know you should audition." So he basically choreographed the solo for me to do in addition to teaching the audition that they had. And I did that and I also - - that was my first audition of all the other, of all the other schools that were set up for me to go audition for. And that was the first of maybe eight auditions, eight other schools. And so I went, I auditioned, and a month later, which within that month I was suppose to go audition for the other schools, I found out that I was accepted to Purchase. And so I said "Oh my God, I'm going to Purchase, I don't want to audition for anywhere else." I didn't bother auditioning for Julliard, or [inaudible], Hunter, any of the other schools that offered dance. Because it was like, you know what, I want to stay in New York, but I want to get out of the city.

MN: So you're going to live there?

MF: Yes. Yes. I didn't want to stay in the city at all. I was like I think I really need to get out. So that's what I did.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: And what was like living at Purchase?

MF: Great [laughter]. It was great. I would say Purchase is not for everyone. It's definitely not for everyone.

MN: And what - - why is - - why would you say that?

MF: Because you can get really bored there. I mean - -

MN: There's nothing going on but - -

MF: Nothing. Like if you want to go do something you definitely have to get out and drive. Drive coming into the city. I mean of course on campus there's tons of parties, you can go partying, go see some of the shows at the Performing Arts Center. There's a museum there. You know, you can do that stuff, but once you've done it all you're like okay there is nothing but brick everywhere. The design of the school isn't that great, at least not at that time, and it was just boring and dreadful, especially on the rainy days. I mean, people would get into a lot of trouble just because they were so bored. So, it wasn't for everybody in that sense. But I knew I'd drive, I had my own car.

MN: Oh, you had your own car?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: I did.

MN: Did your parents get you that?

MF: Yes. Well, I - - no. More like I got it for myself because I had my own money because we sued a company [laughs] when I was a child because I fractured my collar bones. Well I fractured both collar bones, twice on each side, as a child. I was a premature baby so that was the weakest, these were the weakest parts of my body.

MN: So how did you fracture your - -

MF: So the last time that I fractured my collar bone was in this department store and their floor was a mess. They had papers all over the floor and I slipped on one of their papers, slipped and fell, fractured my collar bone because I tried to break my fall when I fell and it was awful. Sued, got tons of money and then they gave it to me when I was eighteen.

MN: Oh so the money was held in escrow for you?

MF: Yes.

MN: And you couldn't get it until you were eighteen?

MF: Yes. And that happened when I like maybe seven.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: How is that? It didn't go - - that it was held by - - this is by the lawyer's agreement?

MF: I don't remember what the agreement was.

MN: So you came into money when you were eighteen?

MF: Just a little bit, not that much. I mean [laughs], I used some of it for college and to buy a car and - -

MN: And what kind of car did you get?

MF: Oh my goodness, I had a lemon. It was such a lemon. It was a Ford Escort, like a 1988 Ford Escort or something like that [laughs] and then I had, after that car died, I had a Dodge Omni [laughs].

MN: Right, not some of the better cars of all-time.

MF: Yes. No, no. But it got me from A to B and that's all I needed. [laughs]

MN: Right. Now what was the path that took you from Purchase into professional dance?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: Well, I - - it was - - college was great and I did spring concerts and all that stuff. I did senior projects with those projects and things. I wasn't sure what company I wanted to work for honestly until - - well no I wasn't even after graduation [laughs]. But that spring we did a concert, a spring concert, and we did a Paul Taylor piece and I was in it and some of the people that set the piece on us came from the company and also graduated from Purchase. And so there was an audition happening about a week after graduation and they were like, "Oh well do you want to go? It's a private audition so you have to be invited by someone who has been in the company." I'm like "Oh okay." They were like "Yes?" I was like "Yes I want to go, of course I want to go, it's a job." I was joking. I said "I need job, of course I want to go." Well - - I was like well yes, I'm going to do the typical artist thing. I'm going to be working at a restaurant, struggling, etcetera, etcetera. I had gotten an apartment with my roommates, all this stuff and I was like well this is, here is the beginning of a professional dance career [laughs] as a waitress [laughter]. So that's what I was thinking and I went to this audition and I was like you know, I'm just going to have fun, I'm just going to have fun. So I took the audition and I ended up getting accepted into the second company - -

MN: Right. Wow.

MF: - - and I was like oh my gosh, I just graduated and now I got into the second company? I have a job. I was joking, I was joking, but I wasn't joking. I really did need a job, but I got a job. And it's - - dancing for the second company is a pretty darn good job because you get health insurance, you get dental insurance, you have all this stuff and you're getting paid every week.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Yes, well you know it's so interesting. I mean people don't realize how difficult the arts are. We have - - we did an interview here a month-and-a-half ago with Dominic Chianese, Uncle Junior from The Sopranos.

MF: Oh wow.

MN: And he never fully supported himself with his acting and singing until he was sixty-eight years old. He always had a day job.

MF: Wow.

MN: So you know, which sort of says that this is pretty special to - -

MF: Yes. Yes.

MN: So you never had to have a day job?

MF: I've never, only in college did I ever have a day job.

MN: And what was your day job in college?

MF: I worked at Sundown Saloon in Greenwich, Connecticut.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Sundown Saloon?

MF: Yes. It was a bar and restaurant and yes, I made lots of money there. I was just serving drinks. It was a family restaurant and then a regular bar, and they served brunch.

MN: Yes. You can make a lot of money.

MF: You can make a lot of money. And it was in Greenwich, Connecticut. So I was like "Okay, yes, no problem." [laughs] And yes, I was going to work at - - what is that Dallas Barbeque? BBQ's?

MN: Oh, right.

MF: That's where I was going to work after graduation, but I had training that week, during, during when the audition was happening. And once I found out, I called and was like "You know, you said you were going to pay me for the training? Great. Can you give me that check because I quit. I've got another job." [laughter] And so I never really - -

MN: So you went right into Paul Taylor out of college?

MF: I did.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: And have been in ever since?

MF: Yes. After - - and it's so funny, I was going to leave the second company because I had been there for about three years and I was like alright, this has been a great experience. It's been awesome, I loved every aspect of having this job. I was very appreciative of the blessing that was given to me there. And so then, I was like alright, I think it's my time to move on. I need to go experience more things. And while I was thinking that I guess a little birdie whispered in Paul's ear and then just events that led up to it. Someone retired from the main company and I was about to leave, but before I could even give my notice, he's like - -

MN: Oh.

MF: - - come join the main company. And I was like, well I would be stupid [laughter] to go. I guess this is a whole new experience, which it completely is.

MN: Yes. And that was how long ago?

MF: Oh gosh, about seven years ago.

MN: About - - so you've been with the company, the main company, for seven years?

MF: Yes.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Wow.

MF: Yes. Second company. Yes, about seven years. I think I'm in my seventh year now. Yes.

Second company, three years.

MN: Yes. Wow.

MF: So it's been a long time now. Yes. I mean it's not the type of company that you just get in and then leave. It's definitely a company that you join and you stay for a very long time and when you retire, you pretty much retire and go into either having your own company or teaching at a university or something or - - it's kind of hard to jump into another company because it's a whole - - it's almost the same except experience except it's a different choreographer. But, people do it. People do do it, but that's if you can stand living that lifestyle for that long. But yes, yes it's crazy.

MN: Yes. What - - what percentage of the year are you on the road?

MF: Oh goodness. I'd say about sixty-five percent.

MN: Yes. And on the real on the road?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: Yes. I mean we're working a lot. Work for us, whether it's on the road or at home, is anywhere between thirty to - - thirty to about forty-two weeks out of the year. That's most of the year. So, it's a lot of work.

MN: But how do you avoid injury? [inaudible] You got to see what they do. It's pretty intense.

MF: Oh gosh. I mean, well I avoided injury for a very, very long time until 2007, February 14th. Valentine's Day 2007, my first major injury, I had sprained my ankle. There are only three degrees of a sprained ankle and I had between a second and a third degree sprained ankle. And it happened during a show and my adrenaline was pumping, I was going and then after we were done I was like "You guys, I think something's wrong. [laughs] Something's not right with my foot." We'd just finished the dance. I'd sprained it, but I finished the dance and get up to bow and they're like helping me walk forward and back. And then I go and they carry me off and I'm like "Oh my God," and it starts to hit me. My ankle starts to swell, it's huge and I'm like, "Wait I got to go back out, I have to take my bows" and they're like, "You're not going anywhere." [laughs] But yes, it was awful. But I healed quickly from it and acupuncture - -

MN: Acupuncture?

MF: I swear by it. I swear by it.

MN: Where did you find the acupuncturist?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: Chinatown. My friend goes to this, has been going to this acupuncturist for over eight years and he is magical.

MN: Does he do sports injuries too?

MF: Yes. He does everything. Everything. He's amazing. And it's like, you know, when you go to Chinatown of course you feel like you're really in China and [laughs] after being in China I'm like gosh this really does remind me of China [laughter]. Yes he was amazing. He was like "You're going to have to make some chicken foot soup. I don't know how you feel about chicken feet, but you're going to have to."

MN: So that was part of it? Chicken foot soup?

MF: Yes. I had my regular physical therapy and [laughs] he's like "Okay, that's fine, that's great." And I was like "Can't I just take vitamins, collagen supplements?" He was like "Yes, but there's bi-product in it. You really want the broth."

MN: The foot, the broth.

MF: So yes, so I had to go get some chicken feet, about a dozen, cook up the broth. He's like "Honestly, most cooks in restaurants, that's what they use for their chicken broth."

MN: Is the chicken feet.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: It's the chicken feet.

MN: It's the chicken feet.

MF: Yes. That's what most people use and they don't - -

MN: Let's do that next year at Rock and Roll Hip-Hop class.

MF: Yes. [laughs]

MN: Chicken foot broth.

MF: Yes. Don't tell them though that it's chicken foot [laughs].

MN: Why not?

MF: Because once people know then they're like "Oh no I don't think so." [laughs] But yes, I it's healed quickly from it between acupuncture, physical therapy, and the chicken broth. Yes.

MN: Oh that's, that's amazing.

MF: It was - - yes.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Now in looking back at all of this, you know we always ask this kind of - - how do you feel about your childhood and experience growing up in the Bronx?

MF: I feel pretty good about my childhood. I think I had a very blessed and luck childhood. I was given an awesome set of parents. My mom is great. You know, my dad wasn't around. He was still great in the sense that when I did speak to him, he was always behind me, backing me. And my Pop was great, his whole family, they were always there and - -

MN: You had a great support system.

MF: I had a huge support system and - -

MN: Did you ever feel resentment in your neighborhood from being successful?

MF: Yes and no. No, not from my neighborhood, I wouldn't say that. They were always like - - they would always ask my mom, "Oh where is she now?" and my mom was always so proud and so she was like, "Oh she's alright. She's a brat - -

MN: [laughs]

MF: - - she's good, she's doing this, she's doing that." And I've been on TV a couple times here and there and so [crosstalk] - -

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: So where, what were the TV **shots**? For the company or separately?

MF: One was - - well, mostly with the company and some separately. Like in college I did, we did like, my friends and I did some extra work for the *Cosby Show*.

MN: Oh.

MF: Like the newer *Cosby Show*, not the old *Cosby Show*. And so that was, you know, that was fun. And then while I was in Taylor Two, *Law and Order* was filming and we were performing outside, and they were like, "Would you mind being in our shot?". So we were on *Law and Order*.

MN: Oh really?

MF: So that was fun.

MN: Do you have a copy of the episode?

MF: I don't. My mom might, I don't know.

MN: Were you ever interviewed on like *Bronx Net* or something or - -

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: I was interviewed for - - there was - - it was one of my last shows with Taylor Two during the summer and we performed outside in front of the court house downtown and I was interviewed, I forget by whom, it was, it was some, it was dancing in the streets kind of program thing and yes that was fun. [laughs] I did that.

MN: Now do you have some of your clippings and stuff to show us?

MF: I do.

MN: So let's - -

MF: I do.

MN: - - let's have a little show and tell here.

MF: Let's see here - - what do we have here?

MN: Oh, that's a mighty nice book.

MF: Yes. Oh that's my mom too [laughs]. This is from this year's - - there's Laura - -

MN: Oh no [laughter].

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: That's me. So right here in the, in the white. Yes. An article talking about the season.

Let's see here, this was at the gala [laughs], this is last year maybe - -

MN: [laughs]

MF: Yes. We were photographed and that's Celine and I, oh and there's Paul right there.

MN: Wow.

MF: I've been in the *Saturday Times*, a few times actually, it's hilarious.

MN: Look at this. That's, that's a great picture.

MF: Yeah in the *New York Times* Sunday, you know who's who or whatever. Oh that's a - -
this is an itinerary, this one we went to Italy.

MN: Yes.

MF: [laughs] Did you see that [inaudible]? Sorry.

MN: [laughs]

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: These are just some articles that were online, in the newspapers. This is from **Insights**, and the *New York Times*. That's me right there in that little picture.

MN: Right. [laughter]

MF: And one of the articles. And we did this dancers responding to AIDS. They had this whole event that happens on Fire Island and we performed there and that's with Michael Trusnovic and I doing [inaudible] outside. And this is another, *The New York Sun* - -

MN: Wow. [laughs]

MF: This is Patrick Corbin and I - - actually this is probably a better picture and [inaudible] in there too. That's from San Francisco, both of these, when we performed in San Francisco. Oh gosh, here's a flyer [laughter].

MN: Yes.

MF: But yes, I tend to - - these are from performances. That's on Black Tuesday. Yes. Esplanade, it's one of my favorite dances. But yes, all these things - -

MN: Oh this is, this is really kind of inspiring because again, it contradicts everything people say about the Bronx.

MF: It does. This is my audition number.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: [coughs]

MF: I kept it. [laughs] I was suppose to give it back, but I said “Oh no.”

MN: Now you mentioned that in college people had all these ideas about the Bronx.

MF: Oh yes. Even my fiancé, he was like, “You’re from the Bronx?” [laughs]

MN: Now where was he from originally?

MF: He’s from Seattle.

MN: He’s from Seattle?

MF: He’s a West Coast guy. He grew up in Seattle and in California [crosstalk] and then in his family like in Tennessee and in Chicago. So never experienced New York until he came to Purchase and so then he met me and I was like “Yes, I’m from the Bronx” and he’s like, “You’re from the Bronx?” [laughter] and I was like “Yes, I’m from the Bronx. It’s cool” and so he was like, “Okay, alright” and then he told his family and they’re like, “Oh she’s from the Bronx. Is she nice? Is she mean?”

MN: [laughs]

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: "Is she okay? How's her family?" I was sad.

MN: Maybe I should take the two of you and Erica [inaudible] over to Johnson's together.

MF: [laughs]

MN: You'd be - - [laughs]

MF: Celine would love Johnson.

MN: Yes.

MF: Yes, it's so funny.

MN: Yes, it's interesting. Before we wind up, is there anything you want to say that you didn't say?

MF: Oh gosh.

MN: Anything you left out that's important?

MF: I don't know. I don't think so. Is there anything - -

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MN: Hey Charlie, anything you want to talk about or - -

MF: I don't know. Well, just the relation I guess. The fact that you did an interview I have to just say is amazing. That you did an interview with my Uncle Lloyd - - well Uncle James - -

MN: James.

MF: - - Uncle James Fleet and then the whole relation how it has come about. It's so crazy. And I read that article too. I think I still have it, I might have it on my computer or something.

MN: Yes. Cool.

MF: Yes, it's just amazing to me [laughs]. I'm going to have to - - of course I'm going to have to email them and say, "you know - - [laughs]

MN: Right. It was in this room that we interviewed him - -

MF: That's so wild.

MN: - - and our Jazz researcher, Maxine Gordon, who is Dexter Gordon's widow. So we have a whole jazz history. Were you ever tempted to audition for like a hip-hop video?

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: Yes. I so wanted to be, I wanted to be one of the dancers for Janet Jackson. I was hardcore Janet Jackson fan growing up. Big time. I mean the hair, everything, I was dressing like her, everything, in black all the time.

MN: Are there any pictures of you like - - like looking like Janet Jackson?

MF: Locked away somewhere. [laughter] I even had like the earrings [laughs].

MN: What were your favorite Janet Jackson videos? Let's see if they're the same as mine.

MF: Oh, I loved Pleasure Principle.

MN: Pleasure Principle.

MF: That was awesome. I loved - -

MN: What was the one in the military outfits?

MF: Rhythm Nation.

MN: Rhythm Nation.

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet

Interviewer: Mark Naison

Date: May 15, 2008

MF: I went to that concert. I got D.M.C.'s, from RUN D.M.C., I got his autograph. That was awesome [laughs]. I was like [gasps] and he was like, "Yes, okay, I'll sign."

MN: Now did you ever try to dance in a video when you were coming up?

MF: I never auditioned for it, but we did different shows and did those dances.

MN: Oh this is like at college?

MF: Like at college and even in high school. We'd put on different shows and we'd do those dances there.

MN: [laughs]

MF: It was fun. But for me now I'm like oh that's fun, that's just for fun and I do this.

MN: Right. Okay solid. Thank you very much.

MF: Awesome.

MN: Wow.

MF: [laughs]

Interviewee: Michelle Fleet
Interviewer: Mark Naison
Date: May 15, 2008
[END OF INTERVIEW]