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Loving, Julia

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Julia Loving, Interview with the Bronx African-American History Project

October 14th, 2020

Dr. Mark Naison and Alison Rini

Mark Naison (MN): Hello. This is Dr. Mark Naison. And today we're going to be doing an interview for the Bronx African American History Project with Julia Loving, who for 27 years has been a teacher with the New York City Department of Education and has a powerful family connection to the Bronx. Joining us is a Bronx African American history project research assistant Alison Rini, who is recording this, may also be participating in the questions. So, Julia, I'm going to start you off the way we start all of our interviews. Tell us a little bit about your family and how they ended up coming to the Bronx, OK?

Julia Loving (JL): Sure. So my parents were from Virginia down in a rural area called Nelson County, Virginia, down below Charlottesville in between Charlottesville and Lynchburg, Virginia. Back in those times in 1960, they ended up moving up to New York City. My grandparents on both sides did not necessarily want their children to stay there because it was in the height of Jim Crow. They grew up under Jim Crow. They went to, you know, colored schools down in Virginia. And they felt that if they moved up north, they would have better access to employment, to education. And they wanted their futures to be a lot brighter than what was to be offered down in Virginia. So, yeah. So that's how my parents came up in 1960. Yeah.

MN: Now, did they move to the Bronx or they moved to another part of the city?

JL: First they moved, they moved to the South Bronx and yes. Not too far from Yankee Stadium. And actually I grew up. I was born in 1970 and I grew up in the northeast section of the Bronx. Off of Bronxwood Avenue and 220th Street. Yes.

MN: So how did they find their apartment in the Bronx? Did they have friends living there?

JL: Yes. Yes. And a lot of times that was what happened. I know what when my dad came up, they came up separate times. So when my dad moved up there, he stayed with his brother and his

sister in law and their children. And my mom moved in the South Bronx, also with her sisters. And even prior to that, most of the family had aunts or relatives that had been here prior to that. So even before my mom came up in the 60s, they had relatives that had moved up, you know, of course, part of that Great Migration story. So they had relatives and had aunts and cousins, even community, family, friends that they would actually be able to stay with. But one day my parents heard about an opening, at 871 East 220th Street. My aunt had moved in first and she had a one bedroom and my aunt found out they had a three-bedroom upstairs. And so that's how we ended up moving, also on the fifth floor.

MN: So this was an apartment building. How many stories was it?

JL: Yeah, it was a tenement building and no elevator. Five, five flights. And we lived on the fifth floor. Yes

MN: And what were the cross streets? 220 St. between where and where?

JL: Between Bronxwood and Barnes Avenue.

MN: OK. And so this was a five-story walkup. Did it have fire escapes?

JL: Yes, it had a fire escape. Yes.

MN: Oh a classic five story.

JL: A classic fire escape story. Yes. Even my brothers, even to my parents' Great anger, shooting Roman candles off the fire escape. Yeah.

MN: So, Julia, did your parents know each other when they were in Virginia?

JL: Yeah. Yeah. My parents, actually, started dating when they were like 14 or 15. So, I mean, they. Yeah, they had been. Yeah. They had dated since they were fifteen. I remember my mom

saying their first date was at a carnival down in Virginia. And I even actually had a picture of her somewhere around her in this sailor outfit. And, you know, she said that was from the carnival ... that went into the carnival. But the families knew each other. My dad was from an area called Shipmen Virginia. And they're both in the same county, Nelson County Shipmanville Virginia, which is close to Lovingston. And that's what the loving comes from, from that family, Loving v. Virginia. Those are my distant relatives. Yes.

MN: Oh, my God. That case changed American history.

JL: Absolutely. Yes. Yes. Yes. The Loving versus Virginia case. Absolutely. So I'm related through of course slave ties. To the white Lovings. But the families are still near each other. You know, we actually even had a big, like plantation reunion down in Virginia, a couple of summers ago.

MN: Really, of all the Lovings?

JL: White and black

MN:, White and black, all of that. Could you please share a photo of that with me? Because I think we would want that almost as part of an exhibit or something connected to the interview. That's amazing!

JL: Yeah, sure. Sure. I certainly can send it. And yeah. So my dad is from that part of Virginia -- Lovingston and my mom is from an area called Piney River or Roseland, Virginia, but they will because they all went to colored schools there, that's how they met up, you know, and like my grandparents knew each other to a lot of it through it was through church as well.

MN: And what denomination did your family belong to you?

JK: OK. Well, we started off on my mom's side. It was Pentecostal. My great great grandparents owned a store, they were only black store owners in this part of Rosen, Virginia. And this is back

in the 20s. They also started their own church right across the street and that was the Pentecostal church. But according to my mom, my great grandparents and great grandparents, grandparents are very strict. And, you know, like they were like fifties kids, late 50s kids. And they wanted to be able to wear nail polish and lipstick. So there was a new church coming about. And my I guess, see, my grandmother had on my mom's side almost 20 kids, 19 kids, I should say, your grandpa. My grandmother had 19 kids. Yes.

MN: Listen, you said they had 19 kids?

JL: No television, just Radio and so on. And so half of the kids went to the Pentecostal church. They all had to go to the Pentecostal church. But when they got of age when they could choose which church they really wanted to go to, half of them ended up going to this new church that was recently designed and created. And, you know, so they could wear the lipstick they wanted to wear and have short skirts – shorter skirts. And, you know, all of you know, getting ready to get ahead into the 60s. So they were a little bit on the rebellious side. So that was a Baptist church on my dad's side. They were all Baptists.

MN: Right. Now, were your parents high school graduates in Virginia?

JK: Yes. Yes, they were.

MN: And did they have any interest in going to college?

JL: Well, I know my mom did. My dad, just because as soon as my father got up here, he had to find a job.

MN: And any dreams of going to college?

JL: He was just out at that time. And before, you know, him and my mom got married and my brother was born. So that was him. He had to work. Yeah. And my mom my mom always wanted to go college because my great grandmother was a college graduate down in Virginia – a

Virginia theologian seminary which had college programs, I guess, for black people. And that was in Lynchburg, Virginia. Even today, they really have a strong black community. You know, I would say that it's more encouraging in Lynchburg for blacks.. It's not as rural, you know.

MN: So what sort of work did your father find when he came to New York?

JL: My dad did everything. He did upholstering furniture when we were growing up. We always thought we had new furniture. But my father would be the one who would sew new cushions and he did things like that. He worked in a car shop, whatever he could find. That was the ongoing joke that every time my mom would get pregnant, my father would lose his job, but then he would find a job. And then finally working for New York City housing. And he retired out of that.

MN: Now, how many siblings do you have?

JL: I have two brothers. Two older brothers, Jesse and Mark.

MN: Right. So you were born at 220 St. between Bronxwood and Barnes.

JL: Yeah.

MN: What are your earliest memories of that neighborhood in that apartment?

JL: Wow. OK. So that neighborhood was a community and we all the families knew each other. It was. Mothers and fathers, kids. The block was always full. We always played stickball or punch ball or, you know, rode our bikes up and down the block and we could stay at each other's houses. You know.

MN: This is the 70s?

JL: This is the 70s. This is before crack came into Bronx communities. You know, this is before 84 and 85. You know, the 70s. And it was such a warm neighborhood. And we had, you know, African-Americans from the South. And we also had people from the Caribbean on the block. We had few remnants of populations of Italians in it. And I think, a Jewish family, I think they moved out once more. I believe once more blacks move in and we had a few Puerto Rican families at the time. On the block as well, because I had a few friends that I know for sure were Puerto Rican, because I remember always saying I'm going to learn how to speak Spanish, too, you know? Yeah. So that was just so it was a warm block. And I'd say this was one of those blocks where if you did something wrong down at the end of the block, by the time you got to the other side of the block, your parents knew about it, you know. Everyone knew each other. They had their phone numbers. If something happened, you could get disciplined by somebody on the block, not by being hit, but told "stop it or cut it out."

MN: Yeah. Sounds like a very warm and supportive environment to be young.

JL: Yeah, it was. It really was. A lot of our friends, we're still friends now. It was one of those real communities and. I lived there until I was ten. And then we moved on. It started getting, you know, a little bit like I say, in the 80s, it started getting a little bit chaotic, the demographic started changing and, you know, drugs started coming in, I guess, like marijuana. And my dad, since he worked in housing, we moved over to Eastchester Gardens housing projects.

MN: So you moved into Eastchester Gardens?

JL: Yes. Yes.

MN: Oh, OK. Yeah. Now what elementary did you go to. Public schools or Catholic?.

JL: A public school. I went to public school when I was on 220th Street. I went to P.S. 21 and that was off of Two Twenty Fifth and White Plains Road.

MN: Right. And what was that experience like?

JK: I remember Mr. Sperber being our principal. I had great teachers. I had one teacher named Miss. Sabino and she loved to do jingles. You know, every holiday was a jingle. She actually would bring in samples of breads, different breads that I had never even seen. And it was a multi-ethnic school. So it was still remnants of other groups of people other than just African-Americans in the community. And yeah. So it was a good school. I remember learning cursive there. I remember, you know, learning phonics there. I did have some awards. Oh, wait. I can show you what I believe from elementary school. Yes. Okay. I found this and I got up on my keychain. Yes, I did. Oh, I got this. Is that funny? I just found this recently and it says Julia, Loving, class 3-2, report card honors March 1979

MN: No, I have nothing from my elementary school. So did you enjoy going to school?

JL: I've always enjoyed going to school. I still enjoy going to school.

MN: Oh, I can see a great smile on your face. I mean, twenty seven years. Wonderful.

JL: Look, I love it. I just finished getting ah, earning my master's in U.S. history and I was teaching all, you know, I was teaching night school and day school at the same time. And my dad said, you are going to be a career school person. You're going to be in school forever. Yeah. So I still enjoy school.

MN: So you loved school and was your family a place where there was a lot of emphasis put on education?

JL: Absolutely. Absolutely. Because my parents came out of the segregated school system where they would get hand-me-down books that, you know, from like the white schools and, you know, with all kinds of derogatory things written in and say, you know, we know you're getting our books. My parents wanted better opportunities for us and they really pushed us. You know, and I see two generations, like my brothers have kids, I don't have any kids, but my brothers have kids and they are college graduates. So the emphasis has always been there. So when my brothers

actually went into the military and me, I ended up going to SUNY, SUNY, Albany. And but the push was definitely to finish school and definitely get your high school diploma. If you had to do anything, you needed to earn your high school diploma.

MN: So you were 10 years old when you moved to East Chester Gardens?

JL: Yes.

MN: What was East Chester Gardens Like when you arrived there, I guess about 1980?

JL: OK. It was definitely a hip hop area. It was louder than the block that I grew up on, you know. So there were people here. Eastchester Gardens.

MN: Absolutely. Did you encounter this? Was it just, you know, people with their sound systems out?

JL: Yeah. Yeah. Yes. Radios. And then it got bigger and bigger. The box. They called them in the box and you could hear it coming out of the windows. there are more people, you know, of There's eight people on each floor. It is in an eight story building with an elevator because, you know, we spent most of our time trying to get our grocery shopping carts at the old tenement building all the way up to the fifth floor. So it was a blessing to have an elevator. You know, when you're thinking about the density, you think about more of the people, how many people, how many families are in there, how many kids. And that's just one building, you know, eight stories high with eight families on each floor. So it's definitely louder there. But at the same time, it still felt like a family element there. And I had friends that had both parents in the household, working class. Everybody left in the morning.

MN: And you'd see them in the morning?

JL: Oh yes, you see them in the evening, you know, at the same time.

And then you had some that were not working, you know, and some that were on the system, you know but so you would see the difference.

MN: Now, what was it, multi-ethnic when you moved in or had it been?

JL: Mostly, mostly. OK, I say this. My girlfriends and I can show you a live picture taken outside the McDonalds on Gun Hill Road down from Evander. My girlfriend, Sharon, was Trinidadian and Puerto Rican. My girlfriend, Tyree, was African-American. My girlfriend Deon was from the Caribbean, I believe they're from Barbados. Right. And I had a girlfriend named Michelle, who's Italian. We still had white folks in the housing projects. Michelle's mom moved when she was like 16. Yeah. And so it definitely was mixed, you know. But then as crack came, there was a lot of white flight. I saw what crack's impact was in the Eastchester houses and in the area. Yeah. Well, you saw your friends that were on honor roll now trying to take their parents toaster ovens and microwaves and try to sell them. It was an addictive drug.

MN: Jesus. Yes. Yes.

JL: You would see among my brother's friends, one of my brother's friends, who went to Bronx Science got addicted to crack and turned into a walking zombie. This happened to people of all ages. This is a drug that crossed generations, that hit not only young males but females, aunts, uncles, grandparents. You know, you just saw devastation, you know, and it was hard to see it because you knew that's what was going on. And I remember my dad having a very candid conversation with myself and my brothers about crack, its addictiveness... My dad was saying that you could be at a party and he was just really, really being just, as, you know, honest and open and somebody would say, "oh, you want to try something stronger than, you know, weed or whatever." Then they'll give you this drug. And before you know it, you're so addicted to it that you'd sell your body or something, you know, anything to get that next time, you know. So I watched a lot of devastation in Eastchester, you know, at school I saw people being killed. You know, it wasn't it wasn't like, you know, parts of Brooklyn or whatever. But I do remember in surrounding communities, especially like Boston Road, where you would see that people have

been killed, drive by shootings started, you know, territory beefs and all of that, you know, and I'm sure they had they had that going on.

MN: I assume you were in junior high. Were you in your high school? Did you go to—

JL: So I went when I left. P.S. 21, I ended up doing, what was it, fourth grade and fifth grade at P.S. 121, which was a big, very, very mixed school because you like I always said that they had like school zoning was taking place there. So beyond the housing projects and what separated the houses from the projects was a Street called ADA Avenue and Eydie Avenue had people that lived in houses, majority white, a few black families. And so their kids went to the local school, which was PS 121. And from elementary, I went to middle school, I went to an ICE 144, which was an intermediate school. And that was mixed. Also about Evander Childs was the next zoned school that I could go to. But there was another school, Columbus High School, which is not that far from the housing projects. So most of the white kids in a community went to Columbus and most of the black and Hispanic kids went to Evander Childs. I was told when I was a middle school that there was another school option that I could do. And if I was interested, they had a free teaching academy at at Walton High School, Walton High School, all the way all the way over near Bronx Science high school. Yes. So I would take the number 18 or 50 bus. It was like an hour ride from where I live to Walton High School. And yeah. Walton was once a girls' school. Then it was mixed.

MN: By the time you got there it was mixed?

JL: Thank you. It was definitely mixed.

MN: Yeah. So you were in a pre teaching program because you knew that's what you wanted to do at that time.

JL: I just did not want to go to my own zoned school. Well, all my brother's friends were there and everybody in the projects was there. I wanted something different. And my mom and dad

were like, well, if you're willing to get up early enough and get to school on time and take that long bus ride, then you can do it. I did. Yeah.

MN: Were there any issues that you face taking a bus ride out of your neighborhood? Were there any safety issues at that time?

JL: You know, at that time, no. No, I hear I hear that, you know you know, kids talk about things like that. But when I went to Walton, I did not have issues like that. Not at all. And to the point where I, my friends, they were younger than me, ended up coming to Walton also, you know, we would take the bus together.

MN: Yeah. So what was Evander high's reputation in the 80s?

JL: It was just rough. And it was. It was so rushed. There was a lot of cutting. A lot of them would cut class and hang out in the staircases and, you know, play dice, ID cards and, you know, just a rough environment. Wasn't too much discipline going on. Yeah, so it's interesting.

MN: When you were living in EastChester, did you have this dream of getting out of the Bronx or did you feel pretty comfortable where you were?

JL: You know, I was comfortable in the Bronx. I loved the Bronx. I still love the Bronx, you know. And summers I spent in Virginia. So it wasn't like I wasn't landlocked to the blocks that so many other well, I had relatives in D.C., Washington, D.C. and Maryland and Virginia. And in the summertime, we would go and visit relatives and have relatives on Long Island. So I wasn't one of these kids that were just, you know, just stuck in the Bronx, you know?

MN: You know, I think you're a part of an amazing family.

JL: You know, I have and I've been blessed. I've been so blessed. More seriously. Yeah.

MN: But also think you're part of this historic family. I've got to see that. That reunion picture, you know.

JL: Yes.

MN: So when did you actually leave the Bronx?

JL: I left when I was 17, I moved. I started attending SUNY Albany. Yeah. And I stayed up there for four, four years. And then I came back to the Bronx. Yeah.

MN: And where were you living when you came back?

JL: I went back to stay with my parents. I majored in economics and I also worked. I had summer internships down at the federal government with the Department of Defense inspector general's office. So I was thinking about relocating down in Virginia and D.C., the DMV area. And some said, you know, I need to go back to the Bronx. I stayed with my parents and I got married. That didn't work out. So I was like, I'm definitely going back to the Bronx. And so I stayed with my dad. My dad was like, well, you know, you've got to get your own place. Like, he really pushed me to get my own place. I applied for Co-op City and that's why I am here. I never left the Bronx. I teach in the Bronx.

MN: You do? What school do you teach? I think it's OK.

JL: I used to teach at Columbus High School. I might go to high school for 20 years and then. Yes. And then I end up over it. I'm now in Riverdale. Kingsbridge Academy on the West Side. Yeah. I never left the ranch.

MN: Just so you know-we have all these issues at Fordham with people coming from other parts of the country with these negative feelings about the Bronx. And a lot of you lived in the Bronx all your life.

JL: Yes. That's what I love about the Bronx. I think the Bronx people in the Bronx are very resilient. I think people are still more communal. Like, I go to other places and I don't know, I don't feel the same welcoming, you know, atmosphere, especially here in Coop City. I walk out my building, I'm out my door and my neighbors out the I'm like, "hey, hey, hey. How's this? How's that?" Whatever. People still talk to each other in the center of the Coop City, which, despite its size, is a very friendly place. Yes. And it's like and they're like right now, if you go outside the club. So there's nobody outside of this working class. It's a working class community. It influences how people raise their kids. The kids are going to school. They come back home. You know, people here are just moving. You know, they're putting their kids in dance schools and karate class. And, you know, it's just a different element, you know? But everybody speaks to each other. I love Bronx history. I love Bronx culture. I love the fact that hip hop comes out of the Bronx. I look at it, you know, and I was a part of that generation

MN: So what was your connection to hip hop? And, you know,, since you were in your teens in the 80s, which is, you know, when hip hop is becoming, you know, a popular global music, almost like being in the Bronx in the middle.

JL: I'll start by saying I grew up with originators. Kool Herc was around me. There also was a deejay, Pumpkin. He grew up in that area. He's a legendary figure. Find out. Yes. Yes.

MN: And you got to have fun. Heffen Park.

JL: Of course I did. I used to go to look. I was in summer camp. And every summer camp, we would go to the pool. But they would have hip hop jams. I was young and we would get on our bikes and ride down the hill and you could hear. See. Yes. So it was a bike ride from EastChester downhill. That's a small park. Sort of. It's just on the other side of the highway from Co-op City in the north. And we call that area "the Valley."

MN: Yeah, right. Yeah. And I actually had a friend when we started the Bronx African-American History Project, Nathan Dukes lived right there. Oh, yes. OK. Connection. How did you meet Kool Herc? How did he come up?

JL: You know what? My brother was a rapper. And he is also my brother.

MN: Right. So did your brother ever do any recording of his?

JL: He did. They did one. And it was called the oath. They were the “ultimate four.” And they had a deejay named Scratch on Galaxie, which he deejayed with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Dr. Jekyll was Andre who wrote the recently passed rhyming grant Uptown Productions. Yeah. So it's like they all knew each other. And I mean, they would come into my parents house, my parents had like this open door policy. Don't hang outside. You could bring your friends inside, you know. And yeah. So I grew up with a lot of DJs, yeah. I went to all kinds of concerts. Yeah.

MN: So most of the concerts were outdoors that you went to or there were also some in clubs or community centers?

JL: Up in the Bronx, they had this place called a Galaxie that people would go to. And I know they also had the T connection, but I was too young to go to Gun Hill Road. So the end and a lot of it were outside in our community community center. And like my brothers were old enough to go to some of those jams. And I was like a tagalong. Sometimes me and my girlfriends would get dressed up and put lipstick on to make us look a little bit older. And I know a lot of times that, you know, they would go down downtown also to a lot of places like Rock City and all these other places right now.

MN: One interesting question: Was it harder for them to crack in as an M.C. than a guy? Were there any, like top of the line women emcees and deejays that were part of your circle?

JL: Mostly guys, mostly, I believe it or not. Yes, mostly guys. And yeah, mostly guys. And I mean, I probably look to outside of the Bronx, I really look to Queens like someone like Roxanne Shante and there was Sha Rock even before her

MN: Right. I was exposed to her, but she was. I was just one.

JL: She was just one. And she was with a group called The Funky Four Plus. She was the plus. Right. So I was exposed to her. I'd been around her for a little bit, just, you know, just a meeting. Not someone that I would say I knew very well. But I was exposed to her. I knew that she was around and he had like the US girls like Debbie B and Lisa Lee. So I think I did see female rappers, but not that many, but the majority were the guys.

MN: So, you know, it sounds like you had an incredibly culturally rich upbringing, you know. You know, people from different backgrounds, you know, West Indian and AfricanAmerican.

JL: Yes. When I was growing up I would go into different churches. And my parents weren't real strict on what churches I went to. So sometimes I would go with my girlfriends to Pentecostal, Presbyterian or Catholic churches I was also a Girl Scout. I joined when I moved up to Eastchester Houses. They had a Girl Scout troop that had a troop leader that was very good about taking us on trips. Sometimes we would have parties with the Boy Scouts and, you know, and we had dance battles

MN: Yeah. Now, did you ever try becoming a B- Girl? Did you ever try break dancing?

JL: Yes, of course. Yes. Yes. Yes. Moonwalking We had cardboard boxes and I always. Oh right. I was in the hallways. And what kind of stuff. Yeah. (38:41). We would go up to the elementary school and they would have battled dance battles and stuff like that.

MN: Yeah, definitely. Definitely. So the schools you went to incorporated hip hop culture.

JL: Oh, yeah. They really incorporated it. If we had a school party, they would have to play hip hop music.

MN: Now, did you ever get music instruction or learn to play a musical instrument?

JL: I took up the flute and that was in a middle school and an intermediate school. But after that, I just did more instruments that were not in school. They couldn't afford it. I don't know if it was or never. I mean, it's in the 70s. 80s. Yeah. There were no music programs from the late 70s on.

MN: So you didn't. So in some ways people attribute the rise of hip hop to people as the first generation who didn't have music instruction.

JL: Absolutely. And you had to learn music. So I'll tell you what. The table became the drum beat. The lunch table became the drum. Of course they were. You know, during cafeteria time, people doing their own kind of, you know, banging on the tables and trying all kinds of hip hop stuff at the time. Yes.

MN: You were rapping in the lunchroom, of course.

JL: Yeah. Yeah.

MN: Alison, were you ever rapping in the lunchroom in high school?

AR: I don't think I was.

MN: No fun. What did you all do at lunch time?

JL: I feel it was mostly gossip. Like, I don't care what you think. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And see, they way they wouldn't let us in with like radios and stuff like that. So you couldn't even listen to 98.7 Kiss FM.

MN: Right. Wow. So when did you decide to switch careers into teaching as your full time occupation?

JL: OK, so I worked for Chase Manhattan Bank in their dividend reinvestment department. I was so bored to death, even though I had this economics degree, I was like, I'm not doing this. I can't

do this. And so I was looking through the Tuesday New York Times newspaper at the public library up the road. And this is a funny story. I go in, I look in the paper and it says library entry. There's a sign out before I go in. There's a sign that says librarian trainees wanted - it will pay for grad school. I didn't do that. I love the library. I was a latchkey kid. And I went there. My parents wouldn't get home until like five, six o'clock and I would go to the library, get kicked out of the library for making too much noise when my girlfriends' in there and then I would turn right back around the next day and show up again. I got the job as a librarian and I ended up working at CastleHill Library. They paid for my schooling. So I went to Long Island University and I got a masters from their library and information science. So I got this degree and ended up after two years at CastleHill. I transferred back over to my community library that I grew up in. But the funny story is when I went to get interviewed, I was interviewed by the librarian that I grew up with. And she said she couldn't wait to see this, Julia Levin, because she knew there was only gonna be one Julia Loving, that was the one that she kicked out of the library. Now, we'll come right back. At that time, she was a children's librarian in a little storefront library that grew up into this big library that's right across the street from the five train on Gun Hill Road right near the Golden Crust Bakery. And yeah. So it was a storefront when I was younger, and ended up becoming a beautiful library. So I went to work there, doing young adult programs and I went to a meeting and a woman named Sondra Kennedy said to me, "Julia, why haven't you applied for positions in the schools? You could be a school librarian, you know?" She then said "send me your resume." And she sent the resumé to the principal at Columbus High School. And I got hired after an interview during my lunch hour. And I got the job. So that's how I ended up in the school system.

MN: And did you eventually become a classroom teacher?

JL: Well, right now I'm still a school librarian, but yes I teach library information science. So I do classes on digital citizenship and research skills and all of that. But also teach at night. I teach Africana studies at night at a Young Adult Center. There's a program for young adults that are at risk in the evening. And it runs Monday through Thursday from 4:15 to eight PM.

MN: So where are you? Where are you teaching now? At which location?

JL: Well, I'm doing day school and night school, so I do day school in Riverdale. And I'm also doing my night school, remotely, at Columbus High School, where I teach African Studies.

MN: Yeah. So in your Africana studies classes, how many students are in the class at once?

JL: Usually it usually is like ten. Yeah. When they show up.

MN: OK. Right.

JL: You know, many of them have issues with attendance. They'll do the work but won't show up on remote. Oh they'll do the work in hand at the end, not show up for class. But many of them also have families. Many of them are in shelters. Many of them have a lot of issues also. And we just try to work with them where they are, you know, and build them up and build them up as much, you know. And we have such great turnout rates with regards to graduation. And if these programs were not in place, I don't believe these kids would have gotten out, gotten a high school diploma, earned a high school diploma.

MN: Oh, this is fantastic. So are you teaching remotely in your day job as well? You're doing hard...

JL: Yeah, well, I'm doing that now, too. Yes. Yes, I'm doing remote in the day and then also in night school. This is good for me, I have a lot of conditions, you know, first of all, I'm prediabetic and I had a blood clot a couple of years back and I did not want to take the chance of coming in live during the Pandemic.

MN: Right. So do you get food delivered to you or do you go?

JL: No, I still go shopping because as I said, mom is still over here. She lives a block away here in Coop City. My dad passed away back in 1996. And so I care for my mom. You know, I do

her shopping. I'll take her shopping and make sure she's good, you know? So I have to be out there.

MN: This is amazing. Alison, do you have any questions that you'd like to ask?

AR: I'm curious about how teaching remotely was during the pandemic and how it is now. I also work on the Bronx COVID 19 oral history project, and so we've been talking to some teachers.

JL: Sure. I'm a lot more comfortable with using Zoom at the time ZOOM was having its issues. You're trying to teach kids and they start drawing all kinds of crazy, you know, pornographic things. And so they changed this to start using Google. Within my school, we had to use Google meets. Yeah. And it's not as great, you know, but now they've really, really ironed out a lot of the kinks with Zoom now. You know, I think teachers adjust very well, you know, with getting their lesson plans online, trying to deliver them. The issue is, to actually access kids who have a phone that they may not have Internet access on it. They may have a tablet, but they may not have access to the Internet. You know the WI-FI issue is the biggest one.

They are trying to get the technology to everyone. But, some of our kids, especially those living in shelters, may not have access to WiFi. They may not or they may have more than one sibling having to share one computer, you know. So those are some of the real kinks I believe were happening here in the Bronx. Let me think of what else. Getting students to be comfortable online with showing their faces, many of them did not want to show their faces because of what is in the background. Maybe their homes are not in the best of shape. So they're a little bit insecure about their backgrounds, you know. So, like, would zoom like I told my kids, I said, I want to see your faces. I don't I'm not really interested in your background info. So what you can do, if you feel a certain way, you could create a background for yourself, would ZOOM and then have you just show your face with nobody in the background. What I've been told by many kids back in March was the fact that there was no space for them to actually have their own space. They had shared spaces and rooms. And, you know, everybody is at home, you know, in comparison to today. I see that people work those kinks out a bit more. Today, the issue for schools is so many kids are doing remote learning, some are doing blended. Some are doing in-school learning. But there are not enough teachers. OK, so I'm doing the library and I'm doing four elective classes.

MN: Oh, my God.

JL: In addition, electives and a U.S. history one class. The librarian is doing that now. And so there's not enough teachers like I had. You know, I spoke to my principal today and I was like, you know, I want to be able to have an effective library program this year, but I may not be able to because I'm covered, you know, because I'm even in my library remotely. I was still hosting a Poetry Cafe along with the Hispanic Heritage Month. We did African-American Heritage Month. We did all the different holidays that I would have done live. But we did it remotely. We also did book clubs. I had an Africana understanding book club. I did a GSA because I know I have a club, the gay straight alliance also. So I did that remotely. So it worked out the kids would just come on and we would talk and, you know, and things like that. But now that I'm teaching full time, I don't have time to do all that other programming for my library. So it's not a great library program. I'm doing way more classroom teaching than anything. You know, I'm not because many teachers have dropped out or quit from my school. You know, New York City schools have always had a teacher shortage. Thirty four kids. Thirty five kids in a class. Right. So you take all that. You have fifteen hundred kids in a class, in a school. And some of the teachers are in school. Some teachers are out. Some of the kids are out. So some are doing good, doing both blended and at and at home, you know. So it's it's it's just not enough teachers to teach certain classes now

MN: And so that's what my wife, who is an elementary school principal, says. It's the same thing.

JL: Yeah. Specialty subject. People teaching. Yes. You know everything

MN: Oh yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

JL: Yeah. English language learners need teachers that are trained to work with them, you know, So do special needs kids, they need those Special Ed teachers. Now you know, everybody is covering everything from what I'm seeing. You know, I think that's this phrase. Everybody is covering everything.

MN: Yeah.

JL: And I notice that the state also said that any person who has a teacher's license, can also teach for 10 hours a week outside of their certification. So that's something. But I'm doing more than 10 hours right now, Mark, it started off with two classes. And Alison, it now is five. And now they have me doing U.S. history and telling me I was doing this the day before classes were starting. And thank God there's this program online from New Visions about U.S. history. One that I could actually, you know, use instead of my reinventing the wheel, I'm taking some of that resources from there and being able to make sure I'm giving my students quality education electives. But U.S. History One, it is the Regents class. And I want them to do well right now. I want to make sure that I'm covering what they should be knowing, you know. So they basically said, oh, tomorrow you're teaching U.S. history. Well, I got a phone call over the summer in August and asked if I would mind teaching elective classes. And I said, sure. This is what I can teach, what I want to teach. Right. And my AP said, well, what do you want to teach? I say even Africana literature or Africana studies something. Right. He was not sure. Right. Then before long those two became four and became five.

MN: Yeah. Right. Now, in terms of your, you know, background in African literature or Africana studies, African history. Was that something you developed an expertise on from your own reading or did you take courses?

JL: Both. Both? Yes, both. And it probably started, you know. It started early in my life. I always wanted to know more about my own history. I started doing my genealogical stuff and I – in high school I was interviewing relatives, trying to find out where I came from. And, you know, it just always interested me. And I always had teachers that actually exposed us to more. And it was important to have this. This is really important to have teachers that will expose you to resources about yourself. So in high school, I had access to James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison and Claude McKay and Nikki Giovanni. So I am teaching my students these authors in high school. And I developed a love for African literature. And, you know, Chinua Achebe. Yeah, I would say from high school on I had parents that always encouraged this. My dad was a big history buff, so I

would always know, sit and talk to him about things that were going on in current events and related to the past. And I think that's how I developed that love. You know, it was reinforced all around me. But I do want to add something to this story, too. I want to add the fact that about communities and how when I was growing up, you know, and I talked about the divide, that 80th avenue divide, you know, not, oh, was always pleasant to go from the Gardens to that part of the neighborhood. We would go into that area to go skating or we would go to White Castles, which is up on Boston Road, or the movie theater, and sometimes we would get chased out of the communities. See, the Bronx was also very racially divided. So there were Italian kids who would chase the black kids out of their neighborhood. And back then. Yes. You know. And it would be worse if we had guys with us, you know, on several occasions we would go to the movie theaters, the movie theater, and then we would go to the White Castle and we would wait there, you know, get our food and walk back down the hill to where we live. And we would get chased by guys in these Camaros with souped up engines and had bottles thrown at us. These were older people. And sometimes they were older. Sometimes. They were our age, you know. And I must say not I'm not going to say they were middle aged people. I'm going to say in their 20s. And that's why I'm here. Yeah, definitely in their 20s. And this you're talking about in the 80s, even in those years. I remember when my friends and I were sneaking out on dates and we would meet our dates and hit the White Castle. It was like we were like 14. And we would go to the movie theater with them and we would all walk back home. We would go stop for White Castles, we could get chased back down towards 80 Avenue and that's where they would turn. Once they hit 80 Avenue they would turn and go right back up, you know, towards Allerton Avenue because 80 Avenue was a segregation line, And I just thought about that when I was feeling sort of queasy when we wanted to go skating and us always having to think about how we were going to get there. Could someone, maybe one of our parents, come and meet us? You know, given what street Skate Key was.

MN: Why? Was Skate Key on White Plains Road

JL: Right. Skate Key was on White Plains Road, but where they entered, it was near Boston Road and was off of like Allerton Avenue and the number three, the number two train ran over

there. Yeah. So I was just thinking about that. That community that I ended up working in because Columbus High School was a part of that community.

MN It's interesting because I'm very good friends with Paul Cannon, who just retired as the principal of P.S. 140 in Morris Sanea in the 70s. He was going to Columbus and he had a run home because sometimes the Italian kids chase the black kids. Yeah, there was a fight. Chased them out of the Columbus area. Yes. That's how he ended up in track as a distance runner. And Then there we did an interview with somebody who grew up in the East Chester houses who went to Evander in the 60s. And most of the black kids at that time came from the South Bronx. Yeah. And so there was a fight with the Italian kids and then all the black kids who lived in the South Bronx went home and he had to walk out of the school and then go back to East Chester. A bunch of white kids immediately surrounded him. But it turned out he had a friend from East Chester, an Italian kid who walked into the middle of the crowd, said, go home. He's my friend. Yeah. Yeah, it was. But the Italian black tensions in the Bronx were very complicated.

MN: You know, Alison also works on the Bronx Italian American History Initiative where we're interviewing Bronx Italians and it's a very complicated and sometimes tense relationship. Yes. And this is another piece of it. Yeah. Yeah. You're from East Chester. What was your recollection of the Edenwald Houses?

JL: Well, you know what? Edenwald was always notorious, you know, in our minds it was notorious. Yes. Like. And it was funny because my brothers, we all went to a camp called Young People's Day Camp. Young People's Day camp covered the White Plains Road area. All right. All of that area. Even Wall Boston Road , Co-op City, the Valley and East Chester. So the kids would get on the bus, go up to Tibbetts Brook. All of us. We go up to Tibbetts Brook during the summertime. And the kids were from all of these different neighborhoods. So growing up, we got to know kids from different communities. So when my brothers got older, they didn't have as much issues in these different neighborhoods

MN: That's right. Boy, was like even in Brooklyn, we knew about Evander

JL: But we didn't have problems because a lot of the kids knew each other from Camp Rhino, which is an interesting thing to think about. And I remember being on a bus and getting off at all of these different locations, you know, every morning. It'd be a I mean, I'll tell you, maybe five or six busses going up to Tibbetts Brook with all of these kids, you know, and you grow up and, each of you like, boy, I know you from camp, you know, so I know my brothers didn't have as many issues that many black boys faced who got into conflicts over ego or territory. But my brothers did not fall into that same category, I believe, because they went to camp and knew some of the guys they ran into when they went into different black neighborhoods

MN: I want to switch subjects quickly before getting back to Alison. Are people in Coop City wearing masks?

JL: They're wearing them. They're wearing them. Yes, yes. Yes. Pretty much. Almost 100 percent. I would say ninety nine percent.

MN: That's wonderful to hear. Yes. Good, good, good.

JL: And we have notices on all the doors and elevators, like in my building. And we have two elevators, but one of them broke down. And even on that elevator, we tried to abide by just having three people on the elevator and everybody had to wear a mask. And so the point where I would see kids would see this, where a community comes into play, when you've watched kids grow up, you can say good morning and you know their parents and you talk to them and they get on the Elevator. Now they're teenagers and they want to get on the elevator without a mask. You can say to them, where's your mask, brother? So you need a mask. I ride up with you. I have my mask turned this way. You turn that way and I'll get you a mask. It's that kind of communal atmosphere. This needs to take place in order for you to correct the kids and say, you listen, if you get something, you may not feel sick or anything, you know, but you may expose your mom or your grandma, you know, if you live with them.

And you know, within a black and Latino communities, a lot of us are living in multi generational homes right now. And so you have to be more careful, too, you know. Yeah. But I would say. Ninety nine percent of Coop City residents are wearing masks.

They're wearing one to the elevators; they're wearing them in the grocery stores; they're wearing them in the laundromat, you know, because we have a laundry downstairs, too. So yes

MN: Wow. Alison, any more questions?

AR: I'm trying to think – what is something that ... a lot of people from Fordham come from all over outside the Bronx. What is something that you would say to people who are not from the Bronx, who are moving here, having grown up here your whole life?

JL: I would tell them, explore the Bronx, you know, because we own City Island.

We are a part of City Island, right? We definitely have the Bronx Museum.

We were gonna have a hip hop museum if it's not already up and running, and you know, beautiful libraries. Take part in a bike ride! There's a bike thing that goes on every year where you can explore the Bronx. You go over to all kinds of communities. You have different neighborhoods to explore and eat at different places.

You know, that's how you get to know the flavor of the Bronx, because there's so many different flavors here for sure. And yeah, it's not as I don't think as cultural as Brooklyn is now. You know, Brooklyn has it going on. But the Bronx is coming. We are definitely coming!

MN: So, as we are winding this interview up, I must say this– You're such a treasure to do an interview with because the energy and joy that comes from you is the kind of thing that young people need to be exposed to.

JL: Thank you.

MN: I'm just so happy that you're working in schools day and literally day and night and, you know, sharing love of books and technology and history and literature, also just sharing the joy, because to me that's what it's teaching at its best is about.

JL: You know, I've been trying to hook up with you for a while because, you know what I want to say? I'm doing this interview in honor of my parents and my grandparents.

And, you know, I really, really think that it's important to share stories and have narratives that go around in. You know, have other people have access to it, you know, so, I'm so glad you pushed me to do this

MN: So smile to the camera. And also, we're going to share some of this with the students in our Bronx class as there is so much of value that you shared with us. I mean, there's a lot to think about in terms of the Virginia background as well as the Bronx stories.

JL: That's a whole book!

MN: Let's stay in touch. I mean, you create so much positive energy. And, you know, I think my current and former students need to hear what you have to say.

JL: All right. That sounds good to me. It sounds terrific to me.

MN: Now, is there anything you want to say in closing

JL: I just want to say thank you, Mark. We need narrative stories like this. We also need professors that are willing to make sure students have access to truth, you know? And I met you on Facebook and when I was a part of the Teach in America History grant program. So I guess we move in similar circles and so I just wanted to say thank you for allowing me to have a voice. You know, I know you like hip hop and I know and I like hip hop. So I guess that the magnet, you know, that had us link up. And Alison, thank you so much, too. And you have my info if you have any other questions about Covid related stuff. Thank you so much.

MN: Thank you so much. OK. Thank you, Alison, for being part of this, setting it up. And let's have a good evening.

JL: OK. Have a wonderful evening. Take care. Bye.

MN: Bye bye. Thank you.