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Melrose, Arnold and Melrose, Evelyn and Teasdale, Ethel

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Transcriber: Jacqueline Soboti

Mark Naison (MN): Hello, I'm here today with Evelyn Melrose, Arnold Melrose, and Ethel Teasdale.

MN: Ok, hello? We're going to get started now. My first question, and this is to Ethel and Evelyn, is when did your families move to the Bronx?

Ethel Teasdale (ET): Now I have to think.

Evelyn Melrose (EM): Well, my family, oh, you got to figure I was three years old when my family moved from New Haven, Connecticut to the Bronx, New York on Washington Avenue.

MN: Washington Avenue and where?

EM: In the Bronx.

MN: Do you remember what the number street nearest was?

ET: Yea, Hunt's--Claremont Parkway and the next blocks I don't know whether that is--I don't remember them but, that was, but the address was 1618 Washington Avenue.

ET: You just got to go back and think.

MN: So your family moved to Washington Avenue and Claremont Parkway?

EM: That's right between Claremont and the next street and Bathgate and Park Avenue was the other avenues.

MN: And what kind of building was it? Was it a walkup, or was it an elevator apartment?

EM: It was a walkup. No, no, it was a walkup, a walkup apartment. And there was three buildings that were built, that were built similar. And my father accepted—what

happened in those days when you moved to New York—there were no houses where

Black people could get an apartment. But if you wanted to accept a job as a super--

MN: So that's how--

EM: That's how we come to live on-- we came to live on Bath-- on Clare--

MN: Washington?

EM: Washington Avenue.

MN: So other families in the building, they were all White?

EM: They were all White, Jewish people. It was during the fall of-- the crash of the--

MN: The Depression.

EM: The Depression. But what I want to tell you, my father would still be in New Haven, Connecticut had he not been called to come work in the United States Government Post Office. And he left a beautiful job in New haven, where he was working for Winchester's mills making all kinds of guns and everything else to come work for the United States Government because it had more of a future to it. You had time to leave; you have vacation, and all of that. And I thought about that, I was thinking about that when I was home, the only way he could get an apartment to live in was to accept a job as a super. Which he didn't mind being the super, as long as he had his job.

MN: So he was working two jobs?

EM: He was, but you see, by him, he had to be working-- he was working at Tremont Avenue Post Office-- that's where he was assigned to, Tremont Avenue. And that was about two blocks from where he accepted the job to become a super. And he always worked nights so it filled in very good with his family. And he was really getting rich but

those people were very poor. They couldn't afford even to eat. My mother was feeding everybody, everyday.

MN: So he was the only one with a civil service job?

EM: Oh, that's right. My Mother was feeding the whole house because the people were very poor they had lost all their money, all their money in the stock markets and whatnot. But they didn't know how to help themselves; the landlord couldn't get-- not one of them to accept a job to clean the, to clean the vestibules. So my father took it and it got so good to him, he, he got a second house. And he did that for a while until he finally gave up the second house to a friend who was working at the post office along with him. And they was doing that for a while.

MN: Wow!

Mark Chapman (MC): So the building was predominantly Jewish?

EM: It was all Jewish, all Jewish.

MN: You know Mark, where I grew up, in Crown Heights, the entire two buildings were Jewish but the superintendent, Mr. Stokes was African-American. And he lived in the basement.

EM: Oh we didn't live in the basement. No, we were on the first floor.

MN: Wow!

EM: We were on the first floor. My father said, "No basement!" But all he had to do was when he came in at night he did down the halls and he pulled the garbage before he went to work in the post office.

MN: Yea, now, now Ethel, Ethel right? Where did your family move?

ET: Yes. Well, they were really from the south and they came-- what little I can remember, not as well as Miss Melrose-- but we lived in Manhattan, Harlem for a short time. But I think we came to the Bronx when I was about two years old that would be 1921 or '22.

MN: And do you remember what neighborhood they moved to?

ET: Yea, we lived on Prospect Avenue area. And same as Evelyn, my father first worked in what they called the "sugar house". And that must have been in Brooklyn, the way I remember them talking about it. That was government too. But he worked in a "sugar house" for quite a while. Plus on Prospect Avenue, 981 Prospect Avenue, my father took the super's job there. And we lived in an apartment, the ground floor apartment, and I remember my mothers always talking about "it was so cold" and that's just very little, I very seldom talk about it myself because I don't really remember to well. But it was Jewish families in there cause I remember when the holidays came, that they were Jewish, they asked you to light the oven stove-- Yea, you got money like that. And then-- that's when I tell you about there was an A&P next door-- used to have-- no one knows that-- on the corner by McCaulfield-- owns the little tiny A&P there. Then we moved further down-- no then he sent for my aunt from Texas and she came up to live with us and then we moved further down Prospect Avenue. That's how come I didn't know Evelyn till late because they lived on one side of the Bronx and I lived on the side on Prospect Avenue.

MN: Right, right. Now, what-- was most of your family from Texas or other states?

ET: No, no. Texas and North Carolina.

MN: North Carolina; cause it's fairly unusual for people to come from Texas to New York City.

ET: Well, my father was in the Merchant Marine. He was a sailor and he signed up when he was about-- he thinks 15-- to get out of there. So he was very young, he was underage, but his older sister signed for him to become a sailor or whatever. And that's when he got discharged-- that's when he didn't want to go back South. And my mother came up here to work, to live with what turned out to be my godmother. She came up here, they lived in-- what turned out to be Long Island, Queens.

MN: Right, now did your mothers work you know also or did they--?

EM: My mother didn't.

ET: My mother did.

EM: My mother didn't because she was having babies. Well she had lost a baby. They had originally come from Savannah, Georgia. But she had lost a baby 10 months old in Savannah and my father was through with Savannah from then on because he said that his baby should've lived, so then they moved to Connecticut. No, after my sister was born-- my sister was born in Savannah too. In Connecticut, I was born. But when she came here, she had to be home because she was pregnant again with my brother, Herby. [Laughs]. And so she was home.

MN: And what about your mother, where did she work?

ET: Oh, my mother, the first job, the first job I remember her telling me about, it was a beading factory. That was a trade she took in school in Wilmington, North Carolina; you made beading on clothing and mostly on bags. And she got a job way downtown.

MN: This was in Manhattan?

ET: Yea, but a beading factory wasn't-- they didn't get much money. I remember I used to hear them talking about it all the time. It wasn't enough money; my mother said her hands were always sore. And then from then on she did domestic work. You know and she--

MN: Did she do domestic work in the Bronx or Manhattan?

ET: No it was-- I can't remember now-- She had several jobs-- I remember her going way downtown to Manhattan--

MN: Was that typical of African-American women in your community, you know, to do domestic work?

ET: Yea, my mother, later on in years, that's what she did, domestic work. And I remember the people who she worked for.

ET: The part when, when you think back on it-- it wasn't that they didn't have education, they did, that's all they could get. Because later on in years when my father went to the post office, he was in the post office you know until he retired, some of your brainiest men worked in the post office. My brother-in-law, who was a lawyer, studying to be a lawyer, went to Hunt College-- post office was loaded with brilliant men, but they couldn't get any other jobs. You know when you look back on it you know it was sort of--

Arnold Melrose (AR): Back then it was a secure job. It was--

ET: Yes, it was civil service, and you got all you-- I know my mother was taken care of very well when he passed.

MC: What type of job in the post office? Was it behind the-- was it the mail security--?

ET: No, my father was a mailman.

MC: Oh, a mailman--

ET: At the beginning he was a sorter, I think that's what they called him--

EM: No, they were laborers.

ET: Laborers, that's what they called it. And then he took-- at the end-- they passed-- they had a test and he took the test.

EM: He passed; my father passed the test when he was 14 years old. Cause they had a nationwide drive on for, for postal workers I guess it was because all the men all his friends came to New York were postal workers. And you had to be living in the neighborhood where you were going to work. And he had passed very high on the test.

MC: So eventually he was delivering the mail?

EM: No! No, he was a mail handler in the post office. He started out on Tremont Avenue, and it was only two blocks away from where he got the offer to be a, to be a janitor. In order to have an apartment, because there was no-- they weren't renting to Black people. You had to take the job as a janitor, so he had it, but they made good money. [Laughs]

MN: Now, when you went to elementary school, was the--

EM: Oh, I could talk about that.

MN: Well, go for it.

EM: I started to-- I started school at an early age, but I wasn't of age to be in school. My older sisters is a year and five months older than me and I always did whatever she did, but I was too young to be in kindergarten. So, but, when they started me, they started me at PS 42 at Washington Avenue and Claremont Avenue-- Washington Avenue and Claremont Parkway. That school is still standing right now, right there at Claremont

Parkway, there it is. I forget what year it was but then never the less I started kindergarten with my sister. Well I thought I started and my mother thought we started to because I made such a racket my sister wasn't going to be left in school and I couldn't go also. So she-- my mother asked the teacher, could I sit in the kindergarten. And they said "oh sure" they all thought it was real nice. And one thing they thought we were different. And I remember them saying this, "I have two pretty little pick-a-ninnies," that's what they called us. There was no Black teachers, all White. "I had two--" and I didn't know what that meant but that's what I remember them saying. And they're so cute and we were the only ones in the whole school-- that PS 42, right over there on Claremont Parkway. And they were coming in from everywhere to look at us. [Laughs] But I didn't mind it. But then finally my sister she finished, you know, they used to promote every six months 1A, 1B, and so I was going to school just she was and nobody never stopped my mother and explained to her that I shouldn't be sitting in there, you know. So after a year my sister got promoted out of the kindergarten going to first grade, so that did it. I had conniptions and that's when my parents decided that they would have to find someplace else to live. And give up this janitor work, and find an apartment. And the didn't have to go to far because about three or four blocks form Claremont Parkway, there was a Black community where quite a few Black people were living. The houses were changing in other words the people who owned the houses was renting to Blacks because what is it that they called it-- White Flight. [Laughs]. You know when they start seeing us they start running.

MC: So this, this time that you're describing was in the early, mid '40's?

EM: No, this is in the 20's yes, this is in the 20's. I was born in 1923.

MN: So this was happening so did you--your family move eastward or south from--?

EM: No they were on the eastward coastline near Savannah, Georgia and they only had to--

MN: No, I mean from where you were living on Claremont and Washington Avenue, where you were living on Washington Avenue. Where was the Black community, further east?

EM: Where was it? It was going downtown.

MN: Downtown.

EM: Yea, it was going downtown. About three block about three from Claremont Parkway, we lived on Third Avenue. You know where Third Avenue is?

MN: Oh yes.

EM: Well it's about-- it started from Claremont Parkway to, oh about 170th Street. And east and west it was Park Avenue and the, and the park and Bathgate Avenue. Oh right, around here, Bathgate Avenue cause that's where we all shopped. And you got good bargains and I don't care where we went we all came back to Bathgate Avenue.

MN: Now, Ethel along Prospect Avenue, were there more, more Black families in that neighborhood? Or was it still predominately Jewish and White?

ET: Jewish was there, on 163rd Street, no, 164th Street we were. Cause when we left Prospect Avenue on 161st Street, where I told you we were before, we moved further up Prospect Avenue and it was then you had found Blacks up there. You even had that Black doctor that was there.

EM: Who Dr. Berman?

ET: Yea. That was probably up there in that brick building, I always could visualize that.

And didn't have to many because we all stayed right there together on Union Avenue

EM: And the houses would slowly, they would slowly, you know-- Because what used to happen anytime my mother couldn't move her furniture around like she wanted-- she said we're going to move. And then she was able to get an apartment anyplace she wanted to.

When we finally across, because you got free rent! They'd give you free rent if you'd just try out their apartment.

MN: This was during the Depression?

EM: Yea, this is during the Depression. You'd get free rent for two months and it was really something. And momma said, "I don't really like this one, let's move across the hall." Because with the flight of everybody, with the whites going you could move wherever you wanted.

ET: You could even get your color scheme, of paint.

EM: Yea, that's right yea they painted everything.

ET: You never went into a dirty apartment.

EM: Oh no.

ET: Never, that's what's so-- you know you can't understand all of a sudden you can't do that they don't do that anymore. You either paint it yourself--

EM: The world is crowded now--

ET: Yea but everything, everything the toilets-- I remember my mother telling me--

EM: You had horse and buggy days. On Webster Ave., Webster Ave was real, a real country. You had the cows and the chickens, the horse and the buggy and the iceman.

Oh, I tell you, I've seen movies of my childhood--

MN: What was that *Billy Bathgate*? That move that they did, there was a movie called *Billy Bathgate*--

EM: Yea, well Bathgate Ave. believe me that was really the shopping center.

MC: So neither of your families ever lived in Harlem, you moved directly to the Bronx?

EM: No, no.

ET: Yea, well I feel like my parents might have been there for a little while. Cause I was born in Harlem Hospital. And at that time, my mother said she had to, I had to go there to be born for some reason she couldn't get into any other hospital but Harlem Hospital to have me. So I think they lived there for maybe about a year or two and then we moved straight to the Bronx because they said it would be better living, you know, they moved up so they thought. The person who would be perfect with this would be my husband, but he's gone; because he actually lived on farms around the Bronx.

EM: Oh he had an apartment?

ET: His family did. They lived in Farms and they thought it was like being in South Carolina. That's what they thought, that's where they came from--

EM: It was farmland, it still looks farmy.

ET: Over there where Co-Op City is that used to be farmland over there.

MN: Now, now when did your families join Thessalonia Baptist Church? Was it when you were a child or was this when--?

EM: When I was a child.

MN: So in other words, was that the first church that your family associated with?

EM: It was the only church we knew where Black people went in the Bronx. Church and a church edifice, you know in a church building.

MN: Right there were storefront churches--

EM: Well that came later--

MN: Ok, but this was the first edi-- building--

EM: Building of a-- where Black people could worship that wasn't Catholic or Episcopalian or something like that; Baptist. Well, what had happened, everybody was going to the Tremont, Tremont Baptist Church. It's still there, Tremont Baptist Church, and that was basically a white church. But if you're Baptist when you come from the South you're looking for a Baptist Church. Now you could go to Harlem and there was Abyssinian. But when you hit the Bronx you didn't want to cross water. [Laughs] It's like going to another state, another country. So people in the Bronx stayed in the Bronx. I was a big girl before I went to Harlem, ew I wouldn't care to go across the water.

[Laughs]

MC: Would you literally have to cross water? How did you--?

EM: Yea! Well everyplace else is an island.

MN: yea, the Bronx is the only part of the mainland.

EM: Yea, the Bronx is part of the United States.

[Laughs]

EM: Brooklyn? Forget it, oh no!

ET: What a memory she has! I can't believe this-- Yea--

EM: Old-time memory.

ET: yea, that's right; don't ask her anything about yesterday. [Laughs]

MN: How many people, when you first started to go to Thessalonia Baptist, how many people were in the congregation would you guess?

EM: It was a lot of people in the congregation. All of those who wanted to you know go to-- didn't want to go to Tremont Baptist. Blacks because they was alright they were welcome there and everything. But Tremont had a lot to say about what was happening with that one Black church. And we didn't want to take orders from them. [Laughs] So therefore, we cut off completely from them.

MN: Now, now who was the minister when you were a child?

EM: Reverend L.J. John.

MN: L.J. John, J-O-H-N?

EM: J-O-H-N, yes.

MN: And was he from the South or was he a native New Yorker?

EM: He was from Harlem. [Laughs] As far as I know, he was from Harlem.

MC: And how long was he the pastor of the church? Did he have a long tenure?

EM: Oh, he was there a long time as far as I know. You know cause I as a little girl and he was there until you joined the church--

ET: Yea, he was there when I cam. Because I was originally a Methodist my parents went to a small church on Union Avenue in the Bronx. We loved it like I said in the paper we walked to church. And then I met my beautiful girlfriend's sister, Juanita.

EM: Yea, she's my older sister.

ET: And she said, "Why don't you come to my church?" my mother didn't care where I went.

MN: Now how old were you when you and Juanita met?

ET: Well I was up in age then, '38, 1938, so that means that I was still in high school.

MN: So the two of you met in high school?

EM: No, no, no you weren't in high school in '38, you were in high school?

ET: Yea, I was in high school then, yes. I don't know how we met. I guess walking talking. She went to Morris and I went to Walton. Yea, so we just met and she said, "Why don't you go to my church?"

EM: Well, everybody was reading books and you probably met at the library.

ET: That's right. She and I we'd meet, that's what the-- you're right! We used to have books, we were readers. In the library, "why don't you come to my church? They got a lot of fellows there. And good music." And I put that in my talk--

EM: And everybody laughed at church.

ET: Yea, everybody laughed at church, cause it was true. Where I was there wasn't very many young people and no fellows.

EM: Yup, Oh, we had all the fellows.

ET: my mother said I don't care where you go as long as you go to church. And I joined there and it was a happy time for me. And I met my husband there--

MN: You met your husband in the church?

ET: Yea I met my husband there, just like a story.

AM: Now the church that their talking about is not the same building that Thessalonia is in.

MN: Right.

EM: No not in-- oh wait a minutes I did bring that picture. Here it is, I thought you'd be interested in to see where it is. Did you go to see it?

MN: I haven't driven by it. I've been in the other church cause I've been at meetings at the new church. This is the old--?

EM: That's the old-- that's the new building, that's the original church. And it's still standing there right now.

MN: Now that-- was that-- that's the original church?

EM: That's the original church.

MC: And its still standing there today?

EM: It's still standing there right now.

AM: Yep, over on Eagle Avenue and 153rd.

MC: What is there now?

EM: It' still there this was last year. When was this, this was taken in '94. All of us and you'll see me on the front steps, you can see me standing there and she' standing there we're next to each other.

MN: Now did this church come from somewhere else to the Bronx or it always was--

[Inaudible]

EM: And then that was 110th.

MN: 111th this year.

EM: No, but they, they showed this picture last year. I was heading the march; we marched, we did the march over again from that church down the hill to--

MN: To your church.

EM: To the one that we're in now.

MN: Right. Now what year was the new church built?

EM: Oh I don't remember that. Do you remember? Cause you were there, the same year--

ET: The year I got married. Oh you mean where we are now?

MN: Yes.

ET & EM: Oh that was Sinai Temple.

AM: Oh that was a beautiful, great, big Jewish Synagogue.

MN: Oh, so the building that Thessalonia is in now was a Jewish Synagogue?

EM: Yes, oh yes. It was a temple not a synagogue. Because it was built for these big elaborate things. It had a bride's grow and a groom's room and it was-- the church itself was really very beautiful.

MN: So you started off in this church, was there another on in between?

EM: Yes, yes that we built ourselves from the ground.

MN: And where was that located?

EM: That was on Morris Avenue and 158th Street.

MN: So absolutely closer to Patterson.

EM: Yea, that's right. But what had happened there, we weren't there too long so something must have happened there because right after they had built the baptismal pool, you know we baptize, and on the same Sunday that we were going to Connecticut, you know, because we used to sing all over, the choirs used to go singing all over. That Sunday we couldn't get in the church, something happened so we lost the church. I don't know could the politics of the church. So we didn't know where to go until the deacons and trustees got together and they found out that we could go back to this little church.

MN: So you went from the new church back to the old church until you could get--

EM: Sinai Temple down in the other direction, down in the other direction along 163rd Street.

MN: Yea, yea what were some of the activities that Thessalonia Baptist church had for young people when you were growing up?

EM: They always had a lot of young people. I know when I was growing up at Thessalonia I was in charge of a lot of the young people's activities, and so was she in a sense that we had the choirs. And I directed the choir, she played for the choir. The junior church choirs and whatnot like that. There was always some sort of activity going on from that little church there, you see they were all young people--

ET: Plays--

MN: Now, did you have trips also?

EM: Oh yes. In the summer time we used to have busses lined up and we'd go to Rockaway and Coney Island, and we still do.

MN: Were there ever any lectures or political meetings at the church?

EM: Oh yes. At this little church here and also now in the one we're at now well everybody's been there.

ET: Yes, that's true.

EM: And in this church that we're in now we have a school. Which is something very, very much needed.

MN: Now this is an independent school or a public school?

EM: No it's a-- there are some public school classrooms in our building but--

ET: They rent-- from us.

EM: They rent them. Because we built our own school and its accredited and we have wonderful teachers and what-not, and they pay.

MC: Summers through sixth grade--?

EM: It goes through it goes through junior high--

AM: Two of our relatives, my, my-- Malcolm just graduated from there right? Did he graduate from here--? Yea and he went to a Catholic school.

EM: Oh, yea, yea, yea. My nephew, my nephew. When you come out of there you go to junior high school.

AM: Go to high school.

EM: No, go to high school. Right when you come out of our church school now you go to high school.

MN: Now, when you were growing up, were the neighborhoods you lived in safe? Did you feel like you didn't have to worry about--?

EM: I never thought about worrying about anything.

ET: Didn't even lock doors, no, no, I didn't.

EM: People used to just walk in the house; you didn't even know they were in there till you're, "oh, you're here?"

ET: Yea, something like that.

MN: Did you feel safe walking late at night back home?

EM: What, here?

MN: No, no your, er--

ET: When we were coming up?

MN: Yes, when you were coming up.

EM: Yes, we felt safe and usually somebody was waiting outside for you when I was coming home. And when I started going out with fellows I mean my grandmother and my father would be standing out in front of the door waiting for us to come home.

MN: Now how old were you when you? Cause whatever she did I did. [Laughs] And I think-- Well, she had a boyfriend when she was 14 and I didn't have a boyfriend when I was 14. You remember Morris Grier. [Laughs] I, I thought he was my brother. Oh, I called his name maybe somebody will know him. That was her boyfriend but I didn't have one. I didn't really think too much about dating seriously.

ET: I don't know I don't think we really called it dating because we was so busy at school; I think it was just fellow-friends, I think.

EM: Well not until the war, during the war.

MN: Now in your families was education heavily stressed for children?

ET: Oh boy yes, that's why we didn't have any dates. I was busy playing the piano in between studying.

EM: Me too, I had the adolescent singing lessons; I'm always having a concert.

Something there was always something going on. I thought for sure I'd be in show business. And I did have quite a few offers but I never wanted to leave home and my church, two places I can't-- *The Common Jones* I was supposed to be in that, in the chorus of *The Common Jones*. And Robert Shore was the director of the chorus of *The Common Jones*. They were opening up in New Haven, Connecticut my hometown. And I said, "Oh my goodness I'll be away from my family and my church!" And they're going to open up there. Now New Haven isn't too far from here I got deathly ill. I couldn't go sign the contract. And the thing that hurt me so bad was that *The Common Jones* was such a beautiful play and then they made movie out of it.

MN: Oh yea, the movie.

ET: Yes, they did.

EM: But, I, the play was on Broadway, they opened up about two or three months in Connecticut and then came right to Broadway. I would've never been finished with going to my church [Laughs] had I been in that play--

MC: Where did you take your music lessons, did you--?

EM: Well first it was with the musician up at my church. And I didn't really realize I had a voice until I was about twelve years old thirteen years old because my sister was always singing, she wanted to be an opera star. And she was always "ooh, ooh, ooh." And I took piano lessons and she took vocal lessons.

MC: From the musician at the church? He gave private lessons?

EM: That's right, he gave private lessons. Then as I got older and whatnot I got, it's written down at one of the concerts I was at, at the church on 143rd Street, Congregational Church.

MN: So you were a soloist?

ET: Yes, she was, very much so.

MN: Can you sing for us?

EM: Oh, how much do you pay? [Laughs]

ET: You are too funny!

MN: When we had Bubba Dukes and Adrian Best they were harmonizing here, they were doing a little of their own thing.

AM: You didn't have any money?

MN: Well I fed them, they ate more. Now in your generation, did most young girls end up marrying by their early twenties? Was-- did most people marry younger than they do now?

EM: Well I don't know about so much marriage; cause you know it was the war, the Second World War that took all of our marrying boys-- took your boyfriend, whom she met in the church.

ET: Yea, Rodney married when he came home. No while he was in the service we married.

EM: No, but he was gonna come, no the war was over he was coming back from England.

ET: No, he came on a furlough.

EM: Oh that's right, he came on a furlough.

ET: Yea he came on a furlough.

EM: Well what did you ask?

MN: So most of your cohort ended up marrying after World War II?

EM: I know I did.

ET: Yea.

EM: Yea it wasn't that long afterwards cause soon as my husband who-- my husband who I married, his father as soon, as he could make it home from San Francisco, he was in the navy. As soon as he could make it home, and it took him over a month to say goodbye to all the ladies he had had along the way. [Laughs] He kept telling ya "oh I'll be home, I'll be home." Now, I tell you it was oh, about a month.

MN: And you had met him in the church?

EM: Oh, no. I knew him through my father and his father were friends in the South. But I didn't know that it existed like that because he was coming. Southern people always

came to my house and they came to New York, you know, to find out how was my mother doing and whatnot. But his father and my father were friends in the South.

MN: Right, so you still had the ties with people from back home when you were in the Bronx?

EM: My parents did. My parents did.

MC: After high school did you go on to college, did you work, what was it like?

EM: No, no, I didn't want to. After, high school I went to work, you know, we worked together.

ET: Yes we did.

EM: Worked at the nail business.

ET: Yea, but that was during the summer. That was a summer job.

EM: After that I really got into my own business. Not business, I was self-employed, I worked with knitwear. Where designs all of that stuff so that was my profession. Now, my sister Miss Rita, I call her, her name was Nita, but she was the reading, she read every book there was in the library in the Bronx. And then she said, "I can't find no books to read." There was a Prospect Book Ship on Prospect Avenue; my sister started paying money to borrow the books from their cause they had better books. One library we had she didn't want to go there anymore. So my mother used to give her money to pay for the books and then take 'em back.

ET: Rentals they had back then.

EM: Yea, rentals. And she did that all during high school, until finally in the summertime, Mr. Cooperman and his wife gave my sister a job in the, in the bookstore. Which was good because Nita knew the kind of books that they should have on the shelf

for the neighborhood cause it was changing. And then all the people knew my sister so therefore they would come to the bookshop and not only that they sold planes and things that kids-- what do call them--?

ET: Model planes, yea, they put them in there.

EM: But when my sister got there she told them, "don't only have model planes, let's get toys." And so she helped them advance their business and they were doing so well. But this couple they were sweet and nice, they has no children they had some relatives but they were very poor and they lived down on the east side. And they told Nita, even Mr. Cooperman said, "Nita, Nita, we're going to leave you the shop when we die!" She was like, "I don't want your shop!" She used to talk like that. "But what are we going to do with it?" [Laughs]. Cause that shop, she was like, their child, you know, it was like one on one, you know. Like "we can't do this until we speak to Nita." What really happened when they died, my sister was able to secure their business, they left it in their will, at a price she would be able to pay for it, and my sister did. And she became not the first, but the second now, because Daniel's undertaker was the first black business on Prospect Avenue. The second Black was my sister, Juanita Lewis with the Prospect Book Shop. And it flourished.

ET: It did, beautiful shop too.

EM: Beautiful, beautiful ship, right next to the Berlin Theatre.

MN: what was the exact address?

AM: Nine something--

EM: Nine something, it was between 161st--

AM: I went by there the other Friday night the palm something café--

EM: There's a palm something in that building it's a palm café.

AM: It's a bar there now; its around 163rd and--

MN: Yea, I know its right near St. Anthony of Padua.

AM: No, it's a little further, closer to 163rd.

EM: Closer to 163rd Street. There's a hotel there that's still there-- Flop Houses. That hotel is still there and the shop is right next to it. Everybody from the church came.

MN: Wow! Now I'm saying if you all were coming up now you'd all have doctorates and having our jobs.

EM: This is right, but we all wanted to go to work you know--

MN: So college was not something that was--?

EM: No, not for me.

ET: I went to school but not to college.

MN: Did you ever think of becoming a teacher? Going to school to become a high school teacher?

EM: No, I never wanted to be a teacher.

ET: I was going to be a nurse.

MN: You were going to be a nurse?

ET: I was going to be a nurse, and then I changed my mind and decided to be a secretary.

So I took about a two-year course it was up on Fordham Road, a secretarial school. I don't think it's there anymore, not Drake it was another name.

AM: A famous name.

ET: Yea, I took some courses there in typing, cause I didn't take that in school that was academic because I was going to be a nurse, that mixes you up when you change after you graduate. But we pushed our own children to go to college.

EM: Oh yea, all of our children graduated college. Valerie she's surpassed her brother, yes she did. [Laughs] Which is wonderful.

MN: Now, Patterson was the first of the housing development to open in the Bronx?

EM: We were first in there too.

MN: Now, now what years were you both married?

EM: I was married in '47.

ET: I married in '42.

MN: '42, and now, today people talk about the projects in a very derogatory manner.

Now when you heard this was being built what was your feeling about this, at that time?

EM: I was so happy my husband and I were living in Weir Court in the Bronx, one block in a private house and a room and kitchen aid. And Arnold, he was a little boy in the crib in the room, but my mother lived up on Franklin Avenue where he was most of the time up there so we really needed an apartment. And so when we applied for it--

MN: How did you hear about this new housing that was opening up, who told you about it?

EM: No, no, nobody moved there but me.

MN: So you were basically the only one from that cohort?

EM: Yea and that were I lived in the room and kitchen it was near that little church on the hill.

MN: Now, Ethel, you never lived in the Patterson Houses?

ET: No, and then I married way before Evelyn, so therefore, we couldn't get an apartment, I was crying about this, we couldn't get an apartment in the Bronx. I lived with my mother or I couldn't find an apartment. My mother-in-law in Mount Vernon, that's how I entered in Mount Vernon.

MN: And you remained involved in the Church in the Bronx?

ET: Yes, I never changed. That's means traveling back and forth. And my children went; they were in the church for a while, too. But when they got older, they could travel or stay home, they went to Grace and Macedonia in Mount Vernon.

MN: Right, now when you moved into the Patterson House was it a safe place.

EM: Oh, it was wonderful. It was very safe. And not only that, it was equally divided between White and Black people on every floor. We lived in 314 and when we moved in there, there was eight on a floor, eight families on a floor, on the 12th floor, we lived. And there was four White families and four Black Families.

MN: And everybody got along?

EM: Oh, we had a lovely time. Lovely time, but all of a sudden-- White Flight.

[Laughs]. I don't know what happened. Where did everybody go? When White moved out and Black move in.

AM: When did we move out of there '62? When did we move out '63?

EM: Move out of there?

AM: Yea, '63?

EM: I don't remember.

AM: Yea, it was '62, because Claremont was being built, people moved in there. But I remember the Donahues--

EM: Yea, she stayed there, she died there.

ET: That was an Irish lady.

AM: Yea, the Irish lady.

MN: This was 314 Morris Avenue?

AM: No, 143rd.

EM: Right off of Third Ave. That was the house that, that was one of the first houses that opened up. It was a big thing when Patterson opened up. You know, it was all over the front page of the news: the new project in the Bronx.

MC: Was it called project at the time or was it called--?

EM: The Project, yea, that's what I knew it to be.

AM: It wasn't called house, no, the changed it to houses recently.

EM: No, it was Project.

MN: But I didn't have a derogatory association?

EM: No, no by no means, by no means.

MC: Was it an income requirement?

EM: Yes, oh yes, definitely an income requirement. Everybody in there had a job and it had to be a pretty good job too.

MN: Now, was there also, were there all two-parent families or did you have any single-parent families? Did you have to be a two-parent to move in, in the first years?

EM: I don't know about that. We happened to be my husband and I and I only had Arnold. He talked up the second baby, Arnold did. He said everybody got somebody, I don't even. I go nobody, not even a dog and a cat.

MC: How many years apart between you and your--?

AM: Eight. But she had another miscarriage--

EM: That was before Valerie.

AM: Well, that's what I said.

MN: Now, now in the interviews with Vicki and Nathan, it seemed like everybody looked out for one another there did--

EM: Oh definitely. That was definitely-- and the house there, our house was really one big family.

AM: Like on a hot day, like today, people would leave their doors cracked. You'd go into somebody's apartment with knocking, especially on the same floor. You try to do that today--

MC: You moved in to the Patterson, was it in the fifties?

EM: How old were you?

AM: It was in the early fifties.

EM: You were starting to go to kindergarten for like, two weeks and then I took him out.

AM: I went to kindergarten, I was born in '47, so it must've been like '52, '53.

MN: '52; and you went to PS 18?

AM: Right.

MN: Now were the teachers in PS 18 good teachers? Did you have good experiences with them?

EM: Oh, I certainly did. And he, he was very smart but he was a pain in the neck. And the teachers used to have me come into school and I'd say, "Well, what did he do?" "He disrupted the whole class." I said, "So, maybe he's in the wrong class!" I told them that because I played with him and I taught him at home so he, he didn't need to be in that

class. And that was part of his problem; I said, "Well please don't call me because I don't have no problem with him at home" I said, "put him in a different class." And I went to junior-high-school and to high school and to college with him, on the phone, talking to the Dean!

AM: You didn't have to bring that up-- Central State.

EM: My husband said, "He's going away to college." I said, "I don't want him to go away!" Yes, he's going away!" [Laughs] He was something else. In high school, he went to Clinton High School. In high school, open school week, my husband and I always went together to the schools, to meet with the teachers. We went-- He gave us a list where his classes are-- We're walking up all there stairs, we get so tired, well where is this number? When we get to the very top, it's a closet!

ET: Arnold!

AM: A utility closet.

EM: A utility closet! To be funny-- Oh boy, was we mad!

MN: Now were there a lot of youth activities in the Patterson Houses for the kids?

EM: There were. And it wasn't so much in the house in the housing as it was in the, oh, I got that thing about the church.

AM: He's talking about the Patterson right now.

EM: All the Patterson was over there who knew that's where we had congregational--

AM: Congregational Church--

MN: Oh, Congregational Church had--

EM: Oh, north New York, yes. And that was an integrated church too.

MN: And what street was that on?

ET: 143rd and Willis Avenue.

MN: And they had a lot of youth programs?

EM: Oh, they had everything there it was open all day.

AM: Basketball after school--

MN: --benefit of two excellent church when you were growing up.

AM: Right and I was like a cross between them. Because a lot of my friend would go to congregat-- my next-door neighbor had three sons, the Jones boys, they would go to North Congregational and her sons Ricky and Lenny would go to Thessalonia, so. I'd be kind of sad when I was in Thessalonia because I wasn't with them but for the most part I went to Thessalonia most of the time. But they had the better after school cause it was closer.

MN: Right. Now, now did you also sing in the choir?

AM: Yea, as a teenager-- me and my cousin. And I also was an usher.

EM: Well, Congregational at Congregational Church they involved most of the project children with the activities days.

ET: And they had nice things and ice cream. I used to treat my kids to that.

EM: Yes. And cake sales---

MN: Now, were these summer camps that kids in the Patterson Houses went to that were sleep-away camps?

EM: I don't know; you never went to one--

AM: Yes I did. I went to Gramercy Boy's Camp.

EM: Oh, I did send you there.

AM: I don't know if you sent me there. I went there for like five years, five years and became a counselor, the last couple of years up in Blairstown, New Jersey [note that Interviewer says NY, but the town is in NJ]. Gramercy, that was the best after school experience that I ever had. You know Gramercy's Boys Club, which I think was on 141st Street between Willies and Third Avenue. We'd go there after school and we'd play dodge ball, potato races, it was like the Olympics, it was like the Olympics for kids in the projects. You had teams, you had maybe ten different teams all the kids in the school would compete that's where a lot of the kids who became athletes got their athletic abilities--

MN: At Gramercy's Boys Club?

AM: At Gramercy's Boys Club and then they would have a summer camp up at Blairstown, New Jersey. And you'd go there for, like, I think, it was 2 weeks, 2 weeks and that was the first time I ever got away from, got out of the city. I went for about four, five years.

MN: Is, is that still there, the Gramercy Boys Club?

AM: NO, they moved from down there up to Washington Avenue, I don't know if its still up there on Washington Avenue.

EM: You know some of those people?

MC: This is my father here. He was the pastor of the Grace Congregational Church, that's where I grew up.

EM: Oh really!?

MC: This is my father Leonard Chapman.

EM: Oh, isn't that--

ET: Yes, he did look very interested about that when you mentioned it.

MC: Yea. And I'm ordained in the United Church of Christ.

EM: Oh you are?

ET: Oh really? How nice.

MC: So when you mentioned that i--

MN: So this is the same--?

EM: That's the church that gave me, that presented me in concert. And here it tells you where I was studying at the time.

MN: Do we have any tapes or recording of your singing?

EM: Oh, I got them too, but they're old and I wouldn't dare play them they've got to be done over.

MN: Put them on CD's-- Now, was there a gang problem when, when your kids were growing up in the Patterson House?

EM: I know there were problems; I don't think it was--

AM: Yea there. I was aware of in junior high school there was a gang called the Suicides; they were predominantly Puerto Rican. They used to terrorize the junior high school students at Clark Junior High School during lunch period. You couldn't go past Willis Avenue that was Suicide territory. And we used to like to go to St. Mary's recreation center for the pool and play basketball and even softball back then because we weren't playing baseball. And we'd have to go in droves of, I mean whole neighborhood would go to the swimming pool together; we went everyplace together. Occasionally we got run back across Willis Avenue to the Patterson Projects they sometimes would have

guns called zip guns and some of our guys got shot or whatever and chased and subsequently we had gangs in the Patterson called the Young Gents.

EM: I didn't even think you knew those people

ET: And don't talk about it though--

AM: Well those guys were usually older, these were guys who were like in high school well they didn't go to high school. They used to hang out on the benches and dress nice with the sweaters with the insignia, and they would protect us from the Suicides and any other gangs who would come from other projects like the Melrose Projects and the Italian boys on Morris Avenue would sometimes come down and there'd be fights. Lincoln Projects would try to come up and take territory.

MN: Right, so the Gents were the Patterson-- And these were kids who dropped out of school?

AM: Most of them, yea. I mean a couple of them still went to high school you know, but for the most part, and they really weren't that violent to my knowledge, they would just protect us you know, in case we were attacked.

EM: Oh boy.

MN: And you weren't aware of that?

EM: No.

ET: I would catch him in the street and he was obedient; he made sure he got in the house.

EM: They don't talk.

ET: I hear Ricky writing Aunt Letty saying things that happened at school that I never knew about and I was over there all the time.

AM: We didn't want to; I mean we didn't want to confuse you.

EM: Sir, you know the Patterson and you know the Congregational Church--

MC: Yes, I know Revered Wells there.

EM: Oh Revered Wells, yea, Revered Marty, oh, he was very good--

MN: Again, you're confirming what everybody seems to say that this was a great place to grow up.

EM: It was.

MN: And I guess doing this research, I feel bad for a lot of the kids that are growing up in public housing now that they don't have this kind of positive feeling. When did things start to change, you know or did you move out before things got bad?

AM: No, they started getting bad before we moved out. I mean, I noticed the drugs and the gangs came when I was in 9th grade. We moved out of there--

MN: Wait, I just want to stop for a second-- Yea, so when you're in 9th grade, which is 9th grade, junior high school?

AM: 9th grade, '59thish, yea, around that time.

MN: You had a sense that things were starting to get very rough?

AM: Yea, most of the drop-outs and the people who were the potential drug-addicts hung out at a liquor store called McGorman's on the corner of 143rd, 142nd and Third Avenue. And they would be there all day buying wine, liquor, whatever. And then I would notice that there were people on the park benches, they looked like they were drunk, they looked like they were high, they were like, nodding, so I knew that that was drugs, so--

MN: this was as early as '59?

AM: It probably was even earlier because I just noticed it then because some of the guys that I went to junior high school with started hanging out at McGorman's. They dropped out of junior high school and they opted to go the drug thing or the other wine they became winos.

MN: Now is it your sense that the kids that were dropping out were ones where the families were less involved than the ones who stayed in school?

AM: Yea, for the most part they, they didn't have any structure, I never would see them at PS 18 after school you know playing basketball or playing wiffle ball or ping pong any of the games. They just, they became like grown-ups while they were like teenagers, just smoking cigarettes and hanging out. And their parents would let them stay out all night long. I had to be home by dark, they didn't even have to be home; most of the time they would stay out in the park on the bench.

EM: And I always told him you bring your friends home to the house I wanted to meet who his friends were, and he did.

MN: Were you aware of problem families in the Patterson Houses, you know, whose kids were starting to go the wrong way or you were just sort of so busy working and doing your thing that it was hard to figure out what was going on.

EM: I didn't notice until--

AM: Well we had one on our floor--

EM: Oh the Johnson's?

AM: Yea, well the Johnson's or whatever cause they had a son named Mario who me and him we just, we just didn't hit it off and one time he pulled a knife on me and we had words and it came down to, I was bigger than he was back then so I didn't back down

from and I don't even really know what happened. I know I got my father involved somehow and the problem went away. You know, he lived right around the corner-- and subsequently Mario got into all kind of problem with drugs and robberies and stuff like that and subsequently somebody shot him and killed him. He's just one but there are other families that we were aware in the projects that you don't mess around with their kids because their troubled people. And for the most part most of my close friends came from families like myself that were pretty stable and the kids were all about going to school and into sports afterwards, you know they had the same life that I had.

MN: So the church, the family, and sports and music and all these activities were keeping--

EM: That's right. And a lot of professionals came out of that group.

AM: Yea, cause there's only 24 hours in a day, and if your devoting time to school you're going to have time to eat and time to sleep and you've got there extracurricular activities you don't have time to hanging out messing with all that crazy stuff. [Crosstalk]

Well we got J.J. Walker--

MN: Was from the Melrose--

AM: No, he was from the Patterson.

MN: He's from the Patterson?

AM: Yea he was in my, in my high school.

MC: From Good Times?

AM: From Good Times. Yea he was in the Patterson and I think he moved to the Melrose.

EM: Oh yea, yea, yea, no. He was in Melrose, no he lived in Melrose.

AM: He lived in 315 for a little while. He lived across the street for a little while then he moved to, he moved to Melrose.

MN: Now you moved from the Patterson to the Claremont Houses?

EM: Yes. We were only there for about 3 or 4 years.

MN: In Claremont?

EM: Yea, in Claremont.

MN: Because that's, from what I hear, even more of a troubled place--

EM: Well, where we were it wasn't because it was on 169th Street and Washington Avenue. That's where we were. And it was only about how many families were on the floor in that house? It wasn't on Webster Avenue-- Webster Avenue was where they seen--

AM: Even back then it was new--

ET: It was brand new.

EM: Oh, then again we were the first tenants in that house.

AM: But your right today it's, it's well, I even heard at the Patterson they have these gangs there--

MN: The Crips and the Bloods.

AM: The Crips and the Bloods are in the Patterson. But, that project is renowned for people getting killed at least two or three killings a year, you know major killings.

MN: Yea, one of my student grew up in the Butler Houses and you know he had to end up going into foster care. It was just-- he describes it, it was a pretty difficult experience. Did you, when did you first start feeling physically afraid, did you ever feel physically afraid at any time when you were living in Patterson?

EM: Each project that I've lived in, I lived in Patterson and I lived in the Claremont where I lived I was always the first tenant in the building and it had just opened up. And it seems just as I moved out it starts getting worse, it starts getting bad rather.

MN: Right, and where did you move to after Claremont?

EM: Tracey Towers. And that was brand new too; I was first in that one too. So I always, I never had an apartment where somebody lived ahead of me--

MN: And you still live in Tracey Towers?

EM: I still live in Tracey Towers. I've been there 27 years now.

MC: Where is that located?

MN: Right near Dewitt Clinton High School.

EM: Right, right by Clinton High School.

MN: It's that big, big tall--

AM: Tallest building in the Bronx.

EM: That's right, it is, the tallest.

MN: And where did you, now aft-- after college, Arnold, where did you end up going?

AM: You mean living?

EM: He came back home to mamma.

AM: Yea, came home for a cup of tea and then I moved out to--

EM: No you didn't want to get out! You just wanted to eat everything out of the fridgedair and leave your empty dirty plates there. [Laughs] Drink the water out of the water bottle. He had a good setup at home. He had his own room and he had everything in there then he made demands on everybody, "I don't want anybody to touch nothing in my room." He was being so demanding! [Laughs]

AM: And then I moved to-- my grandmother got me an apartment on 151st.

EM: Yep, she sure did. My husband's mother--

AM: ON 151st for a couple of years, then I moved to Cedric Avenue, 1600 Cedric, for about-- and that was new building, matter of fact, I got a lead through Floyd Lane, he lived right up the block, told me about a new development that was opening up there.

And then I move to where I'm at now, Mount Vernon, Westchester Plaza.

MN: Now all this time you stayed active in Thessalonia Baptist Church now, you must've then seen the Bronx start to burn at a certain point.

EM: Oh yes I did see things--

MN: And what did that make you feel like to see the neighborhood you grew up in--

EM: You see I always moved to a new neighborhood where nothing was happening so by the time it really started getting bad I was gone to another one.

MN: But let's say you're going back to Thessa-- to the church and you're seeing what's going on.

EM: There's not many houses in that block. They're all private houses on that block and they're all pretty well kept.

AM: I remember, I mean, when they were burning down the Bronx, I mean that period time.

EM: When were they burning down the Bronx? You mean the lower Bronx?

AM: Well they were burning down the Bronx-- Yea, the Bronx where Thessalonia's located, all around Thessalonia it was devastation.

MN: By Crotona Park that area, Charlotte Street--

AM: Yea, yea cause you know they remodeled those homes over there now but before that, who was the president then, I think Jimmy Carter.

MN: Yea he visited there.

AM: He visited there you know.

EM; Oh, yea that happened around that way.

AM; That's when the South Bronx got that negative reputation, you know. And I was amazed that we were still going to the church, there were all this devastation was taking place right around it.

EM: It touched Prospect Avenue where my sister's bookshop was.

ET: No, but it was after...

MN: Well, how late did she have the bookshop until? What year did-- was it open in the '70's?

EM: Yea, no. Well when did she start working on the bridge?

AM: She started, that was in the '60's, the early '60's

EM: That's when she got out of it.

AM: The early '60's, yea she, she sold the shop. She sold the shop and then she took a job as a toll collector.

MN: When did the church move to the Sinai Temple? What year did that happen? Was that in the 80's?

ET: They went down in, in the in 1943. And I couldn't use that building to get married in. I had to use the St. Augustine Church on Prospect Avenue because we weren't in the big building yet and my wedding was large.

EM; October 11th 1943.

MN: Is when they moved into which building?

EM: Sinai temple.

MN: So wait a minute, oh so wow, so you were going to the big church when you were growing up?

AM: Yea.

EM: He was going to the big church.

MN: And that's still the same building there in now? And how many people when you were going was it, did it have thousands of people in the congregation the way it is now?

MN: Patterson?

AM: Thessalonia.

EM: Oh, to Thessalonia.

MN: Did it have like, cause now I hear it has four thousand members.

EM: Oh, well, it has more membership today then what it had then, but, it was always--

AM: I remember we could fill up the whole bottom section.

EM: We used to have people used to always be up in the balcony cause the choir was back up there too.

MC: Picture in 1943 the current church was--

EM: That's when we marched to Sinai Temple.

AM: That church is still standing but it's no longer Thessalonia.

EM: We moved out of this little church here in to the church we're in now, Sinai Temple.

MC: Oh, I see.

MN: And in between there was another building.

EM: Yes, that we had built ourselves from the ground on Morris Avenue but we were only over there for about three years until something happened I don't know but we lost the church.

MC: So when you marched to Sinai that was in '43?

EM: Where we are, yea. But, Before we marched from this little church, to the brand, new church. We built ourselves from the ground. I don't know there was a lot of politics involved.

MC: Now, I noticed the church is located at Reverend Polite Ave/Boulevard? Now he was a long-term member of--?

EM: He was a minister at the time; he was a minister at the time when we moved here when we moved from here the second time. When we moved from the little church the second time, Reverend Polite was the minister.

MN: How many ministers have you had?

EM: That I know of-- Reverend John, Reverend Polite, and our Reverend Samson. It's the third minister.

MN: It's only the third minister in some, like--

EM: One hundred and eleven years.

MC: So Reverend Polite was like they're for some 30-40 years?

EM: He was there for about 20 some odd years. And Reverend Samson has been for how long now?

ET: Oh 20, I think 20.

EM: He's been there for 20 years?

ET: Yea we had it on the last bulletin. I don't have it--

MN: Now would you say most of the members drive to church or walk to church?

EM: I think most of them drive to church now.

ET: They live far away most people live away.

EM: They drive. They neighborhood is--

ET: Is changed.

EM: It is changing, but it's getting a lot of neighborhood people, now too.

ET: Kind of integrated a little.

EM: Because it is very integrated because we have, we have Puerto Rican, and Blacks and oh Whites too, African-American, we have everybody.

ET: What's that other-- Indian?

MN: South Asians.

ET: Yea, something like that.

MN: You're right next to a very-- the Forest Houses which were built--

EM: They're not next to them; the Forest Houses are over by Prospect Park.

MN: The Forest Houses are very near Prospect Park.

EM: Oh, yes and Union Avenue, you lived on Union Avenue.

ET: Oh I forgot that-- Yea, I lived near Union.

MN: Are there still a lot of young people involved in the Church?

EM: Oh, in our church it's really something. With the school being there, getting the education they're graduating students; they come out there and they go to college.

MN: So, it sounds like you're pretty optimistic about where things are going.

EM: Oh, yes. It's really coming up, it's really doing very well right now.

MC: But then, but then, the time that you joined the church, I guess in the '30's I'd imagine--

EM: No, it was in the '20's.

MC: In the 20's; within your lifetime there've been three to four pastors--

EM: Three; three in my lifetime.

MC: John, Polite, and Samson. And so during your, I guess maybe your 20's, when you were 20 to 30 years old that Reverend Polite was the pastor--

EM: Yes he married me!

MC: He married you?

EM: Oh yes, he married me there.

MC: Is that right? Do you recall--

EM: And I got married in that church and I think not long after moved here. The second time, and it was crowded to capacity.

MC: Listening to his sermons over the span of two decades--

EM: Whose sermons?

MC: Reverend Polite; I'm curious, to know, can you recall any particular themes if you had to identify a particular hallmark or theme of his preaching over the decades? Would you be able to caricature his style of preaching? As opposed to other ministers--?

EM: Well, he grew into a very good speaker, but, he grew into it while I was there because after Reverend John who was very dynamic. Oh, he was something else and the audience really loved his preaching. We had to grow to Reverend Polite. But after he was there a while, he developed beautifully. Then people joined the church--

MC: Was he from the North?

EM: Well, he came from Harlem; well, basically, South into Harlem. But he was progressing very nice before he died.

MC: Do you know his educational background?

EM: Well, it was really wasn't like the minister we have today, we wished it could've been because we'd probably be a little further ahead now but at the same time he was good for the congregation we had at the time. The minister we have today is superfluous if you can use it that way. And not only that he's well educated he's got all the degrees. And he's got a large family, pushing the children in there and they even teach lessons all over the place.

MC: So if you had to characterize Reverend Polite's ministry over the decades how would you sum it up? Was there a particular emphasis either in his preaching or in his social ministry that he tended to emphasize?

EM: What would you say?

ET: It's a whole different era. It's hard to put your finger on it because this minister we have now is so dynamic, I'm just talking about his education, and what he puts out there for the children and how the children are grasping all that he says, I wish he was in my time. That's how I feel about him.

EM: They're grasping it. Yea, me too.

MN: Does this minister talk more about political issues and what's going on in the community, the country, and the world that Reverend Polite?

EM: He seems to have an insight on what we need because the first thing he said we needed in that building when we got back when he came on to Sinai Temple was a school, to educate the children. And believe me that school is really an education for all

of them. They graduate and they send them to Europe and the send them-- I don't know--

But, the gift from the church is they send them to other countries, you know, for vacation.

MN: Did Reverend Polite talk much about what was going on in the Bronx, or he was more biblical centered?

EM: That's what you'd say, you said it right.

AM: I would characterize him as country preacher. And one of the markers that me and her two sons used to be aware of we knew that if he went through more than two handkerchiefs we were going to be there till after two o'clock, we're supposed to get out of there at one but if it was a two or three handkerchief sermon we might not get out of there till evening, I remember not getting out of there till 4 in the afternoon. My grandmother taking me to church in the evening.

MN: So he would go off on the text?

AM: Oh way off. I mean he'd be sweating and it'd be winter and he had a handkerchief out and he had two three handkerchiefs ready and he just--

MC: During the years of the Civil Rights Movement in the '60's, did he emphasize that in his sermons?

EM: Oh yea, oh yea, he was all into that.

AM: We even had Martin Luther King come up.

MC: Is that right? King came up?

EM: Oh yea, sure, oh yea, King was there.

AM: We might even have some tapes on that. You can check with them.

MC: I'm going to go visit the church and ask for a meeting with Reverend, Dr. Samson.

EM: Yea. And he's got a large family.

ET: Yea he's a great man. He's got right children, I think.

EM: And the boys are all preachers and--

MC: Did he used to be in New Rochelle by any chance?

EM: He lives up that way now.

ET: Now he lives there but he was from Jersey.

MN: Were you very aware of the Civil Rights Movement when you were growing up
Arnold?

AM: Central State was the hotbed. We had-- everybody came down.

EM: Oh yes, at his graduation everyone was protesting something or other.

AM: Yea, well we were actually the first campus to have federal troops on our campus prior to Kent State. They came down-- It was the first year before Kent State, because there was an incident in a movie where one student got into a fight or whatever and he was kicked off, kicked out of school over or whatever and they protested and whatever and next thing you know it got really rowdy and nobody wanted to go to school, they were protesting-- you could look onto the road, 42 highway and about 70 cop cars came onto campus then behind that two tanks. And they all came on to campus and told us to get back into our dormitories, get into our rooms, don't leave the rooms.

EM: He called me and I was screaming.

AM: They told use they were going to shut the school down and buses came onto campus the next day to take us back home wherever we met. We closed down just before Thanksgiving for about two weeks. And after that, it just got worse and worse in terms of political strife and racial strife. But yea, we had Muhammad Ali was there, Farrakhan, Baraka; I mean, it was like the hotbed of civil rights back in the '60's.

MN: So, Thessalonia Baptist Church, in the '60's, was a spot where anybody who was a Civil Rights leader had to come?

EM: Oh, well they didn't have to come but they came because they had an audience. There was people to listen to them.

MN: Well Mark, do you have anymore questions because we've kept these wonderful folks for a long time and--

MC: Yea, just about two or three more-- What would you consider the high point in the life of the congregation during your years? High point and then the low point?

EM: Well I hate to be self, what do you call it, speaking of myself and my family but, for eighteen years straight, my family gave a family program it was called the Marshall Family Program and it was a musical program and we did that for eighteen years to get rid of the mortgage and stuff of Sinai Temple.

MN: Oh my God! Really?

EM: Eighteen years straight we gave. The Marshall family, my family--

AM: All of us.

EM: All of us; yea cause she was in it too. And everybody looked forward to that program.

MN: Is this on the videotape?

EM: Oh I got some pictures, we didn't do videotape.

ET: Pictures, you have nice pictures though.

MC: Was it a choir or--?

AM: No, family members.

EM: I directed it.

MN: So this was like a little show?

EM: For eighteen years.

MC: It was like an afternoon program?

EM: Afternoon. And the thing about it you know we lived in two different neighborhoods but they'd always hear us practicing it mostly at home. We did it at my house, not my house, my mother's house she had a big apartment house where the piano was and we made like a party out of it. You know when they come they'd have food and whatnot and then we practiced, rehearsed, and in the tenement houses we lived in a ten family home on Franklin Avenue the windows would be all open in the Spring time and we'd be in there singing these spirituals and boy everybody's hanging out the windows and so we'd give away all our programs to the block before they'd get to church. Everybody'd come to the church just to hear the program.

MC: Wow. Was that your maiden name, Marshall?

EM: Marshal was my maiden name.

MN: And this was almost all singing or they had skits also?

EM: No we had the singing--

ET: And poems.

EM: Oh yes, he was very dramatic.

AM: I sent you a program from one of them.

MC: So eighteen years running? And that a fundraiser?

EM: Yea, eighteen years straight. It started in the little church on the hill. And then we had two programs in the little church on the hill.

MN: That was in the early '40's it started and then it kept going right up through the '50's?

AM: Yes. When it stopped I felt a void. What we gonna do now?

MN: Anyway, you could bring it back?

ET: Didn't they do a reunion one Sunday?

AM: Yea well they did do something to commemorate us.

MN: So clearly, this family has been central to the growth of the church.

EM: It was. And my grandmother, she was beautiful person, she was a member of the Matron Crusaders of the church. At one time, they wanted her to be mother of the church, but she said, "Oh, no I have my girls and Matron Crusaders, I cant be mother to any other people." And she was very much loved. And the Amsterdam news did a lot of write-ups, I have write ups that Amsterdam News did on our church and my grandmother, and the church in general. When I got married, I was in the Amsterdam News and he followed my wedding. From the wedding to when I came back and the honeymoon and came and took pictures of everything I had.

MN: Must be like reality TV, you would be on MTV now or something.

MC: Was there a low point that stands out in the life of the congregation?

EM: Oh yes, we did, we did have a low point. But we overcame it. We did have low points but we overcame it.

MC: Right. Would you-- what would you consider the churches that you had a, the closest relationship with and what was the cooperation? You mentioned already Union I mean the Congregational Church of the North, were there other churches in the Bronx--?

EM: Victory Baptist Church and also, well, they came later. And also--

MC: Thompson right, Reverend Thompson?

ET: Yes, that new minister they have now, Kendrick.

AM: What about Trinity?

MC: Oh, Tyler-Lory, I went to college with his sons, Nathaniel Tyler-Lory. [Crosstalk]

MC: Did you know Edwin Hawkins from--

EM: Oh yea!

ET: St. Augustine, yes. That's where I got married, because we weren't in this church so I knew Edwin Hawkins.

EM: Cause we wouldn't be able to do the wedding in the Sinai Temple yet.

MN: Now St. Augustine's was an Episcopal Church?

EM: Yes, that was on Prospect Avenue.

MC: It's Presbyterian.

MN: Presbyterian. Now somebody said something-- is that the church that a lot of Pullman Porters were in?

ET: I don't know.

EM: I don't know it might have been Thessalonica but I don't know, it wasn't a lot of them, but there were some.

AM: Oh you mean that movie?

MN: Somebody who was involved in the South Bronx Church Organization said that there was a church in Morrisania that had a lot of people who worked as Pullman Porters.

EM: A lot of churches popped up during the '50's so maybe some church--

MN: So St. Augustine's was Presbyterian Church?

ET: Yes. Nice church too.

MC: And in the '60's, Metch Rolands, did you know Metch Rolands? Reverend Metch Rolands?

ET: Yea, we just saw him recently, well it was at a funeral we saw him. And he was with us we went to the Bill Lucket's Jazz a couple of months ago; he was there, Reverend Rolands, tall kind of--

EM: Oh yea, oh yea.

ET: You knew him too? Nice person, but he's been sick cause I talked to him a little bit ago--

AM: What's going on?

ET: You missed it! [Laughs]

MC: I think we interviewed Metch Rolands cause in the '60's, the late '60's, he was very important in the development of Black Theology as the ministers began theology that was connected to the Black Power Movement. Metch Rolands was one of the key figures in that, in the Bronx.

ET: You know him too?

EM: He came after Hawkins right?

ET: Right, yea.

MN: Ok, you have any more questions?

MC: Well part 2, part 2 later--

MN: Well thank you very much, this was incredibly enlightening, and we'll have a little more food and this is a great, great session, thank you so much!

[END INTERVIEW]

