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Rosario, Edward

Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Interviewers: Mark Naison, Andrew Tiedt, Princess Okieme

Interviewee: Edward Rosario (Session 1 of 2)

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Transcriber: Andrew Tiedt

Mark Naison (MN): Hello. Today is Wednesday, February 21, 2007. We're at Fordham University. This is the Bronx African American History Project and we are interviewing Eddie Rosario, a Bronx educator and musician, who grew up in the Hunts Point/Morrisania neighborhood. Is that what you would call it?

Edward Rosario (ER): No.

MN: What did you call your neighborhood- -

ER: - -That's close. That's close, but you know I don't know exactly what my section was.

MN: Right, now what was- -

ER: - -I was on 161st Street and Leggett Avenue, which was in between Longwood- -

MN: - -Yeah. People call that Hunts Point. The Northern Hunts Point.

ER: Ok.

MN: Because I think sometimes people talk of Hunts Point only as below the Bruckner, but the neighborhood between Prospect and Southern Boulevard- -

ER: - -That's all Hunts Point- -

MN: - -Yeah. Right. Ok, so Eddie tell us a little about your family and how they ended up coming to the Bronx.

ER: I didn't know at what age I came to the Bronx until I started talking to my brothers and sisters, you know. Where I found out I came to the Bronx when I was one - - from I think it was 99th Street or 105th Street in Manhattan.

MN: Was this on the East Side or the West Side?

ER: In Manhattan?

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MN: Yeah.

ER: East.

MN: Ok, so your family- -

ER: - -East Harlem- -

MN: - -You're from East Harlem.

ER: Yeah.

MN: Now are they originally from Puerto Rico?

ER: Yes.

MN: When did they move from Puerto Rico to New York City?

ER: I believe it was 1928.

MN: Wow.

ER: I believe - - it was because my brother was born in 1931 and we were here.

Andrew Tiedt (AT): Can I ask you a question about Puerto Rico, too? Do you know where they were from on the island?

ER: Yes.

AT: Were they city people- -

ER: - - They were countryside. You know my mother used to explain to me how babies died and they used to carry them along the road side. You know funerals were in the house.

MN: Did your parents come together to New York...or they met in New York?

ER: I don't remember that. I've got to think about it or call my sister.

MN: Yeah. What sort of work did your father do?

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ER: My father was a printer and a teacher in Puerto Rico. He was a teacher in Puerto Rico, came here and was a printer. He had a shop on 116th Street.

MN: Oh, so he had his own shop?

ER: Yes, he did. Yes, he did. He was quite a ladies man. You know - - I was fortunate enough to speak to my brother - - you know, before he died.

MN: Right.

ER: I just lost my brother last year. And you know, happened to be - - beginning to talk about a lot of things that he didn't think that I should hear because he hated my father - - to put it bluntly because my father did not treat my mother well. My father had money and we suffered. We really suffered. I - -

MN: - -Did he live in the household?

ER: No, he didn't.

MN: Oh, Ok.

ER: When I grew up I never had my father home. He did visit...he did visit.

MN: So he had other women he had relationships with.

ER: Oh yeah. He was a ladies man, you know. I didn't know him that well, except when he disapproved, you know, of what we did. And I remember once I was playing blackjack...and I was about nine years old...and he came in and I was playing with my brothers. I go "pay 21." He goes, "pay 21." You should be studying your books for school." You know, he was really disgusted.

MN: Right. So how many brothers and sisters did you have?

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ER: I had three brothers and three sisters. Two died before - - nine really. Seven that I know - - that I can tell you about - - and two others that died - - one at birth and one when she was nine.

AT: And where are you in that birth order? Where- -

ER: - - I am the second youngest. I have a sister in California, Delia, who is...one year and a few months younger than I am.

MN: Did your father give money to the family - -

ER: - -Not much- -

MN: - -enough to support you? Did your mother - -

ER: No, we were on welfare- -

MN: - -You were on welfare?

ER: We were on welfare.

MN: And this was when you were living in East Harlem as well?

ER: As well, yes.

MN: Uh, huh.

ER: And we really - - I really felt it in the Bronx, because that's where I grew up. You know, from the time I began to notice what was around me, all I saw was poverty. I mean, ugly, ugly poverty. You know, rats, roaches.

MN: So when you moved to that block, it was a deteriorated area?

ER: No, it was a beautiful block. I was well kept - - beautiful. Matter of fact, the ugliest part of it was our apartment. You know, everything else, I mean it was a tree-lined, beautiful block. It was like a Brooklyn block.

MN: This was 156th Street and?

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ER: Right at the corner of Dawson and- -

MN: Dawson Street - -

ER: 751 Dawson Street. Right on the corner.

MN: Right.

ER: Okay and 156th Street was here. [Draws map in air] This was Dawson's Street.

156th Street was here and Leggett Avenue came this way.

MN: UH, huh.

ER: And this was Longwood. And we were between Longwood and 156th Street.

MN: Right. So it was 7- -

ER: - - 751.

MN: Is the building still there?

ER: The building is still there, but it has no semblance, no resemblance of what it used to be because I remember playing ball in the hall - - and it looked like - - it looked like a stadium to me and I went back a couple of years ago - - and I said, "I played ball in here?" It was like this! [Describes cramped quarters with hands]

MN: Now when you moved to the neighborhood, was it predominantly Puerto Rican and black or were there still some whites living there?

ER: There were still some whites living there. We still had - - I went to PS 39 and we were very very mixed. A lot of white, a lot of Puerto Rican and less black, but they were growing. The population was growing. When I went to junior high school, it was very mixed.

MN: Right. At 52.

ER: At 52, yeah.

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MN: Now what year did you move to - - when you were one year old - - what year was that? I mean- -

ER: - -That was 1943.

MN: Wow. You look much younger.

ER: I'm 64. I'll be 65 this June.

MN: Wow.

ER: Thank you.

MN: So the family moved in '42 and- -

ER: - -Yeah, '42 to Dawson Street.

MN: - -To Dawson Street. Right and was your family mostly English-speaking or Spanish-speaking?

ER: My parents - - well, my mother was Spanish-speaking. She didn't speak much English. My father spoke excellent English - - when he was there. And we all grew up speaking both. I didn't get the benefit of Spanish until much later.

MN: Right. Because you had older brothers and sisters and they spoke to you in- -

ER: - -They spoke in English, so my English...you can hardly- -

MN: - -Yeah.

ER: - -Tell, you know.

MN: - -Right. And on the street, did you speak English?

ER: In English.

MN: And in school?

ER: In school. Yeah.

MN: What was the block life for a boy, growing up at that time?

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ER: It was great. You know I really - - the only time I really suffered was when I went home and saw where I was. And saw what was around me and what I didn't have. And when I compared myself to what my friends had. They lived in those little - - you know, brownstones- -

MN: - -The brownstones, right.

ER: It was a whole block of brownstones.

MN: So you lived in essentially - - it was a walk-up.

ER: But the corner building was an apartment building.

MN: Right. Ok.

ER: And there were two apartment buildings at the corner of Longwood. [Taps the table] One on this side and one on this side. And everything was brownstones until my apartment building at the corner.

MN: Right.

ER: And those are the only three apartment buildings. Everything else was brownstones, tree-lined, wide. So I was wild. I mean, you know - - it was kind of - - not that my mother didn't care. But it was a different time also. You know, kids used to run around all over the place. And nobody worried as much.

MN: Did people look out for you?

ER: Yes. Yes.

MN: Did you have a sense that adults were watching when you were playing in the street?

ER: It was the same way they describe it now when people talk about the old times. Any adult could tell you what to do and what you better do. And they could cuff you and

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smack you in the back of the head and when you got home, you got hit again. You know, for not doing what you were supposed to do and for getting caught by whoever it was who would tell what- -

MN: - -What were some of the street games you played growing up?

ER: Kick the can, ring-a-leevio.

MN: Explain to them what ring-a-leevio is.

ER: Ring-a-leevio is a chase game. Ring-a-leevio is a chase game. You - - I forgot the rules - - I forgot the rules. I'd have to get my sister to tell me. Let me see, we did - - Kick the can- -

MN: - -Did you do stick ball?

ER: - - Oh yeah, stick ball, punch ball.

MN: Did you do stick ball in the street or against the wall with a box?

ER: Both. When we went to 52, it had a nice little school yard.

MN: Right.

ER: And we put- -

MN: - -Pitched in, right.

ER: - - a box and we called it "pitching in."

MN: Yeah. Now, did you play hit the penny at all?

ER: I don't know.

MN: Or handball?

ER: Handball, yes. Handball, yes. And then sometimes - - I don't know - -we used to put a popsicle stick on a line and somebody would start and you'd just- -

MN: - -We did that with a penny.- -

ER: - -Is that what it is?

MN: That was hit the penny, yeah. [crosstalk] you didn't have any pennies.

ER: I didn't have any pennies.

AT: So you'd line up popsicle sticks and try to knock them down, basically?

ER: No. See these squares? Gestures with hands on table-top.

AT: Yeah.

ER: You stand here and I stand there and we put a popsicle stick in the middle. And then we throw the ball and try and hit the popsicle stick.

MN: - -Yeah, and if it bounces and turns over you get an extra point?

ER: I don't know. I think that they counted- -

MN: - -They counted.

ER: They counted how many times it you know, it hit.

MN: Now, on your block did girls play with the boys or did they have their own games?

ER: Both. Both. Sometimes they played with us—Spin the Bottle.

MN: Right, that was a little older.

[laughter]

ER: Yeah, Spin the Bottle. We used to line up on the steps...I forgot the name of the game, but it was..."Knock, knock who's there? The Devil with a pitchfork flying through the air. What do you want? A color. What color? Brown. Claps hands. Somebody runs and you got to catch him.

MN: Right.

ER: Hide-and-seek.

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MN: Right, yeah. Now what about, like, food smells. Did people go and eat in other's houses in those days?

ER: Not that I recall. My house—my mother was a great cook, you know, my mother was a great cook.

MN: What were some of the things you ate growing up?

ER: Oh man, rice and beans and pork chops, green plantains and sweet plantains and avocados - - she made a turkey. I don't how she managed. Yeah, I guess with the welfare - - to do all that she did for us. You know, because we were really, really, really poor. I have a picture I brought. It's taken on Easter.

MN: Yeah, actually, If you could show that to Princess. You know, these pictures are important.

ER: Yeah, it's taken on Easter. And you see my friend Jesus and he's got on the nice suit. And this - - you say a picture tells - - you know - - is worth a thousand words.

And this is a program from 52.

MN: Now you called them Jesus, not *Jesus* [Spanish pronunciation].

ER: I called him Jesus. We used to go in his house - - and his mother was beautiful because she'd let us play - - and we'd take two couches in his house, put them together, cover it with a blanket, and take two broomsticks and stick them out of the front like we were in a tank.

MN: Oh. So you'd play war. You'd make believe you were, like, in the army.

ER: That's my older brother and older sister.

MN: Wow, now where was this taken?

ER: This was on the roof of 751 Dawson Street.

MN: And this is your mother?

ER: That's my sister.

MN: Your sister?

ER: That's me, that's my younger sister.

MN: So there's a significant difference in age?

ER: Yes, my brother died at 78 last year. That's him. And she died early. See were really scared because you know - -

AT: Is this you? The young one?

ER: That's my daughter. I mean, my sister. That's me at the corner of - -

MN: Wow, is that a church behind you?

ER: That's St. Margaret's Church.

MN: Oh, that's St. Margaret's Church? This is great! Wow!

AT: That's a great picture.

MN: That's a great picture. If you could scan that, that would be wonderful, and send it to us.

ER: Sure. That's me. This is my wedding. That's my older sister and that's my brother. He was the best man.

AT: Would you say you had a pretty good relationship with your siblings when you were growing up?

ER: Absolutely. It was great. The only two that didn't get along were Louis and Caesar. And that was because Caesar was always a wise guy. Smartest one in the family according to anyone you asked in our family - - I mean, he took the post office test and he

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got a hundred out of hundred. And he has almost a photographic memory - - but he went to Korea and came back and started on drugs.

MN: Right, yeah.

ER: That messed him up. That messed him up. This is my wife and I. This is me holding my - - this is the same corner, the same lamp post.

MN: And that's holding your- -?

ER: My niece.

MN: Your niece?

ER: That's my niece, Yvonne. She's 3- -

MN: Bronx Box Lunch!

ER: Isn't that something? This will tell you what I was about at that time. That's Easter Sunday.

MN: Oh, Wow. So this you and this is *Jesus*...Jesus.

ER: Yeah.

MN: And you're wearing- -

ER: - -whatever I could- -

MN: - -Whatever you could find- -

ER: - -Whatever I could wear.

MN: You have the sneakers. This is an amazing picture. So you grew up in poverty relative to the people in your area?

ER: Yes, I did.

MN: Did teachers know this, like, when you went to school- -

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ER: - -No. No. I was good at hiding my poverty. Hardly anybody came up the house.

You know, my mother was sick, my father wasn't there. My brother was on drugs. My other sister and brother had moved out and we - -

AT: Sorry, about what age were you at this point? You said your brother came back from the military.

ER: '53. I was about 11, 12 years old.

AT: Ok, so you're still in elementary school?

ER: Yeah.

MN: So you developed a way of insulating yourself from these tragedies?

ER: Yeah. And I was good in school. I remember Mr. Meltzer - - 7th grade. My mother went to open school nights, looked at me and said "A jewel." I was a good student. Really, I was president of - - I was president of 52.

MN: Wow. In elementary school they had, you know, tracking in those days. Did you get put in the one or two classes fairly early or did your academic performance improve as you got older? Were you - -

ER: - -I was always smart.

MN: So you were always in the top classes?

ER: I was always - - as a matter of fact, they skipped me.

MN: Right.

ER: You know, I started late. That was part of the Latino, Puerto Rican experience. I just didn't start school - - I don't know why. I have no idea why.

MN: You started at what age?

ER: I started at six, almost seven - - and they put in the first grade and then they saw -
- this kid, you know, I used to help my sister.

MN: Right.

ER: They said no, no and they put [inaudible].

MN: How did you learn these skills? Did you pick up reading yourself?

ER: My brothers and sisters.

MN: Your brothers and sisters. Did they work with you or just being around them?

ER: Just being around them. Really, I don't remember. I just know - - you know what
it was, I think partly, or in a major way. I used to hear my sister read to my sister-in-law.

And they used to curl up on the couch - - you know, with the true romance magazines
and all that, you know. And the writing was tiny. And there were no pictures - - and I - -
you know, at least when they got to the back part of the story - - after the front part it
has...the introduction has pictures and all that. And I would be crawling behind my sister
and sister-in-law looking over - - and I had no idea what those markings mean. I said,
"How is she doing that? How can she tell what's on that page? How can she do that?
How is she reading?" So I was curious from the beginning. And I just started being able
to pick things up and then every once in a while my brother would say "No, it's that."
My sister would say, "No, it's that." They'd say "No, you say that like that." And by the
time - - I could read before I got in school.

MN: Right.

ER: And then they found out that I was seven and they put me in the second grade.
And from then on I just, you know - - it caught up to me later - - my poverty and all that.
And the ugly feelings that I had - - the shame and the embarrassment. It caught up to me

later. It cost me quite dearly - - for a while. But I was kind of oblivious when I was small. You know, I mean, playing - - I was a good athlete. You know, so I'd be on the junior high school softball team and - - playing out in the street and football and going to the school yard.

MN: Right.

ER: So, you know, I'd get home, eat, throw - - but later on it caught up. But later on it caught up and really, really caused me a lot of grief and pain - - and my wife unfortunately took a lot of it. But fortunately she stuck by me. You know, she knew, she knew I was going to be ok. Before I did. I didn't know, she knew. And she would have had every right to kick me out—matter of fact she almost did kick me out. I was going to leave twice. She was going to kick me out twice. But after a while, I think to just go ahead for a bit, all of a sudden one day I said: "What the hell are you mad at? What are you angry at? What's making you so angry?" And I remembered some of the things that, you know, that I was really ashamed of. Now we've been married 43 years and we are ok. Everything's ok - - mostly. But at the time, I didn't know. I got into a special program at Morris High School. They knew I had some problems. I remember there was a special room, 310, which was a special program in Morris for children - - students who has some psychological social problems. And they put me in that program and I went to a counselor once a week for a long time. What it actually allowed me to do was unburden. But then I had to go home and it was depressing. It was very, very depressing. You know, I don't know how, with all the talent and love that we had as a family, that apartment was not something to be proud of. You know, I was not proud. I was ashamed. You know, I mean there were holes in the walls. Part of it was the landlord. You know,

the slumlord. Part of it was us. It's never one or the other. It's almost always a combination of things. Part of it was us, part of it was - - we had our own problems individually - - you know, growing up like that, you decide you want to get married, then you have problem with your husband so you don't have time for your house anymore, then you have problems with your boyfriend and you don't have time - - so you know, it was a lot of things that came together, you know, to cause - - that we'd get our electricity cut off - - because we couldn't pay. And we'd go to a guy named Mr. Romero, down the block, and he'd come in and unscrew the bulb in the hall, attach a switch and run a line into our house so we could have light. [laughter] We loved Mr. Romero. Mr. Romero came to our aid about three or four times.

AT: So did you have a lot of people in the neighborhood like that? That you could rely on that were just kind of well known figures?

ER: - - Everybody was - - some people were close and some were not. I know that when my mother died, that's when I really found out that everyone knew her. Everybody came and brought food and stuff like that. They didn't care about the apartment. They didn't care about anything. They just came and comforted us, you know. And I think I told you we were the only Puerto Rican family on the block.

AT: Yeah.

ER: That's not so. I was thinking. There was a lady named Luisa Cruz. I don't know. You should have heard of her because she became a legend in education and she first taught at PS 52.

MN: Luisa Cruz?

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ER: Yes. Oh man, because she was one of the first one's to fight for the rights of Puerto Ricans. And at that time, it was mostly Puerto Ricans. You know you never mixed, Mexicans, Dominicans, Ecuadorians. At that time it was Puerto Rican, you know.

MN: What was your first memory of being exposed to music? Was it in your house?

ER: Home.

MN: Uh-huh. And what was the music that you remember hearing for the first time?

ER: Name it.

AT: Everything.

ER: Yeah.

AT: You said you tried out at a pretty young - - was it in elementary school?

ER: Yes.

AT: You tried out for the band- -

ER: - -Yes.

AT: - -or the orchestra?

ER: Yes, because I was going to junior high school. And the junior high school came to our school to see- -

MN: - -Right- -

ER: - -who they were going to put in their seventh grade music program.

MN: Right, but there was a lot of music in your house?

ER: Always.

[Tape paused for lunch.]

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ER: After we finished eating - - my mother - - especially for me, when I used to finish eating, my mother would say: “[] Nueva York.” “New York is eating.” Everybody’s eating. Everybody’s ok.

MN: Now when we took our little break, we were talking about your exposure to music and you suggested it was everywhere in your household.

ER: The first exposure to music - - it just came to me while I was washing my hands - - the first exposure was my mother’s music. It was a Latin-Caribbean, piano, Noah Morales style piano [hums tune].

MN: Now was this on the radio or on record?

ER: On the radio.

MN: On the radio.

AT: Sounds like Cuban Son.

ER: It was Cuban style.

MN: Now what station would play that kind of music?

ER: Oh, I don’t remember.

MN: But you could get it on the radio?

ER: Yes, I think there was only one. I don’t remember what it was. But it was, I think, just one station - -

MN: - -So that was what your mother listened to?

ER: My mother, yeah.

MN: And that was her preference?

ER: Yeah, it was, you know - - and she used to like a lady named Libertad Lamarque.

AT: Oh yeah. Yeah, ok.

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ER: She used to like her and Carlos Gardel.

AT: That's Porteno.

ER: Tango, yeah.

MN: Now were these Cuban musicians?

ER: These were. Libertad Lamarque was- -

AT: Argentine.

ER: Argentinean.

MN: Argentinean!

ER: And Carlos Gardel, I think, was Argentinean also, because he was tango.

AT: Yeah. There's a rumor that he was born in Uruguay. There's a big fight over that.

ER: Is that right? Uh huh, I don't know, but those are two that I remember—two names that I remember. Of course there was then, you know - - Trio Los Ponchos. I don't know if they were that early.

MN: Did your brothers and sisters listen to music and the radio also?

ER: Absolutely.

ER: And what shows did you hear from them?

ER: That was before Rock and Roll - - I was - - Frank Sinatra, Frankie Lane, who recently passed. Joe Stafford, Patty Page, Guy Mitchell - -

MN: What were the names of the shows those were on?

ER: Well that was - - Saturday morning was the Hit Parade.

MN: The Hit Parade, right.

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ER: And then there was a guy named Jerry Marshall, who used to come on after - - Oh God, forgot his name. But he was - - you know, he used to give us the countdown on the Hit Parade. You know that that "Lucky Old Son" was number one for a long time.

MN: Right. Now was there - - did people in your family go to hear live music also or - - it was more the radio and the - -

ER: It was the radio. We couldn't afford it. We couldn't afford it, you know.

MN: What about musicians in your neighborhood? Young people who later became famous musicians.

ER: Just Eddie Palmieri, Orlando Marin, Charlie Palmieri - - I didn't know Charlie well. I didn't know Eddie well and I would doubt if he remembers me. He may remember my sister. But I remember playing stickball with him. I even remember how he used to throw the ball up and hit it. I remember his style, because it was unusual.

MN: Did they live on the block?

ER: No, I don't know where they lived. But I remember playing a stickball game against Eddie on West Farms Road. It was on West Farms Road, you know, right down there by Tremont.

MN: Right.

ER: But I didn't know he was a musician. I didn't know he played piano. Certainly didn't know how famous he was going to become. And then. Oh - - a guy named Long Joe, used to play timbales and used to go out with my sister. Forgot his last name. I liked him a lot. He was a nice, nice person. But that was it. You know, I mean the rest I got from the radio and records, because records were not expensive. I remember

changing bottles with my sister to go get our first 45, which was “In the Still of the Night.”

MN: Oh wow! So- -

ER: That was the first record we ever bought, on 45. I think it cost us 59 cents.

MN: And that was in the mid-50's?

ER: In the mid-50's- -

MN: - -Now, so you were fairly early into doo-wop and rock and roll?

ER: Yes. Rock and roll started coming around right - - '54, '55.

MN: Right, yes.

ER: You know it really started to become very popular.

MN: - -Now did you try singing doo-wop? Do you try to get in any street corner groups.

ER: Once. You know, you can hear my voice. I don't really have a good voice for singing, even though my family, my wife, disagree. They think I can sing, but I don't know why they think - -

MN: - -Did a lot of kids try singing doo-wop?

ER: We used to sing in the classroom. Every once in a while - - we're in a music class. So every once in a while, you know, one of us would take the lead. I took the lead once - -but not much singing. We were more into instrumental music. As a matter of fact, that's how I got my classical background, was in PS 39.

AT: Could I ask you - - who was your music teacher in junior high school?

ER: The first music teacher was Mr. Cohen.

MN: Now was that in junior high or was that in high school?

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ER: That was junior high school. I didn't have a music teacher in elementary school.

We did have, in elementary school—which is what I was just referring to—was we used to have music appreciation. I'm so sorry that they've discontinued that over these years.

I mean, people are missing so much, as far as I'm concerned. They would sit us in the auditorium, whole auditorium filled, and play records.

MN: Wow.

ER: Just play records. [laughter] That was, you know - -

MN: - -That sounds like the class I teach--Rock and Roll to Hip-Hop.

ER: And one of the first memories I have is [hums William Tell Overture.]

AT: Oh yeah. William Tell.

ER: That's the Lone Ranger!! They said that's the William Tell Overture, by Rossini.

And then there was - - I remember [unknown], you know Offenbach and Grieg and Beethoven.

MN: - - Did you see school as a welcoming place when you were growing up?

ER: Yeah, as a matter of fact, when I started teaching I saw how important it was to kids - - who wanted to come to my class - - who loved coming to school. I think part of it was that they didn't have much outside. And in school, it was really great - - most of it.

Yeah, I saw it as a welcoming place.

MN: What was the atmosphere? Were most of the teachers white?

ER: Yes

MN: And was there any tension between teachers and students that you could pick up on?

ER: Nothing that I don't see as normal. Or maybe not normal. [laughter] Usual, you know, or common. Teacher says something, the student won't do it. The teacher says do

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it, the student rebels. And the teacher, you know, gets angry and goes off. We used to get hit. We used to get hit.

MN: Now, where did they hit you?

ER: In the behind.

MN: Ok, never in the head?

ER: No, every once in a while, I'd get - - [smacks his hands together]

[Laughter.]

MN: You'd get a little smack in the back of the head.

ER: Yeah, but nothing- -

MN: - -You weren't hurt. Just smacked in the back of the head.

ER: Yeah.

MN: And spanked? Or what were the rules?

ER: My shop teacher had a big, big paddle. Big, giant wooden paddle! And he used to call it Sergeant Jake.

AT: Sergeant Jake!?

[Laughter]

MN: And this was in junior high- -

ER: In junior high school.

MN: Sergeant Jake. At Junior High School 52.

ER: And my eighth grade teacher, Mr. Frazier, had a pointer. And if you got your name on the section sheet - - you know what a section sheet is?

MN: Right.

ER: Right, where a class would be - -

MN: - -That was like a wooden pointer?

ER: Yeah, with a rubber- -

MN: With a rubber tip, right.

ER: With a rubber tip, yeah. [Simulates swinging pointer through air, making a “whooshing” sound.]

AT: Oh my gosh!

ER: Yeah man - - and he had no mercy. We’d get it. We’d get it, you know.

AT: Be thankful that some things have changed.

ER: Yeah, yeah. Well, everything is relative and it depends - - that’s one of my favorite phrases - - “it depends.” Because certainly I don’t think it did me any harm. But that’s just not acceptable. You should not hit children. You should not hit - - not as a method of teaching. But I got hit.

[Laughter]

MN: How would - - yours was a neighborhood - - there were a lot of Puerto Ricans, there were still some whites, there were some black and - - was there much racial tension when you were growing - -

ER: Not on our block. See, but we were on “Sissy Dawson.”

MN: They called it Sissy Dawson, because I’ve heard Sissy Kelly, with the Brownstones.

ER: Sissy Kelly?

MN: Yeah.

ER: Because - - and then Banana Kelly was the other block. That was Colin Powell.

But Sissy Dawson - - because most of the black people lived on the other side of

Longwood. And a lot of black people on this side too. But these, in the brownstones, were like middle-class.

MN: Yeah, like the Braithwaites.

ER: Yeah, right. And on the other side they were poorer. You know, and rougher, you know - - and coming up with - - now, all, as far as I know, almost all of my black neighbors were very, very aware of racism - - in this country- -and the history. I wondered why I was a Yankee fan. All my friends were Dodger fans.

MN: All your - - yeah.

ER: I had no idea why until I remembered, now - - Jackie Robinson. You know, now I understand. But we didn't see it that way. As a Puerto Rican family, we didn't identify with the black experience. You know, it's only now, in the last 35-40 years, since I started teaching and went to college that I began to understand what the black experience in this country really is.

MN: Now you're family had a spectrum of people, who if they were in the south, some of them might have been considered black.

ER: Absolutely. My brothers. My brother's dark, my sister's dark, my father was dark - - my other two sisters are light - - my brother Louie is light, Caesar was in between and I'm in between. I mean it goes, from you know - - from white to dark - - in my family. Matter of fact, they used to make excuses in my family for, not the treatment of blacks, but I don't think we were really exposed to, you know, the ugly, horrible treatment that was - -

MN: - - Did your black friends talk about it then or this is something you saw more in retrospect?

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ER: Most of it in retrospect. You know, we were busy having a great time. We had a wonderful time playing ball, talking, playing games and stuff like that.

MN: Right. Now you had also mentioned that you became a member of St. Margaret's Church. How did that happen? Was your family Catholic?

ER: My family was mostly Catholic. I went to St. Margaret's. I don't know how that started, but I started going - - I think because they had - - what do you call it? Not a community center, but it was like a community center. I forgot what they call it now...or then. But I started going and they had a nice little group atmosphere there. I played on St. Margaret's baseball team. It was called the Saints. [laughter] I remember, you know, it was Father Whedon, Father Martin - - this guy I forgot his name. He was crippled - - and Father Krieger. Father Krieger sexually molested me. Yeah, when I was about 12.

MN: Did you know what it was at the time?

ER: No. I knew it was wrong. I knew he shouldn't be doing that. I was confused too. He was sitting next to me, helping me with math, putting his leg - - you know, next to my privates. I don't know. It didn't affect me except I knew something was wrong with him. And that was the only time it happened. I'm often think that maybe I should sue the Episcopal Church today. But I think in the context of my whole life it didn't mean much. I had way other things - - way more pressing to me than things like that. One day a guy next door put his arm over my shoulder and tried to fondle me. And he lived next door. And I didn't know anything about homosexuality or anything like that.

MN: This is interesting because, you know - - there's a book by Kate Simon called Bronx Primitive. It was about her growing up in the Tremont section. And with all these

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people taking in boarders, there was a lot more sexual abuse of girls and boys going on than anyone would have ever thought.

ER: - -I wouldn't be surprised.

MN: - -Because relatives - - you know, a lot of things were going on, but people didn't talk about them, but that didn't mean they didn't happen.

ER: Yeah, I was - - confused me. But my poverty was more central to my development - - or to the development of my - - what is the word? It's not psychosis.

AT: It's your anger, maybe, right?

ER: Yeah, my poverty, my poverty had, you know, an embarrassment. It had way more to do with it.

MN: So shame was more the prevailing emotion?

ER: Yeah, of my poverty. Shame, anger - - the anger came later. You know I think the anger came as a result of what I remembered I had been ashamed about. You know when I realized, subconsciously, because I never said: "I'm angry because I was poor. I'm angry because I didn't have what other people had. I'm angry." You know, that never was in the forefront of my mind. But it worked on me. And it worked on me - - in 7th grade I had a 98 average, 8th grade it went to 95, 9th grade 93, first year of high school 88, second year of high school 85. 3rd year of high school 83 and I graduated 79.55.

MN: Wow, so - -

ER: - -So you could see me gradually- -

MN: Now - - do you - - were there a lot of gangs around your area?

ER: There were gangs, yeah. I don't know about a lot. But The Crowns- -

MN: - -The Seven, yeah- -

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ER: - -The Seven Crowns, The Victorians, um - -

MN: Were they active, recruiting people, like we you were in 52, nobody said, “We want you to join the Crowns.”

ER: No, I was scared from the 6th grade because of all of the stories that they always tell 6th graders that are going to be 7th graders. They say, “Oh man, they’re going to get you. Boy, wait’ll you get to junior high school. When you’re in 8th grade, 9th grade...” and so, you know, we were terrified, going into 7th grade. But the first day came and went, the 2nd day and 3rd day and nothing happened and you know, everything was ok. And all of a sudden, just as I’m sitting here now - - all of a sudden from being 14 years old - - all of a sudden I was an 8th grader and than a 9th grader. All of a sudden everything was ok. I had one experience with a gang when we were playing out in the street and these guys came running past us. 8, 10 guys came running past us! So we went, “Wow, what happened?” And about 3 minutes later, another group of guys comes running past and one of them - - I ran in the hall - - and one of the guys that was chasing the other guys - - ran in the hall and grabbed me, put me up against the wall with a garbage can top in his hand. [Laughter]You know, looking at me like [Makes facial expression.] And somebody else came and said, “No, no, no, not him! Come on!” And the guy let go of me. [Laughter.] And then I was going to see my brother one night and - - it was about 12 at night - - 3 or 4 guys surrounded me. “What you doing around here man?” I said, “You know.” I forgot how the conversation - - but I mentioned a guy named Tillman. “You know Bo Peep? Oh man, all right!”

MN: Bo-peep?

ER: Because he had one bad eye.

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MN: Oh, oh boy.

ER: And his name was Tillman and I knew him from high school. It was my first year of high school.

MN: Now what was Morris High School like for you?

ER: Morris was more racially segregated.

MN: More than 52?

ER: Much more. Much more. And Puerto Ricans and Latinos took a lot of abuse from blacks and whites. Or I should say from whites and blacks.

AT: When you say segregated, then you mean not just in terms of classes- -

ER: - -Hanging out.

AT: - -but friendships, yeah.

ER: Hanging out and friendships.

MN: Right, so were there more blacks than Puerto Ricans at Morris?

ER: I don't remember. I think so.

MN: And more whites than both?

ER: Yeah because at the time it was still, you know - - I graduated in 1960 from Morris.

MN: Right, so Puerto Ricans were, like more marginal than the other two groups?

ER: Yeah. Yeah. And then a lot of it was, you know, the culture and the language, you know - - and the music - - but yeah it was more segregated. It was more - - there still were groups that hung out together. But don't forget that was the beginning, in '57 when I got to high school - - that was right at the height, at the beginning of doo-wop.

MN: Right.

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ER: And a lot of Puerto Ricans - - because Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers had two Puerto Ricans- -

MN: Right, right behind us here. [Points at poster on the wall behind Eddie Rosario.]

ER: Is that right?

MN: Herman Santiago and - -

ER: Yeah, two, maybe even three. So at that - - it was still - - people hung out with their own group. And some of that is cool. You know, some of that is not. It depends. It depends.

MN: Was Morris a place where you ever felt, like, afraid that you would get jumped?

ER: No, I felt safe. But I was aware and wary of the fact that it could be dangerous. Somebody got shot on the steps of Morris while I was there. Or that happened the year before I got there and that was still talked about. But I felt relatively safe. I was - -

[END OF TAPE 1-SIDE A, BEGINNING TAPE 1-SIDE B]

MN: Tell us again how you got into playing drums.

ER: My brother-in-law was a drummer.

MN: What was your brother-in-law - - was he- -

ER: - -He was Puerto Rican.

MN: He was Puerto Rican.

ER: But he was jazz.

MN: So he was a drummer, not a timbale player - -

ER: - -No, he could play timbales and all that, but he was a jazz drummer. And he was the one who got me into Philly Joe Jones - - Philly Joe Jones to me is like - - and Art

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Blakey, you know all these jazz drummers - - and who's what's his name who played with - -

MN: Max Roach?

ER: Max Roach, uh-huH. So I mean I heard Max Roach and Philly Joe Jones before. As a matter of fact, I have one record I have that I played for a friend of mine - - I said, "Walter. Come on. Why don't you come upstairs? I want to hear something." Because I was about 14. And it was "Tempus Fugit," Miles Davis. I liked it then. And then I heard a record that I used to play in St. Margaret's - - because I used to play, it was called, "Cubano Chant." And it was by Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers. That's one of the first albums that I ever, ever - - that's the album that got me into wanting to play jazz.

MN: It's Cubano Chan?

ER: Chant. Chant, it's chant.

MN: Cubano Chant.

ER: Yeah.

ER: All right. Ok.

ER: On one side it was jazz and the other side was Afro-Cuban. It was called - - Dee's Dilemma was the record that was soulful at first and then he comes in with his saxophone and I mean you could tell - - it was Jackie McLean.

MN: Wow.

ER: And I used to say "Lenny, how about it?" My friend, Lenny - - said "Yeah, Jackie was always angry," and you could hear it. And you know, that's what got me into, you know - - the feeling and the - - you know.

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AT: Did you start - - Did you start playing percussion or actually start playing the trap set? So you started - -

ER: The traps. I started with the traps.

MN: The trap set is?

AT: The drum set.

ER: The drum set. A regular, American, jazz drum set. I played that before I played congas and timbales and bongoses. And they used to be in the school yard. They used to have little jam session in the school yard. They used to say, "Eddie, Eddie go ahead. You know how to - - go ahead."

AT: Everybody knew you were a drummer so - -

ER: - -But I was scared.

MN: So people would be playing their hand drums in the school yard?

ER: Yeah. And all that. Timbales, cow-bell. And I heard it.

MN: Were they good?

ER: Yeah, often. Sometimes- -

MN: - -Are these older guys mostly?

ER: These were - - no these were not older guys. These were our age.

MN: Oh, really?

ER: A little older, but nothing like professional musicians or older guys. And all of a sudden, I just started playing, and I remember taking my drum set home - - the first thing I played was "So What." You know, Miles Davis, "So What." Just like that I tried to do what Jimmy Cobb did, you know, and I got better and better and better. I never took a lesson. If I'd taken lessons or practiced, I really would have been good now.

AT: So you basically learned playing by ear- -

ER: --Yeah.

AT: --Maybe playing with some friends- -

ER: --Yeah.

AT: --and then you had a lot of experience in the band and- -

ER: --Yeah I played in a band - -

MN: --Now, what instruments did you play in the band? Percussion?

ER: But yeah, drums. Drums.

MN: Did the school have drums?

ER: That was funny. We had the rag-taggediest set of drums. [Laughter] I mean, one was like this, you know [Gestures] You know and the snares were missing from underneath. Another one was this big, but it was like a band snare drum. You know like the guys playing in the marching band, snare drum.

MN: Yeah, Andrew, why don't you get the Conga and we can have a little demonstration?

ER: I'll show you a little bit of what I know.

ER: Ok, sure. We can talk afterwards.

ER: I admire a lot of congeros. [Taps on table] I mean they roll...one thing, I could never do that. But I keep the beat. [Taps on table] I could keep the beat.

MN: One of the most amazing things I saw is this pianist, Valerie Capers, who I became friendly with—she's about 70, trained classically, taught herself jazz and Latin music. And her bassist...he bangs on the base, as like a drum in between to create more different rhythms.

[Break in tape]

MN: So here we go. We're going to have a...

ER: Is it tight?

AT: Well, yeah the heads tight, but it's cracked actually. It's still got a rich sound.

MN: Wow, this is Bronx African American History Project Live Music.

[Eddie plays conga]

[applause]

ER: You should hear some of the guys that really play. I could do this a little bit and - - if I had another one, I could play with a groove. But some of them other guys, I admire them, because this is nothing. I want to get that on record. There are guys that are unbelievable. This was - - because I could keep the beat. I'll keep the beat. You give me - - you play a song, you tell me what the tempo is and I'll play it. I'll play it, I'll play it well. And I'll solo a little bit, but just like with the other drummers - - Joe Murillo and Max Roach - - I just can try to come close to doing something. This is not bad.

[Eddie Strikes conga.]

AT: Yeah, it actually sounds pretty good considering that it has that big crack. It has two cracks.

ER: Yeah and I know a guy that fixes them

AT: Oh yeah?

ER: A guy named Cali in the Bronx. I bought my first cowbell - - from him. I bought my first conga. It cost 13 dollars.

MN: Wow.

AT: He's still around and he's still fixing drums?

ER: Yeah. I just got my first conga fixed by him.

MN: Right. Where is his shop?

ER: He is on Ogden Avenue, right up from Yankee Stadium. You know, I used to live on 166th Street and Ogden and he's down the hill. The buses used to not be able to come up the hill in snowstorms. That's some hill.

MN: Right, that's what they call Highbridge.

ER: Yup, that's where I was, that's where I was.

MN: Now, tell us on tape the story of how you got that first drum set downtown.

ER: Oh, I had been wanting a drum set for a long time. You know, my first drum set was a set of books: thin snare, thicker tom-tom, thicker floor tom-tom, cymbal was - - I don't know - - anything - - a can, you know anything that- -

AT: - -Something metal, right?

ER: I started working for Safeway. As soon as I was 14, I got my - -

MN: - -Working papers?

ER: Working permit, you know. And I started working at Safeway on 163rd Street and Westchester. And I would, I would- -

MN: That was a supermarket?

ER: Yeah. Down the block there was an A & P. With Safeway, they were really competitive at the time. And I started working. My first paycheck was \$28.02. You know, and I went home, gave it to my mother, kept a couple of dollars. And I kept saving a little bit, kept saving a little bit, saving a little bit, saving a little bit. I had about \$180 dollars and I went downtown, Frank Wolf and Manny's on 148th Street, and I looked. And you know, I said, "How much?" He said, "275." And I went home and told

my mother. I said "Ma, I got 180 dollars." She said - - from somewhere, I don't know where, "Here's a hundred dollars. She gave me a hundred dollars. I could not believe it. And I went right back downtown, said, "I want that set right there." It was blue pearl. It was Gretsch. Set of Gretsch, blue pearl.

MN: Gretsch!

AT: That's a good brand.

ER: Yeah and he gave me it. He gave me a foot pedal. He gave me cymbals. He gave me the high-hat. He gave me the bass drum. He gave me - - you know, he gave me everything - - 275! And I took the \$5 dollars that was left and I took a cab home. And I still have it. I still - - they're right there. And every once in a while I take out the snare because the snare doesn't matter on a drum set, you know. You'll see guys with one color drum set and the snare is totally different. You know, how you like the sound? Some snares, you know, sound better to you than others. And I still have it, but mom, thanks mom. I couldn't - - we were on welfare! I don't know how - - And once she told me - - once she had a 100 dollar bill. Well maybe she hit a number or something like that.

MN: Were numbers big in your neighborhood?

ER: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MN: Was the number guy part of the neighborhood?

ER: Yeah, he used to come up like clockwork.

MN: You remember his name? Did he wear a jacket and tie?

ER: Yeah. As a matter of fact he did - - and an overcoat.

MN: This is very different than - - you people think of like, crime. But the numbers people were almost respectable.

ER: And It still is that way in some neighborhoods.

MN: So he came in an overcoat, in a jacket and tie.

ER: I think my mother took numbers for a while. You know, I think my mother took numbers because I remember her telling me the story - - the cops came up to the house and my grandmother, who was going a little senile at the time, you know, they were just asking questions - - but my grandmother kept inching toward the drawer where the slips were. My mother, she got so angry, you know because she made it obvious that something was there and they found it. They found the betting slips. You know, I don't know what happened. And then I remember the cops coming up 'cause of my brother and the drugs. You know there was a lot of- -

MN: - -You're brother got involved in drugs after the Korean War?

ER: Yeah.

MN: When did heroin really start really hitting that neighborhood?

ER: Right about then.

MN: The early mid 50's?

ER: Yeah.

MN: And did this take out a lot of the young men in the neighborhood?

ER: It was devastating. It was devastating.

MN: Oh boy. Could you see it? Like, was it like people nodding out or- -

ER: - -Sure. The guy used to nod in my house. I used to say, "What's wrong with Caesar?" I had no idea, you know. I didn't know. "What's the matter with Caesar?" I saw a guy o. d. in the house. He didn't die. You know he didn't die, you know, but they shot up? And all of a sudden the guy went - - [Claps hands together.]

MN: You actually saw people shoot up?

ER: Yeah.

MN: Wow.

AT: Was this about the same time that you started noticing other changes in the Bronx? That- -

ER: You know, we used to sleep with the doors open. And then there came a time when we woke up and something was missing. And that's when we, you know, people started to need money, and would betray their family and friends.

MN: So you think - - if you're looking at things that really made the neighborhood deteriorate, drugs would be one of the major- -

ER: - -Oh yeah, I think so. I think so, you know, along with the racism and segregation in the society which impacted all around. You know, I mean no jobs. You know people used to, "Why do I see so many blacks and Puerto Rican guys standing on the corner?" "What do you think? What'd you say is the reason?" "You don't want to work." "I thought you might say that. You know, you just don't want to work. Is that what you really think?" You know, and every time an opportunity comes they're lined up, you know, blocks around to get jobs. You think we don't want to work, and we don't want to feed our families and we don't want to have a little extra for a hamburger or to eat out. You really think we're that much different? And the fact is that many of them do think that we're that different. You know, that you are superior. You know, that's why I agreed with community control, except that it went awry because our - - in my opinion - - our shortcomings are the same as white people's shortcomings. And instead of us taking advantage of being able to give our children an education the way we see it,

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instead of emulating - - the wonderful part of education, you know, which imparts knowledge and hope and all of that other stuff - - we took the worst aspects of the white man which is, cheat, you know, and corrupt, and make deals. So we got people making deals with book companies and we got people deciding because they're on the school board they wield power over principal. Not everybody. And then many boards, many board members that were great and really, you know, but eventually - -

MN: In the time was - - did you become aware of racism? Were you affected by, let's say, the Civil Rights movement going on? Or was this something that came later- -

ER: - - It dawned on me gradually, but then my first teaching job was in central Harlem.

MN: Now how old were you when you- -

ER: - -I was 24.

MN: Ok. So you went from Morris directly to college?

ER: Yes. I went to CCNY.

MN: Oh, you went directly to CCNY?

ER: Yeah, CCNY, on a hundred dollar scholarship that my guidance counselor gave me. And she was white. You know, it's hard - - it's hard to make it look like your own people are not smart. But what I'm saying is that we're all the same, one way or the other and we can all go one way or the other. And power, and you know, when you don't have power and you don't have opportunities, you can go the wrong way, even when you're children are at stake. We've been made desperate.

AT: Do you think this is one moment in your life where one person stepped in, gave you a helping hand and made a difference?

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ER: Yeah, that was, I forgot her name. I put in down. I wrote an essay a couple of months ago. I said it was Ms. Berliner, but it was not Ms. Berliner. Ms. Berliner was my English teacher, who turned me on to Shakespeare.

MN: When did you decide to become a teacher?

ER: I didn't want to become a teacher. I wanted to become a baseball player.

[Laughter] Or a doctor, or a musician. You know, teaching was the furthest thing from my mind. I don't know how I - - but when I got into college they said, "You got to have a major." So what am I going to do, you know? I'm an athlete. So I think I'll try physical and health education. But you have to be in education to be - -

MN: Now, did you place baseball in high school?

ER: Yes and college.

MN: Oh you were on the college baseball team?

ER: Yeah.

MN: What was your position?

ER: Second base. Short stop. Second base, short stop.

MN: Where - - did you play in sand lot teams in the Bronx?

ER: Yeah, you saw that picture? Me and Henry and Julius. That was on 128th Street - - and Harlem River Drive.

MN: Ok, so that's in Harlem.

ER: Yeah and the Bronx, played in St. Mary's Park. You know, we played a lot in St. Mary's Park.

MN: Where there any - - what about Crotona Park?

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ER: Crotona Park, I played a lot in Crotona Park. But nothing much organized. A lot of pick-up games. I just did not have the where-with-all or the knowledge to know where to go. I tried out for the St. Louis Cardinals one time at Macombs Dam Park. But I had no idea of what I was doing. Nobody, except for one guy named Bobby Concepcion - - I wish I could find him today. He taught me - - he taught me a lot. He took me out to St. Mary's Park and hit me ground balls until my tongue was hanging on the ground. You know, he said, "No. You're going to learn how to field a ground ball." And he had me there for an hour in the heat. A straight hour! I rested maybe for five minutes out of that hour. And he...he taught me a lot. I really wish I could find the man. And he was in charge of the St. Margaret's baseball team.

AT: I was really interested in how you became a teacher and that story that you told about the person who actually helped pay for - - did you already have a plan to go to college or do you think that - -

ER: I wanted to go to college.

AT: Ok.

ER: I wanted to go college. I knew, you know, it was a matter of pride. I was the only one to go to college in my family. My sister was the only one to graduate high school. I wanted to go to - - it was expected. So she gave me - - it was a hundred a fifty dollars, Bronx Community College. She gave me a hundred dollars and I borrowed fifty dollars from my brother and I registered and I went to work at Safeway to help me keep going, you know. My first semester in Bronx Community College, I failed a four credit course and a three credit course and that's because I was fooling around across the street from

the Y. That was where they first held their classes—Bronx Community—before they got a building. And I was cutting class. You know, I was messed up.

AT: It took some time before you kind of developed - - a sense of, maybe, responsibility for your education and your life.

ER: Yeah, for myself as a person. For myself, as a man, as a husband, as a father, it took a while.

AT: Now at this point were you already married?

ER: I was married at 21. I was married at 21. I got married in 1963

AT: Can you tell us just a little about how you met your wife?

ER: My wife, I met through my brother who - - I don't know how he met who he met - - but he - - there was a softball team downtown called the Buenos Amigos. And he knew that I could play because he could play. We were all good ball players. And he came and took me to join the team, but they didn't have space on the team. Meanwhile, he had met some people on 111th St. and so - - he had a party for - - for himself. Since my birthday is exactly the same day - - nine years apart - - it was our party. And my wife, along with the people from 111th St., went to the party and that's how I met her. I really wasn't interested at first. My friend would come from downtown and said "Julie asked for you, Julie asked for you, Julie asked for you." I'd say "uhhhh" you know. And then eventually, you know, one thing led to another and I started seeing her a little more. And how do I like to put it? She chased me until I caught her. [Laughter]

AT: All right. I guess that makes sense.

ER: At 17 I was playing ball. I was at Morris - - Morris High School. She was at - - was that Jane Addams? Right around the corner.

AT: Yeah, ok. I'm not sure.

ER: Yeah, so I would meet her. And since I was in such need - - you know I was lonely inside. I was sad inside. To everybody else, I was, "Hah, hah hah." But I was not happy, you know, inside. And she saw that need and all of a sudden I needed her. Listen I cut a whole term of math - - to meet her at the train station. My class was at 8:00 and I never went. And I went to the teacher at the end of the semester, said, "You gave me a 55." He said, "Who are you?"

AT: So this is what dropped the average down to 75.

ER: Yeah it was going way down, you know, going way down.

AT: So you actually met her your senior year in high school?

ER: When I met her - - was it my senior year? Might have been my senior year - - half way through my junior year and then my senior year because I used to - - I went to go see her every day for a year. I remember that. Never missed a day. Went to go see her every day! They must have gotten tired of me. Her family, you know. Thank goodness her family accepted me. Except when I started mistreating her. You know, I began to mistreat her. I was angry, jealous, short tempered, you know.

AT: Do you think that—did things changed for you when you changed your environment? You said you graduated from high school, you began taking classes at Bronx and you said you had some problems the first or second semester.

ER: I don't think - - it had nothing to do with environment.

AT: No?

ER: I had nothing to do with environment, I don't think. It was all here.

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AT: I'm also wondering, about maybe the people you spent time around - - your friends, and your influences, but - - also did you have - - I'm thinking you mentioned that your wife is from a similar neighborhood. What was your impression of the other neighborhoods around you?

ER: She was very poor too. She was very poor too, but she will acknowledge that I was even poorer than she. And she - - they broke up her family. Welfare broke - - they were living in different people's houses. Until they got back together. And she was very, very poor also, but she knows, she saw, she met my mother. My mother liked her very, very much before she died. She really liked her and my family came to like her. I was almost going to bring her, but she decided she wanted to - - I wasn't going to bring her, I was going to drive her here and told her, "You know what you can do? You can walk up and down Fordham Road," because you know, we used to shop around here. We used to go to- -

AT: - -Oh, right.

ER: - -the Paradise Theater. You know and she loves the shopping centers and the 99 cent stores and, you know, she's crazy about all of that, you know. But it would be an honor for me to bring her. She's made a big difference.

AT: I think we would love to talk to her, actually.

ER: She could tell you a lot also about my family, you know, they all loved her - - and do. Anybody that meets her knows - - anybody that was thinking of having an affair with me...all they have to do is see us together - - and it's erased. You can't separate us. And I know that now. I know that now. I didn't always know that. You know, I was not a good pleasant - - and she will tell you I wasn't that bad.

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AT: What was life like as a young man then for you? I mean, even as you are going through college, beginning to teach- -

ER: - -I was outwardly happy, gregarious, you know, talented, smiling - - and inside I was suffering. I was angry, shamed and I had a balance because a lot of times I was having fun and I really did have a good time. And I really was enjoying it and I really did impress and I really - - you know, on the other hand sometimes a lot of stuff came rushing in on me. I often took it out on her, so it was kind of both. I've always been both. When I was taking my test in 6th grade to go to see if I wanted to go to special junior high school - - I had to take the test three times because I was on the border line each time. You know, when I got hit with a baseball in high school - - you know I was going back to first base and the guy didn't catch the ball and he hit me in the mouth. And I went to the doctor and I said, "Doctor, why do I have this rash on my hands." You know, it was stress. He said you're a sensitive and a complex individual. Thanks. He was telling me, you're putting this on yourself. Because he'd give me medicine, go away and come back. You know, if he takes it away and he comes back, this is more than just a passing thing. It was here. But I'm better now.

AT: So you'd say even in, let's say, your 20's, the biggest point of stress in your life might have been where you grew up and not being able to let go of the experience. You talk about the experience of being in poverty and - - you feel like it separated you, right? Is this where you were heading with that?

ER: What do you mean separating?

AT: Well, for example, when you talked about your experiences in junior high school, in elementary school, it sounds like you talked about being aware of a separation between

me and other kids on my block. I'm wondering if this is where the stress started or is this is only part of the whole issue.

ER: That's part of it. I think a lot of it was my own personal makeup. I don't know why - - who you are or who you are or who you are. I know there's something within us that's unique and individual - - and it's affected in different ways by the same thing and in the same way by different things. I'm just very, very sensitive. I still am. I cry at the drop of a hat. You know, I could be driving and thinking about something and I'll start crying. I'll say "Julie, give me a tissue." So I think part of it was...I was just...my nature is being very sensitive. I hurt easily. And on the other hand, I'm both in so many ways. I'm very forgiving. I think it was my sensitivity that - - I just don't know what other people were thinking. But nobody knows how I took things. And it reminds of "I Never Promised You a Rose Garden." You know where she tells the psychiatrist, you know I gave her everything. I did everything for her. I said I gave her this, I gave her this. They said, "We know what you gave her. We don't know what she took." So inside me is you know, a love, a shame, a hate, an appreciation, a disdain. You know, I mean, I've been like that ever since I can remember. It's like the left and right side of your brain.

AT: So know to some extent, how much do human beings change throughout their whole lifetime?

ER: Yeah, so it was not only the difference between me and my friends, which was definitely a factor. It was more me with myself in my environment. It was what I saw and what I felt within myself relative to what I was in.

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AT: Now do you think, if you say “I also had this kind of sensitivity,” do you think it’s something that you could take and use - - let’s say did you use it in the classroom with kids- -

ER: - -Oh, absolutely.

AT: - -Did you use it in your music?

ER: Absolutely. That’s a good observation. That’s one of the things that made me, in my own opinion not so humble, a great teacher. Because I shared with them. You know, I used to them, listen I was twelve years old too. You know, I was fourteen, I was nine. And I wondered too at fifteen and sixteen, is anybody going to love me? Is anybody ever going to love me? Am I going to have somebody to love me? Am I going to be a father, a husband? Am I going to - - what’s my life going to be like, you know? And I think they appreciated that because they knew that I was being honest about my own fears and dreams. I got a letter from one of my students - - I still have it. If I’d found it I would have brought it. He said Mr. Rosario, I’m leaving for Howard University tomorrow. I wanted you to know because - - you’re the best teacher I’ve ever had and besides my mother, you inspired me most. I said - - you know stuff like that. I get letters from Ohio and all kinds of - - you know - - I was sensitive, not only to myself, but others. I always put myself in somebody else’s shoes.

AT: So you said that originally you weren’t that interested in teaching. You wanted to be a baseball player and you wanted to - - but obviously you’ve felt some kind of fulfillment from teaching.

ER: It was great.

AT: Where did you teach?

ER: I started - - Julie don't pay attention to this part. I was going out with another woman who knew a principal in Harlem. I graduated and she called the principal and told them that I was a physical education major, just graduated and could she interview me. And I went. And that's how started at 201. You know, 127th Street between Park and Madison. And that was the beginning - - you know it was an experiment - - I walked right into a teacher's strike. You know, my first year was the UFT striking.

AT: So how did you fit in, if they were in the middle of a strike?

ER: I did not strike.

AT: Yeah. You were not the most popular person in that school.

ER: No, but at that time the UFT was - - I mean I remember Al Shanker saying, "I don't care about the kids because they don't vote." And the climate was one of white against black - - because most of the teachers were white, most of the students were black. And they really resented the community taking over the education of its kids. Because they knew - - many, not all - - that they did not concern themselves as much as they should have with the education of minority children. They were looking for security. I'm all for that. I'm a union person. But they were fearful of the fact that they were going to lose a lot of jobs to minority people who wanted their own to teach their own. I don't know who can argue with that. Not that a white teacher can not be a good teacher. Obviously that's not so. Because they're some black teachers that are not good teachers. For their own or anybody else. But they were scared that the community was going to really try and get rid of a lot of white teachers because the community was perceived the union as being anti-minority.

AT: And it might have been to some extent.

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ER: It was to an extent. I mean anywhere you go in the history of this country, you're going to find whites not servicing, serving, the black community or making the black community - - or minority community subservient - - or looking at them as if they don't deserve to be served with the same caliber of service as their own community. You know, that's historic.

AT: This is the 1960's we're talking about? So this is when you really kind of hit these issues.

ER: The 60's was some decade. That 60's was unbelievable - - I had an afro this big! [Gestures around head.] [laughter] I did. I had an afro that big. Wearing dashikis, you know, got in touch with not only my Puerto Rican side, but my African heritage. And then the school, and then the neighborhood and then the community - - really became - - that's when Afro-centrism really really came into play and taught us a lot - - you know, about pride and where we were from and - - you know, and we needed it. And it had always been there. We had always had people somewhere that knew what we were about. But it was either suppressed - - one way or the other, not given the freedom to express itself - - or usurped. But that helped give me a feeling of pride. And from there I went to, "What is it being Puerto Rican?" That's when I started learning about the lyrics to Puerto Rican music. Because my friends used to say - - especially my black friends - - "What did he say Eddie, what did he say?" And I said, "Gee, I don't know." So they'd ask another one of my friends, who'd say, "awww, he didn't say anything. It's just rhyming for the beat." And I said, "I wonder how true that is." So I started asking questions and listening and finding out. Found out it's just as Shakespearean - - you know the lines are

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beautiful. You know, the sentiments and thoughts are beautiful. It's not nonsense. It's really, really deep, you know, life, explaining, expressing lyrics.

AT: So you think that some of your consciousness - - your Puerto Rican heritage, also - - sort of came from the Civil Rights movement?

ER: Oh, yeah.

AT: Was that connected in any way to your beginning to play more Latin style music?

ER: Yeah. When I first began to—I wanted to start finding out what my Puerto Rican-ness was about. So I started going to the marqueta. So I started asking friends, you know, “What did he say?” And I started playing timbales. And I broke up my drums. I broke up my trap set. I took the floor tom-tom, took out the bottom skin and the top-skin, put the side tom-tom on top—took out the bottom skin, put it on top of that. So I had one, big long...

AT: I'm imagining this here.

ER: And then I took the snare drum and lifted it all the way up to be next to that one. So I had- -

AT: And you played them with mallets, instead of sticks- -

ER: Yeah, I played them with timbale sticks. And then the bell—I had a hole in the edge of the bell. You know the bell goes like this and then there's a little hole. I hooked that on to one of the lugs that you tighten and that's how I started. That's how I started. I started practicing and I got pretty good.

AT: Were there places you would go to listen to music at that point in your life?

ER: I went to the Hunts Point Palace. I went to the Audubon Ballroom. 845—I played at the 845, but that was later, after it was no longer the 845. It was the same building.

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AT: Actually, I don't know all of that history. So after it was the 845, what were they doing at this place?

ER: I can't remember the name of it, but we played up there. We played up there. It was six guys. Timbale, conga, bongo, a bass, a guitar and a singer. Six guys, 180 dollars a night, 30 bucks each.

AT: That's not too bad.

ER: I was so proud. The first 30 dollars I made. I said, "Oh man," I was really, really proud that I had done that. And this was the Bronx.

AT: What kind of a crowd would you see then. This is a Bronx show and you're playing Latin jazz or just- - Latin music?

ER: Latin, no Latin. It was Latin. We'd take music that was popular, that we heard on the radio - - what was it? Malanga, no it wasn't La Malanga - - Eddie Palmieri.

Songs like Truco Tru. Quitate La Mascara. We'd play - - there's one that was very popular. [Hums song.] "Amor Por Ti," which was from a guy that left the Gran Combo and went on his own. He died. And so we'd go and we'd play the same songs every week. Same songs every week for like six weeks. But they went to the dance. They didn't care. And I had a great time. I had a great, great time.

AT: Ok, so the style of music you were playing - - you would dance to it.

ER: Yeah.

AT: It had a lot of rhythm. Did you say that you had a horn?

ER: No.

AT: Just, bass- -

ER: - -bass, drums, singer- -

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AT: - -drums, singer. Ok.

ER: We'd sing choro. You know, whoever was in the band would sing choro. That was in the Bronx. That was all Bronx. I never played in Manhattan. Once I played in Brooklyn, I think. But no it was the Bronx.

AT: What would say - - when you were out playing a lot - - what were the main venues for Latin music - - in the Bronx.

ER: The Hunts Point Palace, my sister danced at the Rovalie's and Caborojeno and - - 845 to me at the time - - I was too young - - it was more like a bar. Club 845 - -

AT: Yeah, it's not a very big space.

ER: It was a bar mostly, you know, and they played music, but it wasn't a dance hall. Of course then there was the one downtown that everybody went—then the Audubon, it was downtown, the Palladium - - the Cheetah came much later, but the Palladium was definitely the spot at that time. And at the Bronx it was the Hunts Point Palace. You know there were three movies on that block at Southern Boulevard. There was The Spooner, The Star, I forgot the other one - - and there were three on Prospect Avenue.

AT: There was a movie theater right next to the 845.

ER: Yeah, that was the Prospect Theater. Then down there was the Franklin, then there was the Berland. I remember going to those theaters. Oh wow! My brother took me to see Frankenstein. Yeah, the movies, it was something. Right there, there was Casa Alegre. There was a hamburger stand right on the corner where the number 5 bus used to take us to Pelham Bay. We used to get right on there. There was a bank

AT: Do you remember - - know that you're talking about the neighborhoods a little bit - - you remember the old elevated train, the Third Avenue train- -

ER: - -Sure.

AT: - -and you must remember when they put in the Cross Bronx Expressway and some of these changes in construction started happening.

ER: Trolleys. I remember the trolleys.

AT: Could you see some of the effects that these - - its sort of a notorious history - - but these changes had on the neighborhood?

ER: I didn't realize what kind of effect that Cross Bronx was having until a few years ago. You know, when Moses just said, "Everybody out."

AT: Lovely.

ER: And we're taking this. I don't care how long you've been living here. I don't care about your children. I don't care about your schools or where you're going to go. We're going to make a Cross-Bronx expressway. I didn't really—I do remember the Bruckner Expressway. You could see the Bruckner Expressway from my window.

AT: Oh, yeah?

ER: Yeah. And I could see - -they were building that for like, ten, fifteen years! Cause I could see the planes coming into LaGuardia. I remember the constellation. Do you remember the constellation - - the plane with three tails?

AT: No. It doesn't ring a bell.

ER: It was a plane with three tails. It was a big, four engine Lockheed. It was a Lockheed.

AT: You could see these coming? You could see all the way to LaGuardia?

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ER: Yeah. And right past the Bruckner Expressway. Bruckner Boulevard was just like a cabbage patch at the time. Then there was Colgate Field. I played baseball at Colgate Field, which was right on Bruckner Boulevard. Right off of Hunts point.

AT: Ok, yeah.

ER: It was beautiful. And then 156th Street was all Brownstones, tree-lined. Leggett Avenue—and right around the corner was PS 52. Oh, and you know what else I got? I was a hero. Here's an article I wrote for *Latin New York*.

AT: You wrote the article? All right.

ER: Page 26, I believe. This is the award I got at graduation.

AT: This is a different school, right? Junior High 40.

ER: Yeah, that has nothing to do with 52. This is my award. My Frank D. Whelan Award. That was in junior high school. 1957.

[END TAPE 1 SIDE B, BEGINNING TAPE 2 SIDE A]

AT: Look at this.

ER: This is the original article. People coming down, trying to get off. And really it was nothing.

AT: So where was this fire? This fire was Dawson Avenue and- -

ER: - -It was really Dawson Street. Yeah right on the corner of my house. Right behind the fence at 52. Right behind the fence.

AT: So you and your friends were there, helping out?

ER: Yeah, so people were trying to come down the back of the building - - down the fire escape - - and we were just extending a hang so they could drop down. They made a big thing out of it. You know newspapers.

Princess Okieme (PO): How did this fire start?

ER: Some kids were playing, as a joke, with - - not mat- - I don't know, but it was a joke. And he started it as a joke and it became something very serious. It was crazy.

AT: I'm trying to figure out what year this was.

ER: This was - - the back - - 1956. This is June, 1956.

AT: 59, it says. The article says 59.

ER: On the back? Oh, 59.

PO: Did the boys go to jail for a long time that started the fire?

ER: No, it was a prank and they really didn't know the seriousness of what they were doing. I think they gave them a good scare.

AT: So this fire - - it hit the whole block, is what it looks like.

ER: It was serious. I was serious. They put it out pretty quickly. I remember the custodian from my school - -I forgot his name, Frank something - - slapping one of the Puerto Rican women and the guy getting mad and attacking him. He said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm just trying to." Because she was hysterical. So he was just trying to calm her down and he smacked her. And her husband just went crazy. But he had to apologize. "I'm sorry, I was just trying to calm her down, cause." But that was interesting. That was an interesting time.

AT: We're going to have to make a copy of all of these. I think we hit a lot of the questions that I wanted to ask, but there's always more to talk about and we can invite you back another time.

ER: I'd be happy to.

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AT: Obviously we're going to talk about doing the oral history project in the schools.

Do have anything you want to add, before we finish up the interview?

ER: You know, you just have to understand that sometimes people say things - - when you talk about black and white and Puerto Ricans and blacks and traitors and who knew what they were doing and - - who really cared. Because people take things very personally. They call you a traitor if you say something about black - - against black. Or Puerto Rican against Puerto Rican. I want to be clear that I mean no such thing. What I say is the way I see it. There are many sides to a lot of questions. That sometimes you say things and you don't get a chance to see the other side of that until later on. And so people only see one side and they say, well, he's talking bad about us. You can't be a prouder Puerto Rican than I. As proud, but not prouder. I think we all have a lot to learn from each other. I think we need to take a good, long strong look at what all this is really about because we've still got poverty. We've still got the racism. We're still hurting each other. We're still not giving everybody the advantage of what this country is supposed to give you. And I would like to be part of helping as much as I can.

AT: Do you have any ideas? Where would you start?

ER: The obvious answer is education. But educating who? Because we have to educate the people that are discriminating against as much as you have to educate the people who are being discriminated against. I hope I said that right. It's both. We've got to teach our kids and give them pride and teach them - - we've got a lot to work on ourselves. Somebody said we don't value education. That's hogwash. I think it was Badillo - - not Badillo somebody like that. I hope I don't misquote the man. But somebody well known in the Puerto Rican community said Puerto Rican parents do not

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care about education. That could not be further from the truth! Some don't. Some white people don't. Some black people don't. Some Asians don't. I don't like to hear people paint everybody with the same brush. That's why I said before, I don't like absolutes. You know you get in trouble when you start talking about all of them, or none of them, or I never, or you always. You know, you get in trouble with that. How do you like people when they say, "Well you know how you all B's are?" "You know how you men are?" Nobody likes to be put in a category that they don't belong in. So we've got to start by educating both. I mean, we've got people today that still don't think we deserve a proper education. We've got people today that still don't think that we are worthy of the same kind of consideration as anybody else. Today, right here, now, we've got people that don't believe that minorities deserve the same thing that everybody else deserves. And it's people like Newt Gingrich who say, "Well, all the Constitution promises is the pursuit of happiness." I say, yeah, but you get in the way of that pursuit. [laughter] But you don't say that do you?

AT: That's a nice way of putting it.

ER: You don't say how many impediments you put into the pursuit of happiness for us. You know, you never talk about that.

AT: So it's about removing some of those impediments.

ER: Yeah, and getting a mindset from these people that are in the highest levels of government - - and education to begin to understand your wrong. How much more plainly can I put it? That's wrong. You're wrong - - the war in Iraq. If you don't like the war in Iraq, you're a traitor. Putting it in absolute terms. If you're not this, you're that. There's room for disagreement. But we're not going to get far if you keep throwing

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our applications in the garbage can. We're not going to get far if you keep thinking that you can learn much easier than you can. We've got a long way to go. And it's both sides - - education here. I don't know how you're going to change these people's minds about, "What's the matter with these niggers? They got cars. They got T.V.s." How am I gonna - - it's the same thing with religion. How am I going to convince you about something and no matter what you say, you're going to turn it around and say that it's the will of God or, whatever. I believe in beliefs but - -

AT: Start small, start local, start with individuals.

ER: Yeah. You got a little bit, a little bit, a little bit. You know, there's some progress we've made, but in other ways we've got no further than a thumbnail. And its hard to see. You can see it in the headlines. You know, you can see it in the way people put their foot in their mouth. That's why I don't want to put my foot in my mouth when I'm talking about board members and - - because it makes it look like all board members and community control was no good, and we were all corrupt. Some of us were. And it was to the detriment of our children. You can't get away from that. I don't care who you are. You can't get away from that. But you also can't get away from the fact that we're in this position because of the rampant racism that developed this country. Now you see what you've created, not you don't like it. Now we're reacting in a way that you don't like it. Now we're reacting in a way that you don't like and you don't acknowledge any part in how we got there! You know, you don't acknowledge - - anybody can make it if he wants to. That's garbage because you stop us.

AT: Yeah. Impediments, as you say, are built into the system.

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ER: Yeah, you talking about medical school and Harvard and education and health care, hospitalization. Who's at the bottom of the pile? Why? Why? How're we going to do it? I was playing basketball with a guy and he was pushing my arm. He said, "Hey, you can't do that! That's wrong!" I said "Well you stop your wrong and I'll stop mine." If you gave me a generation and say we're going to stop all racism - - everybody's equal - - and 33 years from now we're still in the same position than I will take more of the blame. OK? But it's the same thing. Stop yours and I'll stop mine. If you stop yours, you watch how quickly I can stop mine? But you don't stop yours, but you want me to continue to be what you want me to be without giving me the tools that you give your own.

AT: Princess has some things to say about this. I know you're taking a course in - - we've had some conversations.

PO: No, I'm just learning. I'm learning a lot. I don't even have questions.

ER: It's been my pleasure.

AT: Yeah, we've loved having you here. Just got to say thank you and "to be continued" as far as this is concerned.

ER: I'll be happy, now that I know how to get here. I know how to get here now.

AT: Maybe we'll just stop here for now and maybe we'll continue.

END OF INTERVIEW