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Harper, Cheryl

Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewee: Cheryl Harper
Interviewer: Arthur Hayes
September 24

Arthur Hayes (AH): I'm Arthur Hayes, I'm interviewing Cheryl Harper. It's September 24, Friday. And this is for the Bronx African American History Project. I'm going to get some basic facts, do you mind telling me your date of birth?

Cheryl Harper (CH): April 12, 1977.

AH: And you were born where and your first five years, where did you grow up in?

CH: I was born in the South Bronx, I think I was born in Prospect Hospital - - I think it closed down, I think I was the first baby born there and then they took me to Lincoln and I grew up my whole life in the South Bronx.

AH: Specific address?

CH: 314 East 143 St. Bronx NY Patterson Projects. First I grew up in 1635 Walton Avenue until I was 11.

AH: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

CH: Yes. I have nine. Most of us are not together.

AH: OK, the ages range from what to what?

CH: 42, my sister who I'm coincidentally going to meet for the first time in 21 years today and my little sister Billy Jean is six years old.

AH: And so you all have the same parents?

CH: No, we all have the same dad. My sister Joy and I are the only ones who share a mom and a dad.

AH: And your father's name is?

CH: Mr. Randolph Harper.

AH: So you grew up in an apartment?

CH: Yes.

AH: And how many for the first grade school, high school - - how many siblings, brothers and sisters did you live with in that apartment?

CH: From the age of I guess two until actually until the age of one until eleven, my father, my sister, and I lived together and then until I was 22, my father, my sister and I - - well she left when I was 19, and we lived together in the Patterson Projects.

AH: Where did you go to grade school?

CH: Grade school I went to PS 70 in the Bronx, it's next to Bronx Lebanon Hospital. And then for junior high I went to Diana Sands and left there and then went to IS 83 which is across the street from Patterson Projects.

AH: Diana Sands, is that named after the actress?

CH: I don't know, I didn't know who it was. [Laughs]

AH: So give us some idea of your neighborhood and your neighbors and buildings when you grew up, it was in the early 80's correct? What do you remember?

CH: So we start from 1535 - - I'm thinking you guys really want to talk about Patterson Projects it doesn't matter?

AH: Yes, but in a sense of what you remember, what you recall about growing up there. We've had stories about people who would say - - almost twice your age at Patterson Projects - - and typically then it was parents who worked in the post office. Moved from Harlem, worked in the post office, and we got the impression that many of them were in the solid, lower middle class families. So we're trying to see how families if any had changed from the 50's and 60's and early years where apparently there were typically and I said there two parent households for

example, seemed to be a norm. And so we're trying to get a sense of this contrasting change.

Was there a gang presence or had that died out?

CH: Are we starting from my early memories?

AH: What's your first memory if there were, do you recall their role?

CH: Right. I'll go back to when I was six years old. My dad had just taken custody of us, my sister Joy and I. My mom was extraordinarily abusive, we were in the news papers for the stuff that happened when we were in her custody and my dad took custody of us and we lived at 1635 Walton Avenue.

AH: So at the time, you were living only with your mother?

CH: My father took custody of us.

AH: But was he living with your mother at the time?

CH: My mother and father were living together but we were not really seeing my dad that much because my mother would shuffle around to different people's houses where she would go and get stoned and we didn't even see her that much.

AH: So she was a drug addict?

CH: Yes she was a drug addict and an alcoholic.

AH: What kind of drugs, was it heroin was it - -

CH: She tells me now that she was primarily an alcoholic at that time but she also told me that she was also addicted to crack for eight years. Now she's six years recovered. That's hard for me to answer that particular question because I remember her drinking a lot of wine. I remember bottles of Thunderbird as the carpets of the house would be stained at my cousin Cheryl's house.

They named me Cheryl after Cheryl, that was her beloved cousin who died of a drug over dose, her stomach wall cracked open.

AH: So your mothers first name?

CH: Janis.

AH: So from what you remember, at what age did you sense that your mother - - its hard to say that a child senses a lot of alcohol, there's something abusive - - what are your recollections of how that played out? From a child how did you - -

CH: In the book which we were discussing today, there's a depiction that comes from my life and this is of two little girls dragging their mother out of the cab with her pants down urinating on herself. Five and six. And yes, I knew she was on drugs or whatever. I knew I was a little kid but you know, it was just my mother and that was don't cross your mom, help her out of the cab, she peed on herself, pull her up by the sides of her jeans - - you and your five year old sister and she sneaks in the house. She think she sneaks in but my father meets us at the door or there's other times when I remember her - -

AH: This incident you're talking about it, it actually happened, was it day light?

CH: It was early evening.

AH: Early evening. You're in a cab coming from where?

CH: From my cousin Cheryl's house.

AH: Which was where?

CH: It's not far from Diana Sands - - you know that sign near - -

AH: No not quite.

CH: Near Crotona?

AH: OK so near Crotona and what?

CH: I don't know exactly.

AH: So you were with her somewhere else before?

CH: Yes at my cousins house.

AH: And she was drinking there?

CH: Yes.

AH: So you sort of knew there was a connection between her conduct then - - her drinking and then the way she was behaving. You were old enough to put those two together.

CH: Yes.

AH: And so there were other incidents like that that you recall?

CH: Yes. I remember my mother trying to go shopping with us for groceries and we would come home and she would be so drunk that she would drop the bags on the floor and the jelly - - I remember the purple jelly, the grape jelly spilling out onto the floor. You know those dirty marble floors at the tenements that were very nice when they were new. I remember that. I remember spaghetti sauce spilling out - - I remember the echo that it made - - you know how those walls are?

AH: Right, right.

CH: Remember the echo it made on the floor. I felt kind of safe because I was home, but it was kind of nightmarish too because it was like wow, I'm going home with the wicked witch.

AH: Did your mother work?

CH: No.

AH: And your father, did he work?

CH: My father made jewelry. People here might know him because he was the bracelet guy here on Fordham Road for about ten years, he used to sell children's bracelets.

AH: What years was that?

CH: '83 through I'd say '87/'88.

AH: So he was his own small business?

CH: Yes, yes.

AH: So there came a time when you said you were about six, where your father - -

CH: Took custody of us.

AH: So actually, do you remember exactly a knock on the door where he came in - - or?

CH: We went through a series of court proceedings for a few years and I remember that too. I remember lawyers coming and passing by and we're cute little kids - - or ignoring us - - there were hard benches I remember that. I remember waiting all day to go into the judges chambers and asking a couple of questions and my dad saying "We're going home soon."

AH: And you were age six again?

CH: Yes I was six.

AH: Do you recall your experience with your mother different from your friends experience with their parents or mothers?

CH: I didn't have any friends. I was a little kid who had a mother who was obviously sick and I was secluded. I went wherever she took us and primarily the kids that associated with were my cousins who were tremendously abused and neglected - - unbelievable.

AH: By their parents?

CH: Yes. One of the parents was Cheryl who I mentioned earlier who died of a drug overdose, she died with her stomach splitting open - - they found her in the house dead five days after she had died.

AH: So give us a sense - - your immediate family, your cousins and you - - was it - - a lot of them or many of them, the ones that were adults, were they involved in taking drugs?

CH: There was my cousin Chevon, a little girl she was about a year older than me. My cousin Chip who - -

AH: They eventually fell to drugs, but I'm saying before that when you are six or seven, were there people in your family who were your mothers age - - you mentioned Cheryl?

CH: Oh. Well by that time I didn't know about anybody being on drugs in my mother's family except for her cousin Cheryl. Now, my mother's cousin's husband, I knew that he was on something but he's not really in the blood line so you can't mention him.

AH: Now you said - - and you're about to say now your peers who were relatives, many of them, or a good number of them ended up being on drugs or were addicted?

CH: Yes. They're all addicted now.

AH: How many?

CH: The three that I mentioned use some sort of drugs.

AH: To this day?

CH: Yes. My cousins' yes.

AH: And did you also do drugs?

CH: No.

AH: What kept you from - -

CH: Because my father would kill me if I did, he would really kill me. But I do have my own vices. From the age of 11 until only two years ago I was taking my allowance - - when I was 11 I was taking my allowance to junior high school and buying the prescription meds out of my classmates parents medicine cabinets when they were at work and ODing.

AH: Self medicating.

CH: Trying to commit suicide.

AH: Why did you feel - -

CH: I read some article when I was in I think 7th grade something about suicide and I had never even conceived of that idea and I had been trying to get out of the misery of life and so I started when I was eleven. I was like oh my god there's a way - - you can actually end your own life. It had never even occurred to me, I was only 11.

AH: What's the misery, can you describe? And what caused the misery, enough so you were suicidal?

CH: The misery is that my whole life I had this idea of what my life should be. I had this idea of what life was and I had these elaborate dreams, actual dreams when I went to sleep. And when I woke up, it was so different and when I was young, I had a lot of talent and things like that and it made me think that I could creep into these worlds of my mind but my reality was so different.

AH: Describe the worlds of your mind - - specifics, so we want to get a sense - - what's the contrast?

CH: The world in my mind had gardens in it. Snow - - I love snow very much. Music. The Wizard of Oz - - I always associate myself with that movie and I do have it now. And now as an

adult I associate myself with the movie To Kill a Mockingbird. But as a young girl the Wizard of Oz was my ideal and that's where I thought I belonged and my life was nothing like that. It was like a hell. I'm not saying I had the worst life in the world. I heard some story on Oprah whose parents threw snakes down on her in a well - - I mean that was worse than me. It was just a dingy, dirty, filthy place where there were lots of promises and stuff because my parents were very talented and gifted but addicted to drugs.

AH: Both parents?

CH: Yes.

AH: And your father - - go ahead I'm sorry.

CH: My father was an alcoholic - -

AH: But even when he took custody of you he was an alcoholic then?

CH: Yes.

AH: But he seemed to be in better control of it than your mother?

CH: Yes. He wouldn't let us be exposed to that. But once he took custody of us, and he was the primary care taker, there were some obvious things going on. I remember my dad coming home once in a blue moon until he caught himself collapsing on his bed and us little girls, one would take one foot, one would take the other and we would pull his boots off.

AH: And that's two of you?

CH: My sister Joy and I. She was about 5 and I was 6. He got a grasp on that pretty soon, but I do remember that but he was a great parent. I don't want my dad to think I'm lying or - -

AH: So he's alive today?

CH: Yes.

AH: Is he - - no longer drinks or is he - -

CH: He is five months sober from crack cocaine which is an immense accomplishment because he's been struggling with that for 20 years. He's an amazing person. He never let his addiction to drugs change his compassion for people - - he's very compassionate. He would go to the shelters, to the soup kitchens and get stuff to share with other people.

AH: So apparently his generation - - do you know how old he is now?

CH: He's 59.

AH: OK 59. Did it seem to you - - I don't necessarily know if you - - the crack cocaine epidemic, was he caught up in that? We're talking about the 80's now - -

CH: Yes but see, I didn't believe that. This is a long, long story you're going to need a lot of tapes for this. [Laughter] You really are. It wasn't until I was 16 that somebody convinced me he was on drugs, someone in the family. I saw life was a hell and it was getting more and more as a hell - - but my father was like this magical character. He is who I based this main character in my book "Melting Ice Heavens" - - I'm going to plug my book [laughs] after and I thought my father was not even a real person, I thought he was a prophet until I was around 16 years old.

AH: Why is that?

CH: Because he's so magical. It was like you would go into a trance when he starts talking.

AH: Did he dress in non-traditional clothing?

CH: He was a regular person, very articulate, very compassionate, very beautiful. He looked like the guy in the book, green eyes - - very keen features, wavy hair. This 6'4" - - he looked like a fairy tale queen only he's a man - - that's what he looked like.

AH: So let's jump back and talk about grade school. You went to grade school where?

CH: PS 70.

AH: Right. Were you a good student, bad student?

CH: Oh I was horrible. They told my dad that they should keep my sister Joy and put me away because I would never be able to learn or anything.

AH: What did you do to have them say that, do you recall?

CH: I couldn't understand what the teachers were talking about, I was introverted. I was poor on tests, I did badly in everything associated with scholastics. It was like I wasn't even a person. I didn't know what they were talking about. All I knew was these dreams in my head and I could draw and I could sing and that's all I knew.

AH: So were you able - - did they ever give you outlets to perform and sing? You never got a chance to draw or paint?

CH: There probably was that but I didn't really participate in that. I was very alienated from the other children because by that time I was with my dad and I was a little girl. And I didn't know how to be a little girl. I didn't know how to have a birthday party - - we had never had that yet. And my dad was trying to struggle with taking care of two little girls - - braid our hair. I didn't know what the other girls were talking about. I remember one time, this was a little later I was maybe 12 or 11, I was in class and the girls were talking about before the teacher came in "Oh I have 20 pairs of underwear in my drawer," and I was thinking who the hell has 20 pairs of underwear you know? Wow, how did that happen? We didn't even go shopping or anything like that. It's kind of like a cave man kind of mentality. I really don't know how to depict it.

AH: So what was the transition period in high school, was that difficult or did you stay to yourself? Where did you go to high school?

CH: High school I initially was at Art and Design - - got kicked out of Art and Design - -

AH: OK well let's go back. Now how did you - - so - - who got you - - in order to get into Art and Design you have to show them - -

CH: Your portfolio.

AH: Right. Anyway so how - - and then someone had to say you had talent I guess and apply for this thing when you were in junior high school or middle school whatever it is? How did that come about, apparently you were drawing for someone, who was that person?

CH: My father. My father told me when I was a baby, when I was a little girl: "You are a singer. You are a writer, you are an artist." I didn't know what he was talking about but I thought I was so lucky to be his daughter. And he took me to Art and Design and we did the test and he made me do a portfolio to be ready and he got me in pretty much. I mean he didn't have influence, but it's him. All the good stuff - - He always says it's me - - it's not me. It's god, 'cause god makes us all have the blessings. I mean I believe as long as there's a breath of life in a person all the things are there, you just have to go through the right channel. My book is going to be making millions of dollars.

AH: What was your portfolio? Was it drawings, oil paintings, what did you - - do you recall what you presented in that portfolio?

CH: The portfolio was primarily fashion design - - fairy sort of things, ball gowns, and all sort of things like that; things that were completely different than me.

AH: Other than your father though, was there any school teacher - - I'm assume they still had art classes?

CH: Yes but nobody could convince me because I didn't believe in myself.

AH: I understand that but was there anyone who tried to direct you and say you had talent, was there a teacher?

CH: Honestly, I couldn't say enough to mention their name. It wouldn't be somebody who devoted any substantial amount of attention and you know, it's not true. It would be my father. I had an upstairs neighbor Unis and Willy Reed who were very contributive toward us they were Seven Day Adventist. And they were very lovely toward us. Their grandson is two years my junior and he's now in law school.

AH: They grew up in Patterson?

CH: They were on the second floor and we were on the first floor.

AH: And who was the one in law school now?

CH: BJ. Bruce Wells. He is Unis and Will Reed's grandson. He grew up in Massachusetts but he would often come to visit his grandparents, so we were exposed to his life too. One time we went up to his house for the summer with his mother who was a psychologist and a nurse and his father was a dean of a college. So I mean we were exposed to that and I was like woah - - people live like this? Oh my god.

AH: What age was that?

CH: I was 14.

AH: So you were about to say that you ultimately didn't go to Art and Design.

CH: I did go but I was kicked out.

AH: By the first year or - -

CH: I was kicked out after two years.

AH: And why was that?

CH: Because I refused to attend things that you have to change in order to do phys ed and I was embarrassed. The girls, you know, they had things in common. I wasn't wearing a bra, even though I needed one I was trying so much to disassociate myself as a female because I didn't know how to be a female, so I was trying to be a male. I was trying to hit that because I couldn't fail as that because I wasn't supposed to be that anyway. This is a mind of an insane person. So I'm insane, I'm in the mental health system now so.

AH: But I would argue that that's rational though, that does make sense. The expectations are not there for one so as you said, it would be hard to fail. Where did you go to high school after that?

CH: After that I went to Morris High School where I adapted the persona of Michael Jackson.

AH: Meaning - - did you that way also?

CH: Yes I did. I had a silk mask that I made, I put the mask on my face. I wore aviation glasses - - it sounds crazy you can go right now and people right now you can say Michael Jackson and they'll know what you're talking about on 143rd and Morris. I had the hat, I had the shoes, gloves - - gloves that were for the wrong season but still they were black and so, I was Michael Jackson.

AH: So what teachers do you remember from Morris?

CH: There was a teacher Mr. Johnson who was amazing. He was a math teacher and I'm horrible at math but he was just amazing. And there were a couple of other teachers but I can't remember their names quite honestly, I can't. Morris was - - it was weird because it had a very rough population of students there but there was a lot of magic. First of all the building looked like a Walt Disney depiction. Yes, you got it a castle. You got it Dr Hayes. There was still this

sort of idea with the teachers there that there were diamonds inside the kids and that let's get them out of hell and then they'll come back and shine up the rest of the kids. That idea was still entrenched in their mind someplace.

AH: So it was Johnson and he was a math teacher?

CH: Yes, Mr. Johnson at Morris High School. He was amazing.

AH: Do you know if he's still there?

CH: No I don't. If he still was I would go talk to him because he would believe in me and I would have more fuel to go on.

AH: I have a question let's go back. You say you had trouble in school but did they just promote you?

CH: This is weird - - see I told you this was going to use a lot of tape. My father taught me to read by the New York Times - - he started off with the New York Times. So that's the person who taught me to read. They told him I wasn't able to learn so he got the New York Times and every day he would show me "Sound this word out, sound this word out," and so by the time I was in the third grade, I was on a twelfth grade reading level but everything else - -

AH: Do you know where your father grew up, was he from the Bronx?

CH: Yes, Prospect Avenue I think. I think he grew up on Prospect Avenue before - - I don't know he said that before - - he told me when the tenements got up he said the neighborhood was very family oriented back then.

AH: Yes.

CH: That's what he always says.

AH: Right. He is where now?

CH: Right now he's upstate in Cooperstown New York getting treatment for cancer.

AH: Can he be reached, can he talk?

CH: Yes he can be reached.

AH: Because it seems to me we should try to do this in a tandem and that we should have you tell a story and we'll follow to fully understand. He does seem remarkable in many ways - - this whole anecdote how he taught you to read the New York Times - - that's admirable. So did you graduate from Morris?

CH: No I didn't. I still didn't do the phys ed so they told me I had to do six months or I had to do the summer to get the phys ed in and I said no, so I dropped out. So my father's like dropped out? You're going back. By then I was 18 so he couldn't make me go back, so he said "You're going to get your GED." So that summer that I dropped out - -

AH: We're in the 90's now?

CH: Yes '96, '97? Something like that?

AH: Alright so you dropped out - -

CH: Yes, maybe it was '94 because when I'm 28 it's ten years since I dropped out of high school.

AH: OK so '94. And your birth year again was what?

CH: April 12, 1977.

AH: So you drop out - - what do you do with yourself?

CH: I went to GED school. I took the test. The course I think was four months or something - - they let me out after three weeks they let me take the test.

AH: What's the test?

CH: The GED test.

AH: No phys ed?

CH: No, because see I could have got the regular diploma if I would have done the phys ed, but I'm still not doing the phys ed [Laughs] I think I know everything, you know I'm not doing that. But yes, I did the GED test after three weeks and I stayed home basically that summer and my dad was like "Go back, find out if you passed." And I was like "No, dad I failed." But I did pass and I got my GED when I was still 18.

AH: Alright so then after that you - -

CH: I had a few jobs. A few neighbors in the building wanted to help me out because I was a good girl, never dated, never exposed to really anything. But I was so badly adapted into society, even where I lived, so Manhattan, 72nd St - - West 72nd the building right where John Lennon died - - where he lived - - what's the name?

AH: It's a hotel but I can't remember - -

CH: Yes that's where I was working.

AH: Doing what?

CH: I was an orthodontist assistant.

AH: Didn't know what I was doing, couldn't fathom being on the trains with all these white sparkly people - - oh my god I was kind of like an animal.

AH: But you had been to Manhattan when you went to high school.

CH: But it wasn't the same.

AH: That was the what, 59th St area?

CH: Yes that was at 59th St. Long story - - I met Ralph Lauren there too when I was 15.

AH: He came to speak or - -?

CH: No, no. I was going home on the train station and I saw a guy who looked like Ralph Lauren down the street and when I got close to him I was like no, that's not Ralph Lauren. And then I got closer in front of the train station and there was Ralph, Ricky Lauren and I think one of their kids and I was like "You're Ralph Lauren aren't you?" And he said yes and there was a limousine in back of him and he shook my hand. And I really wanted to say please take me out to model [Laughs] because I was wanting to be a model. But I was like oh my god I just met Ralph Lauren let me just go and say this.

AH: So you're working - - you have a decent job but you say you kept jumping back and forth or what?

CH: There was a problem I really could not communicate in the smallest way with the patients and they were very uncomfortable around me. I didn't know how to answer phones - - I didn't even know how to say "Hello." I just like - - on the phone let them talk first and then the sentences were broken up. So the lady who was the orthodontist, she was a black woman and she was in a prestigious area. She was like listen you need to go to school and if you do, I'll consider having you back but I can't have you here darling, you are not well adapted - - you're scaring off our patients. And I wasn't very good hygienically either. I didn't wear a bra still - - I had this sheet that I had torn off of my bed and a little section of sheet and tied it around myself to make it look like I didn't have breasts but I obviously did and I was wearing a sheet - - so it made me look weirder. This is like a crazy story right?

AH: Well it's your story.

CH: You can hear my voice changing and all that.

AH: So you had a number of jobs and you're still 18/19 - - so what's the next step?

CH: Stayed in the house for about - - no, no, no when I was 19 I went to Catherine Gibbs Business school and I stayed there for seven months for a nine month graduate program or whatever it was for billing or something - - dropped out.

AH: Dropped out after that?

CH: Yes. Dropped out after seven months, didn't complete it. And after that I stayed home, in my dark house with my dad, watching Charlie Rose at night which was a great revelation to me. When I found out about Charlie Rose I was like oh my god, there was this guy who was talking to these celebrities - - which he is a celebrity - -but he's talking to them in this dark room which is kind of safe in this dark room around this round table. I loved watching that, I waited for it every night that that came on. And I still do believe that I'm supposed to be that person at that table. And I am. I will be. [Laughs]

AH: So one question comes to mind; why do you think - - or how did you avoid drugs?

CH: Because my father would kill me if I used them.

AH: Did you hang out with other people much?

CH: A little I hung out because I thought the ghetto thing was the thing to be because I was so much the opposite and they looked like they were so adored and everything like that - - it was a shiny thing, like those girls get attention from boys, that's how I want to be - - they're wearing clothes, nice stuff like that and plus they were girls. So that was the immediate area of my neighborhood and I'm trying to adapt to something - - assimilate to something. And they were girls so I thought that they were great. Which they are great but that's not - -

AH: You said "ghetto thing," can you elaborate?

CH: Streetness, using drugs on the reg, having a lot of sexual partners, getting into fights, causing trouble, just being jealous of people, starting trouble, roaming the streets, wearing the greatest new sneakers - - I didn't do those things but eventually I was allowed to hang out with them.

AH: At what age?

CH: Gradually from the time I was around my late teen years.

AH: So now you're like 18/19 and you're having these jobs, and you came back home - - so what are you doing then?

CH: Nothing. I was walking around being Michael Jackson and that's how I got a lot of respect by being Michael Jackson - - innocent Michael Jackson who was so weird and can speak differently than other people. They speak in this kind of ghettoness type of term and I can kind of have a little bit of my dad's way about me so people are a little fascinated because they don't know anything, people my own age.

AH: So your typical day was like what?

CH: Nothing. Like my typical day was day dreaming, laying around in this filthy house that we lived in.

AH: House or apartment?

CH: Apartment. I would go to my Aunt Unis' house and she would say "Cheryl, you need to go to college." And her daughter Sheila Wells and her husband Bruce Wells who was BJ's father, Bruce Jr - - they would invite me to go to Massachusetts but I always felt too ashamed and I had nothing to offer so I never went back. But I was grown and basically they were offering to

mentor me again. And I never took up on it. I just felt like garbage. I felt too spoiled. By the time I was 17 I felt old.

AH: Now your fathers family, did they grow up in New York or are they southerners?

CH: They grew up in New York.

AH: OK how about the grandparents?

CH: My grandmother, Anne Harper, I think she grew up first in North Carolina.

AH: Have you ever been to the South to visit?

CH: Yes we have a cousin who's a corporate lawyer there.

AH: Where in North Carolina?

CH: I don't know exactly, I was like 6 years old when I first went to visit.

AH: Do you know their last names?

CH: My last name is Harper so - -

AH: Alright but your father wasn't born in the South?

CH: No.

AH: So he grew up in the Bronx too right?

CH: Right.

AH: Did his parents come from the South?

CH: I know that his mom was born in North Carolina

AH: OK but you don't know when she - -

CH: No because I never met her. She had passed away by the time I was born.

AH: So your father would be able to tell us. So - - from age - - you're hanging around with the Jackson thing - - when did you get out of the phase, this persona?

CH: It's hard to say. I think I started leaving that alone when I was around 23 years old when I had my first boyfriend, which was my supervisor. Long story how I got involved with him but I didn't love him. He presented to me like he loved me, he was twenty years my senior and I felt sorry for him crying and begging me to go out with him.

AH: Supervisor in what?

CH: In a job, I was in another job. I don't want to say what it was because it's going to be too - - people are going to know what I'm talking about.

AH: It's alright. But you were going from different jobs at the time?

CH: Yes. So by the time I was 23 I had another job and my first boyfriend who was 20 years my senior - - a big garbage guy who I hated - -

AH: What do you mean by a garbage guy?

CH: He was trash. And I was too stupid to remember and pay attention to the lessons my father had taught me and I was just so entrenched - - I was kind of in a trance by there was some dude who was paying attention to me and I thought it was in my head but it wasn't but it was a game trying to play on me. But I let that happen, it's not anybody's fault, my father had taught me better and then I fell in love with a guy his name was Ralph Perella - - he was again about 20 years my senior, a drug addict - - I don't know if I could get sued for that, could we take the name out?

AH: OK I'm sure we can - - you'll probably be able to see transcripts or whatever, we're not trying to get into any legal problems with this. So when did you embark upon the book project?

Two years ago?

CH: Yes two years ago when I came back from the Salem Tyeko University of Aeronautics in West Virginia because I was going to be an airline pilot.

AH: OK so let's go back. How did you get to the Japanese owned - - because they have a [Inaudible] post in Connecticut, the same company, the Japanese company that's why I caught that. But how did you - - At what point did you decide OK enough with Michael Jackson and you went - -

CH: My little sister Joy had been to college and she had graduated college.

AH: Where was she in college?

CH: She was in college at Suny Purchase and she graduated with a bachelors in music composition.

AH: So what is she doing now?

CH: Right now she's in Miami Florida trying to promote her album.

AH: And she's about how old?

CH: She's 26 years old.

AH: So apparently you have musical, creative talent in your family?

CH: Yes.

AH: So did she tell you or what did she - -

CH: She had been trying to get me out of the situation I was in. Because even when we were living in that dingy house and stuff, my sister went to Bronx Science. She was going to - -

AH: Joy?

CH: Yes Joy. She was going to the Apollo winning the championships or whatever - - winning. There were agents shooting at her from right and left. Even when she was in junior high school

there was a author, I forget his name, but he wanted Joy in his book but we were like no, he's not offering enough money, she was like a prodigy, I was jealous of her my whole life.

AH: But she went to Bronx High School of Science you said?

CH: Yes, yes.

AH: So she was good in math or science?

CH: Yes she was smart. She wanted to be a cardiac surgeon but then she went to the Apollo and the bug for entertainment was in her after that, she didn't want to mess with anything, medicine, she wanted to be an entertainer. The attention and the applause - - she did get a lot of attention and she's beautiful girl.

AH: Are you still in contact with her on a regular basis?

CH: Yes she's still in Miami Florida, she moved there last year.

AH: OK so again, as you were saying, how did this - - you were persuaded, convinced you should go to school, and this was aeronautics you said?

CH: Yes. Because I said oh, let me be doing something where I can get away from people, go in the sky. Didn't know anything about what I was doing. So I applied to maybe three dozen colleges all over the country and I got into a few on financial aid and all that stuff like that. And I picked out one. I wanted to go to one in Florida, Embry Riddle, but my father was like "No that's too far away you can't leave me." He didn't even want me going to one in West Virginia. He was like you should go to one in Long Island but I wanted to go to one in West Virginia. Long story, long story. Need a lot of tapes.

AH: To get into aeronautics school you had to - - do you recall?

CH: Essays, I had to write essays.

AH: Do you recall what was the convincing part of your essay?

CH: What was the convincing part of my essay?

AH: Well what you would guess to be?

CH: I have an ability, I wouldn't call it a talent it's an ability passed on from my father I think to make a lot out of nothing and make it real. I have that ability to take almost a crumb - - my dad used to do this exercise with us when we were little when we were like five or six. He would take a piece of lint and say "Tell me 20 things about it." And I guess that is manifested throughout my life so I can do that, I can pull you in by doing it. I can say this little aspect I know about now make it really big.

AH: That's reflected in your story telling. Remember I said you had vivid details about maybe ten seconds a time, but you had such vivid detail.

CH: Yes Dr. Hayes.

AH: So that's where it comes from. Well that explains a lot. Alright so you go there to school, what are you learning? What were you learning or training to be?

CH: I was going there to be an airline pilot but I only stayed there a little less than a month, I had a nervous breakdown. But it was great, it was so beautiful oh my god. The hills were amazing, there were mountains all around it was green, the people - - there were white people and they were so friendly. And everyone said the white people are racist but I mean they might have been racist I don't know, but I would just go up to them and be nice to them and if you're nice to them they would be nice back to you. And the black people there were sweet too. I guess when you grow up in a different environment you have a different perspective of live and you think everything is this little corner in the Bronx and it's not. These people have this

brilliance in their eyes and the food is nice and everything is really clean and at night you hear birds and all these things chirping and it's like oh my god I'm living in this tiny part and I don't even know what life is. I don't know. And I still feel that way.

AH: What year is this?

CH: That was 2001, I came home on September 11th just coincidentally because there was a psychiatrist in West Virginia and he was like "You need to be committed." So I called my family and said they want to commit me to a psychiatric ward and they said well we don't know the law outside of New York City, you're coming home.

AH: What was the diagnosis? You said you had a nervous breakdown?

CH: Major, major depression and when I came home to New York City they found out I had borderline personality disorder, which I mean - - all the garbage that I went through I had to be a monster but I just thought it was normal but when I got into a foreign environment it started getting worse.

AH: Why do you say monster? Because you haven't told me that you've done anything to hurt other people?

CH: I feel like a monster.

AH: A little quirky but not a - -

CH: I feel like a monster I feel like somebody who destroyed the gift of life in me. And I so often wake up in the morning and say "God, why didn't you give this life energy to somebody who wants it?" I could die and I'd be - - I do feel that way sometimes. But once in a while I meet somebody who's brilliant and I try to grab a hold of them like Joe Sigel or - -

AH: So you're living where right now?

CH: Right now I'm living in Ollandview Avenue in the Bronx near the Pelham Parkway.

AH: OK and you're living by yourself or?

CH: In a shared apartment.

AH: When did you - - and so you don't work now?

CH: No I'm on SSI and SSD.

AH: Which means for those who don't know?

CH: I'm getting money for all the time that I worked and I'm getting money for having major depression, borderline personality disorder.

AH: When did you start writing your novel?

CH: About two years ago.

AH: What spurred you to do that?

CH: Because I felt like I was a waste of human life and let there be one thing that I did before I died or killed myself, which I tried many times. I was in a coma in '99 they told my dad I was going to die. None of my organs worked but before I died I said I wasn't garbage that I actually did something with all these conceptions and things in my mind and when I write it's different than when I talk. When I write everything is clear, when you talk you lie. You have to kind of depict something, your emotions are battling you so my words are kind of getting jumbled up here. But I wanted someday in the world to say gee, these things in my head - - I was associating with these brilliant things - -

AH: How did you find Dr. Naison, how did you find out about this project?

CH: I was coming home or I was going to a psychiatric appointment with my doctor. My doctor's name is Dr Bloomhill [Inaudible] at Lincoln Hospital - - I don't know if I should have

said that name, maybe she wouldn't mind but anyway, I saw his film crew out there and I walked past them and I knew about my book I was like god, she's been just been trying to tell me about having the ability to relate your ideas to people. So I walked across the street and I said god, let me go back and see what's going on. I said "What's going on guys?" And they told me and I said I'm Cheryl Harper I wrote a book - - immediately Dr. Naison gave me his card and said contact me. I contacted him a year later. I ended up in a shelter and x,y,z but I found his number again and I called him and long story. Did a lot of things.

AH: So you're obviously hoping that this book will do well and I said Dr. Naison [Inaudible] but what sort of generally - - you made some comments about the Bronx and particularly what impressed me you said when you went south you saw that the world was slightly different. But reflecting on these years, these two decades or more living in the Bronx - -

CH: 27 years.

AH: Yes but have you seen changes? What are those changes for better or for worse, does there seem to be the same thing?

CH: In a way you could say it's more shiny because everyone has adapted to this mentality of materialism. They don't even know why. But every time something new comes out even if it's something that they don't need or they don't want, they're trying to get it so that they kind of associate themselves with these videos that are being thrown out on them from TV so I see people who look like they're really economically really prosperous but they're not. And it's kind of like a clown show really. But I mean it's still basically the same story: a bunch of people who are of family structure, same thing being perpetuated over and over. Some people are being enlightened and getting an education - - god bless those people who can I don't think my mind

works for formal education - - but it's a vicious cycle. I can't say it's something that I have pride in - - when I'm blessed enough I don't even want to come back to the Bronx. Maybe I'll change I don't know, but I want to crawl out of myself.

AH: Is it the Bronx or is it you?

CH: I don't want anything that is associated with me. I would change the way I look if I had the ability and one day I probably will. I'll change my name.

AH: What's the best thing about the Bronx?

CH: The best thing is my early memories of life with my dad. I mean there were great things too. He would take us to Crotona Park and he would catch butterflies with us. He would catch butterflies and put them in a jar and then let them loose in the house. They're beautiful things too, it just seems like the bad things get kind of stick to you. Or maybe they just stuck to me.