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Jackson, Bessie Interview 1

Bronx African American History Project
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Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Bessie Jackson

Date: n. d.

Session 1 of 2

Page 1

Transcribed by: Gregory Peters

Dr. Mark Naison (MN): This is the fifth of the interviews of the Bronx African American history project and the person being interviewed is Bessie Jackson, who is the president of the Bronx Chapter of the Society for the Advancement of African American Life and History. Today, we're going to start the interview talking a little bit about the development of the Bronx and talking about the history of the association and its work. So, the first question I have to ask is when did your family first move to the Bronx?

Bessie Jackson (BJ): Okay. Can I go back and --

MN: --sure

BJ: kind of straighten out--

MN: -- okay

BJ: --the name of the organization that I [Laughs] am involved with. It is the Bronx branch of the Association for the study of African American Life and History, founded by Dr. Carter G. Woodson in 1915. Well, actually I came to the Bronx without family, and I came to the Bronx in 1946. I finished high school here, then I returned to Alabama and I went to Alabama State College for a couple of years. Then I returned to the Bronx and by 1949 I was settled in the Bronx.

MN: Did you come to the Bronx because you had relatives who lived here?

BJ: No, I did not come because I had relatives who lived here. There's a history behind my coming to the Bronx, however. I didn't really want to get into it because it takes a long time to talk about it. But since I know now everybody is curious as to how and why I came to the Bronx, I'll tell you. I'd have to go back. I was born and raised in Dallas

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Bessie Jackson

Date: n. d.

Session 1 of 2

Page 2

County, Alabama, near the city of Calera. I knew that I had to leave there because I had reached a point where I knew that I had to go further in my life, I had to advance in my life. So I needed to get away and explore. Now, as I said, I was still in high school but I was not as young as today's high school students are, because I didn't start school until I was six years old. And then I started in what they called the primer at that time. You had a whole year in the primer. Then the next year, you spent a whole year in the first grade, and then you went up from that. But what happened to me after the first grade, I was sick most of the year and I did not, I was not promoted to the second grade, because I only went to school a couple of months during the year. So then from that point on I went on with my grade each year. So I was, in my way of thinking, old enough to leave my parents' home. And I did not like working in the fields; I was raised on a farm. And this was my parents' farm; it was the family's farm. But, I wanted to explore, I wanted to see what else I could do. I knew by the time I was eight years old that I must become a teacher; I wanted to be a teacher. And I had to find out how I could do it. And there is much to say as to how I got even to the twelfth grade, because there was no high school close to me. So what I had to do, what my parents had to do, was allow me to live in the home of other people, away from our home, in order to go to high school, and they paid for it. But at that time, a dollar was worth an awful lot of money. It was worth an awful lot of goods or whatever, services, goods and services. So they paid four dollars a month for me to stay in this home. And they supplied my food, my food was supplied from home, we bought very little food because we grew almost everything we ate, we grew or raised almost everything we ate. So, I would go home occasionally and stock up with

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Bessie Jackson

Date: n. d.

Session 1 of 2

Page 3

peas and usually different parts of pork, yams, sweet potatoes, and whatever. Now, I cannot give you the whole story now, because I become pretty upset sometimes when I think of the fact that there were students who were going to school on the bus, back and forth; they were living home and they were going back and forth on the bus. And of course they were the Caucasian children. And they would spit at us walking along and throw pebbles at us and what not. But in the meantime, we had to get an education the best way we could. And now I feel personally that I'm not an educated person, that I'm a semi-educated person. And that's because I never had the advantages, I never had a library during the whole time I went to school in the South. I couldn't go to a public library even though as I just stated my parents had their own farm. Because it was our own farm and our own land, we had to pay taxes. So, they owed because they took the money for the taxes. It had to be paid. But we were not given an equal, adequate education. We weren't given adequate educational advantages; we didn't even have access to a typewriter, to learn to type. So there were many things we did not get. And of course there was no foreign language [Crosstalk]. So, and of course I feel that anytime we are denied these things, when other children our own age are given these things, then of course we are being terribly mistreated. So this is one of the things. Now the way I got to New York. I had a home economics teacher who I talked to quite often. And, she knew my desire to get away from home, but to finish high school. She asked me if I would like to go to Massachusetts to work during the summer. Well, I always did like to do housework, but I didn't like to do field work. So I said yes I would like to go to Massachusetts, any place would be different. So then she gave me the name of an

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Bessie Jackson

Date: n. d.

Session 1 of 2

Page 4

employment agent. And she said, write to her, and let her know that you would like to come. What was happening was that they were soliciting southern women and young girls to come to the North to work during the summer or whenever, to do housework, domestic work. Anyway, I wrote and it was through that agency that I came to New York, made my first stop in New York, and then went on to Massachusetts, ended up in North Adams, Massachusetts. A place where I saw maybe five African Americans while I was there and I lived there for a month. But I knew I couldn't stay there; I wasn't comfortable there. But I had seen the New York Times, and I had seen the want ads in the New York Times. So I went to the want ads in the New York Times, called people there, and actually was employed over the phone. I came; I was told exactly how to come to New York. I was told to take the White Plains train from Grand Central Station. Well, now, I had no idea what a White Plains train looked like. I thought the White Plains train had to be white and I wanted to know [Laughter]. I asked people: "What does the White Plains train look like, how will I know it?" I just couldn't get people to answer me. I went to the man at the booth, and he was very impatient with me, he said: "You'll see it when it comes!" What was I to look for? So anyway, finally there was a man, a young African American man who said: "I'll show you, I'm taking the same train." So I went on with him and I got on the White Plains train, and I told him where I was to go, Intervale Avenue. I got off at Intervale Avenue, then I walked according to the directions I had been given. I had no trouble finding the house I had been told about. When I got there, of course, I found that there was a doctor's office in part of the house, and these were young Jewish people, I didn't know anything about Jews, I only knew

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Bessie Jackson

Date: n. d.

Session 1 of 2

Page 5

white and colored. So anyway I later came to realize that they were young Jewish people. I didn't meet the doctor himself, the wife had just had a baby. And she wasn't there; her mother and father were there, they had been staying there taking care of the other child that they had, a six -year-old child. And they wanted to hire someone, the mother and the father, were going to pay me to work, to stay there, and to take care of the house and the child and whatever, to do domestic work. However, the grandmother was very skeptical when she saw me. I was wearing socks, what they called barber socks, and I looked a lot younger than I really was. And she said: "You are a child." And I told her my age and of course I guess that didn't really mean anything; she didn't really believe it. Anyway, she told me where my room was, it was night, so I went in my room and went to bed. And the next morning when I woke up the six-year-old was standing over my head. So I spoke to her, and I greeted her and asked her name, told her my name. Then I got up and I got dressed. I went in the kitchen, there were dirty dishes in the kitchen, so I started washing the dishes. I had been trained to work, so nobody had to stand over me to tell me anything, I knew that if there was a job to do and nobody else was doing it, it was my job. So it was in the house, it was my job, so I started washing the dishes. And the father, this is the grandfather, came in and told me that his daughter had gotten sick during the night and she had to be rushed to the hospital and there would be nobody at the house. And so I wouldn't be able to stay there, but he would give me a reference and he gave me, what did he give me? I think he gave me, I know it was less than ten dollars and I think it was more than five dollars that he gave me. And I went on my way in a strange city knowing absolutely nobody. But it did not matter, I had absolutely no fear,

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Bessie Jackson

Date: n. d.

Session 1 of 2

Page 6

absolutely none, because it was early in the morning, I had all day to find a place to live, [Laughs], and I had no fear. So anyway, I started walking through the area, then I saw a man who spoke to me and asked me if I would come to his house to light the light. And I had never had such a proposal before,[Laughs] I said “Light the light, what does that mean?”[Crosstalk] He explained that he wanted to light the stove to heat some water. I said, “Well, what’s the matter with you? Can’t you light a stove to heat some water?” Then I asked him about his wife, I said surely she knows how. He said she wasn’t home, she was on vacation. I said, “Well, certainly I am not going there.”[Laughs] And you know when I told a group of African Americans this story, oh yes he promised that he was going to pay me. And I said wait, but anyway, when I told a group of African Americans this story they explained to me what was going on. That this man, of course he was wearing a tall black hat, and this man was Jewish and it was Saturday, and he couldn’t light it. Oh, he explained to me that he knew how to light it, but it was a sin for him to light it. I said: “It is a sin for you and not a sin for me, you’re afraid of going to hell, but I can go to hell?” You see, that is the way I felt, I felt disrespected by him. I still feel disrespected when I think of it. Because this was a total disrespect, you light your own light and don’t ask anybody else, you don’t ask anybody to do, to commit what you believe to be a sin. I have never done that, and so no, I don’t like that. Anyway, I just walked around looking at the sights, and as I said not feeling one bit upset until I finally wandered over to Boston Road, and when I got there I saw a lot of businesses that were owned by African Americans. I saw barbershops and restaurants [Crosstalk].

MN: Bessie, I was just going to ask what section of Boston Road was that?

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Bessie Jackson

Date: n. d.

Session 1 of 2

Page 7

BJ: Not too far from Morris High School, north of Morris High School, yes. There was a theater there some place near, and it was between, this was between that theater I believe, and Morris High School

MN: Was this 1946?

BJ: This was in 1946, yes. It was the summer of 1946, and so I went in to one of the beauty parlors, where I saw all these ladies getting their hair done and sitting around waiting, and so forth. So I just simply asked, "Does anybody know anyone who wants someone to work for them?" And the ladies, most of them didn't say a word. They were quiet, somebody said no, so I walked on out. I mean I was going to ask at the next place, the same question; but what happened was there was a barbershop, right next to the beauty parlor. And one of the barbers came from the barbershop, and called to me. He said: "There's a lady in here who wants to talk to you." So I went in to see what the lady had to say, I had a small bag in my hand, an overnight bag; the rest of my clothing was at the train station. I had put the other bag in a locker at the train station. So anyway, she asked my name, and where was I from. Because you see, they didn't ask those kinds of questions here in New York, they didn't do that kind of thing here in New York, but they did in Alabama. But anyway, I mean because everybody talked to everybody in Alabama. But anyway she said: "Do you have a place to stay?" and I said no. She said: "Well, you sit there until the lady is finished with my hair." She said: "I have a vacant room at my house, you can go home with me." And I did, you see I had been raised to talk to strangers, to invite strangers in, to serve them something to eat or to drink, this is the way we were raised, where I came from. So, other people sitting there told this lady,

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Bessie Jackson

Date: n. d.

Session 1 of 2

Page 8

I didn't hear them tell her then, but she told me that they told her that she was taking a great chance. And when I met people who I told this kind of story to, you know a part of this story, they said to me, you were taking quite a chance [Laughter]. Well that's the way it was. The lady was very nice. I stayed, I went with her and I stayed there all weekend. And Monday morning, it happened that she was a domestic worker. But she did days work, she came home, you know back and forth, well not days work, she had a special person to work for, but she went back and forth. And she had a lovely apartment on Plantain Avenue, that's where that was. So she took me to an employment agency on Boston Road. The next morning, Monday morning, before she went to work, she took me there. So anyway, right away I got days work, and went back to her; she had already told me, "Don't tell anybody you are here alone, tell them you have an aunt here, and that you are living with your aunt." So I did as she said. The only strange thing I found about her was her accent. I had never heard anyone speak with that accent before; she was from Trinidad. So she told me that she was from Trinidad.

MN: That was something that was curious to me. When you went to these different shops and stores, and as you got to know the neighborhood, did it seem that there was a blend of people who had Southern backgrounds, who had West Indian backgrounds?

BJ: There were more, many more people with southern backgrounds, many more people in those days. Almost everybody, almost every African American you saw could tell you that they came from one of the southern states or another. A lot of them came from South Carolina, and some of them came from North Carolina. But I found more from South Carolina, and I didn't find as many from Alabama; I rarely did find people from

Alabama. Mostly the Alabamians when they came here, they went to Brooklyn, they either went to Brooklyn or Buffalo. Because I had never heard of the Bronx, I had never heard of it.

MN: So you think there were different migration patterns from the South—

BH: --yes, yes—

MN: -- and a few people were going to Chicago, for example.

BJ: Yes, Chicago, Detroit, Cincinnati, Buffalo

[Unidentified Person: Cleveland]

BJ: Yes, Cleveland, Buffalo, and Brooklyn. But not the Bronx.

MN: Now, how did you end up getting the time to go to high school if you ended up--

BJ: -- I negotiated it, I negotiated it. One of the ladies who I worked for, for one day, lived on 163rd Street. She was Irish; I didn't find that out until later. But what I did find out, what I did realize coming from my background, I felt she Caucasian. But I felt very comfortable with her, I felt very comfortable with her. And while I was in that area, on Boston Road, I walked down and I saw Morris High School. And I said, that's the school I want to go to. I want to finish my high school education right here, and then I walked down to her house, I remembered where it was, and I asked her if it would be possible for me, because they had enough space, they had a five room apartment, she and her husband and her son. And I asked her if it would be possible for me to live with them. And I would do all the housework and I would have Saturday to work all day, the only thing is that I like to go to church on Sunday. And I would do whatever I could in the afternoon, but I wanted to go to Morris High School, and finish my education there. So she said, "I

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Bessie Jackson

Date: n. d.

Session 1 of 2

Page 10

think that will work.” And so it did, it did work, it worked for a while. And then what happened was she started taking up all my time on Saturday, most of Saturday I was out with her shopping. And because I was out with her shopping, I didn’t have enough time, really, to do enough housework. So, we saw that I wasn’t able to do all the things that she wanted, so as a matter of fact she became, and I had to do my homework. So during the week I didn’t have much time to do anything but wash dishes. I really didn’t have time to clean during the week. And Sunday of course, it was my day to go to church, and to the movies wherever; it was my day. So anyway, I realized she was unhappy. So I went to the guidance counselor, and asked if there was anything, if she had any job that I could do and I told her what I wanted to do, that I wanted a sleep-in job, the same kind of job that I had, I told her what I wanted. So, the guidance counselor called me a few days after that. And I came to her office, and there was a young woman, and she talked with me and right away she wanted me to come and work with her, and stay with her. Well that worked out well, there were two children in the home, a husband, and a wife. They lived on Undercliff Avenue in a building owned by Mr. Rackland. Mr. Rackland had that very big building on Undercliff Avenue and the next building to it. I was told that everybody who lived in those two buildings were Jewish except one family, one Catholic family, well, a mother and two boys, and her boys, the two boys were, actually there were three boys, and the Jewish mothers hated them, and didn’t want their children to play with them, and the children, of course as I said, were street boys. So, you could see the difference right away. Mr. Rackland himself lived on the floor that I was living on, the sixth floor of that building on Undercliff Avenue. I told a story a couple of months ago

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Bessie Jackson

Date: n. d.

Session 1 of 2

Page 11

on Bronx Net about an experience I had while I was working, while I was living there. I didn't tell where it happened but anyway, while I was living there the lady of the house gave me a note to take to a friend of hers who lived in the other building. I took that note with me and went to the other building and got on the elevator, and was put off the elevator. I was told that I would have to take the servants' elevator. And I didn't know the difference in a servants' elevator and a non-servants' elevator. I ran out of there scared, I was frightened, because the elevator was packed with people, people coming home from work. And nobody said anything to this elevator operator. I looked at them thinking that someone would say to him, "Take her upstairs where she wants to go." But nobody said a word and they looked angry too. And so I ran out as fast as I could. And that was one of the first impressions of an invisible color line I saw in New York. You see I knew about color lines and such, but they didn't have them out in the country. But I didn't know anything about color lines in the North, I had been told there are no color lines. So this just stabbed me right in the heart. I ran back to the house, I went back upstairs, I took the elevator there, I had no problem there. The elevator man did not discriminate against me there, and I told the lady I couldn't go to that building. I could not go to that building and be put off an elevator. So then she did what she should have done in the first place, she called her friend on the phone, and said whatever she wanted to say to her.

MN: So, Bessie, you know it still bothers me that you went through such hurtful experiences as a young person. It sort of causes me to wonder about your experience at Morris High School, in terms of the teachers, guidance counselors, and your fellow

students. You mentioned, and I don't take you at your word, when you said you were semi-educated in the South. I imagine that there were emotional and moral and other kinds of experiences that benefited you--

BJ: --Oh yes, definitely

MN: --even though that you were attending schools--

BJ: -- definitely--

MN: --that were more financially endowed we'll say.

BJ: Definitely.

MN: What was it like at Morris?

BJ: Okay, what was it like at Morris? It was like a different world. I had enjoyed school thoroughly until I went to Morris High School. And that is the only year that I didn't enjoy it thoroughly, however I did get some enjoyment out of it. But it was quite different. I had never seen, I didn't even know white people discriminated against one another. Jews didn't like Irish, and Irish didn't like Jews. I didn't know anything about that because all I knew was black and white. I developed a relationship with a girl for a while, then I realized that she didn't like Jews. So then I realized, well I didn't get too close because I thought I'd be hurt next. You see what I mean. She told me she didn't like Jews. Actually I did very well there but I had an instructor there, who I thought really shouldn't have been in the system; she was a math teacher. And she knew that one of the boys there had a problem, and she said he was a foster child. This was new to me, I had never heard of foster people. So she said, because where I came from if you didn't have a mother or father you had somebody, somebody took you in and they said this is

my adopted child, but there were never any legalities about it. This is just where the child lived, and this was the home of the child. So anyway, the child, the boy, had a lot of problems, apparently, he would antagonize the teacher and the teacher would antagonize him instead of ignoring him. Almost every day there was a disruption in that class, and then she would have other boys take him out. You see, what would happen after she started, she often started herself, and after she started antagonizing him he would stand up like he's going to hit her and a boy would stand up over there, one would stand up over there, they wouldn't say anything, they would just watch him. And then the teacher knew that they had her back, so she could do this all the time, and I had never seen a teacher act like that in the South. There was a much more cordial relationship in the South between teacher, students, and parents; the relationship was much more cordial [Crosstalk]. I graduated that year.

MN: Just so we can take it back to your student days here. Was there a significant African American student population?

BJ: It was, yes it was. It was a very, it was really an integrated population [Crosstalk]. It was an integrated population with everybody. The principal I found out was Jewish, the teachers were [Crosstalk] Irish and Jewish. And I liked most of the teachers really, I really liked them. I didn't dislike that one who didn't--

MN: -- the math teacher?

BJ: -- Yes, who was not adequately prepared to teach. I didn't dislike her, but I even at that time realized that she was in the wrong profession. She should not have been there.

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Bessie Jackson

Date: n. d.

Session 1 of 2

Page 14

MN: So, what would you say the level of interaction or socialization was among the students of different racial groups? Did they live in the same neighborhoods, the same buildings--

BJ: --they lived--

MN: --the same blocks?

BJ: They lived in the same neighborhood. I was, I guess, the only one who had done it so far to Morris High School. Because then, after I had gone to live with these other people on Undercliff Avenue, I had to take the cross town bus over there. Well, some of them took buses I don't know where they were going you know back and forth. But some of them took city buses, but yes, they did live mostly, I think, in the surrounding areas. [Crosstalk] The surrounding area was integrated at that time. The Bronx was integrated-

MN: --So--

BJ: --much more so than it is now.

MN: So if there were student clubs, or teams, or dances, or people, students gathering together in the cafeteria, was there a racial divide? Was it --

BJ: -- There was a racial divide because there was a language divide. You see, they had the French Club; they had different clubs there. And that is about the only thing, they weren't totally racially divided, not totally. But I was only there for one year, and I felt comfortable, I felt comfortable with the students.

MN: What did the curriculum at Morris offer that you might not have gotten had you attended an all African American school, say in Alabama?

BJ: Well, they offered foreign languages and business courses. Those were the main things, foreign languages and business courses.

MN: And you know, I know it's hard to think back. But do you feel that you were encouraged or discouraged towards pursuing a college education?

BJ: Oh, nothing blocked that, I had to pursue that. As I said I knew from the time that I was eight years old that I must be a teacher. I was impressed by my first grade teacher and I wanted to be like her, Ms. Deathel.

MN: Many people say that they--

BJ: --yes—

MN: --went in to education—

BH: --yes—

MN: because of someone.

BJ: Yes. Yes. And not only that, but then I went into Early Childhood Education also. But that wasn't my first choice; I really wanted to be an English teacher. But then I came to realize, okay, here is the semi-education. I came to realize I did not have the background when I went to college, I didn't have the background that I should have gotten in high school, in literature, you see. I couldn't get it all in one year, at Morris High School. So there was much I didn't know about, you know, and had never been in a library until then.

MN: Now, when you went to college in Alabama did you know you were going to return to the Bronx and be a teacher there? Was that your goal?

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Bessie Jackson

Date: n. d.

Session 1 of 2

Page 16

BJ: Oh, definitely. I knew I would not live in Alabama because at that time, everything was so highly segregated. You know there was a Jim Crow style of life there, and I knew I couldn't deal with that. So yes, I knew I would return to New York.

MN: What was the life experience of other family members? Do you have any siblings, cousins and so on? Did they remain in the area, or did they too migrate to parts of the country?

BJ: None of them came to New York. They thought you know, that I was kind of crazy to branch off from everybody. And I guess I was. My father even told me, I had nerve, but I didn't have very good sense [Laughter]. I wasn't very smart [Laughter]. So anyway, I came from a very big family.

[Unidentified Person: a big family.]

BJ: Yes, yes. I am one of eleven.

MN: [Crosstalk] What year did you begin teaching elementary school, and when did you return to the Bronx?

BJ: I started first in daycare. And I loved it; that was in 19-

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE; BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

BJ: I left and came back to New York. It was incredibly hard because I was paying my own way. Although it was really very inexpensive, but I didn't even have the expense money to pay for the inexpensive.[Laughs] So I had to come back and work again. And in the meantime, I got married. And I worked a little while, then I had a son and this was a different career for me. I was quite ready to be a mother and I loved it.

MN: And where did you meet your husband?

BJ: I met my husband here in the Bronx—

MN: --in the Bronx—

BJ: --In the Bronx, yes.

MN: Now you had mentioned going to church on Sunday.

BJ: Yes.

MN: What church did you attend when you first moved to the Bronx?

BJ: When I first moved to the Bronx, I attended Tried Stone Baptist Church. It's still there on Boston Road, I don't know the people of course. It's quite different, you know, everybody there is different. They don't know me now and I don't know them.

MN: Right. Now at the time you started attending that church was it an entirely African American congregation?

BJ: Oh, definitely. I never saw anything else in New York, really. In New York, every church I ever went to, no I won't say that. I'm sorry, I went to a Presbyterian church, I joined that church and it was a Caucasian pastor there. And that was a mixed church; that was Gun Hill and Fish.

MN: When you got married were you living in the neighborhood near Morris High School, was that where you were living? Or in a different part of the Bronx?

BJ: Well, not too far from there, yes. I was in that general area. The people around me were going to Morris High School.

MN: One of the things that you used was the term integrated at one point, and mixed. And usually we use those terms applied to different racial groups--

BJ: -- Yes.

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Bessie Jackson

Date: n. d.

Session 1 of 2

Page 18

MN: -- But I think also we are coming to a great appreciation of the economic diversity within the African American community. I know it may have been difficult for you. You could probably think along those lines as a teenager, a young person, were you aware of different economic backgrounds among African Americans in the Bronx at that time? Were there those who came from working class families with domestics and that sort? Were there children of teacher or professionals?

BJ: I felt my way into that with the newspaper and so forth. In the beginning those were not the people I met, in the beginning. Well you see, in the South I knew lots of teachers and so forth, professional people. But I didn't when I first came to New York, I didn't know African American professionals. What led me into that was I stopped going to church briefly, just before I got married. And then I didn't go on a regular basis. And with my young child, my baby, I didn't go for a while, but by the time he was, well, about a year and a half, I felt like I've got to get back, I've got to go to church. But now which church should I go to? Because I wanted to get involved. So I went around to a few different churches and then I would read the Amsterdam News. And I saw Friendship Baptist Church advertised and that's in Harlem. And I decided first of all, I liked the name, Friendship, Friendship Baptist Church, and I was a Baptist. So I said, well I'll go there and see what it is like. I went there and the pastor of the church was Rev. Kilgore, who was a graduate of Morehouse College, and he came from North Carolina and I just saw a whole lot of people that I could blend with immediately. And he said from the pulpit, inviting people to visit us, to come back, he said, "We're friendly here." And so that day that's what I needed, a friendly church. And so I went back and

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison

Interviewee: Bessie Jackson

Date: n. d.

Session 1 of 2

Page 19

then I joined. And now I had, these were the people who had, at that time, most of them had used cars. But they were people who were getting up on their feet, the social workers and the teachers, yes.

MN: Now, in the 1950s [Crosstalk] could an African American woman who had a high school diploma get work other than domestic work?

BJ: Oh definitely, definitely. I did for a time, work for, New York, for AT&T. And I loved that work. And I had that job that was the job I had when I got married. But after I became pregnant I was sick, and I had to let the job go. So I didn't go back to work then, until I went back to work, I went into daycare.

MN: Okay, we probably should cut this now, and then arrange for a –

[END OF SESSION].