

6-28-2004

Tyson, Cyril Degrasse

African & African American Studies Department. Cyril Degrasse Tyson
Fordham University

Follow this and additional works at: https://fordham.bepress.com/baahp_oralhist

Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tyson, Cyril Degrasse. Interview with the Bronx African American History Project. BAAHP Digital Archive at Fordham University.

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Bronx African American History Project at DigitalResearch@Fordham. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of DigitalResearch@Fordham. For more information, please contact considine@fordham.edu.

Mark Naison (MN): Today is the 71st interview of the Bronx African American History Project and we're here with one of the really, leading figures in New York City education, social service, and urban policy: Cyril DeGrasse Tyson. This interview is going to concentrate on his family background and his early career. When did your family first move to the Bronx?

Cyril DeGrasse Tyson (CDT): We'll go back before that, since you're dealing with your big history of the family. My parents came here from the West Indies after the First World War and they initially - - my parents were born in Nevis, in the West Indies and they initially settled in what was then called San Juan Hills, which was a pocket of blacks from the South and the West Indies, Puerto Ricans from Puerto Rico at that time, and some whites who had been involved in interracial marriages. This community was between 57th St. and 64th St. --

MN: It's where Fordham University is now [Crosstalk]

CDT: - - to 64th St. and from 11 th Avenue, over to lets say 9th Avenue, but also stretching off into the area which is now Lincoln Center. North of that 11 th Avenue became West End Avenue,

which was the upper income white community. And between the black community and white community were circular gas tanks, which now have been long replaced by the housing that's there for really middle class people and people from Lincoln Center, OK? At that time where Trump is now building houses, was a railroad yard. And that railroad yard, the trains came out of there and ran down 11 th Ave. The hospital that I was born in, was called Nursery and Charles Hospital on Amsterdam A venue, which became upon purchase, the Catholic high school of Harlem Memorial, which now, it is like a reincarnation - - [Crosstalk] you know is housing, And all of this except the housing was pre-Fordham, moving down [Inaudible]. And in this

community that I indicated, was this pocket of blacks, Hispanics, but blacks from the South and blacks from Nevis.

MN: What sort of work did your father do when he first came to the United States?

CDT: My father worked in the commissary of Horn and Hardart between 50th and 51st St, which now is a Con Ed power station. That commissary ran east-west from 11th Avenue to the river, and was looking right straight across at the Normandy when it sunk. OK? And so he could walk down to work in the Horn and Hardart, it was not unionized although many of those kinds were in the construction community at that time, and it was thoroughly organized from production and efficiency this way. The Irish did all the cooking, like making the soups and all that. Germans did all of the baking and all of that. Italians drove the trucks because the teamsters had been a union for a long time. It's just that they didn't have horses anymore. And blacks generally washed the pans, the bake pans OK. And Ham and Harter was able to keep - - in the commissary of course they had restaurants - - high efficiency because they recruited people who worked through the people who worked there. And so therefore they would say "Well we need some guys." And then somebody would write a letter whether it was [Inaudible] or whoever and say you know we have a job, you know if you come, you know we can get you some work to do. It didn't have to be [Inaudible] because in that period in American history if you lived in a community somewhere else which is Germany or wherever, everybody knew each other in the community. So you could just say "Jimmy hey I think I can get you a job." And then you come over. So, we lived there until at the age of about five, we moved uptown.

MN: Right. Now how many siblings did you have?

CDT: Five - - Four - - Well sometimes. At that time we had three other siblings.

MN: And were you the oldest?

CDT: No, I was the youngest son as a matter of fact.

MN : You were the youngest son.

CDT: Yes. And - - but my sister was not born yet. And, so my parents said - - by the way we lived in different cold water flats in that period, OK? We lived in 58th St., which was across from Clinton High School, the old Clinton. And then we lived on 60th St. and then on 64th St. --

MN: Explain to our audience what a cold water flat is.

CDT: The cold water flat is a apartment building where it's like a railroad car, not exactly like that but there's no doors in between each room, you could in effect walk down the central part to either end and, which divides in a sense the rooms. And the, usually the kitchen, what you call a kitchen today is off of the entrance into the apartment, and in that kitchen is a pot bellied stove. Now - - rectangular at that time, not the old west stove. And it - - you cooked your food by putting coal and the wood, but obviously coal was better because the wood burned too fast and didn't maintain the temperature that the coal would and a stove pot went up and out either to the side, or if you were on the top floor then straight up through the [Inaudible]. And in that room was also an ice box. There was also a tub like you see in the old westerns - - and the bathroom, that's why the tub was in the kitchen, the bathroom was out in the hall and usually two seats in our area that's in that hallway and that's how people went to the bathroom. So that went up to 64th St. and during that period of time some houses were built privately just for blacks. One was called Phipps Houses and one had a [Inaudible] - - These houses had inside apartments and there was a selection process by which blacks were selected because they didn't have that many apartments. And apartments that were on 40 - - uh 50 - - 64th St., the back of those apartments faced the back of the apartments that were on 63rd St., which were the Phipps Houses. And, so some people ultimately lived in those houses. And then my parents decided to move to Harlem and we got there by taking - - the elevated structure ran down 9th Avenue, which I effect I guess

was Amsterdam Avenue, and ran up to 110th St., curved over to 8th Avenue, and then ended up at 155th St. where you see a [Inaudible] of like the - - And we moved into a - - My mother was always interested education. She had only had what was the equivalent in America to a junior high school education. When you were in the islands, you went to church school and you really couldn't, go to England to go to high schools that they would have there and they wanted come. You had to take examinations and then if you had money you could go, but most people had a junior high school education. The overseers and all those kind of folks of course were off the island cause the island's just a little dead volcano like, you know, the sand was even grey, this color [Laughter]. With an island off of an island it's all the same kids so - - OK so - - so when we moved my mother had probably ahead of time checked out where the school was, and that's where she wanted to move - right next to a school. And so we moved to 114th St. between 7th and 8th A venue and in the development of Harlem, which was a city of white of course, blacks in this league were in a sense - - first lets take the alluvial plane. The alluvial plane is 110th St., roughly up to 145^h St. east of St. Nicholas Avenue. I'm using that as an example because there is a geological rift that runs through rift that runs through Harlem north to south. And, the geological plane, well the lower part of that is - - and so parks were built, the grid parks, but along that plane, so you have to think Nicholas Park and so on. And then at the top of that you had the major church and Columbia and so on and so forth. So, blacks first settled in 134th and 36th St. and so on, and spiraled outwards. So it wasn't a movement north south to north, as much as it was a general movement from the center outward.

MN: The center outward, right.

CDT: So we lived there and uh, in the lower part there 7th Avenue and what we found, my mother found out after she moved in was that the school that was right across from her was not an elementary school, but Waldleigh.

MN: It was a high school.

CDT: Waldleigh High School. So at that - - that shows you the best part.

MN: Now were your parents church goers?

CDT: They were Moravians, because remember they were born in the British Isles, they weren't Baptists and they were Catholic, they were Moravians, Martin Luther and - -when they came to the United States, they belonged to the third Moravian church. It was the third one built in Manhattan.

MN : Yes. One moment - -

MN: So you were saying about the Moravian church.

CDT: The thing about the Moravian church and by the way, Adam Clayton Powell's fathers church is a - - both of those churches initially were really in Hell's Kitchen. And the other thing that was different than the black Baptist churches was that our pastor was white because that's the way the Moravian church was.

MN: Now when your family moved to Harlem, were they connected to a whole immigrant community in terms of fraternal associations? Did they keep in touch with other people from Nevis or –

CDT: Yes. And at that time, just like in Europe when people move for jobs or whatever, you know they tell other people what's going, what's the best place to get a job - - and nobody had phones in those days, and the social organizations provided not only a communal link related to people in the south where you came from, but in that community, that was the community

second generation flavored, or in the case of the West Indies or Puerto Rico, would be what home town and so the many of the social organizations had names related to where people came from.

MN: Right. Now, it mentions here your mother was vice president of Eton Benevolent Society.

CDT: That's an example of a society that was set up by people who knew each other. In order to not get socialized but to provide benefits - - You see you couldn't get insurance - - I mean New York - - Metropolitan Life I think had 10 cents insurance, but it was very - - everybody couldn't get it and then you know that whole business.

MN: Now, so - -

CDT: So they - - in banning together you pay dues, and you got [Crosstalk]

MN: Is Eton the name of a community in Nevis?

CDT: No they just decided to call it Eton.

MN: Now were all the people in it of Caribbean ancestry?

CDT: Yes.

MN: And was this men and women?

CDT: Always, all of societies would be men and women. This was not like the men's special societies.

MN: So your parents were involved in these West Indian fraternal organizations which provided insurance, but also social and intellectual activities as well.

CDT: Sure and the health benefit was if you got ill, you know, you get some help - - a dollar or for some - - I mean this was not big time health insurance.

MN: Right, right. Now when your family socialized, was it predominately with other people of Caribbean ancestry or did they also have friends were African Americans when you were growing up?

CDT: Well my family was socially spread out because my mother was a very active person in the community. She had a gift of organizing, and so we met many people not just other African Americans, people in the islands were African Caribbean with the slave trade and all that, so - - but because of her involvement reflected there, she was, she rather quickly became involved with whites - - you know your history so you know that initially what we call white folks today other than the Anglo-Saxton Protestant were not even called white, they were called by their nationality from which they came.

MN: Exactly.

CDT: So you know, you're Italian American or you're this or that, and my hunch is, is that the white imprimatur actually helped "white" folks because it finally made all of them seem alike in color up against the blacks.

MN: Yes. Now when your family moved to 114th St. was that neighborhood racially mixed?

CDT: East to west, not north to south. There was still some white folks at this peripheral edge of that spiral that was working its way out. And - - east of that, and including in it, were Puerto Rican. So that the major concentration is what we called Harlem.

MN: Right, so we're talking about the 1920's or 1930's here?

CDT: We're talking about 1934,5, I'll be 77 in October --

MN: What was the first elementary school you attended - - Was it in Harlem?

CDT: Yes.

MN: And what number was that?

CDT: Well when I was on 114th St., I think I first went to kindergarten at a school called PS 10, which isn't there anymore, 'cause its public housing, yes. 116th, uh 117th St. we'll say Nicholas A venue, but then after that, we lived in two apartment houses on 114th St., and then we moved

to

111th St, which was further south, bordering Central Park - - North. And then I attended PS 110, which also doesn't exist anymore, but that was between Lenox and 5th. Of course, my brothers who were older attended the same institution.

MN: Now, were you very aware going to school of your mother's community activism?

CDT: Only - - I think I really gathered it at the time that I moved into junior high school because you're older then and you're more receptive and we lived in, I attended the junior high school, Cooper Junior High School [Crosstalk] on 116th St. between Lenox and 7th next to the Jewish synagogue. I became more aware of that because she - - for the building of the new school, because that junior high school had been an elementary school.

MN: Now your family has had an extraordinary record of academic achievement. What was going on in the household when you were young children that created an atmosphere that produced so many, intellectuals?

CDT: The only thing I can remember in particular is that my parents like most immigrants, particularly when you're coming from a place where you can only go so high with education, is that they prided education. They were not educated, [Crosstalk] and my father went further than my mother, but jus that they felt that education was the way.

MN: Right. Now was there political discussion at your dinner table? Was that something that was going on? Were people talking about the events of the day in terms of The Depression, of what was going on in Ethiopia with the invasion?

CDT: Well, by the time I was getting ready to enter junior high school, the 7th grade, we moved from Harlem to the Bronx when I was in the 7th grade.

MN: OK so you moved when you were in junior high school.

CDT: That's right.

MN: And what year was that?

CDT: Oh I would say '38 or something like that - -

MN: Now how did your parents find the Bronx? Were there other people they knew who had moved there before?

CDT: No. My mother, we would move often and it was - - and my mother took the leadership in that and she was always looking for a better - - a better place. So, she and I should say she did go back to school because she was a seamstress and so she took courses and that helped supplement our income.

MN: Now was she a seamstress in a factory? Or in - - at home?

CDT: She - - because she had the kids, so she took piece work.

MN: Piece work, at home.

CDT: Out of the garment center.

MN: So the garment center had people who did piece work out of their homes.

CDT: Yes

MN: Was she a member of the union in doing this? Or this was really below the surface - -?

[Crosstalk]

CDT: Yes. At that time very few black people were working in the garment center. I worked in the garment center pushing - -

MN: The cart.

CDT: You know - - [Crosstalk]

MN: Now when you're saying your mother was constantly looking for a better situation, was this primarily in terms of housing quality or quality of schools?

CDT: Both. And community.

MN: And community.

CDT: Yes. Depending on which at the moment which was - -

MN: Right. So - -

CDT: And then education was [Inaudible].

MN: Right. So did - - was - - did the family move to Kelly St. right away in the Bronx? What was the first location?

CDT: What had happened at that time is a largely Jewish community at the Nexus of Prospect and Westchester Avenues were moving further north. By further north I don't mean up to where Crotona Park was, which had been by the way, the dividing line. But like, the Pehlman Park, and then once in '30 - - once you had the world fair, and Moses was building all these highways, then that opened up for white folks a movement further out, in Queens and so on and so forth - - the white people who owned the buildings, who also had some different corporation interest in companies that were building new stuff, decided "Hey look, we don't need to invest anymore money into the buildings that we have, we need to invest money in the new stuff and therefore, we now can in effect allow blacks to come in," when prior to that they were protectors of the whites indicating to them that, you know there won't be any in here. Related to that, they start painting every three - - all of the - - to keep up the building, and then to the point even in those days, you could fall three years behind as an owner of a building in taxes, before the city would take it. So they would purposely fall three years behind, when they wanted to get the hell on out. If they wanted to stay and have the blacks live there, they would still stay behind three years, that if they pay that tax, their taxes, what they were - - when they wanted to get the hell on out, it was the city that would come in and take them. When we moved up from Longwood Avenue - -

MN: Longwood between where and where?

CDT: Between Prospect, there's a station there - -

MN: Yes, I know where that is - -

CDT: I think Westchester - -so Longwood did not exist of course, going west, it was -- Longwood was just an avenue for Prospect going to Bruckner Boulevard. [Inaudible] So at that time, it was still whites - - mostly Jewish, the janitors were Irish and German.

MN: Several people who I interviewed who moved to the Bronx at that time, said that when the landlords opened their buildings they were somewhat selective initially in terms of which black families moved in. Is that - -

CDT: That's true, that's what they did when they finally had to let Hispanics onto Southern Boulevard. Hispanics who were fair skinned, they would allow in first - - in 1930 whatever it is

when we moved up, there weren't that many - - up there they wanted Hispanics of any - - you know at that time, so that wasn't an issue and in fact the Grand Concourse was still all white.

MN: Yes. Now when your family moved into Longwood Avenue, was it a bigger apartment then they had had in Harlem?

CDT: Yes.

MN: So - - And how big was the place they moved to?

CDT: Well, it had more bedrooms, and it had a back room with a sink which meant at that time, families that lived there probably had a maid. But those were what I would call working class whites, starting toward middle class - - It wasn't like the people on the Grand Concourse who had maids quarters.

MN: Right. Now at that particular corner which I guess is Prospect and Westchester, people talk about what they called at that time the Bronx Slave Market, where there were women lined up for domestic work along there.

CDT: Yes.

MN: Is that something you recall seeing?

CDT: Yes. What they did, they stood on certain spots which they identified and then people would know that that's where they could go to pick up a cleaning person for the day.

MN: Right. So this was day work.

CDT: Yes.

MN: Like today you see with so many of the Mexican immigrant workers, or - -

CDT: Yes, the differences are that the people stay over night.

MN: Right. Now when you moved to Longwood Avenue did you then attend Junior High School 52?

CDT: Yes.

MN: And what was that like relative to the school you had gone to Cooper Junior High - - How did it differ?

CDT: Well, in the first place, there were mostly white students. Even though there were a couple of black faculty, notably, what I call the Turner family - the sister taught English, the other sister taught art and ultimately, their brother became the first head of the office in the Board of Education that dealt with zoning, when they were dealing with overutilization as the code word for integration. So to have at that time, not just one black teacher, but two in the same school, even when I was doing I was project director of Haryou Study, if I remember correctly, at that time there was only one black principal in all - -

MN: In all of New York City - - this was 1962 to 64.

CDT: That's right and she was in Brooklyn. So, I mean you know, it gives you an idea of what this whole thing - -

MN: Now what sort of reception did you get in the school in a predominately white school--
Was it a different feeling?

CDT: A different feeling, but I don't remember any racial incident. People attended but you know, they went with their buddies, and it was kind of a self segregation - - there wasn't any rioting problem or anything like that.

MN: Yes. Now did you get involved in extra curricular activities at Junior High School 152?
The music program, school newspaper, things of that sort?

CDT: No. I was interested in art. And I did a lot of that. But - - and I shined shoes and I made money - - for young kids this was a novelty - - the shoe shine box that you could sit at one end, most of the kids would shine shoes on their knees, with the box. But I had a buddy, a Greek guy, and he was very eager to make money 'cause he didn't have a father or even another brother and he was very entrepreneurial - - and so we teamed up and we made a shoe shine box, and we also went to the florist right where all those streets merge and began to work in the florist and you got 10 cents for each delivery.

MN: Wow. And this is when you're in junior high school or high school?

CDT: Junior high school. And so when we'd go to that, we'd have our boxes together on Prospect Avenue, and so we were on call to deliver flowers and then I could watch his box and then we'd rotate so that we you know, make sure we each got a fair crack at it.

MN: Yes. Now when you were in Junior High School 52 how many older brothers did you have at that time?

CDT: Dh - - two.

MN: And where were they in school?

CDT: When I entered junior high school - - my brother Albert was in the 9th grade in junior high school - - and my brother Dave just about at that time was entering Science High School. He

was one of the first blacks to graduate from Science High School when it was created and housed in the junior high school up - - you know where that - -

MN: Now urn, how long did your family live on Longwood Avenue?

CDT: I would say maybe three years - - What happened was, one of the ceilings, the bedroom ceiling was beginning to fall in. And so we switched the bedroom to the living room and the living room to the bedroom, but then the living room ceiling fell on in - -

MN: So this was one of the consequences - - this is a building where the maintenance had been, you know --

CDT: An example, you know what's the old story - - You're going to let blacks in because what white would want to live in there at that time anyway? But you don't put anything back into the building, you take - -

MN: Wow.

CDT: The rent is raised anyway - -

MN: So you get more rents with less maintenance, so you could - -

CDT: Well that's just - -

MN: Super profits.

CDT: - - Normal business. And you know, we didn't have any lawyers, we couldn't - - didn't have the business to sue, I mean we just did nothing. So we moved to Kelly St. at that time Kelly St was mostly white and the same old story - - you know, the landlords would make their decisions and - -

MN: And this is Kelly between where and where?

CDT: Intervale and Longwood.

MN: And this was - - what block - - what number, was it the - -

CDT: Oh I see, 878 or something.

MN: So you moved to Kelly St, was this also - - was the building on Longwood a five story walk up or was it smaller than that?

CDT: No it was a walk up.

MN: It was a five story. And was the building in Kelly St five stories also?

CDT: It was a walk up, I think it was five or four stories.

MN: Right. And so your family moved to Kelly St when it was predominately white, but the whites were in the process of moving out?

CDT: That's correct.

MN : Were there any Puerto Rican families on Kelly St when your family moved there?

CDT: No, not at that time.

MN: So - - And were the blacks mostly West Indian, or were they also African American?

CDT: They were both.

MN: What was the street life in these neighborhoods? Were they safe at that time?

CDT: Yes. Safer and then the whole process of course landlords letting the buildings run down, but this building had lights on the stoop, which was nice - - but if the bulb finally went out, the landlord didn't put a new bulb in. And they began saying that they'd give you paint to paint your apartment, but they wouldn't paint - - No, usually it was every three years that the painting was done. So they - - we were still using coal, so there was soot that goes into the building, you know how that is. And - - but you know, over time the same thing happened.

MN: So families would move to one area that it was deteriorating, then they'd move to another area.

CDT: Well, I can put it another way: families were allowed to move into areas that were in the process - -

MN: Of deterioration, right.

CDT: Exactly.

MN: It was a sign that landlords had, in effect, started to give up on a neighborhood that blacks or Puerto Ricans were allowed or encouraged to move in.

CDT: Yes. I didn't understand it when I was seven or eight.

MN : Yes. Did your mother you think know?

CDT: Yes.

MN: And so this is one reason why - -

CDT: See you're always looking for the place that they finally let you get in.

MN: Right. Just at the beginning.

CDT: Yes. That's - -

MN: Before it really went down.

CDT: Yes.

MN: Now I've met people from back then who know your mother. A gentleman named Elias Karma, who is - - he owned Hollywood Clothes. He's 94 years old. We interviewed him, he's still alive. He remembers your mother as a figure in the community.

CDT: Well in the first place, Elias started out on 163rd St on Prospect Avenue, just a pants store, OK? He was a hard worker. He decided that he wanted now to have a clothing store with not just pants, and he moved to Prospect Avenue to do that and he also went to City College at night to take business courses so that he could learn how to manage his business. And that was not unusual for Europeans - - derivative, deriving from Europe, to be able to do that. Blacks even with the same skills could not quite do that. The banks wouldn't give them loans - - even if they had the 20% or whatever and young people they couldn't - - it just couldn't work. They could have candy stores, they could manage that because of course the pennies - -

you couldn't you know. So I got my first pants- - that I paid for myself - - from Eli when he had the pants store.

MN: So - - and where was the pants store?

CDT: 63rd St. on Prospect Avenue on the southwest corner.

MN: Southwest corner. And then he moved to a different location with the Hollywood Clothes.

CDT: He moved down south on Prospect to let's say - - the street didn't go through it at that point, but roughly it would be 162nd St on the east side.

MN: So you bought your first pair of pants with your own money at his pants store.

CDT: Yes.

MN: And then did you regularly buy clothes at his clothing store?

CDT: Yes. Until I learned that I could even get it cheaper down in the lower east side in - - on Hester St. and over with - -

MN: Did you or any of your siblings ever work in his store?

CDT: No.

MN: How did your mother meet Elias? Was it in the various community organizations?

CDT: I - - you know I'm not quite sure, but my mother was in, into so many of those kinds of things - - I mean for example, she was one of the people who organized the 41st Precinct coordinating council and that's how I first met the present District Attorney, the federal what's the guys name? Morganthau. He was a young person then, you know the son of the secretary in the treasury.

MN : Yes. Of the 41st Precinct - -

CDT: Coordinating Council. So she - - she was always involved in wherever she was. On Kelly St. she organized the neighborhood association on Kelly St which provided activities for

kids - - she linked up with the Harold Tribune Fresh Air Fund and sent kids away and the TA --

I mean she was always - -

MN: Did you ever go to camp outside of New York City?

CDT: Oh yes.

MN: Where did you go to camp?

CDT: Well, going back to the San Juan Hill, I knew somebody in the Children AIDS Society and they sent four children with their mothers that had young children to camp to Staten Island I.

MN: [Laughs]

CDT: OK but later, Rye - -

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

CDT: - - P - A - L, established their first facility in Harlem at 113th St or 12th St in a brownstone and my mother worked with organizing the parents group related to that. We went there to play the little games and all that sort of business. Since most of these organizations that did things for blacks were white organizations really to begin with, she met white folks and in relationship to that they recognized I guess the leadership quality in her and you know in organizing you always look at people who can be the glue so that you're not so stretched out - -

MN: Now, do you ever go to camp Minisiuk? Because a number of the people who you know, went to that - - that was by I guess the Mission Society.

CDT: Yes. [Laughs] What happened was - - I think I was supposed to go to that camp because

they went to register out of the church on 135th St. or 6th St. on St. Nicholas and Morningside Avenue but I may have gone there a couple of times. You know, camps were segregated so - - but the way they did it then was at a certain period in the summer when the black kids would go and then there'd be a certain period in the summer when the white kids would go.

MN: Yes. Now, when you were in junior high school, were you at that point starting to think you were going to end up in college? Was this something that you were thinking about at that time?

CDT: No, actually I was just thinking of trying to get out of junior high school.

MN: [Laughs]

CDT: But I was fairly bright - - I think I got skipped once in elementary school - - and I do remember they built a school called PS 113 on 113th St. , two blocks from 111th when I was living on Longwood and I do remember being restless in class and I remember teachers saying that they didn't have maps yet, you know the maps that roll down and all that sort of business? And he saw with me struggling all the time, so he gave me that brown roll paper stuff and he said "Take it home and draw the United States." and all that - - you know, proportionately - - and I did it and he used that until they got the - - so, but, when I entered junior high school, it was a whole different ball game. First because I had walk out of my neighborhood to get there, so you're walking through other kid's territory OK? And kids would say "Lend me a nickel" you know, that you had for the milk and - -

MN: Was this in the Bronx that you're talking about?

CDT: No, no I'm talking about - -

MN: This is, this is Harlem.

CDT: This is Harlem. I mean you're finally in your own little enclave, like your own little sub camp. But, so - - you're now involved in a whole different kind of situation which then begins to preoccupy your time because you have to figure out who you need to know, what you have to do - - Then you know, then you have to walk all the way through 116th St to 111th St. two avenues over and that seems like you're in another world you know [Laughter] - - At that age you know.

MN: Right. Now in - - how did you decide to go to Morris High School; was that a natural progression from 52 [Crosstalk] or was it a choice? Oh you went to Roosevelt?

CDT: Yes. Now here's how I think that happened --

MN: Cause Roosevelt was mostly an Italian area right?

CDT: Well white folks just - - black folks [Inaudible] as a white area.

MN : [Laughs]

CDT: Even though the Italian community was all around here, really go south - - nearly - - nearly to the Cross Bronx Expressway. I mean there's Irish and Jewish and all that, but I think what happened was that teacher Turner, who was the art teacher, I think I entered a contest, a Macy's contest in art - - I did something and I don't think I won a prize or something, but, but I wouldn't of entered that if she hadn't encouraged me. And so I think she made the arrangements for me to come to Roosevelt because Roosevelt - - I'd never seen a school like this. It had two pools. It had a whole floor with typewriters. It had art department that was - - I mean it was like - - you know, not that I had never seen any other high school. [Laughter]

MN: So this was a very well equipped school.

CDT: Mark, I never grew - - I'd never seen any other high school.

MN: Right. Now this was in the forties right?

CDT: Oh - - '37, '38 - - Yes.

MN: Early forties.

CDT: '41.

MN: '41 OK. And what was your experience like at Roosevelt?

CDT: I think it was - - It was fine. I didn't think I was some budding artist or something, so it wasn't - - Like that and there weren't many blacks there maybe two or three or four - -

MN: Did you go by bus?

CDT: No I took the trolley or I saved a nickel back and walk all the way home.

MN : You walked from Kelly St.?

CDT: No, not going to school, coming back.

MN: OK so you walked from Roosevelt down to Kelly St?

CDT: Yes.

MN: Did you walk through Crotona Park?

CDT: No it was too far east.

MN: OK. What made you transfer to Morris?

CDT: I, you know, I was simply told that they finally were zoning - - See Roosevelt was not a zoned high school, 'cause it was never full. Because north of Roosevelt was Fordham, you know - - not that many people. So - - so they zoned Roosevelt and between Roosevelt and Morris, it wasn't a high school. Monroe was further west.

MN: Right, right. Now what was Morris' reputation when you went there in the forties? What did your mother think of Morris - -

CDT: Well, well they still taught the Hebrew language so that kind of - - it had a very good reputation. You know, it was the first high school in the Bronx. There was still a lot of white kids there, all different kinds - - it - - As a facility, it was horrible. In fact my mother fought as president to get a least a gym outside of the place and that's why - -

MN: So the facility was much worse than Roosevelt, the physical plant.

CDT: There's not even a comparison. You can't even discuss that.

MN: Was Morris at that time a fairly integrated high school? Or was - -

CDT: No, no it was - - Morris has annexes. Old elementary schools became annexes of Morris;

Morris had five annexes.

MN: Five annexes!?

CDT: Oh yes, 3rd Avenue, side of 5th Avenue down, down the - - 149th St. they had maybe four.

They had annexes, they took - - Rather than building another high school in the Bronx, they took elementary schools and made them an annex of Morris High School.

MN: Right. What were the teachers like in Morris; did you have any teachers you would say were great teachers, or inspiring teachers?

CDT: I thought the teachers were OK. I know the war started and all of that and there was some tendency to the effect of to say to you - - they know you're poor, I mean they know their students like - - Hey look, you know, get a job to help support your family type of thing.

MN: Yes, but it wasn't somebody tapped you on the shoulder and said "Cyril you have something special to offer the world?"

CDT: I don't remember any particular teacher doing that. I was well known because I was an athlete. What had happened was I was up here at Roosevelt High School, and I was in the gym, you know how you line up and all that stuff. And the gym teacher was just talking generally - - there was a track up on the top 29 times around - - And he was pointing out the kids who were lined up and he was saying, talking about athletics and how you look and all of this and he - - you had to change your clothes before you went in so you had sneakers and shorts - - And he was

pointing out different people and talking about them and he happened to say "Now take Cyril Tyson. He could never be a - - he could never be a runner. " [Laughter] Up to that time I liked baseball and thought I'd be, play centerfield but you couldn't anyway because the leagues were segregated - - So he said I couldn't be a runner. And I got very upset about that. And so, before

each gym period, I'd go up on the track and run, then I'd run one lap faster, and then two laps faster and then - - and then I went out for the track team and I beat the miler. OK. Then I got transferred to Morris, and then I kind of forget about running track. But then a guy died, he got shot in Harlem, and they needed someone to run. So, when they found out that I had charged around the track up there - - and that's how I got on the Morris High School Track Team. Now my track coach thought that not only was I good runner, but he thought that some intellectual, book qualities because he spent a lot of time with me. Also, he was himself a graduate from NYU, he played football, he was Jewish and belonged to the New York Pioneer Club.

MN: Ah the Pioneer Club.

CDT: Which was the first interracial athletic organization and mostly Jews and blacks because the New York AC didn't take Jews. Snyder always would say - - his father owned real estate, sometimes I would go see him after school and he was picking up the rent, you know if you're going to get to college so, you know just get a job. So I go on selling the home news and selling news papers and shining shoes and - - So I [Laughs]

MN: So you ran track in high school and you ran for the Pioneer Club as well?

CDT: Yes because you run for them in the summer time.

MN: Now what was your distance, your best distance?

CDT: My best distance was anything from the quarter mile to the half mile 'cause you ran 600 yards, but I also ran on the cross country team.

MN: So you were middle distance and long distance.

CDT: Well, long distance only during cross country, but also strengthened me for when I ran -- Most quarter mile runners would be running - -

MN: Now did track have anything to do with your attendance in college, or was that strictly academic?

CDT: Well what happened was, when I got out of college you know the War had started -

MN: When you got out of high school, right.

CDT: - - And so I was going to be drafted. Plus you had to take extra courses since the war had started, classes like meteorology (which I absolutely loved) and photography (which I also loved). I stayed in high school another six months to take those two courses, and I made the decision that if I went out and volunteered since I was going to be drafted anyway, that I could pick where, what branches or - - I didn't want to go into the navy or coastguard or anything like that because all blacks did there was work in a mess hall. That much I knew. I didn't quite understand how segregated the army was until I went in. They called me so I didn't even go to my graduation.

MN: Right so you went directly into the army before you graduated.

CDT: No I graduated but I didn't go to the graduation.

MN: OK now what year did you enter the army?

CDT: January probably I believe 1946.

MN: OK so this was just after the war.

CDT: Yes. I went to Fort Brat and from there to France and from France to Germany.

MN: Now were you part of the group that first integrated the army? Or - - no.

CDT: Everything was segregated.

MN: Yes. Now did you - - how long did you stay in the army?

CDT: Oh - - a couple of years.

MN: Now how did you end up going to St. Francis College in Brooklyn?

CDT: OK. I came out of - - I came out of the army - -

MN: By the way had you two met each other at that time?

CDT: We met each other at 111th St when she was three and I was four. [Laughter] Then you know, my mother moving us all over the place. My mother knew her by the way. We re-met while I was at college and I broke training before to meet at Madison Square Garden - -

MN: [Laughs]

CDT: - - And went to a dance. Broke training because when I was in college I worked eight hours a day, all through college.

MN: Wow.

CDT: And I was also an athlete in college.

MN: So you were running track at St. Francis?

CDT: That's right. And I was working two to ten at night.

MN: And where were you working?

CDT: I was working in the Board of Education.

MN: Doing what sort of work?

CDT: From two to ten at night they opened up the schools for every school. So, I worked for the people at the Board of Education that ran those facilities from two to ten at night.

MN: Oh this was for the afternoon and night centers.

CDT: Yes.

MN: Which were the wonderful things they had in those schools. And so you worked in those centers.

CDT: I worked from my freshman year to my senior year, and then during the kind of Christmasy thing beginning in late October until the end of December, I also worked in a post office so in the - - in that period of time I would leave the school that I was working at and then go to the post office and work from - - school was finished at about ten you know - - and then I also worked from twelve to eight in the morning and then got to a nine o'clock class.

MN: And when did you sleep - - or you didn't?

CDT: During that period of time I slept only on weekends.

MN: You slept only on --

CDT: Well because I had to do my papers and stuff so you do that - - I mean I'd be home - -

MN: I'm going to tell my students about this when they complain. [Laughter] This is a person who only slept on weekends, OK.

CDT: Just during that period of time.

MN: Right, right. But even so, if you can do it, they can do it. [Laughter] No more excuses.

CDT: My students, when I was teaching in college said you know, "That's your problem."

[Laughter]

MN: Now were you still living with your family during those years or did you get your own apartment?

CDT: I lived with my family until I got married.

MN: OK. And where were they - - were they --

CDT: [Crosstalk] I, I - - I should say, as any like, urn migrating family's, the mother and father didn't have that much money, but if the kids, lets say each kid lives there, they bring in a little bit and it's an economic unit.

MN: Were they still on Kelly St. at this time or did they move somewhere else?

CDT: Kelly St.

MN: So they - - Kelly St. was a place they stayed for quite some time?

CDT: Yes. I went into the service and came out on Kelly St. And then I went to college - -

MN: On Kelly St.

CDT: - - On Kelly St.

MN: Now was Kelly St. changing a lot during those years?

CDT: Yes. It became all black.

MN: It became an all black area. And what about - - when did you know, Hispanics or Latinos start moving in - - or that never quite happened?

CDT: Well, they moved into Kelly because the blacks weren't going in, but they began to move

into streets that blacks had not moved in where whites had stayed longer, like Fox St. and Beck St. OK?

MN: Yes. Now, was there ever a problem with gangs on Kelly St. when you were, you know, in the service, or high school or college?

CDT: Oh yes. By the time I was in high school there were gangs all over. You know, there were gangs all over. But if you didn't hook up, but you didn't have anybody to help you beat somebody back when somebody - -

MN: Right. Did you have an affiliation?

CDT: No, because in the first place, I didn't have time to be around. I was in school, I was an athlete, and there was some respect, you know for athletes, you know - - I was Bronx champ, I was city champ - -

MN: Oh, so you did - - you were very successful in track?

CDT: Well, comparatively - -

MN: Well what is that medal for?

CDT: I thought you were here just for - - [Laughter]

MN: I mean, that's Olympics? No?

CDT: No that's the Penn Relays.

MN: That's the Penn Relays!? You had a gold medal in the Penn Relays?

CDT: Oh I have a couple.

MN: In what - - was this individual or --

CDT: No in those days Penn Relays were all relays.

MN: So this was the 4 x 400 - - 4 x 800?

CDT: 4 x400.

MN: And this was a team from the Pioneer Club?

CDT: No. This was high school and I also did it in college. But this was an important one from high school because I fell over the finish line in the end - - I anchored.

MN: This was when Morris High School won a gold medal in the Penn Relays?

CDT: Yes but it's not big deal [Laughter] - - believe me.

MN: Oh come on --

(voice: tell them about the jacket when they thought it was a gang jacket)

CDT: Oh yes. 1-- if you win championships, you get not just an ordinary "M," but you get a chenille M, you know a little puffy kind of M.

MN: Right yes, I - -

CDT: And so I put it on a sweater that my mother got for me, heavy sweater, and one day I was walking towards my building on Kelly St, and some kids came around Intervale - - it didn't make any difference to me - - and they saw the M and they said "There's one of them," the M - - there's some gang with an M on their sweaters - - I don't remember - - and they started running at me, so I ran into my building and they started shooting. See, in those days, you had - - you can make homemade guns - -

MN: The zip guns?

CDT: Zip guns.

MN: Right. So they shot zip guns at you.

CDT: Yes. And I ran in and then in through the second door, and bullets hit the door and I went upstairs to the director of the house and of course, he always wanted to protect it - - "Alright lets see who it is." And I said well you're not going down there 'cause they'll shoot you. [Laughter] I mean if it's just a fight, I can deal with that, but they're shooting real bullets [Laughter]. So I said, forget about it, don't worry about it - - But that's - - They thought - - The M - - It was a

gang that had the emblem - -

MN: Right. Now in the forties, were there any like, drugs on Kelly St? Did heroin start to come in yet - - or not really?

CDT: Not really, I'm sure there must have been some guys - - but it - - that was not a big step - - I just don't see that as any driving factors in relationship to my age at that time. In fact, even in Harlem, other than the crowds at night clubs, drugs didn't really heavily come into Harlem for kids until the real gangsters decided that they would break the taboo of getting involved in drugs and - - I mean I'm talking about the mafia kind of guys - - but before that, if you got, if the other guys got involved, they were in trouble - - they didn't want to deal with that.

MN: Yes. When you were in Morris, did you ever do any writing for like the school newspaper?

CDT: If I had enough time just writing - - I did learn to type 'cause I had a little underwood so I typed my papers.

MN: The reason I'm asking - - so at what point, you know, you're going to school, you're working, you're running track - - at what point did you start thinking of yourself as a thinker, rather than just a doer?

CDT: I was a thinker by going into the army and seeing all that crap and seeing how the army treated us, seeing, you know - - and I had to figure out what the hell is going on - - we've got prisoners that were treated in camp better than we were treated.

MN: I think this army experience is important. Had you had a very intense experience with racism before the army?

CDT: Not that to me seemed unusual - - when you lived on 111 th St, you didn't go too far in Central Park south because kids that came over from Columbus Avenue, most of them were Irish, or some Italians, some Polish, they'd chase you and so on. But when you're living in a closed ghetto situation, as long as you stay within that, uh the racial stuff is not a big deal.

MN: And what about in the Bronx, in these racially mixed but - -

CDT: Well, for example as blacks continued to move in, that wasn't called the South Bronx then, it was like Brooklyn. Every area, Matt Haven, Morrisania, Hunts Point; it's only later on that everyone decides that the South Bronx is everything below Fordham Rd, you know.

MN: Now what about the police, did they give particular difficulty to young black boys or adolescents?

CDT: Yes. But their approach to it was that kids were causing trouble. My only encounter with the police was when my mother had sent me to the drug store, which was on Hewitt on the corner, which we had went to when we lived on Longwood, but now we lived on Kelly, so I had to come back up and walk up, and when I came out of the drug store a cop called me over and then they put me in the police car. So, they took me to Ryer Avenue police station, which is way west and north of where I lived. And they wouldn't tell me why, but they started questioning me about a lot of stuff. And they were supposedly polite, they offered me a cigarette but I didn't smoke, I said I'd like to call my mother because she sent me to the drugstore [Laughs] so, but they wouldn't let me do that - - I was at Morris High School at the time - - And finally I can't remember, but something had happened, and then finally they did take me back to Kelly St. And I said "Well can you come up and tell my mother where I've been?" And they said "No."

[Laughter]

MN: But you hadn't run into things which - - from store owners, or teachers - - that really made you feel racism was like this overwhelming - -

CDT: No. I knew by then racism existed, but the people that I related to who were white, for example Eli, he's got a business; he wants the black folks to come in there and buy his clothes, also the fact that he was an alright guy, so therefore, I mean it's not to his advantage to be racist - I understood that, but I didn't associate with racist whites I did associate with were whites that

were friendly - - of course there was no question of inviting me to their home, you know because then you'd meet their sister you know, and then it gets - - that's a whole other problem. But as far as white guys on the track team, and - - No. When I went into the service down at White Hall St. and they separated the white guys and the black guys and there was a white guy who had graduated high school with me and they separated us from then on and then I was in Fort Hancock and the black soldiers in here - - and you went down to basic training in Fort Braq and you got on the train, and when you got to Washington, when you could see THE CAPITOL, they took all the black soldiers and put them behind the cold car or whatever the hell it was, and that's when - - you experience racism. But when you're inside the ghetto, you know - -

MN: Now you were in Fort Braq North Carolina?

CDT: Yes.

MN: And were your officers white or were your officers black at that time?

CDT: White.

MN: So you had white officers and an all black regimen.

CDT: That's not unusual.

MN: And what were some of the - -

CDT: That happened when I was in Europe also.

MN: Now what were the restrictions placed, I mean you're down there and this is basic training, what are some of the restrictions placed on black soldiers in that environment, you know - -

CDT: They simply conformed to the environment. I went into Forte Brag - - [Inaudible] Fayetteville for example, looking for the soldiers, what's the US - -

MN: USO.

CDT: -- USO. Anyway they told me that my place was down somewhere else. So there were

clubs, but only for blacks. I walked by Sherman, is that the monument that sits in the middle of Fayetteville? And the benches would say "Colored" and "White," you know that sort of thing. So you couldn't sit on the wrong bench. And then I finally found this place for blacks, it was just a hole in the wall or something, and I - - my overall experiences throughout the army - - we can get to that another time - - and the South were such that I never got off the base except when I heard that there was a black teachers college, somewhere near there, and then I went there a couple of times because then there black women.

MN: So, was this something that you and the other people talked about, you know when you're in the bunks "What the hell is going on here? This is - "Or was it something -

CDT: Well you know it varied because you're in a mixture: the black guys who came from the south said "Now what the hell's the problem, where have you been?" [Laughs]

MN: Now it sounds like it was even more irritating in Europe in some ways.

CDT: Yes, because soldiers go over there because there's a racist guy you see and he's killing people - - you know Jews, Gypsies, Black - - you see, everybody that's not Arian, and then you find that in your own army you're in segregated units, for a while I wasn't put on paper I'll talk about that some other time - - and oh, I had an AGCT score of 110 or 11 or something I didn't quite understand that when I went in, but you take the test and so on, but it turned out that because I had an AGCT score of 110 or over I was eligible for officer candidate and they went through a lot of interviews with me; what books did I read, what's this, who I knew, and all this business, and I worked so hard that I wasn't particularly interested in being an officer because you know, who the hell - - even when my brother Dave became an officer, but that's another story - - and - - but I went to re-interview, you know, and while that process was going on I got sent to France and France to Germany. When I was in Germany much later they tracked me down and said "We finally got you, you can go to officer's training school." And I said I

didn't want to go, when I tell you about that that's a weird thing and so - - And they said "Well what do you mean you don't want to go?" and I said "I don't want to go. I want to go home."

MN: Now you were saying they were Nazi prisoners and they were being treated much better than the African American soldiers?

CDT: Even the ones that were sent over here. And they saw it! Yes, yes, yes.

MN: And did you start writing about this or was it, it was something that was just said you know -

CDT: No. I started writing accidentally. I mean - - well why don't we hold that until you read all the things I've written. You know, you'll have a chance to go through all that - -

[END OF SESSION]

Interviewer: Dr. Mark Naison
Interviewee: Cyril DeGrasse Tyson
Date: June 28, 2004
Page 34