



1-3-2012

Henry, Ray

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Interviewee: Ray Henry
Interviewer: Anthony Trabucco
Date: May 3, 2012

Anthony Trabucco: I'm just gonna start asking questions and you just talk, man, aight?

Ray Henry: OK

AT: So, for the record, state your name and date of birth.

RH: Ray, Ray Henry. Uh, March '52.

AT: Aight, now tell me about your upbringing, your early childhood. Who you lived with, where you lived?

RH: Haha, I lived in a lot of places! I lived on Fordham and Valentine, I attended Our Lady of Mercy, uh, parochial school, which is on Marianne Avenue and Fordham Road, not too far from Fordham University. I lived with my mother at that time, we moved from there to Third Avenue and 178th St. We left that location cause, uh, I was still goin to our Lady of Mercy. Then, me and Freddie used to kind of like walk around the neighborhoods cause we, you know, on our school days when we would be off, we...and I found this location on Longfellow Avenue, which was a nice area at that time, it was still partially white and black and, that was about it, and Cuban, there wasn't that many white, um, Puerto Rican, um, Dominicans or anything like that. Uh, from there we moved to, further up on Longfellow, actually my mother was the president of the Longfellow Better Block Association, whereas, what we did, we gave block parties in the schoolyard and we had four bands for every three hours. Um, we had a different, different talents, different styles of music. Not only did we have oil can d-, calypso, oil can drums--we had Latin bands, we had soul bands, we had, uh, rhythm and blues and stuff like that. We, kind of like, had the battle of the groups, that was my institution.

AT: And did you ever perform in those?

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RH: I sang in a couple groups at times there. But, um, we had the battle of the groups, that was my institution to the South Bronx. They said wait a minute, we got all these entertainers that came from here, Billy Stewart, Mongo Santamaria, um, Mangito was his son, he taught me how to play LPs and...I sang with the F-Tabs, I sang with, uh, the Butterscotch somewhat. Not really the Butterscotch, I would say, but we did little things. We sang with Colonel Abrams, uh...who else, there were quite a few people I sang with. But we always had--. I sang with Al Jarreau. And we moved up towards, um..actually, I was on 174th St., we moved up from Longfellow to 174th, whereas at that time the neighborhood was shell shot. It looked like World War III hit the South Bronx! Today, and the image that's being portrayed today, they not really considering all of the endeavors that we embarked upon when we were coming up in the area. We used to sing with, like with Joe Patan (name may not be correctly spelled) under the street lamp and, you know, we were doo-woppin, you know, we really had a good time. And every time, we always drew a crowd, people loved the way we'd sound. Then, um, following that, we moved up to Longfellow and Dr. Sorge (name may not be correctly spelled) from I Love a Clean New York Inc. was involved with us somewhat because we were the only, uh, youth group in the neighborhood that were actually cleaning up the debris that was left over from the buildings being shell shot or being ripped off and stuff like that. So, during that time, we'd find--I was looking for a lot that we could put a park in, uh, you know, and I don't even have, I think I do, hold on. That was that picture I showed you the other day.

AT: Which one?

RH: Where you seen all those abandoned buildings.

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AT: Oh, yea, yea.

RH: Ok, so we couldn't, I couldn't get a lot on Longfellow Avenue so we walked around the corner to Bryant, right behind that corner building on Bryant and 174th St. was this building that was torn down and that was the first building the kids and I, we, uh, got together and started throwin' rocks, pilin' up rocks and stuff like that, havin' a good time! It was fun! So, then we, uh, started with, uh, I was working with the Association of Neighborhood Housing developers, um, whereas, they had, uh, they had a couple unit and the People's Housing Network hired me...and I managed 1230 Boston Road, I managed 181416 Crotona Park East, I had, I was appointed by Judge Tressel in the Housing Court. So we were ridin' around, doing our little sidewalk act, the kids used to like my car, they called it the Batmobile!

AT: (Laughs) What kind of car was it?

RH: Cadillac, convertible.

AT: Cool.

RH: '66, can never forget it.

(Both laugh)

RH: But we had, no, we had fun, um, but then after a while they had, we had got into a spat with some of the guys that lived in the building on the corner, right next to the lot. They didn't want us to have it and they figured they could do what they wanted to do and they wanted to try and commandeer the project there, like that bully situation that we going through today, with the kids in school. And, yea, no man, that wasn't happenin'. So, after my mother had passed away.

AT: When did she pass?

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RH: Around eighty--'87...something like that, in that timeframe, you know. And, I was kind of like dishearted, lost all my momentum cause my mother had passed away and I slept in Crotona Park for about a year or so, I mean, not a year, a couple of months, six months...I had my resume out there, HPD picked me up again cause I had originally worked for HPD. I started workin' for HPD when I was like 17. I worked for the Board of Education when I was 16.

AT: Really?

RH: Yeah, I was doing, uh, maintenance for the Board..and, I made more money than the average adult I know (laughs), you know what I'm sayin'? So, I was always fortunate that I always had good jobs and I had people like Reverend Foster, who used to send me out on conferences and stuff like that, under the cedar title, you know title 1-10, and we passed legislation on the titles. So, that would, made me more, like, comfortable with what I was doin' because it was, we were, it was an involvement, you know, Reverend Foster didn't know nobody there. Then I got all the kids together, we used to ride around with the PA on top of the car, playin' music and sayin' (yells in Spanish). And then we'd, you know, so that went on and we, Reverend Foster didn't win in that council magnate district, he ran in this council magnate district, and this is, I think, the 16th council magnate district, I don't even know. But, he ran here, and he won. But the kids from my area also made the contribution to, you know, campaigning with him, or for him, at that point and we were happy, you know. We were ridin' around in cars and listenin' to the music and clappin' our hands and every corner we stopped, everybody would get there and listen to the music we were playin' and then the Spanish, we had a lot of Spanish kids, they would translate for us and that's how, I guess, Reverend Foster won the seat.

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So, following that, we, um, Cherry Park was developed, before--during that time, which, you know...

AT: How old were you when this was goin' on?

RH: What, the Cherry Park?

AT: The Reverend Foster stuff.

RH: Oh, maybe about...17?

AT: Okay.

RH: Um, yeah, approximately 17 years old. And, until today I still see Reverend Foster and, you know, he has the utmost respect for me because he was the first black city council that we ever had in the Bronx.

AT: Really?

RH: Yes, I was more enthused about him becoming a public official for and representing the community because he actually toured the area. He, he sat in meetings with us, even in that shell shocked block that we had, they had, he used to come and sit in our meetings and we may have maybe ten people, if we had that many, initially. It started pickin' up but then the buildings started getting...you know, they were actually vacant, people moving out, we only had two buildings on Longfellow. During the time that I was working for, um, the association, uh, People's Housing Network, uh, which Mike Mckee and Roger Hayes (names may be spelled incorrectly) came out of, uh, the New York State Senate and they were a coalition. And, it was, we used to have a lot of meetings up in Rhinecliff, New York, in the shrines and stuff. We used to always travel underneath, in the underground (Laughs), you know, whereas we never, you would never see us on top of the land, we'd be always under the land because it was so pretty up there, cause it was

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snow, you know, then. You'd see no footprints in the snow! How you movin' from building to building, you know. But, it was pretty, it was really, cause it was, this was a part of Catholic charities as well.

AT: Now, you said the high school you went to was St. Ann's, you said...parochial school?

RH: No, I went to Dewitt Clinton.

AT: Ok, Dewitt Clinton. So, now, it seems like you were pretty active from an early age, you said 16, 17. Tell me more about your high school environment, what that was like, how that shaped what you were doing.

RH: Well, I, what happened was I didn't like to attend the...the school was alright, I went to Junior High School 80, which is on the Moshulu Parkway, 207th street and at that time, uh, I won the Hollywood medal for printing, because I knew everybody need somethin' to eat and they gotta read the can, read the labels on the can, so that was my interest at that point. I left and went to printer's trade school, which was a private trade school cause they, I couldn't get anything further in my area of interest. Today, now I need to go back cause now they got computer. (Laughs) Which is, you know, computer graphics and stuff so I need to advance my, advance the technology but I need to apply myself more to it but I haven't done it as of yet cause I, you know, I'm computer illiterate. Not computer illiterate, e-literate! (Laughter) So, you know, I'm not ashamed to say.

AT: (Laughs) No, that's fine, man.

RH: But, you know, I'm learning each and every day and as we go along, we meet each and every, each different individual, they share, you know. It's not like, you know, I know it all and I don't want to share with you, you know. But, but even at that age, I

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mean, at a young age, I did pretty good. We had a 75-car garage on Longfellow. We used to make a thousand dollars every two days.

AT: There you go!

RH: Um, aside of me managing properties for the court, we were still, I was still doing my side thing, we would build cars and get 'em out on the road, you know, I had, uh, before I left Longfellow, I had, what, I had three Cadillacs, one Ford, and Reverend Foster's station wagon that we used to get the flyers and the posters to put up around the community. And I enjoyed it, I mean, through, you know, actually I need to go back a little bit. There was one gentleman that was really instrumental in my life, uh, his name was William Shuler. And we had the Modern Mariner Cadet Corporation...

AT: How do you spell Shuler, just spell it for me.

RH: S-h-u-l-e-r.

AT: OK, continue, sorry.

RH: He kinda like worked with Raheena Davis, uh, what's his name? Uh, there was another, uh, Admiral, I forgot his name but we had cadet programs in the area, we had karate schools at 134, 136. PS 66? We had karate schools on Freeman and Jennings, I mean we, you know, we were, all of us, every--collectively, it was a fun thing for me. We had competitions against the United States Coast Guard, we had competitions against the 41st precinct karate team. My sensei came from the 44, uh, the 41, the 41st precinct and he was located on Simpson St. So I was born and raised, I was born and raised in the Bronx. I never tried to venture out of the Bronx but what I did do, I traveled from borough to borough through entertainment, singing, reading and meeting new people. At that time it wasn't like it is today cause there were no guns, if you had a fight you had to fight one-

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on-one, hand to hand. Now they don't want you, they, the kid, I guess, they punks now, I ain't gon' say it. (Both laugh) Because they'd rather shoot you than fight with you one-on-one cause they don't want the ass whippin', excuse my language. So, I mean, you know, we had a good time out here. Then, my grandfather lived on Teller Avenue and 170th St., on the top of the hill by the schoolyard. I forgot the name, the number of the school, but I used to have to come all the way from Longfellow Avenue over here to feed him, you know, make sure he was alright. He bought, matter-of-fact, he payed for my first car and got my driver's license. So, I, you know, even today I remember him and I, you know, I love him still to this day for helpin' me out. But I was able to be, you know, be successful. I had that, I had, what they call it? Oh man, um, I had that moral support in my family. You know, we didn't, a lot of kids didn't have it. You know, even when I went to school, I always went to school in white areas. You know, my mother didn't want..."No, boy, you got to go to school where I'm tellin' you, I'm sendin' you. You not goin' to school with these boys around here." So, we always traveled from state, place-to-place but I was, she would always make sure that we were in, that we were either in-- after a certain time, after my third grade at Our Lady of Mercy, she couldn't afford to pay for it. So, you know, we were poor. I mean, very poor but we got, I got along. That's why when I switched schools, I was working and paying for my education so that helped me out quite a bit.

AT: Now, it sounds like you tried to...own property, if I'm not mistaken. Right, you had that lot, you were trying to manage houses. How important did you feel, how important did you feel it was, uh, to maintain buildings around the Bronx, to own these properties and to use them?

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RH: I felt that it was a necessity because we was, we lived in dilapidated housing and, like I said, those buildings that we, that are no longer there, uh, were, um, they were falling apart. Um, and when HPD hired me, what I did was try to learn the trade to the best of my ability so this way that I could supply the building with services that we weren't receiving. You know, because I used to run in and out of abandoned buildings and have fun with...we had fun, you know. (Laughter) But, you know, the kids used to chase us up and the backyards and the vacant lots and we chased each other around. We had, we really had a lot of fun in my growing days. But, you know, I was never depressed. You know, that was something strange, you know, out of all that devastation I should've been depressed. I was, the only time I really became depressed is when I lost my mother and that was enough to make anybody be depressed. If you lose your family--

AT: Absolutely, of course.

RH: It's the same thing, so, but my mother was always, like, always instrumental, she dealt with the Board of Ed., she dealt with the community, uh, the politicians and tryin' to get things done, you know, where--

AT: What was your mother's name?

RH: Cherry, Mary Cherry.

AT: Cherry or Sherry?

RH: Cherry, C-h-e-double r-y.

AT: OK, cool. So, now...

RH: That's why the garden was named after her, Cherry Park.

AT: Oh, really? OK, so after she passed, gimme an idea of what you were doing in the late 80s, early 90s, how you were, how your life changed?

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RH: Well, we were still singing. Keith, uh, Keith Brooks and a couple of other guys, Vinny and, uh, Fefee (name may be spelled incorrectly) from Brooklyn. So, we sang, that's, uh, it was kind of like, that's all we did but then, um, my life changed...it was basically a happy time, um, before my mother's demise...uh, cause we did the garden. My mother used to always say, "Ray, I don't why you puttin' so much effort into that project. That garden is not gon' be anything." Then Liz Christie from the council on environment, Liz loved my mother so she said, "You know what, we gon' name this Cherry Park." And that's when Cherry Park was developed. Mayor Koch came up and he put two goldfish and stuff in the pond and we became part of Bronx Botanical Gardens. You know, we were all, we were affiliated, you know. So, but I learned from them and they--my only problem, my only setback was that i couldn't remain in that area of, in horticulture that way because of my mother's passing and I kind of like sulked and we just gave up for a minute but still today, I'm in the process of tryin' to have my mother's name restored to that project because that was one of the first green thumb packages in the Bronx, uh, that was actually completed with the assistance of others. Uh, and I could thank, uh, Ray Spano for being, referring me to Liz Christie because Ray, he was the editor for Alternate Currents, everything came out of the Association of Neighborhood Housing developers so we just, they assigned our staff to, uh, different, uh, agencies or, I would say, parishes in the Bronx. Or, rather, all over the city. And, um, we were very happy. We did what we could do. I'm, I'm glad that I got the experience cause I got renovate a building, I could take this building apart and put it back together with my eyes closed.

AT: That's good knowledge to have, man.

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RH: And a few others cause I had a few buildings. I, all of the buildings that I really managed for the courts were like 45 units and better, except for one building. That was 1230 Boston Road, that was 20 units. But it had 5 or 6 room apartments and when I took over that building we only had two occupied apartments. When I left that building the building was half full and I was trying to continue to work with the building. And then the city foreclosed cause the back taxes wasn't paid but I wasn't responsible, I wasn't supposed to pay the back taxes. The owner of the building was supposed to pay the back taxes.

AT: And now, what time period was this, what years were you managing these particular buildings?

RH: That was like, during around the 80s.

AT: And, now, how did you feel...the people that lived there, the tenants, how did they treat the place? I mean, did they, did you have problems with them? Were you able to cooperate with them? Were they good?

RH: They were cooperating with me. You know, we, everybody, they were on the bank account, we had three signatures on the bank account. Whatever repairs we needed, we sat down, we met with each other and they told me, you know, what they wanted and I, just, on a regular basis they'd call me on the phone, I'd get in cab, I'd run to 1230 Boston Road.

AT: And, the reason I ask is because...uh, I think in the media and in a lot of literature the way the Bronx is portrayed is there was this white flight and then all the black folks were left and the place fell apart for some reason and--

RH: No, no.

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AT: And what I'm hearing from you is a completely different story.

RH: No, it wasn't even like that. The plight came in when the buildings started becoming vandalized, burnt out. I don't know if it was an insurance deal, don't, don't quote me, but I know they were makin' room for, kind of, gentrification again, to move other people in that didn't have any place to stay and, you know, this was basically other people other than black, white, Cuban. So, there was, I didn't understand why they would be burning themselves out and jeopardizing the lives of their families. But, it happened so then the landlords started doing insurance jobs, walking away from buildings, sitting in, um, what they call it? Uh, speculators, not speculators, um...these people that milk buildings. They'd hire individuals, say, that these the owners of the building. He'd collect the rents, he wouldn't spend the money to make repairs, you know. So the buildings became abandoned, people started moving out, they no longer were comfortable where they lived. So what my institution was, to stabilize the community whereas we could all live together, you know, and live decently. Because, if I remember correctly, when I was a child women that were on welfare, they couldn't even have a man come to their house. You know, so, there was a problem there (Laughter). Uh, you know, cause like if the case worker came to the home, they'd come and look through the house and see if you had too much of somethin' they wanna know where you got it from and who was the man, he's been spendin' they money and, you know, c'mon, that's my private business, that's private--that's private business. That don't have nothin' to do with the city of New York. But through the Mayor Lindsay administration, he was the one who funded that project, Cherry Park. Mayor Koch, he gave us some support. As a matter of fact, when he came up and contributed the fish to the pond, he said "This is the first rebuilding of the South

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Bronx." My agency, which was the Longfellow Block Association, and then we incorporated it into Longfellow Better Block and Houston Housing--

AT: And who said that, that is was the rebuilding of the Bronx?

RH: Mayor Koch.

AT: Oh, did he?

RH: Yeah, so, uh, we were you know, we were back on the good foot. Then we had, he also made some suggestion that we start an umbrella organization. That was when the planning boards first started and I would go to 51 Chambers, bring the street permits up from there to the planning board, uh, and give it to the district manager who also, by the way, graduated from Fordham University. You know what I'm sayin'? But, you know, we, Fordham has been involved in our life, you know, in our community for a while. It's not like it first happened, you know. But I, you know, I really think they, I'm satisfied, I lived a full life here and I had fun, you know, overall, I can still smile about it. The only thing I found about losing my family members and I wasn't able to do more for them in my capacity of managing property for the state and for the city. Um, I wanted to, more or less, try to get my family to, like, okay, if my mother was alive now, by me moving here, she would enjoy this place, you know. Because it's a private home, we don't have to worry about factions running in and out of the building causing destruction and stuff like that. But now that, um, this building is gonna be up for sale soon, or it is up for sale, for purchase. So, I'm kind of disheartened about it because there's not enough monies and the city's tying up monies. Eh, section 8 is supposed to be paying a certain proportion of the rents.

AT: What's section 8?

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RH: It's, uh, it's a housing subsidy. Whereas the rent's would be exorbitant but the section 8 would cover a certain amount and the client would be responsible to pay a proportion of the, you know, to the landlord. But the, um, they're phasing out, not section 8, but there's other units that they phased out whereas, I think I showed you an article? I don't know if I showed it to you. (Looks for article) And that program was basically geared for people that were working, uh, trying to better their life and, uh, the city decided they wanted to ax it. And where are these people going, but they're going to wind up in shelters. And, like I said, we don't have enough affordable housing. You know, we need more. (Laughs)

AT: Absolutely. Now, you said that, I'm interested because you said that Fordham has always been active in helping you guys--how much of this work you were doing, uh, you know, Fordham has a Catholic tradition obviously, how much of this work was affiliated with the church? I know you were working with Reverend Foster and stuff like that--

RH: Well, that was--Reverend--mostly all of our work was done through the Church because Monsignor Smith was my catechism teacher and he was a part of St. Joseph's who actually did the, well, would up negotiating with the administration, kind of like the rebuilding of the 174th shopping area and the renovations of the building. He worked, we worked kind of, like, close together but, uh, then he became Monsignor Smith and they moved him to Father Gigante's parish and then I think, if I'm not mistaken he passed away. But, uh, he was very instrumental in the area, too, so, you know there are some people that we have in our hearts and we don't forget, we'll never forget and Father Smith, Monsignor--well, he was Father Smith at St. Joseph's but he became Monsignor and he kind of, like, stuck by us, you know, he didn't have no problem with us. Cause when I was young I used to be a little devil, we used to fight all the time. We be out at

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these block parties. But, you know, Father Smith used to grab me by my ears and say "Come here, boy!" (Laughs) But, you know, I remember even, my godfather's a priest so, I was baptized so I just try to keep things in proper perspective. I met with the, the Catholic fathers from citywide at the conference downtown and I told them I was, uh, what was I? I was a moralist, which I am. You know, I'll listen you, I'll hear what you have to say, if it doesn't register, I'll think about it. I may not attack you, I may not come back at you the same day but I will get back to you, you know, cause it's something I felt uncomfortable about. Even with the shelters, the shelters across the street from a school-- I don't think that's logical. Because, first of all, you gotta set up--we need role models here and what does that do to those kids? It gives them a different perspective of life. People don't care about us, why should we have to care, you know what I'm sayin? So then all of our family members, they're in shelters, they got nowhere to live, you know, and a lot of people are unemployed. Even with the unemployment problem now, understaffed, underpaid, you know? There's a whole lot of problems out there that haven't been addressed yet. I, I had, in my mind I have a way of doing things but I can't express my thought as far as media coverage and stuff like that. I have to do it through the people, within the people cause they have their own suggestions and I think that it's better that way, all I do, I'm like a tool, a mechanism to deal with the city administration so that way, you need something done, I have my little green book that tells me which agencies, who is responsible for certain areas. I just get on the phone or I do it through the councilman's office and now that we have a new assemblywoman I'm kind of like working with her and I'm pleased that she's articulate, you know, and she's young enough to handle the weight, the workload. You know, so it's just uh...

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AT: Now, it's interesting to me that you say, you always stress how people were involved. Now, the Bronx is probably the only place in the borough area to resist traditional gentrification. By that I mean, you know, businesses coming in from the outside. It seems like everything you're saying is happening inside the Bronx. Would you say that's absolutely true?

RH: Yes.

AT: That's good. Um, now I'd like to, how did you get involved with the Clay Avenue Historic District?

RH: I was placed here by the city of New York. I was the super for a building across the street.

AT: And what year was that?

RH: '92.

AT: And, just, talk about that. How did that unfold, how did you--who was here, what was it like?

RH: Well, it was always, it was a peaceful block, you know, everybody, the owners, the older people that came here, they owned the houses and all I did, they used to knock on my window to get me to do work for them cause they knew I was skilled so I helped them out. Mr. King, before he passed away was actually the founder of the Clay Avenue--it wasn't the Clay Avenue Historical District, it was just the historical district. After he passed away, then after our meetings, we used to meet privately in his basement and we used to discuss the politics of it. So I learned from him and the tenants there, some of the owners and tenants, they said "Ray, just put your name on the paper man, I ain't, just do what you gotta do." (Indistinguishable 34:27-29), we got kinda like close together

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because he had a building around the corner and he had hired me to do some work for him as well. Although, during that time I was, you know, I didn't have a regular, I had a regular income coming from HPD but it was, I still had to pay my rent. So the monies wasn't, you know, exorbitant. It should have been. Uh, then I didn't, I couldn't make enough money so I had to become a part of the public assistance program, whereas they pay the rent and I had to pay the telephone, light, and gas and whatever, you know. That put me there. Then after, after moving from that building, because they built, actually I placed, I got, I enrolled the building in the TIL Program, which is the Tenant Interim Lease Program, whereas the tenants could own their own apartments. My institution was to have the building turn into a co-op. So, a building similar to this, or it had three, four apartments and I wanted each and every tenant to own the building, I mean their apartment. I had one tenant in the building, she was married to the owner. He passed away so she figured she was entitled to the property. That didn't work! So I tried to get her to pay her, you know, continue to pay her rent and work with us whereas we would own our own apartments, instead of having to lease 'em. And that didn't work too well, cause she was still stubborn and she figured she was gonna be the owner. So, we had a sister named Karima Malik (name may be spelled incorrectly), she came from HPD as, supposedly, the organizer for the building. But what the city didn't do, they failed to notify us in advance of whether they were gonna come to us. Uh, they would come when they wanted to, you know, and, at that time, listen, I got other things. I go to meetings, you know, I'm involved with other things. I can't just work with you like that. You have to notify me cause even if I have my schools, even after I had my school, still had my school, I wouldn't be home at all cause I would be always in training. You know, so I,

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you know, I, um, so that, um didn't work. She pulled out, the coordinator that was supposed to be responsible for the TIL, he refused to work with me because of her agreement or whatever. And...that was it, the building was sold, after I did all the work, except for the interior. So, one of the guys that I knew said, "Well, Ray you movin' out...", I was workin' in this apartment, I was renovatin' this apartment. He said, "You move here, you can move in here." And I moved in here, been here since then.

AT: And what were, how bad would you say the buildings were before you renovated them? Were they really run-down or...?

RH: Yeah...well, this apartment was filthy, I mean, it's cluttered now but, I mean, it was filthy. It had carpet on the floor, looked like mud. You know, they had wallpaper on the walls with, you know, part of the corners hangin' off, stuff like that. So, we, I stripped all the corners. Along with that, we did the electrical lines along the top of the ceiling where the curve is at. (Points at the ceiling) All that was out cause...even over here, it had, cause I had put, we put, I put four outlets in this room. So, all of the wiring had to come, go across all the way back, to the back where the circuit breaker's at. So, that room was vacant, was out. All of the ceilings were out in here. You know, so that's where, I finally got, I got this one together. Then I sanded the floors and--

AT: Were--were any of the buildings on the block just uninhabitable? Were they, I mean...

RH: They were.

AT: Yeah.

RH: That building across the street there, I forgot the building address. Uh, it should be 10-....sixty...(goes to window to check address)...it's 1062, yeah, 1062, 1064 was vacant,

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1062 was vacant. This building here I think, that's right next door I think is 1065, that's vacant now but the city kind of like put in a package to sell the building. 1065 was totally gutted and done over. The lady that bought that building, 1062, she spent money to renovate the building, but, you know, well I don't know who she hired but whatever. Um, but 1062 is one of the more highlighted buildings on the block. I did 1060, uh, 1060 here. I did, I worked in 1050, I did 10-, well I did a lot of buildings, I did a lot of buildings on this block. I worked, in fact, at one time I had mostly every building on this block as a super.

AT: And how did the neighborhood change after the renovations began, after, after it was designated as a historic district and everything started to look a lot nicer, how was the neighborhood different?

RH: Well, it kept most of the little monster out the block. You know, the ones that'll cause trouble all the time. Yeah, well, they don't come in here. They don't come in here at all. All they do, if anything, if any damage they do or any crimes they commit, they mostly commit it outside the block. This block, I been here twenty years and they only had one shootout on the block. And, it really was, it was stupid, we never had that problem here before.

AT: And obviously you feel a...a responsibility to take care of this block. Do you feel that the other people who live here do as well?

RH: Well, they have concerns. You know, basically each and every one of them is concerned with their own buildings, the buildings that they own, you know. So, collectively, that brings it back together. It's better if you own your own house than if you rent from somebody else and you don't care. If you own your own building, then you

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care. You know, you gon' put pride in it. Other part of it, you don't really care. You know, man, "it's just a place for me to live", you know, sayin', and no matter what goes on the house, they don't care what kind of drama goes on. They don't, you know, I don't know, it's probably the teachings. My mother taught us different than these people are teaching their kids today. Cause if I said something wrong out my mouth, or even if my mother was talking to somebody..and, she would say, "Boy, let me tell you somethin'. You see adults talkin', keep your mouth closed." She say speak when your spoken to! I always, I always got that from my mother. Um, yeah, if Sister Bernice called me up to the chalkboard and she hit me on my hand with the pointer stick, I got home, somebody from the school called the house, I got home, I got beat at home, too, you know. So, it was always, I could never win! You know, I could never win! But today, in this day and age, if you hit a child, the child can call the police and say you hit him and they'll lock you up. So, that's what they need, they need some chastising.

AT: Now, I'd like to, I want to come back to Clay Avenue in a minute or two, but I'd like to hear more about your mother because it sounds like she was very influential, uh, not only to you as a person but to what you do around here and what you do for a living. Um, how did she feel about what was going on in the Bronx in the 70s and the 80s, when the Bronx was burning?

RH: She wasn't happy, she wasn't happy. She lived here, she said well, I don't why, but you see, the thing was, when I was on Longfellow, I spoke to Mr. Ron Schiffman (name may be spelled incorrectly) from Pratt Institute, okay, of architectural design. And he has sent, uh, one of his, um, his intern from the school to us to do our, to give us architectural assistance. And we started, drawing, you know, doin' the maps, doin' the layouts and

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everything. But that was that time when Mayor Koch offered, said that we should become a part of the umbrella organization. So my, I pulled out, I pulled out because they weren't ready, I felt. There was always a power struggle, you know, up there. And then, um, because I never needed them. I always used my own intuition or my connections to get what I needed done. Because in certain city agencies, we have people that we put in those positions because they needed jobs and they were, you know, they were out there. They kind of like adapted quickly, so they learnt well. But we just wanted, we wanted to survive and, actually, there was, there was building across the street when I was on Longfellow that's called Gardenview. This building was a huge courthouse--courtyard but it had five entrances. It was beautiful, it had a fountain in the middle of it and everything. I mean, it was a beautiful building. So, when, uh, when Ray Spano came up. They said, Ray, cause he was the architect, he was the intern from Pratt. He came, he say, "I'm gonna give you assistance." And he started drawin' up the plans and we were about to submit it to the planning board for, you know, of our intent and for some reason or another, it just fell by the wayside. We always got cut off for some reason. Because we didn't ever deal with bureaucracy that way. I would do my little research in terms of who was, what agencies I needed to know, uh, who I need to get involved, get in touch with. And then, what they did, they, um, they, you know, kind of like gave me, offered me some kind of assistance because of my past experiences or maybe my employment, who I worked for and stuff like that. Cause, alternate, like I said, uh, the Association of Neighborhood Housing developers had the alternate currents and that was a, more like, a litigation part of the, of the, uh, of the association. Uh, they were, kind of like, even right now, you can call them on the phone, you can even get information from them as well

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cause they are, they were active. Yeah, cause they, oh, oh, it was called City Limits. It was, that was the newspaper, that was the paper, it was City Limits and they, they've been pretty good.

AT: Now, obviously a lot of stuff you did was, you know, with community members and stuff but it sounds like a lot of it was, you know, in conjunction with, with the help of the city. How helpful do you think the city has been with what you try and do? Not only, uh, you know, when you were first beginning, throughout the entire time, how has it changed, has it gotten better, worse?

RH: Well, the city was a school for me. I learnt from the city, you know, cause I didn't have the time, I didn't have the time to sit in the classroom. I had to get mostly hands-on experience. So, the city was a school for me, I learnt. The only administration that I'm really against, actually, is the present administration.

AT: (Laughs) I had a feeling. I don't like him either.

RH: (Laughs) Because he seems like he has some gestapo with him, you know what I'm sayin'. But Mayor Lindsay, Mayor Koch, uh, what's his name, uh, David Dinkins, they were all kind of, like, cooperative and, you know, and when, uh, what's his name, Giuliani? Uh, you know, Bloomberg, you know, so, what they did, they kind of turned people away from, uh, understanding the vote, you know, the education part of it. People are saying, oh, no, I'm not ready to vote. So that put is back, back there in the 30s. Because they, they were arrested and I think that was one of the main problems is that these, our kids are getting arrested. They're not really interested, you know, in voting because they don't, they feel the administrator or the public officials have forsaken them. You know, that's neither here nor there but that's the way they feel. Because, uh, if you go

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back to the time where, the time in Alabama when they had the riots down there. They were tryin' to prevent the people from voting. It was, it's the same here today but it's in a different category.

AT: It's subtle.

RH: Yeah, it's like, it's not, now it's like we gon' lock you up so this way you got no, you don't have no voice and it's only affecting the black and the Puerto Rican communities, or communities of color, lemme put it like that. That's why we have an overburdened, overburdened, uh, shelters in these communities. Whereas other communities, they don't have any. Riverdale, you go up in Riverdale in the Bronx, they don't have any, they have maybe, uh, what they would call it? Supportive housing unit, but they have no shelters. They had the, on Fordham Road, rather Kingsbridge Road, they had the armory. There was shelter there. Then we had the armories down here they turned into shelters. You have, uh, prisoner release programs, people coming out of jail or people that were sentenced to, uh, drugs and stuff like that, placed in these type of facilities where they have, they're mandated, they're monitored to live accordingly. You know, um, I don't see they serve any, it doesn't have no precedence over here. It's just that, I go around, right around this school here, this school right here, we have six shelters, six! And I think it's unfair to this community to have, to be over-saturated and other community boards have no shelters at all. So, we talkin' about the fair share, that's what I'm interested in. I want, you know, I want it to be spread across the board evenly, legally so this way, not one community be over-burdened. And then you got certain people comin' from different parts of the Bronx or Manhattan, Brooklyn, all of 'em from the city of New York that have no, they don't have no, they're selfish, they don't really care. Give 'em somethin' to

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do that would attract their interest, they'll do better. And if a person has a place to stay, I'm sure they would wanna keep their place.

AT: Yeah, now, I just have one more general question. Um, obviously what you've done in the past has worked, with your neighborhoods, with all your community action groups. What do you think that local groups and municipalities, local governments, can do to keep up the work that you've been doin'?' What's missing, what could there be more of?

RH: There's a lot of things. One of 'em is not to overlook the factions that are actually makin' improvements, that's number one. That's the first, that's the first law of nature. Cause if this, if I have an agency workin' with me right now and they're successful and they're achieving their goal, I'm gon' give them support because it can't be nothing more than beautification and self-gratification, ok? That's the way I see it, I mean, I don't see it no other way. Cause with the numbers you got strength. Without the numbers, who are you? You're like me, I'm just movin' from place to place, not bein' recognized! I was involved with the president of the United States comin' into the South Bronx.

AT: Were you?

RH: Yeah, that was back then. If I could find the folder...I could give you a copy...if I could find it. (Looks for folder) I don't know if I have it in here. Actually, I don't really have to talk about, I don't really have to give you an interview because the simple reason is, my paperwork gives the interview!

AT: (Laughs) You do got lots of folders, man.

RH: Yeah, man. These are my school, these are my school folders. See this one is from when I worked with the city...I did see it...here's most of the stuff that I told you about.

END OF INTERVIEW.