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Mark Naison, Yvonne Marie Smith, Member of ETA Omega Omega, Donna Joseph, President of ETA Omega Omega

Eta Omega Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated ©

Transcribed by Amy Rini July 15, 2023

Mark Naison (MN): Okay. Welcome to another great interview with members of the ETA Omega Omega chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, we're here with Yvonne Marie Smith, to talk about her experience with the sorority but also her life, as a community leader. And so we always begin by asking people we interview - tell us a little bit about your family and then how you got involved with the sorority but first about your family background.

Yvonne Smith (YS): Okay, my parents were both born in New York City. My father was born in Harlem. And my mother was born in Yonkers. My moved to the Bronx when I was three months old, and I lived in the Bronx until my adult life - stayed in Manhattan for like 12 years. Then I came back to the Bronx because I've worked in the Bronx, lived in the Bronx, have a heart for the Bronx. I've attended elementary, junior high and high school here in the Bronx and now I'm residing in the Bronx.

MN: What neighborhood did you grow up in?

MN: So what neighborhood you live in when you went to elementary school? What neighborhood in the Bronx?

YS: I want to say I went to Saint Fort Apache, but forgive me. No. That's cool, though, it was the Southeast Bronx.

YS: Morrisania

MN: Right. Okay. What? What street did you grow up on?

YS: I grew up on Home street between Seventh and Prospect Avenues.

MN: Oh, my. Okay. Yeah, I know it extremely well.

MN: And what elementary school did you attend?

YS: Public School 99, which is now a senior citizens complex.

MN: Oh, yeah. Nine PS 99. They had a great night center, back in the day. 50s where they had all these talent shows where a lot of the great doowop artists were featured. And what Junior High did you go to?

YS: Went to Herman Riddle, which is on Boston road and 177th Street. But on Boston Road

MN: Right, now, I don't know if you were there when Maxine Solomon created the house that jazz built a little storefront on Stebbins Avenue. Well, that may have been before your time.

YS: I don't remember. I'm not sure. But one of the great musicians wife cache forget was my music teacher, or the name escapes me right now. But I had a music at Herman Ritter and the main user teacher husband was a famous musician who come to me in a minute. The name can't think right now. We'll come back to me. I went to high school to James Monroe High School, which is now an academy, several academies. But when I went to high school, Leo Weiss was the principal. He took no nonsense he took no wooden nickels. So because of his determination, I think that encouraged most of us to finish high school.

MN: Right

Again, James Monroe has a lot of famous graduates in music, The Chiffons, Afrika Bambaataa, went there. So, um, were when you were living in Morrisania was this before or after the, you know, the fires hit the neighborhood?

YS: Well, since I'm in my 70s, it was before the fires. So I remember the 70s.

MN: Now, I would have never guessed that. So you're my age. Damn. Okay, so now, I have to adjust - I was thinking you were, you know, growing up in the 70s, not that you were in your 70s. Yeah. So you go back into the 50s and 60s.

YS: Yes. Yes. I remember the Old Bronx. Yeah.

MN: Did you ever go live in place was not too far from where you lived. Did you ever - that block had some very famous musicians

YS: I remember the Chantelles I think it was School. Yeah, the Chantals from St. Anthony of Padua. Elementary. Yes. I remember that.

MN: So did you have good experiences growing up in that neighborhood?

YS: Prior to the fires and Bronx burning and the drug epidemic, yes. It was a close knit community. You couldn't do anything that another adult wouldn't stop and remind you that you were a child. They were the adult and you listened. I remember one time, I caught myself sneaking over to the lake. And we didn't have a telephone. When I got home. My mother said, "please talk to me about your day." Someone saw me go home before I got home. And she called me on the carpet about it and reminded me that I had needed to be careful of where I go and what I did. That was the kind of community it was, right.

MN: Now, did your family belong to a church in the community?

YS: I belonged to Trinity Episcopal, which is opposite Morris High School. That's the church I grew up in, right.

MN: Was your family from the Caribbean?

YS: My mother, well, my parents were born here. My mother's father was from Montserrat, when he was a young man. My father's mother came here when she was in her maybe late teens. And she was from Jamaica, but they didn't go back home. So my heritage is an American heritage.

MN: Now the reason I ask is because it's Caribbean career. Many of the people who were at Trinity Episcopal were Caribbean, even if they were born here, they had families from the Caribbean.

YS: Yeah. Okay. But I know, I got there because of a friend and ... go ahead. I'm sorry. I attended a church because a friend of mine went to junior high school with me and she invited me and we were mentored growing up. The elders of the church were very much into how we were raised. And that was the upbringing.

MN: Right? Um, now how long did your family stay in Morrisania? When did they end up moving out?

YS: Until we until we burned out? Literally burned, until we were burned out.

MN: So your building was one of the ones that was hit by the fires?

YS: Yes, yes.

MN: What was the exact address because I you know, I drive through the neighborhood. So I'd like to sort of pass by and you remember the number of your house.

YS: It was 859? It was between 863 and 855. Now there's a private house on the spot, right? opposite corner is a public housing development. The bar is gone.

MN: You remember the bar? That bars Oh, wait. I can't remember right now. But it was a big bar. I can't remember right now the name of the bar.

MN: Right.

MN: So What do you remember what year your family was burned out?

YS: After maybe 1970? I think I had already finished high school. It was under the early late 60s, early 70s. I can't give you the exact date.

Because

MN: that would make sense. So where did they relocate to? Where did your parents relocate to?

YS: Well, we spend time divided because we couldn't find a place to live. So older brothers slept in the park. My sister slept with my aunt in Queens. Now the older brother was sent to the military younger brother slept in the park because there was no place to really live.

MN: Oh, boy.

YS: The city was not quick to find a replacement. So we got dispersed.

MN: Wow. So how did did you still manage to keep, you know, your schoolwork going? And you know in the face of all of that tragedy?

YS: Yes, because I think I had just finished school and started to work. So that was possible. Also, you know, the family took, my aunt took me in. So I had that stability of being with my aunt, although she was in Queens. I did not like Queens. I got back to Manhattan and the Bronx as quick as possible.

MN: So what sort of work did you do after high school?

Okay, I went to college at nights. I started working as a file clerk, a clerk typist then I then I became a paraprofessional for the Board of Ed. Right. After I officially finished college, I went to work for the federal government. So I've been a file clerk, but a type of professional kinds of things. And I started working in the government. I was able to move to different agencies, to health and human services, social security, IRS, Department of Labor, defense contracts, to name a few.

MN: Now what,

YS: and then some of them will also they were also some of them located in the Bronx. I wanted to work in the Bronx, where I could walk to work or take one bus.

MN: Now, what college did you end up attending to get your degrees?

YS: Okay, I'm going to City College at night, because I've worked in the day to help my mother financially, it took me a long time because I didn't have the money to even pay the minimal fee that they charged as an evening student. And then when I finished City College, I took off a year and I went to grad school out of town, I received an award called a Teaching Fellowship. I finished my degree within a year and a quarter when I went to Virginia Poly Tech. And when I came back from Virginia Poly Tech, I started working for the federal government. But I took a couple of classes at Lehman because someone had received a class action lawsuit. So I interviewed, collected information, analyzed it, on why female teachers here in New York are not receiving principalship, assistant principalship. So I took classes in accounting, and business law, which qualified me to become an economist. And this is a person who did not like mathematics, was afraid of mathematics. But after becoming the economist, I came to the Board of Ed and worked my way into clustering math, junior elementary, junior high school and taught high school math. And I've also served mathematically as treasurer at the church, treasurer for City College Black Alumni. treasurer for the sorority, treasurer for not for profit.

MN: Whoa. Yeah, that's quite a story. So your official title is an economist?

YS: No, my official title is a retired educator, happily, retired educator.

MN: Okay. So, so you're after your various careers in government, you spent a significant amount of time in the public education system?

YS: Yes. 23 years, I believe. I think it's 23. So I think it's 23.

MN: And a lot of that was in the Bronx.

YS: Yes.

MN: What were some district 9, district 9 and district 12. I worked on East 166 Street I've worked on Oh, gosh. Bristol Street. I've worked on Washington Avenue. Quick summary

MN: So not too far from where you grew up.

YS: Yes. Yes. That was the goal.

MN: So you wanted to return to the place, you would serve another generation of young people from those communities? Yes. So how did you find ETA Alpha Omega? Or did they find you?

YS: A friend, she kept telling me "come on, you gotta come to our lunches our lunches, buy some tickets." So I started coming out to the luncheons you know, to the different activities. And I liked what I saw. I liked I liked the system, you know, being coordinated, being embraced, encouraged, and I like to see women who were educated, and we're moving forward and we're doing things, positive things, many were also school teachers, and we had other people but I remember the you know, because it's it's difficult, you need to have that kind of support system when you're a school teacher. So I enjoy that

MN: now because so many of the people who I've met have been educators and you know, educators in the Bronx, and you know, it. I come from a family of educators, and my wife is an elementary school principal, so I know what it's like and I I think this is a, you know, you need a support system to keep motivated in the face of all the different things you confront. So, you know, that's one of the amazing things that I've discovered about this sorority is, you know, you're the heroes of the Bronx, you know,

the way I see it, you know, kept - held it together when everybody else gave up on it. So it's kind of a great story. And so, when you joined the sorority, where were you living? What were you back in the Bronx then?

YS: Trying to remember 1980. I was back in the Bronx living still home with my mother, who lives on University Avenue.

MN: Okay, university, and we're just between Tremont and Burnside.

MN: Yeah. So I guess they call it Morris heights. That area where University Heights since the resection, so and and so where were the sorority meetings held? When you first got involved?

YS: I think the first meeting was held at a church in the Bronx, if I'm trying to remember, I think there was a church in the Bronx, was it on White Plains Road? Because when we first, when I first came to the sorority thinks with a bit, we talked about going back to 1980 something now so I think so. You have to you, have to like verify that but I think it was at a church in the Bronx. Okay,

MN: now, um, so you're living in University Avenue and commuting to Morrisania, did you go by public transportation or by automobile?

YS: You mean to just a chapter meeting?

MN: Did you work?

YS: I could. I had my first few jobs, I could walk to work or take more than one bus. Okay. That was the goal. I spent most of my working career in the Bronx.

MN: Right. So it was easy to get around by public transportation.

YS: Yes, yes.

(4 hours AR) 7/14/23, 7/15 2 more

MN: Now, when you joined the sorority, What activities did you get involved in? They immediately make you treasure? Or did you do other things before they found out about your skill, your particular skill set?

YS: I walked in the door. And I think shortly after, I finished out someone's term of treasure. Yeah, I know. And that's because serving as treasurer, I became the chapters financial... Let me see No, no, corresponding secretary. So I was saying that the time that I was doing it, it was handwritten or typed on a regular typewriter. And then after serving in that position, I started to do some of the committee work, supporting whether it was membership scholarship, the different committees that were involved in. And then after being involved in the committee work, I began to become chairperson with some of the committee's like I said this chairperson for our connection Committee, which is the political arm of the sorority. And we used to invite the candidates in at night and just disseminate information on what it is to be political and the significance of being politically involved. I also served as chairperson for our leadership committee. That's the committee where you're raising and mentoring others to become leaders. Not just in the sorority, but beyond the sorority. I remember serving on membership, which is you're encouraging others to join. I also served on our hostess committee where you set up, encouraged, you know, just holding together on like, if you have an activity, the host is the one that is in the background, pulling things together and seeing that people are comfortable have also served on the scholarship committee. We had a chance to go through and you know, receive the applications look at the applications and vote on the young people that will receive the scholarships and ... am I skipping anything okay, but I also served as as the chapter Financial Secretary ... did I miss anything? I don't have I don't know if

MN: you did virtually everything

YS: Except for become chapter president.

MN: Okay. Now, before I get back to sorority you know, I have some questions about the Bronx since you know, you spent so much of your life there. You know a lot of people who are outside the Bronx, they saw the fires and then the crack and they did you know, they gave up on the borough, but the Bronx

kept coming back. What do you think gave the Bronx its resilience? How, how is it that the Bronx able to come back from all these tragedies?

YS: Well, the Bronx had employment you know, we used to have a lumberyard. We had a perfume factory. We had childcare, we had Lenox China, we had trying to think you had at one time you had to theaters on Prospect Avenue. So you could live in the Bronx and work in the Bronx. And we had Fordham University. We had Lehman College. So we had colleges and universities, we had shopping centers. Remember, Alexander's on Fordham road, shopping in neighborhood, I'm trying to think you could do your food shopping, your grocery shopping, you had doctors in the Bronx, we used to have doctors who visited your house, if you were sick, we had hospitals. So we have every major industry was in the Bronx. And then you had two churches, which were the foundation and the bedrock for our spiritual growth. So I think that just knowing that is what kept me focused to gain a Bronx plus, we had politicians who were raised up in the Bronx, when I went to Trinity Episcopal, we had a couple of senators and judges, who were our mentors, who were you know, our leaders. So based upon, you know, the leadership based upon the fact that we, even though they had fires, you still had some housing that stood, you know, the time and we're not completely destroyed. And like I said, so it was between those places that you can live and work and go to school that really kept me in the front. And I wanted to, I wanted to give back to the community that I grew up in, because I struggled as a child. And I wanted to give back.

MN: Now, what about the young people of the Bronx that you work with as a teacher?

YS: they were tough, but I reminded them that I was from the hood.

MN: So how did you get their attention and respect? I mean, I'm an old coach. So I have my own ways of doing this. But you know, how did you, you know, get their attention.

YS: I said to them that I live not too far from where I'm working. So therefore, my family is watching. And I would advise you to treat me accordingly. So if you don't - (laughing) I shouldn't tell him? No, no, no. No, one day, I had my younger brother visit me and, um, and I just let him sit quietly that I said, you don't know who the gentleman in the back is, that's my younger brother. And he stood up and he said, I

don't like how you're treating my sister. I had respect for about two or three months after that. And I just I just had a heart to just know how to relate to children. I just knew how to relate, what to say to them. And I was fair, you know, I used to give constant recognition parties, and I didn't have my own children. So I adopted my children that I worked with, so that I recognize their birthdays and recognize their celebrations. And I spoke with the parents, and I still every now and then I'll see a parent or a child and they remember me like I said remember I've worked all the different grade levels district nine and 12 those sub districts and I've always had a good evaluation, so I think I did a decent job at teaching

MN: so um you know, are you living in the Bronx these days? Also? I live in Kingsbridge okay. Okay for for them things which Riverdale. Right? Okay. I didn't know the Veterans Hospital. I know. I know all these places. I'm constantly driving around the Bronx, taking people on tours, exploring restaurants. So I just have to ask you, because it's been remembered - Johnson's barbecue on 163rd. (24:00)

YS: So don't I remember them?!! Oh, my goodness, every Friday night.

MN: Oh, yeah, that's my favorite spot. And I'm actually having now Dwayne Johnson's daughter has gotten involved and upgraded so they actually do deliveries. So I'm ... they're catering my seniors PISA celebration next week. Oh, you know. So yeah. That's still around after 60 plus years. Yeah. So I'm gonna do

MN: Yeah. Do you remember that on Prospect Avenue ... they used to make ice cream. I'm not sure what was under the umbrella breyers? But we had an ice cream store that used to actually produce ice cream on #@\$ (undecipherable) Avenue. Do you remember that?

MN: No, no, no.

YS: Okay.

MN: Do you remember the

YS: not far from Johnson's not far from Johnson?

MN: Do you remember some of the nightclubs from Boston road? The blue Morocco? Club a 45. On Hunts Point Avenue?

YS: Yes.

MN: At Hunts Point palace

YS: (Laughing hard) Yes. Yes. I'm laughing, I told you. I told you how old I was. Yes, I remember.

MN: And were you involved in music when you were in school? Where did you take it? You know, were you in a music program or take music classes?

YS: I played the viola from junior high to high school. Okay. I was in the I was in the orchestra was in the all- city orchestra as well.

MN: Wow. Okay. Do you still play?

YS: Unfortunately, no, I just listen to music. But no, I didn't purchase the instrument. I was discouraged from buying it. So I didn't buy it. So then I stopped playing. But I'm gonna play straight through from junior high to high school. I kind of have an ear for music. So I taught my second graders how to read music notation, because they weren't allowed to have music. So I taught them individually. And I taught them an appreciation for classical music.

MN: So did you have students who were big into hip hop when you were teaching?

YS: At the high school, but I taught high school in Spanish Hall and for about about a year, maybe two years. And those were the students that were into hip hop. But in the Bronx, I didn't have any personally that went into hip hop.

MN: Right. Okay, (28:04) so I may have some questions at the end. But I'm going to turn it over to your sores to ask questions about the eight omega omega experience.

YS: Okay. Thank you, Professor.

MN: Don't worry, I'll have more after I hear what everybody else has to say.

DJ: Good evening. Good evening. Sorry, Yvonne. It is my pleasure to have this opportunity to interview you here for the African American History Project. And so if you don't mind, I'm going to adlib a little bit with some questions. But first, what is your earliest or fondest memory of ETA Omega Omega?

YS: I'll say that the fondest memory because I have more than one, but the fondest memory was when Supreme Bachelor's, Barbara Kay Phillips, was discussing her tentative programs and she wanted to introduce for the first time, the educational advancement fund. And she literally said, "come up with the checkbooks." And we ran up a couple of ones with the checkbook. And so I am in the history book, as one of the charter members of the educational advancement fund. And I was interested because I'm always, from a child, would be taking lessons at home. So when she opened up that program, I said, this is something that I could really see me getting involved with and follow me through. So for many years, I would donate a sizable amount of money I haven't done recently, but I still if I can attend the AF functions, and I just love the goal that we are able to give scholarships and and support education among our young people. And it's continued because I think that was 90 and 80. And it's still going strong. Yes, that's my fondest.

DJ: You find the summary and so just so we have it on the record, can you tell us when you became a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha?

YS: June 1980.

DJ: Okay. And you were initiated into ETA omega omega, correct? Yes. And tell us what the size of the chapter was at that. Time.

YS: Oh my gosh, 20 people. I don't think it was even 25 It was very small, very intimate.

DJ: Very intimate. And you stated that you said you met at a church?

YS: Yeah, I think I think we met it was a Crawford Memorial Baptist. I remember we met at one or two churches, I think on White Plains Road. I'm trying to indicate we may have met at as far as houses. That's how small we were. I can't I'm trying to say and we went to church. I don't and I'm trying to think then I think – somewhere along the way, we started meeting at College of New Rochelle. But that's many years later. But I remember meeting meeting at a church and it was a small group.

DJ: Professor, Did you have a question?

MN: Yeah. How many members now?

DJ: 136

MN: Oh, whoa. Okay,

DJ: that's why I was asking. Sorry, Yvonne, right from 20 to 136. And you've, you've been here for the stretch. So as a member over 42 years, and the charter member of EDF and then now EF has grown so much that there are a plethora of endowments. What would be you think your most impactful moment in the sorority?

YS: I'm gonna suggest not just being a part of the ETF. It's also that for most activities, even if you don't see me, I'm supporting if I can financially and attending. I can't, I can't even count how many luncheons Galas you know, meetings that I've been to. It was a matter of joining and participating. Like I said, I think I served on just about every committee within the chapter.

DJ: And in on that, I didn't want to interrupt before. You mentioned connection, corresponding and financial secretary, Treasurer leadership Chairman, being on membership, and even to the present day, you're on executive board. Right? So yes, you're investment chairman. So what does that mean to hold a leadership position from initiation to present day?

YS: For me, I feel that, that the ability to share with others what you've learned, and to be able to create and influence positively is important. And that can be done through the notion of leadership. You lead with the support. It's not as you know, it's not just I am the one... It's a coordination, it's a fellowshipping. And it's taking what you know, and ensuring that others see the importance and the beauty of it, and that they go forward. To me that's leadership. It's not just about me, it's about others learning and growing, and sharing that with others and moving forward. To me that's leadership.

DJ: And if I can, if I can offer sorry, if I'm you are always a strong supporter, and a gentle love tap... especially if it has to do with numbers. She never an embarrassing moment, but definitely will tap you and let you know the information, so when I heard that you were leadership, Chairman that that made sense to me because you definitely exude that. I have on here also, you are a parliamentarian, and you get into those bylaws that wasn't on your list. But can you just tell us sorority wise, and in other organizations, I know you get into those bylaws, can you share with us how you use some sorority skills and other organizations? So tell us the organization that you hold high leadership positions in and then how you've impacted the daycare center and other organizations as well.

YS: Okay. The ability to understand protocol, and bylaws. I learned that from the sorority, and I took that knowledge and applied it outside. So that when a friend asked me did I want to join a nonprofit board, I said yes. And when I joined the board, I became their treasurer. So going along, as working as treasurer came to the point where the federal government suggested that we have a president who had a degree, education and experience, so that's how I got I voted to become the president of the south east neighborhood centers, it is the South East Bronx Neighborhood Centers Incorporated. And that's a nonprofit that has oversight for daycare. And the connection is to the centers and are named after our sorority sisters, our senior members and golden sorors from omega omega would go to the center and train the workers with young babies in the daycare how to read and write. In there, and on the board right now we have two other members who are from this chapter, serving as our lawyer and also serving as a general member with knowledge of education. So that's how you connect and you pull in, you encourage. So on that board, there's three of us from the sorority, and we wear my colors to remind them anyway. So that's my community involvement as far as leadership. I also took the knowledge of a protocol and how to write bylaws and recreate it or develop the bylaws for my local Eastern Star chapter Eastern Star as assistance to the Masons. So they didn't have any bylaws - so I took from scratch and

both in their bylaws, there was somebody else right? They asked me to help to renew or, or to redo the bylaws for my, for my daughters of the Sphincers(unclear), like the Shriners, so I rewrote their bylaws, and helped them to increase their dues. Then a new chapter was formed called Lady Circle of Perfection, brand new. And I somehow was tapped from the Supreme national level, to write their first ever bylaws. So historically, you'll see me on that particular committee. And then there are other things that I've done as far as like nudging folks to keep records and do the right thing and to make sure that their bylaws reflect their constitution and their guidance. And that got that information from the sorority. Yeah. And, and I chair the Senate(?) meeting. So I need to have a knowledge of protocol and parliamentary procedures.

MN: As somebody who once chaired the board of a nonprofit organization in the Bronx, I know how important it is to have people who know all those details, and insist that things be done the proper way, because so many organizations get in trouble when they cut corners. So it's incredibly valuable to have somebody with your skill, as well as your determination to make sure these organizations run in a fiscally and legally responsible way. Because a whole lot of them don't, and then disaster befalls them. So this is just remarkable. But it also speaks incredibly well for how the sorority creates leaders, which then strengthen community organizations, which desperately need that expertise. Wow.

DJ: Thank you. Sorry, Yvonne about Cednick (?) Eastern Star. And definitely, we tried to continue those partnerships with – Gwendolyn daycare center was in our chapter. And so on the heels of that, what are some memorable service programs that ETA Omega Omega has done over the years that stuck out to you?

YS: I would say the mentoring program, and also the health fair piece. And I remember also, we extended the health fair piece to mental health awareness, which I became interested in since I was struggling at one time with depression. So when I saw we had that I remember we're serving on that committee and just basically doing some background - bringing materials in and just being supportive of the National Association for mental health as NAMI. I had a church member who was actively involved in that. So she provided me with a whole suitcase full of materials, which I shared out of seven and I think I brought some to the sorority chapter. So that's another connection. Being aware of, of the mental health awareness, but making folks aware, making folks aware that mental health is not, it's not a shame.

Yeah, we all have suffered with problems one of every now and then and to acknowledge it, and to move forward on that. That also came out of the sorority.

DJ: Thank you for mentioning Nami right, because that wasn't a program 40 years ago that was a program more recently and actually Sor April was the chairman to connect everyone here. Okay, so the health fair stood out and Rites of Passage mentoring programs, if you could just elaborate on each of those for us. Okay,

YS: what the health fair, we coordinated with the other Bronx chapter. And I think I got hooked into them because I went to a gospel brunch, and met their president. And so when she was doing the health, so while I kind of know them, so for many years, I would be at the health fair when they would do it. And as far as I was the other piece, it was a health fair, give me the rites of passage mentioned otherwise called the rites of passage. I think for a few years, I had to write the guidance, I wrote the guidance for how to get the young people aware of their finances. And I think I remember doing some lessons on how to write a check. And there's one of those that she's in our chapter. Now, she remembered me when she told me, she said, I got a bank account, I'm going to college. And that's what if one person sees you that you've touched, I just, just, you know, just a blessing. So that that stands out? Yeah.

DJ: And so you've, you've been an ETA Omega Omega for 42 years. So tell us if there's one or more than one members of the organization who have influenced you?

YS: Actually, it's so there's a few. There's so many, because I think I'm always grateful for our chapter leadership. It takes a lot to be a president of a chapter or vice president. I don't think people realize that. You come and you chair the meeting. But in the background, you've got people like me, like, what is that? How come? So you're constantly doing the dialoging with explaining to and being supportive and holding your your peace and, you know, not blowing up on us because we can sometimes have little children. So I think that, to me, is in balance, I see the thread of being able to take the time to understand one another even in tough times. And even though we may not always see eye to eye that we come together as a chapter and have accomplished so much. I would be here for hours trying to explain all the things we've done as far as not just financial, but the mentoring, the support. There are a couple of

politicians when I see them go, “Yes, that’s a soror” when they remember me. And I'm like, okay, so that to me is so important. Also, when I travel, I see us as ambassadors for other systems, I've been in the airport in St. Croix, and was told “I'm coming back to get you to take you to dinner and was taken to dinner. But I can’t remember the soror's name, it was so many years ago. And then I was traveling once on vacation, and another friend said, “that's your sister over there, go over there and get a get a welcome drink.” That chapter invited me to their meeting. And I shared some of the things that we were doing at our chapter with their chapter. And I've gone to conferences, and I've shared a room with the sisters. So because of that connection, so this year, we do it in the Bronx. And to explain to them, it can't be done someplace else. And I'm also nudging the order, the Eastern stars, to have an active scholarship program. I've nudged them as far as changing their bylaws. And when I go to my Eastern Star meetings I got on pink and green, not the colors. So they go in and I've had some members say to me, “when can I join you?” Okay, yeah. So that's the positive influence that they want to, ... they just they see. And they want to be a part of what they see. And I hope they see something good. So they want to come and become a sorority sister from other organizations.

DJ: Absolutely. Absolutely. And so over the time, that you've been a member, how do you think the civil rights movement to the the 90s all the way to Black Lives Matter ... How do you think that has impacted the sororities program and also connections since you were Connections Chair?

YS: I see that tie in to that we're aware of poverty and struggle. And I know we have many sisters who are involved in the community boards where decisions are made, trying to improve, trying to improve the community. I also see the connection not just from our chapter in the Bronx. But when you go to leadership the recognition of what it is to support politically, that I'm not a Republican, I'm not a Democrat, but I'm going to support politically and encourage others to vote to, you know, to donate time and money. And that is not just black lives, black lives are important. But the fact that we are able to produce a vice president, we know that she has support from her sisters, were able to back I do I make phone calls all the time, you know, say to “senator, so I'm not happy with that.” And I know we've also brokered by telephones to chapter meetings and made phone calls. So that, to me, that connection is so important that we're able to know the significance of expressing how you feel, and having an influence locally, because your local politician, you can get their ear. The current borough president was our

Assemblywoman and I know that she's very supportive of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, and I know she knows of this chapter. Because when I see it, I'm like, hey, (46:00)

DJ: that's so interesting that you said that because when Vanessa Gibson's won Bronx borough president, I remember when she was Assemblywoman, and she came to McKinley Community Center, when we should MLK day when I was, I remember that. Um, so she is a friend of ETA omega omega. So tell us, between the health affairs and political connections and the mentoring programs, what do you feel is the most pressing issue today and scholarship, with with our young people going into college, what do you think is most pressing issue that the sorority needs to definitely move forward in the next in the coming years?

YS: mentorship, and I say mentorship because if I'm mentoring someone, I am directly or indirectly influencing their thinking. Not that I want them to think like I think but I'm influencing them prayerfully, they'll take what they're learning and go forward and serve somebody and be a mentor, mentor to someone else. So I think to me, I know we need housing, you need this. But I think that we're able to really set up a good mentoring, not just from the rites of passage, but beyond mentoring, we need to also mentor some of our young men, the fraternities. And I'm gonna say it, they're not doing the same work that we're doing. No disrespect to them. But we know that the sisters, we really are in the trenches as far as reaching out and establishing and having a continuation. Because when I tell people I've been in this in 42 years, I say, yes. I took a short break when I got a divorce. But other than that I've been if you don't see me, I've sent a check around this calling someone to support what's going on. So I think to me, we need to just work on being that influential mentor, you know, reaching out as, as far as we can, politically also, to encourage our political representatives, in their groups, to mentor and to support, not just financially, but sometimes in person mentorship.

DJ: Okay. Thank you. And I just for the record, I know when we don't see you is because you're on. You're on the leadership trail, leading something else in another organization, right. So the thing with Alpha Kappa Alpha women is we're leaders all over. So even if you lend an encouraging word, or a thought question, we'll send an email and ask the question, I said, "Oh, okay. Thank you for that." Right. So we appreciate you, we love you. And thank you for your service over the years, and I know you've dropped some gems that Professor Naison is going to follow up on

MN: Okay, first, let me take a picture of everybody so

Okay, smile. Excellent. Okay, now, this is an incredibly inspiring story, that someone whose family was scattered when their apartment building burned in the late 60s has become a leader in so many aspects of Bronx life and as taught people how to keep alive community organizations by following the procedures that are necessary to do this. So it's an incredibly inspiring story to put on record. But I want to ask you now something. What makes you proudest to be from the Bronx. What is and what can the Bronx teach the country?

YS: Okay, I see us coming from humble beginnings. It's not a rich borough. We have a lot of social issues. We have a lot of academic issues. But I see the hope in that, from the church organizations, from similar somewhat to sorority organizations, that we can inspire others who cannot maybe see the future, we can inspire them to let them know that if I can make it, if I can make it that another person like me can make it. Like I said, I was not, I didn't have money growing up, I had a lot of, you know, difficulties. And I stayed the course. And I also used to see the Bronx as the Forgotten borough. And because we were forgotten, we were able to kind of, within the borough, support each other and to kind of keep that secret. So now that the borough, you know, the borough is expanding, you get housing all over the place, and you've got an influx of a newly arriving population that doesn't really understand completely, the significance of a partnership of you know, mentoring each other, and being supportive. And also, knowing that hard times doesn't mean that I'm not going to make it. So I think that's been my inspiring goal that, you know, I have other other friends, we were not we were not rich, and most of my friends have finished school, we would you know, torch, but we may be the first in the family to get a degree to reach back because I have a lot of other friends who work and live in the Bronx as well. So I think that to me was inspiring that I didn't give up. I don't know, I just knew there would be a future. And I just kind of stayed the course and kept going. And I have weathered some difficult times, yes.

MN: So what does the Bronx have to teach the United States of America

YS: that I don't have to be rich, that I can be an African, Caribbean, American, black American, white American, Latino, and I can still survive the tough times. And that even though we're supposed to be the

Forgotten borough, internally, there's been activity and movement to support the different programs. And you know, we have, we've had some very good schools in the Bronx. We just haven't gotten the credit, maybe. But most of my friends who have finished we went to school in the Bronx, grew up in the Bronx, went to school in the Bronx.

MN: Okay. Well, I want to thank you for this incredibly important interview. And thank you for all you have done, and all you still do. Because it's people like you who make it possible for other people to fly. Because when they come down to earth, those programs have to operate efficiently, honestly, and correctly. So thank you. And thank you for another opportunity for me. And thank you to Saudi (?) Muhammad who harassed me mercilessly to start this because it's been an amazing experience for me. It's been an honor to get to know all of you. So here we are. And the country has a lot to learn from us right now. A lot to learn from us here. Okay,