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## Manus, Charlotte and Himmelstein, Paul

Bronx African American History Project  
Fordham University

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Interviewee: Charlotte Manus  
Interviewers: Mark Naison  
Date: 11/17/2017

## BAAHP Oral Interview

Mark Naison: Welcome to a very special oral history interview with the BAAHP. We have done over 300 interviews, this is the first one we have ever done in front of a class, and this is something I am doing because the students in my Bronx class have been such a special group. Today we are interviewing Charlotte Manus, but we also have as a guest interviewer Paul Himmelstein, who is one of the stars of our great book "Before the Fires." So this is going to be fun for everybody, so whenever you have questions or comments, please feel free to break in. We always start this way; Charlotte, can you tell us a little bit about your family?

Charlotte: Well, I moved from Harlem, I came from Harlem as a child. I moved to Prospect avenue, just below Boston Road. It was a regular neighborhood, mostly blacks.

M: What year did your family arrive?

C: 1947.

M: 1947. Do you know how they found about the Bronx? Did they have relatives living here?

C: Yes they did, we had cousins there that we took their apartment because they left and that's how we moved there.

M: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

C: I have one brother.

M: And what is your first memory of the neighborhood?

C: They used to pick on me, I got into a fight everyday.

M: Why did they pick on you?

C: Because I was new in the neighborhood, new on the block,

M: Ok so you were on Prospect avenue, what were the cross-streets?

C: Freeman and Jennings.

M: Ok, and is your building still standing?

C: It sure is

M: And what floor did you live on?

C: I lived on the first floor,

M: And what elementary school did you go to?

C: I went to 54, PS 54, between Freeman and Chestnut

M: Was the racial composition of your class different than your block?

C: Yes, at that area, it started with a lot of Puerto Ricans at that time,

M: Were there any white kids in your school?

C; Yeah, there were a lot of white kids in the school, where they lived I don't know

M: So your school was more mixed than your block, which was predominantly black at this time?

C: Yes

M: And did you walk to school by yourself?

C: Yes, it was just around the corner

M: So you started out in kindergarten or first grade?

C: First grade.

M: And what were your teachers like?

C: They were good, they were nice to us, we didn't have any problems. They didn't treat us any different, most of them were Jewish, at that time. And we weren't treated any different, you know.

M: You said you got beaten up and had to fight a lot-

C: Yeah, I had to fight on the block.

M: How long did you have to establish a reputation?

C: About 6 months. My mother told me if I didn't fight back, she was gonna beat me up.

M: This is quite a familiar story. So after 6 months things were kinda calm, what kind of street games did you play?

C: Oh God, we used to play hide and go seek, Ringoleavio--

M: Could you explain Ringaleavio to these folks?

C: Oh, we used to run, race, stuff like that...ringaleavio, it's hard to remember.

Paul Himmelstein: You had to get tagged.

C: Yes, it was a tag game,

M: And you had to get to a home base.

C: Right.

M: Did you jump rope also?

C: Yeah, we jumped rope, that was when we did a lot of double dutch.

M: Now, did boys and girls play together on your block?

C: Yes, and the boys jumped rope also,

M: Now, did you play stick ball or any ball games?

C: I didn't, but they did, the boys did.

M: So the girls didn't play the ball games, stick ball or stoop ball, or anything?

C: Yeah, no.

M: Did you play skullies?

C: They did, yeah.

M: Explain what skullies is.

C: It's with bottle caps...

Paul: First of all, you have to with chalk make square boxes, and draw with chalk a skullie thing. You use bottle tops, and you use an orange peel, otherwise it'll just fling anywhere, you tear off an orange peel and stuff it in there (under the bottle cap), so now it's got some weight, and you can do it like a checker, and as soon as it's on the ground like this, only there was like one, two three, or something like that (\*gestures to make boxes\*), I forget how high the number went. And you would play each other, and you had to get to a certain point, and you'd just do like this like you would with checkers, and get there, and you could get knocked out of the box, and you had to start all over again. And the one who got to the final, that was the winner. But that's what skulzy was about.

M: Did your family go to church in the Bronx, or in Harlem? Did they go to church? Were they a churchgoing family?

C: My mother was. I was raised basically with my mom.

M: Right, and were they Protestant or Catholic?

C: Baptist.

M: And did they go to a Baptist church in the Bronx?

C: In Harlem.

M: In Harlem, so this is important because a lot of families move to the Bronx still had their church ties in Harlem. Do you remember what the name of the church was?

C: No, I don't. I remember it was on 7th avenue and 125th.

M: What sort of food did you eat in your house? What sort of cooking was?

C: My mom didn't know how to cook, so whatever she could get out of a can. She didn't cook when I was a young kid

M: Was education stressed in your house?

C: Oh yeah.

M: So, what sort of activities in school did you enjoy the most?

C: \*laughs\* getting home. You know, because we had bullies in the school that used to chase us, from the school, we just wanted to get home.

M: So you felt you had to fight in school?

C: Yes, it was all about fighting.

M: This is very interesting, it's somewhat familiar to me, growing up in my neighborhood in Brooklyn, you would think that a neighborhood with people fighting all the time wouldn't have 5,000 people coming up for old timers day, good things! You're fighting all the time, so there must have been something good about it (the neighborhood) that I want to come back,

C: Well, we're glad to see each other, glad to see we're still alive anyway at this point. But they were glad to see each other, we loved it.

M: What were the best things about growing up in that neighborhood that you remember?

C: The best thing about growing up in our neighborhood? \*looks at Paul\* Well, we grew up in different neighborhoods.

P: Well, you come outside, and you see the same people everyday, everybody got their own little crew you know, that they hung with, basically everyday, and then it depends on what type of person you was you know, in my case, I just used to hustle pool and things like that, craps, you know, that type of thing. So I hung around with hustlers.

M: So Charlotte who were your friends? Were they all from the block?

C: Yeah, and we still keep in touch.

M: Were these the same people you used to fight with, you then made friends with?

C: Yeah, we all love each other now.

M: Were they all African American?

C: Yes.

M: And did you walk to school together?

C: Yeah, well, we didn't walk to school together we weren't all going the same place.

P: Sometimes, you get promoted, and the same people are there.

C: They were in the class above you--

M: Now, this is a neighborhood that produced a lot of great music, so what were you hearing in your house? In terms of music,

C: My mom liked jazz, my mother was from Boston, so she played a lot of jazz. I liked jazz, I grew up with doo-wop, so she played jazz and I snuck in doo-wop.

M: Now did you get the doo-wop from the streets or from the radio?

C: The radio, we had Dr. Jive at that time, Mary the Kate, I had a lot of DJs, Marty Q, there were a lot of DJs at that time,

M: Magnificent Montague, on WWRL

C: Yeah, that's right.

M: Yeah, I'm at Crown Heights at the same time. So did this music really capture your imagination when you first heard it?

C: We just loved it, and we sang it.

M: So you heard it, and you saw people singing it always and on street corners?

C: That's what we did.

Off-camera woman: Is that you met Paul?

C: I met his brothers before I met him, then he came along,

M: Geographically, Prospect Avenue is a big street kind of north to south. Jennings street goes East to West, Freeman street goes East to West as well, Freeman is just south of Jennings, and Jennings street produced this very famous group called The Chords, where 1954 did this song “Shaboom,” was the first urban harmonic song to hit a million records, that was a big breakthrough, and Paul grew up on that block, Paul grew up on Freeman Street--

C: You’re forgetting the Chantelles, from Fontaine Street, well Jackie Landry.

P: Jackie Landry lived on Jenning street too, off of Prospect.

M: Jackie Landry, now they all went to Catholic school, say, St. Anthony of Padua, which is on 166th and Prospect, that was a predominantly black, and eventually all black Catholic parish, and they were eighth graders, at St. Anthony of Padua when they recorded “Maybe”, the first urban harmonic song by a female group to reach a million records. So think about it within like four blocks of each other this music history is being made.

P: There were other groups in the area, well I didn’t know, and I was listening to a group that was maybe only a few blocks away, you know, at that time. I learned all that later on as I got older.

M: And there was also great jazz in your neighborhood, because Lyman Street, that little place in your neighborhood, had Elmo Hope, and also Thelonious Monk used to live there for a few years and used to visit there, and then on Ritter Place you have Maxine Sullivan, and you had Henry Red Allen the trumpet player on Prospect. All these great musicians in different genres are there, Now, what did you do after school? Did you ever go to night centers, or PS 99?

C and P: We did.

C: That was the place to be.

P: They gave dance lessons in the lunchroom, big lunchroom, you went to dance in there, and they gave talent shows. I sang in the talent shows there, before I was singing rock and roll--that’s how I met my group.

M: What sort of stuff were you singing before you were singing rock and roll?

P: PS I Love You, like Perry Como, and those type of things.

M: The crooners,

P: That's the music that was on in my apartment, ok, but from there I graduated, toward the street, and rock and roll became it for me, so I started singing rock and roll, the rest was history.

M: So, did you and your girlfriends ever dance together?

P: Yeah, that's what you did you asked anybody, "you wanna dance?" that's what they did, it didn't have to be your girlfriend. A lot of people, even in today's world, stand on the side, then somebody says, "you wanna dance?"

C: People don't dance together anymore?

M: No, they don't dance together anymore. I used to, for extra credit in my classes, say, if you dance to James Brown in the front of the class you got extra credit, and most students wouldn't do it. I would have to do it with like two or three people. We'll have to try that in this class-- would you dance to "On the Good Foot?" No?

C: I don't see any volunteers...they don't really dance today, they go to clubs and whatnot,

M: They dance.

P: Some people just want to be there.

C: That's right.

P: Hoping to meet someone that they can click with.

C: That's true.

P: That's really what it is.

C: \*pointing to audience member\* She agrees.

P: To hang out, you know, to meet someone.

C: You went to these places to dance.

M: Now, you danced; were there any other places you went to dance,

P: House parties.

C: Oh yeah,

P: We called them granimos.

C: I was gonna say don't go there \*laughs\*

P: It's history!

M: Well, there's a dance called "the slow grind,"

P: There was always someone, like a businessman with a card that said "I have a party," after you leave the center. It was like, with the ticket, thirty five cents to get in. And that's what you did. And they sold food out of their kitchen, but it was a house party,

M: So there were a lot of house parties like that?

C: It's all you had.

P: Yeah, that's where it was.

M: Now, did you ever go out of the neighborhood much, or was most of your social life was in the neighborhood?

C: That's why I ended up in the Paterson projects.

M: So, you met people from there?

C: Yeah, people from my block moved to the Paterson projects, so we started going there for the birthday parties and whatnot, and then before you know, we started.

M: And this is very interesting, because was public housing seen as a positive thing when you guys were growing up? Were the Paterson projects seen as nice?

P: They were seen as nicer than my building, they were seen as modern, elevated, up to the sixth floor, even though it was just one floor up, you weren't seen as really poor to get in them, the affordable housing, it was eight or nine of us out of fourteen living there, my mother's room was at the other end, it was like barracks.

M: You were in a seven room apartment?

C: Yeah, it was me, my brother, my mother, and my mother's husband.

P: We could have used your apartment! We needed another bedroom.

M: So that's a seven room apartment,

C: And we paid \$55.00 a week, mama didn't have it all the time.

P: Where I grew up, I remember overhearing, the rent was \$43, that's without gas and electric, but yeah.

M: Did you in the summer, did you go to beaches ever? Like Orchard Beach?

C: Once in a while.

P: In the '40s, my junior high had a swimming pool, that the other used to use.

M: An indoor swimming pool?

P: Yes,

M: And did you ever go to Coney Island?

C: All the time, we went all the time,

M: Did your family go, or did you go with your friends?

C: My friends,

M: How long did it take to get there by subway?

C: It was a long ride, we used to take, we used to change at 59th street, until I moved to the Tremont area, then we were taking the D train,

M: Was there a particular place in Coney Island where you went? Did you go to the same spot? Like was there a place where the Bronx people would go?

C: No, my mom would just let us go, and tell us to meet up back at the Cyclone,

M: Now what junior high did you go to?

C: I went to PS40, right across the street,

M: And were you in any music or art program there?

C: No I wasn't.

M: When you were growing up, this was pretty different in terms of men and women in terms of career, but were you being targeted to a particular career as you were growing up?

C: No, I decided to go with art, as I got out of junior high school.

M: And what sort of art?

C: Paintings, fashion.

M: Is that what you eventually went into?

C: Yeah.

M: What high school did you go to?

C: Actually, I went to high school in Harlem, they put us out there to make it into an elementary or something, but I ended up in Grace Dutch, right around the corner.

M: And did they have good programs for what you were interested in?

C: Yeah, I was in commercial art there,

M: How long did you live in Morrisania, in that apartment?

C: We moved, actually, we were there until my daughter was born, on Prospect.

M: Wow, so you were there from the '40s to--

C: The sixties, we were there in '67.

M: So you moved just before the fires hit?

C: Yeah,

M: Now did you see signs of deterioration in the neighborhood? In like the fifties?

C: No, no idea.

M: What were the things that let you know that the place was becoming more dangerous? Was it drugs?

C: Drugs, yeah.

M: When did you start seeing heroin hit the neighborhood?

C: It was the late sixties, early seventies,

M: So in the forties and fifties, there wasn't much of it around?

C: No, if it was, it was probably the other people.

P: Heron and pot, those were the two drugs I only saw, these were people I was growing up with, some were drug addicts, some would smoke a joint or whatever, you just did certain things, you know. But those were the main drugs, that and cocaine. That ain't changed.

C: Right.

P: Some people did, and some people didn't. My drug was making money, go to the pool, make a crap game, I did that type of stuff, insistently, that was like my job.

M: Now Charlotte, did you ever feel unsafe in your neighborhood?

C: No.

M: So you could come home any hours of day or night?

C: Yeah, I didn't have any problems coming home late at night,

P: My sisters could come home, wherever they were.

M: So even though there were fires and people getting beat up, you never felt really unsafe?

C: No, we didn't have that problem.

Unseen voice: Even with the heroin epidemic, it didn't start getting very dangerous?

C: No.

P: No, if you're from the neighborhood, you're from the neighborhood.

C: Exactly.

P: As a matter of fact, you don't even know that people are looking out for you while you're walking past them and all, if somebody, who's a stranger, tries to approach in any kind of way, you're gonna jump off that newsstand, leave that girl alone, "get out of here, before I stomp you," or something. That was never a problem, well she's a lady, but as a man person, running with those type of people, who won't think twice, about putting a foot up your you know where, and if you're messing with the wrong boys, it's as simple as that, that's just the way it was, it wasn't, you didn't ask them to help you, but if thy saw you being surrounded.

C: --like family.

P: \*phone rings\* must be my lawyer, he'll leave me a message, sometimes it's someone trying to sell me something.

M: Did you ever try to sing?

C: Yeah, we were singing with the Chantelles before they were the Chantelles, it just didn't work out \*laughs\*.

P: Everybody sang in the street, always, it was the thing to do, you know,

M: Did you know that you were in a place that was really special when it came to music?

C: No, it was just natural.

P: You were walking down the street and you would hear a group harmonizing, it was like that in a lot of places,

M: Now, in terms of ethnic division in the Bronx, were there places you were told not to go? Where you weren't welcome?

C: Yes, Little Italy.

M: Oh, right by here, right by Fordham, there were the Fordham Baldies?

C: That's right, the Fordham Baldies. They shut our school down once because they were supposed to come.

P: During lunch hour, almost all of our school people left and went to Fordham Rd.

C: That's right.

P: And of course, the n word was used when we got there, "get out of here," the appearance of the people who came to do damage,

M: These are the people who worked in the school?

P: No, students, these are the students who got out for lunch, and a bunch of them went to Fordham rd,

M: So some of the kids from PS 40 went to Fordham Road?

P: On 180th, and farther up,

M: Was it a racially mixed junior high?

P: Sort of, as the time went on, there was white people in the school, but they didn't live around there. School went according to where you live, close to the school, that type of thing.

M: Were there fights in the school along racial lines or did you all get along pretty well in the school?

P: Well I'll tell you what happened with the pool, I laugh at it. Junior high school had the swimming pool, and in the summertime, it became a center, you know, So first of all, when the girls went to the swimming pool, it was only girls, not boys and girls. Then when the boys went, they swam naked, the girls wore bathing suits. So, they had shower stalls,

M:--that sounds like prison.

P: You had to take a shower before you got in the water, especially for the boys, I don't know about for the girls.

C: They made us rinse off.

P: You'd come out, and there was a teacher, or whatever you called them, it was a white person, he would walk down to see that you were clean. The thing is though, that black people get ashy, you know, so he was telling them, "You got to go back in, you got to wash," they'd say "I did wash!" He'd say "No you didn't!" I had a laugh, I laughed. I was the only white person there, and I lived there. And I intervened, I told the teacher, "he washed," and he said, "No, they gotta get back in there and wash that off." I told them, "That's called ash, ok, black people, when they come out of the shower, and their skin is drying up, they get dry skin,

M: How many people at Fordham know this? Probably not.

\*everyone talks at once, audience and interviewers\*

P: I Defended them, I said "He's not dirty, it's called ash, that's the way it is." Anyway, I defended them. The teacher said, 'come here, you want to stay in the pool?' 'cause After a while, it's time for the girls to come use the pool, there were certain times, you only got maybe an hour, so I got to go in twice, because he felt he needed me, to see who was clean, I never forgot.

M: How many movies were in walking distance from your house?

P: A few blocks away from my house.

C: We went to the Freeman, right there on freeman and Southern Blvd., we went to the \*arc hills, that was on Prospect, near the train station. We had the boston theater, so you walked to the movies every week, on saturdays we were allowed to go,

M: Now did you know about the live music clubs that were in the neighborhood.

P: Like the 45.

C: We were in school, by the time we got out of there, they were closed, most of them.

M: so when you left in 67 what were the clubs that were still open in the neighborhood?

C: Boston Road,

P: The powerbar,

C: well, by the time I was on Crotona avenue I was by Crotona Park,

P: There was a bar called the Apollo Bar.

C: Right.

P: on 69th,

M: and they had live music there?

P: well they did at times, but they had a contest going, and we went to be in the contest, my group, and they didn't let us because we were too young to be in the club.

M: Now did you ever go to the Hunt's Point Palace?

C: Sure, we lived there, by that time we had gotten into the latin scene, they had a lot of latin bands,

M: So you all learned how to dance latin, and what were your favorite latin bands at that time?

C: Rodriguez, santa Maria, all these groups, spanish and puerto rican groups, loved it, I had all the albums, I still do.

M: Now before we go, do you guys (audience) have any questions?

Audience member: I haven't heard you guys mention anything about sports.

P: Well no one picked me to be on their team, all stickball, all basketball, I guess they thought I wasn't that athletic, but when they were playing, I would bet on who'd win.

M: In our neighborhoods, \*gestures at him and Charlotte\* girls didn't play sports,

C: Yeah, not really.

P: Different neighborhoods played each other, that's what I'm saying, a team from another neighborhood would come and challenge another team from a different neighborhood, you know,

M: In stickball, or--

P: Well let me tell you something, you may not agree with it, but back then, you bet on who's gonna win, you bet on it,

M: Right, you bet on everything,

P: And that's the way it went,

M: They're betting on what Dr. Naison's next question will be,

P: That's the way it was, while the game was playing, you were betting, in blackjack, in the back of the schoolyards, i used to do things like that, sorry boys, girls, that's what I had to do to survive.

Audience member: I'd love to hear more about the school environment, like were the teachers encouraging?

C: They were just there.

M: That's interesting, because--were you guys in the one or two classes? Like the top classes, academically?

P&C: I'm not sure, I don't really remember,

M: Now that's interesting, because some people we talk to, like bob young or joseph arens, who ended up becoming the jazz people, they were put in the high classes, so they got a lot of attention, because they scored high on the reading tests, the classes were tracked, so we have to be careful, because if you interview people who ended up becoming professionals, they scored higher on the reading tests, and they may have had a very different experience, some of them like Vincent Harding, ended up working for dr. king, he was the valedictorian of Morris high school, so for him school was like, it came easy, most kids it didn't. So you're saying the teaching was indifferent?

C: Eh,

M: Did you have any grade teacher you remember?

C: No.

M: You had no teacher who said, "Charlotte, you're amazing"--

C: No.

M: Nobody ever said that to you,

C: No.

Charlotte's daughter [?]: One teacher said she thought she was better than everyone else in Harlem because she came from the Bronx,

C: She said, you think you bad because you come from the bronx. I had to get down and fight too. We had to fight.

M: So there were things about school, then, there were the night schools, but a lot of children fell through the cracks, kids were warehoused if they didn't read, we do it better today, so there's progress and then going backwards. Did you ever see yourself going to college?

C: Not at that time, no.

P: One of my first jobs.

C: I had to work.

M: You had to deliver something to Fordham.

P: That was my college.

Audience member: you say that your mother was from Boston, by way of, my mother is Virginia my father is Jamaica, where are your people from?

C: I didn't know my father, my mother married a man I thought was my father, I have no knowledge of him at all, we went up there to get her birth certificate, in and out of there.

M: Are they originally from the South or the West Indies?

C: My mother's side, I guess, I didn't know too much about my family, on that side.

M: So, she was from South Carolina...

C: My mom was from Boston, and that was it,

M: And that was it.

Audience member: So even your mom didn't know where her parents were from?

C: All my cousins were in Harlem,

M: So you had no family ties, to the south or...

C: I had a few cousins who lived in Augusta, Georgia, and we went there in the summer, when I was a little kid.

M: Now growing up, did you have any friends who were from the West Indies?

C: Yes, my ex-in-laws, and they're still on Ritter place, we tiptoed past there,

M: I see. So the ex, was he someone you met in the neighborhood?

C: Yeah, they lived right across the street,

M: And did you go to school with one another?

C: No, he was a year younger than me, so we didn't really meet until we were older, they didn't come out of that block, Ritter place to hang with us, he was the only one who started coming out with us,

M: So there was like a class division, Ritter place held itself above Prospect Ave, because that was more private houses.

C: Exactly, they lived across the street but they stayed in their neighborhood,

M: Now did you know there was Maxine Sullivan on Ritter Place, and did you know she was famous?

C: Yes.

M: So you knew what there were famous people living in the neighborhood?

Daughter: Maxine Sullivan's house was like a ghost house, we would play running over there and we would run away because we thought it was a monster, that's terrible.

C: She was so sweet too.

M: More questions? Ask, folks.

Audience member: Were there ever any issues with the police?

C: Actually, no, the police used to be our friends, they were so nice to us.

P: Well, back then, they had a cop on the corner kinda thing, that's the way they policed. You knew this cop, like I mentioned, two dollar brown, so you would pay him off with two dollars.

M: Two dollars, I love it.

C: That's the name of the fame.

P: Crap in the streets, games, oh here comes two dollar brown, give him two dollars, and he'd go the other way, African American, but for your question, cops were in the neighborhood, not driving around, so you knew your cop, everyday you'd see him, and he had an area he'd walk, maybe six blocks this way and six blocks that way, so it was designated to cover a certain area, and to tell the truth I don't remember when that stopped, after awhile you saw them in cars.

M: Did you ever experience racism?

P: Well, with me, there was the "what are you doing around here?" kind. Cause I was white, and they were black, I had cops yell out their car, "we're gonna get you," I was with Dino crossing the street, yeah, and I never forgot that, and I said "what the hell's he talking about," cause this is where I live, these were white cops.

M: So Charlotte, you didn't run into racism with teachers from the school?

C: Oh not at all.

Charlotte's daughter: she was a light-skin, she's a little darker now, but she was only a little darker than Paul then.

M: Was that an issue in those days?

D: And she had long hair, so they probably thought she was.

P: No.

D: Yes, she had light skin and long hair, and that probably made a difference, she's in denial but it did.

P: It might have made a difference.

M: Well it maybe made a difference with the teachers.

P: I'm pink and it I had to go through certain things, it wasn't the people in the neighborhood, it was a fairly white neighborhood, the Bronx,

M: What was Crotona Park, was that a big part of your neighborhood growing up?

P: Oh yeah.

M: How did you use the park? Did you go swimming there, fishing there?

P: The pool, the Crotona Park pool, it's still there.

M: A pool used by people from different neighborhoods, a melting pot.

P: It even had a deep part and a kiddy pool.

M: Were there ever fights there?

C: I'm sure, they tried to drown you,

M: Who is this, a girlfriend?

C: No, one of the guys, out down my head and tried to drown me, I never went back.

M: Did you ever fish there?

P: Well there's a lake, the Crotona park lake, back then you could rent a boat, it was like a gigantic in-ground pool and they had fish.

C: They still do.

M: Did you ever go to the Bronx river to do anything?

C: No, I didn't.

P: I've been there, but I wasn't a fisherman.

M: So for school you went first into Harlem then into grace dodge, what was grace dodge like?

C it was fine, a lot of Irish and Italian, we went out of school, jumped on the bus after school and went right back to prospect. We didn't hang around the neighborhood,

M: So when did you meet your first husband?

C: In 1959, we got married in '61.

M: Did you get married in a church?

C: Yes, Mt. Carmel.

M: Right in the Bronx, still there, and he was Caribbean?

C: Yeah his family is Dominican republic, and Jamaica.

M: So did you learn Caribbean cooking?

C: No, I might as well say soul food,

M: So if your mother didn't cook, how did you learn?

C: I learned on my own, adding stuff, you know,

M: And it's really good?

Daughter: I always said we should open a restaurant, but she doesn't cook enough, but whenever people come over, they say it's so good, it started Monday until Sunday, on Crotona.

M: Where did you move first when you left prospect avenue?

C: To Crotona, park north, right in front of Crotona park.

M: And how big was that apartment?

C: It was a private house.

Daughter: yeah I come from a private house, I'm sorry, I don't come from the projects.

M: Is it still standing?

C: Yeah.

Daughter: and when she moved, she took the boiler, sold everything.

M: So you moved in 1967 to cpn, late sixties early 70s that the early fires began, so what was it like to see the Bronx on fire?

C: It was terrible, it was like Vietnam or something, terrible.

M: And do you remember what year you first saw a fire?

C: In the sixties, they were just trying to get out of the Bronx.

M: And how did you explain that to yourself?

C: We didn't, at long as my house wasn't burning it was fine, we were ok.

M: So there were apartment buildings burning?

C: Yeah, but it wasn't in my neighborhood, so it was ok, around us you know,

P: I heard the landlords did it, for insurance.

M: So did you hear fire engines?

C: No, not really. If we did it was normal.

M: So when you were living on Crotona where were you working?

C: At that time I wasn't working, I hadn't started until...

Daughter: the seventies, after nanny passed.

C: That's right, I was a home attendant.

M: So you (daughter) grew up in the house on Crotona avenue?

D: Yeah, it had a terrace and everything,

C: Yeah, the only part of our block with a terrace.

P: You were rich.

D: I thought I was, we were.

P: I lived in a tenement!

C: We weren't rich either, someone bought that house and put us in it, that's how we got in.

M: Were you glad to move to a private house?

C: Of course.

M: And did you have friends in your old neighborhood? Did a lot of them move to private houses, too?

C: A few. Yes. I was trying really hard to get into the projects, I thought that was great, but then they went downhill.

M: That's an interesting transition, in the fifties and sixties public housing was seen as a positive thing, and then it started to deteriorate, negative association. What elementary school did Stephanie go to?

C: she went to 92, on 79 and Clinton.

M: When you moved to Crotona, was your major shopping area.

C: And Fordham Road.

M: And when you lived on prospect, what was it?

P: Wilkins Ave.

C: Never, we were going to Fordham.

M: You were going to Fordham even in the sixties? And was Wilkins a Jewish market?

P: It was.

C: But I never went there,

P: It was a Jewish neighborhood when I was born, when I was four or something, it was black and Hispanic, but the market stayed Jewish, the five and ten was there.

C: And we lived right around the corner from Jennings street, so I went there, and that was a Jewish shopping area.

M: Down the hill near Southern Blvd?

CP: Yeah.

M: So you have a house in Crotona Ave, when the fires were going on did you ever think, I have to get out of the Bronx?

C: No.

M: So you describe, you had a fight when you were in school, in the pool, it was burning, and you still love the Bronx?

C: Uh, yeah. I still have heart for Harlem too.

M: So that's interesting, having the old timers stage.

C: I started going in 1980.

M: Across from forest houses.

C: And then they changed it, because they were doing work there, and it changed to Crotona.

D: The other one is the small one.

M: And more questions?

Audience member: Do you both still live in the Bronx? (Yes.) And how do you like your new neighborhood compared to the old one? Do you like it more or do you have nostalgia?

C: I live in the Tremont area, and it's crazy.

P: I come and go, I know my neighbors where I live now, I live near the reservoir the other side of Lehman, I come go you know, I never really left the neighborhood, I started in, back to the South Bronx and hang out w those still around.

M: So there's an emotional attachment to the people you grew up with, that's interesting because I don't have that with those I grew up with in crown heights, it's really striking, that 5,000 people come back here every August from all over.

P: Everyone had a lot of fun growing up here.

Audience member: I have a question--when did you become so interested in the Bronx and the South Bronx?

M: Ok well, my senior year, well, as I said, I'm the Brooklyn kid who went to Columbia, and I got really excited about history, and become a historian, and my senior year in college a basketball party I met this girl who had two sisters in the Bronx, she was from Georgia, she was African-American, and we ended up being together for six years, but I kind of got kicked out my family and got adopted by her family. She had one sister who lived on 167th and Grand Ave, and one who lived on the north side of Claremont park. So, ok, I love the Bronx because it was the only place we could hold hands and nobody would look twice because they thought we were Spanish, like we were two Puerto-Ricans. At that time you know you have this gorgeous black girl, and a six-foot, tall, red hair, muscles, and everyone is thinking, "what the fuck is going on," you know we'd go to Harlem or a white neighborhood and it's tough, but you get off the subway in the Bronx, and \*shrugs.\* At that time in the sixties, it was very multiracial, and I had wonderful times, her sisters were some of the best cooks, the southern cooking, I was up there all the time. Then I got the job at Fordham, so I had a very warm experience with the Bronx, people, and culture. It was not academic, but it was, you know, I was up there two or three times a week, at parties, or you know, so that was my connection, and now teaching at Fordham. And when I started teaching at Fordham, a lot of the students were from the Bronx, and then I became active when the fires started, working with the Bronx clergy coalition, and on Prospect avenue and 156th street, in the eighties, called sports for the people, when the crack epidemic hit, I got involved with an organization called save a generation, down at St. Martin de Tours, so I've been very involved. But the emotional connection came out of my girlfriend -- one girlfriend, two sisters.

Audience member: Do you and her still keep in touch? (16:02 left)

M: We've been a little out of touch for the last ten years, when my memoirs came out, "white boy memoir," we reconnected. We left on good terms. I was too high-maintenance for her, as you can imagine. But I love the Bronx. I have a poem that was in Before the Fires, I can read it.

You have the book w you? It's in the office? Anyway, in it I talk about the Bronx, and feel the kind of racial tension I felt anywhere else. I love the music, it's everywhere, coming out of apartments, coming out of stores, bodegas, and it was a mix of diff kinds of music. When I used to teach in Bronx schools, I would put on Tito Cuente, and everyone would move their shoulders, not just Latino kids, everyone in the Bronx. Tito Cuente was your soundtrack. Everybody danced Latin, everybody sang doowop. That's the way it was.

P: Everybody used to play the coobas (drums?)

M: the drums. You had a lot of types of people forced together, and it made it work, not easily, but you know, people keep coming back. It's the same thing with the housing projects, they have reunions. I used to go to the Paterson housing projects reunions when. So there's a lot of warm feeling about the forties, fifties, and sixties in the Bronx. The Bronx narrative was this was a great place when it was Irish, Italian, Jewish, and then the black people and the puerto ricans moved in and it all went down, but no. We discovered it was a great place for blacks and latinos, in the forties, fifties, and sixties, and that experience had been erased. You have more variety of popular music than any place in the world, it was tough but it was safe. And people go back there, with friends like that, you know. You keep coming back, it's a pretty unusual situation, that I don't go back to Crown Heights like that, and I don't know anybody who does, with my high school there are reunions, but not the town, and people from all over the country come back for reunions. I've been Bronxified. This project, because of that experience, I had a warm feeling about it, and you know, it's fun having people tell stories, you have to listen.

C: You can tell some stories,

Audience member: Do your students know how you became a guest on the Dave Chappelle show?

M: Do they know how? Do I have to tell you the story?

Various people: Do you know who that is? Look it up on Youtube.

M: Let me explain the story. Ok. I think it's around 2003/2004, right before my book came out, I did a tour, so I get this call, Dr. Naison we're doing a black history quiz, and I said I'm very busy, I have a lot of things going on, I had this amazing hip coalition going on a Fordham, have you heard of dead prez? We brought them to Fordham, we had afro--, other students doing that. They kept calling us, I'm sitting in the office with three students, and they call again, they really want me. I say to them oh it's this Dave Chappelle show guy, and they say Dr. Naison! Dr. Naison! It's the best show! You have to do this. So I have a really busy day, I have people coming here, so I tell them if you send me by limo to the studio and then send me back to my in-

laws in Westchester I'll do it, and they say ok. Well my three students came on with me, and we get to the green room and I say, holy shit. Because everybody is like half my age. In the green room there's good food and stuff, so they take me and brush off my dandruff, put makeup on me, and they take me in, and there's forty people in there, and there's a podium that says, "we know black people." I said, oh my god, what the hell. I met Dave, he was very nice, everybody was very nice, the nicest people I've ever met in TB. And I've done TV, I've done things like the O'Reilly factor, who were really trying to screw me over, which doesn't really work very well, but that's besides the point. So I go in, and they start asking me questions--first of all, it's not a black history quiz show, it's about popular culture, so they ask me about good times, which I only watch sports, then they say, is pimpin easy, so I say according to big papa, pimpin ain't easy. Then they ask me the question--what is a loosie/lucy, so I say \*gestures pulling a cigarette/joint from lips and blowing out\*. So the last question they ask me is what is a chickenhead. And I know exactly what a chickenhead is, but how do you say that on national television, so I turn red, you can see my answer, it was correct you can see. And they only put me on for four questions, and one of them was what's going to solve the race problem I said reparations, so they put that on. So people would come up to me on the subway, in bars, they would say is that you, and since they play it every two weeks I called it the gift that keeps on giving. They did an interview on CNN, and it got kind of messed up, and I had to take an uber and the driver insisted he knew me from somewhere, and I said Chappelle? And he said ah! That's you, and he insisted on taking selfies with me. Now you're interviewing me!

C: You're interesting too.

M: You know, we have about five minutes left. So what do you feel about the Bronx today? As the things going on. Do you think good things are happening or do you think that it's moving in a negative direction?

P: The fact that they rebuilt a lot--brand new buildings, housing, what was the president's name who started that too, not Clinton, jimmy carter started that and he grabs the shovel too, he had one term but he's done more good since he wasn't the president, you know, remodeling, part of the Bronx is like you're in jersey, private houses, where buildings used to be--tenement buildings.

M: Well most of those five story tenement buildings were burned down in the fires and now they're apartment buildings and townhouses.

Audience member: That's how they're gonna make it unaffordable for the people that already live here.

M: That's the great danger, and people get pushed to Yonkers or Mt. Vernon, Brentwood, so that's--don't go! That's it I'm not leaving. Do you live near Tremont? Or did you like your private house better?

Daughter: She's on Crotona.

M: Oh so you're really near St. Martin de Tours, which is up on Crotona.

C: Yeah, yes it is.

Daughter: It's a co-op, but it's really the most beautiful building in the whole area, it's got a lawn, it's got a garden, it's got rocks, it's beautiful.

C: You still gotta go around the corner you gotta stay right there. Lot of crime around there.

M: There's still a lot of crime around there?

C: Yeah, you got the bloods and the crips, in my area.

Daughter: Lucky your hat is burgundy.

M: Any more questions?

Audience member: What would you say is one thing that you miss from your area in your childhood that you can't get back?

P: The togetherness. When you went out, you always saw somebody that you hung out with, that you wouldn't avoid. It was that kind of neighborhood. Also, your mother could sit on the stoop, and not worry about getting shot. These gangs, they think they invented drive-bys, that's nothing, that's some old gangster movie they must have watched, ok, on the bicycle and all that. And they don't care if they kill all of you, it's just to get babies. That's how I see it. I think they're creeps. That's the way it wasn't.

M: That you had a certain type of conscience when it came to people.

P: That's not tough, that don't make you tough, to kill somebody's mother, so you can get someone that's behind her that she's blocking. And your mother can sit on the stoop and not worry about that. Especially the summertime, people would sit on the stoop and there was no AC, I remember having a fan in my house, that's why we sat on the stoop.

C: of fire escape, or roof,

P: the fire things, you can get cooled off on there on the street, a camaraderie, your mother can go to the store and not worry.

C: Even in the middle of the night.

M: The fact that you felt safe even at night, even walking through the subway, two in the morning, no worries.

P: It was not as dangerous.

C: Can't even get in the house, not in the daytime, it's crazy.

Audience member: This isn't my interview, but you were talking about music in the Bronx, I'm a different generation, oldies, by the same token, I once wrote, I miss these south Bronx streets, I missed them while I was in the military, in Virginia, and on the cab ride home from the hospital, James Brown songs, because I was born in New York on a Monday, and I was born on a Saturday, so it fits. Just the sounds, art tatum and my favorite, what's the documentary--

Daughter: oh, who got shot?

Audience member: No, the jazz guy, I say that your father looks like him all the time.

Various: Coleman? Coltrain?

Audience member: John Coltrain. My mother would put that on and I would fall asleep to John Coltrain, because I grew up in music, so music is embedded in the Bronx. I don't know if it's because of her, or my father grew up in the Bronx, it's part of the tapestry, the sounds the smells, the bricks, of the Bronx, and I appreciate Paul and his group, because it's doo-wop, because it's a different sound.

C: Everywhere.

Audience member: It's great listen to Misty Manus, and Paul, hear yourself talk about what I know a little bit of, and you know a little bit more of, black and white, in that book.

M: Thank you.